

Requiem

I stomp my feet in the snow. Both action and sound are a pale defiance of the night. My toes remain frozen in their boots. The iced branches above scrape and squeak, laughing at my discomfort. Nevertheless I will endure the frosted wind.

It started a month past. The bodies. The first was the unfortunate Mr. Garrett, though at the time it was assumed that he succumbed to the effects of strong drink.

It was not until David and myself plotted the incidents upon the town map and its surrounds that the pattern emerged. Each of the unfortunates found frozen and dead in the streets must have crossed over the bridge of Sanderson's Wood at approximately the hour of midnight.

That hour is fast approaching now.

When I judge the time has come, I set foot on the bridge. The boards are frosted and slick. Though the surface of the stream is iced to a standstill, deep waters lie below the crust. It would be an unfitting end to fall.

As I reach the apex of the bridge's curve, my eyes stray to the ice below. Two pale blue eyes stare back.

Heart leaping into my throat, I jolt back. The heel of one boot slips on the aged wood. When I regain my balance, I look again.

Nothing meets my eyes but the shadow of the bridge on the snow.

I square my shoulders and press onward.

I feel it the moment my boots leave the bridge. The faint weight between my shoulder blades, as if my hair has come loose.

I dismiss it, alert for shadows or movement in the wood. The walk into town is not a long one, but the night is deep. I told no one of my intent, but it is not impossible that someone followed, intending mischief.

The skin prickles along the back of my neck under the chill of the breeze. It feels as if someone is breathing faintly against it. The weight between my shoulders grows heavier.

I shrug, thinking my cloak has shifted. Ice races down my spine.

There is something on my back.

The breath on my neck becomes a rasping in my ear. "Mother, do not leave me."

I scream, abandoning all pretense and dignity, bolting for the town. Tiny fingers dig into my shoulders, nails like claws, piercing cloak and shirt. The small shapes of feet imprint on my spine.

I scrabble at the clasp of my cloak, working it free. I fling my cloak from my shoulders, feet slipping and sliding in the snow.

The thing on my back is not flung free. It clings to me, heavier and more solid by the moment.

“Get off!” I swipe my hands behind me, fearing the bite of tiny teeth. I feel nothing but the increasing weight against my back, quickly becoming a leaden burden.

“I want to be with the others,” the rasping voice pleads.

I stumble, catching myself on my palms. The thing clutching me is heavy enough to drive my hands through the snow to the hard ground below.

“The earth,” it moans in my ear, leaving frost in its wake. “I long to sleep.”

I dare to look behind me.

A tiny creature looks back, frost-rimmed eyes inches from my own. Its round, pale skull is bare of hair, its body emaciated and fingers withered to the bone. The moonlight shines through its translucent skin.

With a sudden sinking twist of my stomach, I realize what it is. This spirit will not be satisfied until laid to rest in consecrated ground. Its weight will only continue to grow. I can only hope to reach the cemetery before it drives me into the ground or draws the warmth of life from my body.

“Take me!” Tiny feet dig into my back, as if it tries to spur a horse.

I push myself to my feet, swaying under the unwieldy burden of the ghoul.

My legs are tiring as I stumble past the houses on the outskirts of town, quiet and dark. Ahead of me, on the crest of the hill beyond the town, the church stands against the winter-grey sky.

There is less snow in the streets, my footing surer. I run, but my steps are heavy. My legs are cords of frozen wood. I fix my eyes on the church. It is my only hope.

The path beneath my feet curves upward, into the hill. Onward. Onward. There is no room for any other thought. The pricking of nails is indiscernible from the pricking of frost.

It is snowing again.

I stagger and stumble. The cold creeps into my core as the weight on my back begins to crush my ribs. The cemetery is ahead. Always ahead. I cannot breathe.

In the morning, they will find me frozen and dead.

Sudden warmth drapes over my shoulders. Large hands clasp my arms. "Reckless fool!"

Hope floods my veins. David. His hands pull me away, toward my own darkened home.

"Church!" I gasp, my burden hissing renewed demands. "The graves."

Blessed man, he doesn't question me. He sweeps my arm over his shoulder and clasps my waist, drawing me through the slough of snow.

My legs give out as we breach the edge of the cemetery. David hauls me up and drags me forward.

The ghoul on my back explodes into high shrieks, toes scrabbling in excitement. "Here! Here!"

I fall to my knees in the graveyard. The claws leave my shoulders, bloody holes in their wake. The ghoul leaps down, plummeting through the snow with a faint puff.

David recoils as he catches a glimpse of it.

"A myling," I gasp, feeling light as the snow without my terrible, precious burden. "It will trouble no one else." At last it will sleep.

David understands. "When the stream thaws, we must search for it and bury it."

For the myling means that a child's bones lie beneath the bridge.

994 words.