

Cancer

A *Husk* Love Story

JL Williams

Sewer grates belched methane fumes as the underground furnaces kicked on. The morning had a chill in it – a reminder of how February mornings used to feel before radiation choked the life out of the world. The steamy mist was broken by a void in the shape of a man, walking slowly. A less sensitive person might not have seen him, and that was the way Jack liked it. Unless he made his presence known, there was nothing about him that wanted to be noticed – a character trait that came in handy in his line of work.

It happened that this morning was one in which being noticed was important. His destination was an alley on the north end of the city, and before he reached it, he pulled a tarnished silver lighter from his pocket, and lit a cigarette. This was his way of drawing attention to himself: anyone watching him would know what he was immediately, once they noticed that he didn't exhale. He didn't breathe at all.

There were men in the alley. Three of them, crouched around what looked at first to be a pile of garbage. By the needless caution with which they moved, Jack could tell they were ex-police, doing what they knew to do. This was a crime scene – Jack didn't need to see it to know that – and these men knew the rule: don't disturb the evidence. Their detached calmness in the face of whatever they were seeing told him they were experienced. They'd seen this kind of thing a hundred times. Jack had, too. One of them – Detective Burns -- turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow. “Kasey?”

Jack nodded casually. “Jack. Just Jack. I'm a crime scene specialist.”

The man stared at him for a few seconds. “Boss said that. We were wondering what makes you so special.”

Jack reached into his coat and pulled out a flashlight. Pointing it at his face, he clicked it on. His head disappeared until the flashlight was clicked off again. The man raised both eyebrows this time. “Christ. You're...”

“Dead,” Jack said flatly. “Mostly. I'm a ghost.”

The other men regarded Jack carefully before going back to their examination. Burns took a deep breath. “Okay, so you're a ghost. Big deal. It sucks that you're dead, but that doesn't explain why the boss wants you here. I know *I* don't.”

Heavy footsteps behind Jack, accompanied by the smell of bad cologne and a voice that sounded like it came from inside a meat grinder. “He's here because I asked him to be, and that's all you need to know. Is there going to be a problem here, Burns?”

Burns clenched his jaw. “Chief, I don't see a need for any 'specialists'. We're good cops. We've dealt with homicides before.”

Chief Davis made his way past Jack and got right in Burns' face. Jack was losing his willingness to be here, but he didn't move. Davis was a friend. “Burns, I don't give a good rat's ass what you think, or how many cases you've worked. If you'd like to go to the core and shovel molten slag for the rest of your life, be my guest. If you want to be a cop, then you work for me – and that means following my orders. Is that clear, or do you think the poor mangled woman in this alley should lie here and wait for you to get your head out of your ass?”

Burns had the look of a man who was itching to throw a punch, but he didn't. “Crystal clear, sir.”

“Good,” Davis said after a pause. “Now, Jack is here as a favor to me, and that's all you guys need.” He turned around and shot Jack a look of apology, which was ignored. “He's got some talents that --”

Jack raised his hand to silence Davis. He was sick of being on display, and put the focus back where it belonged. Besides, he knew as well as Davis did that the whole thing was bullshit: he wasn't here because the case required his special 'talents'. He was here because the case was personal. He could tell that just by the note left in his apartment:

Jack:
It's started again.
Davis.

Burns had every right to be pissed, and his dislike of ghosts was apparent enough. Jack was no stranger to being the target of animosity, but Burns had it backwards. He was the unnecessary one. For that matter, Davis didn't need to be here either, but he was a friend. Jack needed him to be here, to keep things grounded. The situation was too personal for Jack to handle alone.

He moved past Burns and closed his eyes before examining the scene. He already knew what he was going to see. When he opened them, the familiarity of it was almost comfortable. There weren't any surprises. He looked at the victim – a woman in her late twenties, fair-skinned, probably quite attractive before the killer got to her. Jack sighed. “Hi, honey.”

Burns made a noise. “Can the vic hear you, Jack? Is she, you know – like you?”

Jack mumbled, his eyes scanning every detail of the grisly mess. “I wasn't talking to the victim. The victim's gone.”

Burns was confused. “Then who --”

Davis was about to cut him off, but Jack's voice beat him to it. “The victim's name was Rosie. Before you ask if she told me that, she didn't have to. Her name tag is in the pocket of her apron. Other than the fact that she has brown hair, she's the same as the other six victims: female, late twenties, slim figured. She worked as a waitress – a job that was once considered minimum-wage, before the idea of money disappeared -- and then she just kept doing it, maybe because she liked it. She lived alone. There's no wedding ring, nor any indication that she wore one.”

“Tell us something we *don't* know.” Burns was clearly unimpressed.

Jack barely heard him. “The killer is an 'eel' – a shape shifter. Like the previous victims, Rosie's face is twisted into a look of horror, and her eyelids have been torn off. The killer wanted her to see what was happening – to watch herself be disemboweled. There's no evidence of a struggle – either Rosie was paralyzed by fear, or the killer restrained her somehow – there's bruising on the wrists and ankles that would indicate she was held – or tied – down. The heart was ripped out, but it's not here – that the killer keeps as a souvenir.” Jack paused a moment, letting the details sink in. “Rosie suffered, but her lungs were punctured, so she couldn't scream. When she finally died, the killer burned out the eyeballs – it's how eels feed on the living. Rosie's soul is gone. The killer... ate it.”

He stopped talking, and after a moment he heard Burns' voice. “Jesus Christ. Ghosts and cannibals.”

Jack lit another cigarette, mostly out of habit. “It looks like a bloodbath, like a mindless, unprovoked attack, but it isn't. Like the others, this one was a mercy killing – at least, it always starts that way. Other than being female, the one thing that all of the victims have in common is the slight necrotizing of the skin.”

One of the other cops spoke. “Red cancer.”

Jack nodded. “The beginnings of it, yeah. The killer believes that by killing them, she's putting an end to the misery they'll suffer later. In the midst of it, though, anger overcomes her, and she butchers them.”

“You said 'she',” Burns piped in. “The killer's female? That doesn't seem right. Most serial killers are male – especially when the victims are all female, all of the same age and build. Everything would indicate a particular taste, wouldn't it?”

“Ordinarily, yes. But not this time. You asked me who I was talking to earlier, didn't you, Burns?”

“Yeah, I did. You said 'hi, honey.' I wondered who --”

“The killer,” Jack insisted, without a hint of emotion in his voice, “she's female.”

“How do you know that?” Burns smirked. “You ghosts know each other? Haunt the same places, maybe?” He scoffed, but a quick scowl from Davis kept him from opening his mouth again.

“Because,” Jack replied, “the killer is my wife. We – I – have to stop her. I just don't know how.”

—2—

Valentine's Day, 2000.

A slightly younger, more vibrant Jack is winding through the alleys to avoid being seen. The thousands of rats that populate this area steer clear of him, and stare at him with beady eyes. Their expression is one of envy – Jack moves through the urban refuse in the same quick-but-cautious manner as they do – only better. Jack's been through this area before. It's his route.

He runs so quickly that he forgets to pace his breathing, and has to stop for a minute to cough into his jacket. He's trying to be as quiet as possible, but years of heavy smoking have given him an unshakable wheeze. In his head just now, he's cursing himself for ever having started the habit, and at the same time wishing to God that he had one. His left hand clutches something small, wrapped in newspaper. He can't let anyone know he has it, because they'd steal it, just like he did not more than fifteen minutes ago.

Not that it has any monetary value, mind you – not with the world in the state it's in – but most people haven't caught on yet that if it has no practical purpose, it has no value. The small, square thing that Jack clutches so tightly is, in the new world, utterly worthless – but to him, it's the most important thing in the world. His essence, the very reason for his being is encapsulated within this tiny box. It is his talisman, the source of his power. Without it, he is nothing.

Jack had to do a lot of negotiating to get his hands on it, too. He knows people in specific places – people who know things, people who can get things. Jack's been a private investigator for a year now, and it pays to be connected to the less desirable parts of humanity. Jack hasn't done much detecting lately, but he's still in good with a lot of bad folks. Especially Clutch – the man who got Jack the thing he needed. Clutch was a good guy, if you were a sucker. Jack wasn't a sucker. He was, on the other hand, a thief. Clutch wanted too much in return for it, so Jack snatched it and ran – a very bad move on his part – and now he has to run.

At the end of the alley, Jack darts through a narrow passage in the older commercial sector, where the office buildings are made of red brick and placed entirely too close together. This is a good thing: if he works his way halfway through, he becomes nearly invisible to anyone on either side. The perfect hiding place. For a second, Jack pauses there in that blind spot, and thinks to himself that it would be cool to have the power to vanish, just like a ghost. To be a permanent blind spot, noticed only when he felt like being noticed.

There was one person, though, to whom Jack never wants to be invisible. He makes his way through a metal door with the word MAGGOT crudely spray painted on it, and descends a staircase to a basement. Two rows of old Christmas lights mark the passage, and when he reaches the bottom he can see Erin sitting there on a ratty couch, wrapped in a knitted blanket. Once he's looking at her, he forgets completely that he's out of breath. He only knows how beautiful she is, even wrapped in frayed wool with dirt on her face, under a string of old red-blue Christmas lights.

She smiles at him, but her eyes are shining like wet dimes. She's been crying, but her smile is clearer than any impulse he might have to ask her what's wrong. She doesn't want to talk about it. Jack's return smile says all right, sweetheart... we won't talk until you're ready, and he sits beside her, brushing a spiral of strawberry blonde hair away from her face. He feels guilty, but he's always thought her ten times more beautiful when she's been crying. He stares at her for a long time, lost in her, and realizes with shame that she's hurting, and he's taking pleasure in it. He feels like an asshole, but she doesn't show any signs of offense. She's staring at him, too.

The second shameful realization is that Jack hasn't said a word to her since he got here. Before he has a chance to rectify that, it's her voice that cuts the silence. "So... what's that you've got there, Romeo?"

He blinks in confusion, and snaps back to reality with a devious look on his face. "Wouldn't you like to know?" He thrusts both hands behind his back while she throws the quilt to the floor and mercilessly tickles his ribs. He can hold out for a long time, but doesn't intend to. She's laughing, and that trumps crying any day of the week. Especially today.

After a few minutes of undefended torture, he finally hands over the small treasure, and she waits a minute, shaking it against her ear. "Can I guess what it is?" She's got real anticipation in her face, even though Jack suspects she probably knows what's in it. She was always good at figuring things out. Jack thinks she would make a much better detective than he, but she likes the puzzles and clues a lot more than the hours and the risks. He nods, urging her to play her little guessing game.

"Umm... a porsche?"

He laughs, shaking his head. "Sure. Like Dick Tracy here can afford a porsche. Try again, Nancy Drew."

She snickers. "Nice cross-reference, Sherlock. Now let's see..." She holds the tiny thing up to her eyes, peering at it for any rips or holes. "Is it... candy? Because you know, if it is, you sure went El Cheapo this year." This has him smirking again, and he raises an eyebrow at her. She shrugs. "Just as well. Candy just goes straight to my ass anyway."

Jack's hoping he took her mind off whatever she was upset about, but he doubts it. "Honey, maybe you should just open it." She sits up and applauds like a giddy teenager, shredding the newspaper and revealing a small, square box. It's covered in purple velvet, and her jaw practically hits her in the knees. "Well," he says, "go ahead. Open it." After a minute she slowly lifts the top off the box.

Inside is a diamond so big and shiny she can barely see the ring it's sitting on.

“Oh, Jack... it's so beautiful. It's just perfect.”

“No, Erin.” Jack takes it from her gently, and gets off the couch. Lowering himself on one knee, he takes her hand, placing the ring slowly on her finger. He tilts his head up, and looks her dead in the eye. He's not smiling anymore. Now he's utterly serious – a vibe that always makes her a little nervous. Not tonight, though. “Now it's perfect.”

The rest of the evening is passion. Jack's present is her body next to his in the dimly lit bedroom, warm and soft. Her hair cascades over his chest in an ocean of curls, and he sleeps more soundly than he has in forever – at least until he awakens in the middle of the night to hear her slow, quiet sobbing. He turns to put his arm around her, and hesitates.

There's a dark spot on her shoulder that he didn't see earlier. A patch of discolored skin, like a bruise. Was that there before? It had to have been. Jack thinks back to earlier in the night. Did she fall when she jumped on him? No, this wasn't a bruise at all. He examined it carefully, his keen eyes moving over it inch by inch. This was something else. Something awful.

“Oh, God... Erin, you're infected! Why didn't you --”

She can't hold it in anymore, and the dam bursts in a typhoon of wracking sobs. “I'm so sorry, Jack... I didn't want to ruin the evening, and I don't know what to do. Please, Jack... just hold me, please...”

He puts his arms around her, and fights to keep his own tears from spilling. Valentine's Day will never be the same again.

—3—

Jack sat on a rusty barstool, and pounded back his eighth glass of scotch. The glass made a knocking noise on the bar, prompting a surly hulk of leather and long hair named Gus to refill it, which he did without speaking. “The Wailer” was a converted warehouse on Fifth; before the world went down the toilet, the building was owned by Gus's employers, who used it to store illegal weapons and drugs. The place reeked of gun metal, which fit well with the *don't look anyone in the eye* atmosphere.

Like most of the regulars, Gus didn't say much. He didn't need to, because he knew what people wanted when they came in here: they wanted to grab their sorrows by the throat, and hold them under an ocean of booze until they stopped kicking. Jack didn't say much either – the first night he showed up, he sat at a stool, looked Gus dead in the eye, and said “Jack. Scotch. Neat.” That was three years ago, and the two hadn't spoken since. Their dialogue was a subtle language of nods and glances, which they'd perfected over time.

People didn't pay for their booze in the Wailer. They drank for free, provided they contributed something. Information, security, work, entertainment, it didn't matter. If you put in, you drank. Fail to deliver, and you're out – and since the owners had cornered the market on vice, there was nowhere else to go. People prized this place, and would do anything to make sure it didn't go anywhere. Jack played the saxophone on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Today was Wednesday.

He'd been at the bar for about four hours when Gus cleared his throat, and Jack glanced up to see him cock his head at the main doors. Detective Burns' pudgy frame eclipsed the entrance, the bulbous tip of a cheap cigar poking out of his unshaven maw. For the first time since he'd first set foot in here, Jack spoke, which made Gus pause a moment in subtle surprise.

“Fuck.”

Jack's instinct was to vanish before Burns saw him, but the bar had a 'no powers' policy when it came to ghosts. Besides, it was too late. The fat prick was already making his way over. Jack did what he could to pretend he didn't notice, even when Burns parked himself on the adjacent stool. “Evening, Jack.”

“Put it out.”

Burns stared blankly at him. “Sorry?”

“The cigar,” Jack said without moving. “Put it out. It's bothering me.”

Burns scoffed. “I don't think so, pal. You bother me in general, so I guess we're even.”

Jack didn't say anything. He didn't need to. All he had to do was glance over at Gus, who'd been watching from behind the bar. Gus strode over, plucked the cigar out of Burns' mouth, and put it out on his tongue. "Problem?"

The look on Burns' face told Jack the message had been received. This was Jack's territory. "No. He'll have a drink. Bourbon, rocks." Gus nodded and poured the drink.

Burns was stunned. "How did you know I drank --"

"I know a lot of things. What do you want, Detective?"

After a deep breath, Burns said, "Davis told me I could probably find you here. We need you to provide a profile of your wi – of the killer. It would help us understand what our next move should be."

"Nothing to profile," Jack said. "You're not going to catch her. I am."

Burns' face was turning red. "Look pal, I don't like you, and I don't like this case. Something about this whole thing doesn't add up, and I'm willing to bet my left nut that you're in on it somehow. I don't know what you did, but those women are dead because of you. It's your fault, Jack. And unless you want to let us in on what the hell's going on here, you're my prime suspect. Got it?" He got up, finished his drink, and made to leave until Jack's hand shot out and grabbed his arm.

"Sit down, Burns. I'll tell you what you want to know." He waited for Burns to take a seat before going on. "You're right. Those women are dead because of me. It's my fault. But you don't understand. You can't."

"Try me."

Jack swallowed the last of his drink, and watched as Gus refilled it for the ninth time today. "You ever been married, Burns?"

The detective nodded. "Nineteen years. She left in '98. Some crap about 'finding herself', though I still don't see why she needed my best friend to help her find herself. Their loss, I guess."

Jack continued. "Erin was the best thing that ever happened to me. I proposed to her on Valentine's Day, four years ago, and I promised her that no matter how bad things got, I would always be there to protect her. To take the pain away. Every day I took care of her, watched her waste away into nothing. I used every resource I had to find a cure – even a treatment. Anything to make things better for her, but there was nothing. I couldn't do anything but sit there and hold her hand while the cancer went through her like a swarm of bees."

Burns took a hard drink, trying to push away feeling like a heel. "You were both alive back then?"

"If you could call it that. The world was over. Everybody was dying back then, little by little. Some faster than others. The point is, I made a promise to my wife, and I broke it. And now, because of that, I've caused seven deaths. Deaths that could have been prevented, if I'd just --"

"--Just what?" Burns cut him off. "Look, the cancer took a lot of people. There was no cure back then, and we don't know anything more about it than we did before. There was nothing you could have done. So, what – now she's killing people to get revenge for you not being a miracle worker? Is that it?"

"No, not exactly." Jack took a drink, and then a long pause as he swirled the Scotch around in the glass. "She wants me to stop her. To end it. To do what I failed to do the first time. I have to destroy her... probably both of us. "

Burns wanted to come up with something to say, but he was too uncomfortable. After a few minutes of silence, he gestured to his glass, and Gus refilled it and gave him a clean, very expensive cigar. Burns then looked over at Jack, and said the best thing he could think to say.

"Women. What are you gonna do?"

It was horrible. Seven deaths, all innocent people, and despite himself, Jack laughed. The two of them spent the rest of the night in silence, brooding and drinking.

June, 2000.

Jack's been sleeping in a folding metal chair for days, refusing to leave her alone. Things are always so much harder when she wakes up and doesn't see him there. Her quiet moaning in the middle of the night has awakened him again, this time from a dream of long ago, a time when he remembered what being happy felt like.

He can barely recognize her now. The red curls are gone, the last strands of them withering to the floor a few weeks earlier. Her skin is shrunken and stretched over her body like cling wrap, torn and cracked and yellowed. Her lips, eyelids and ears have shriveled and fallen off. Infectious boils and scabs cover most of her body. Jack has to sponge them off with warm water. When she moves, they ooze.

Her eyes are covered in a wet mask of gauze that Jack has to replace every few hours. She's lost most of her teeth, her mouth so riddled with tumors that she speaks in mumbles and screeches. Jack's the only person who can understand her, which doesn't help. When she speaks to him, her voice is a flurry of curses and accusations.

It used to hurt, but Jack accepted that this was the disease talking, and not the woman he loved. There were periods in the beginning when she would smile at him, and they would hope together. It was hard, taking care of her for so long without being acknowledged, but every so often she'd remind him she was still in there somewhere, underneath all the sores and infections and hurtful things she'd say. That was his anchor – to know that no matter how horrible she was to him, it would all be better in the end. They'd beat the disease together, and he'd have his Erin back. He promised both of them he'd make that day happen.

But it never came. Within months, she'd deteriorated to the point where she couldn't get out of bed anymore. Her feet and hands gnarled into useless claws, and she dropped so much weight that she couldn't walk under her own power, even if she wanted to. She was an infant – a screaming, dirty baby for him to clean up after. She swore at him, spit at him. Said awful, hateful things – and her occasional reassurance was rarer and rarer, until Jack didn't hear it at all anymore. All he heard was mindless raving about how stupid and useless he was.

And after a while, Jack knew she meant them. There was a day, Jack didn't know when, exactly, when the woman he fell in love with was gone, and in her place was this ungrateful, hideous creature that he could barely stand to look at. He didn't want the burden of her anymore. She wasn't getting better, and his endless search for a cure had left him with no answers – only temporary fixes that eventually ceased to take her pain away. He wanted to feel compassion for her, but all he's been able to feel since then is dread. He's already started mourning his wife, even as the monster in the bed wakes up coughing and barking like an animal.

Like he always does, he pushes the selfish thoughts down, forcing a smile. “Hi, honey. Did you sleep okay?”

She scrambles and flails, howling in pain as he struggles with her. He knows what she wants, and slowly takes the gauze off her eyes. The eyeballs are black and slippery. She mumbles something in a gravely version of Erin's voice. “Waagha.” Jack rises, going to the kitchen to bring her a glass of water, and two pills.

“Here,” he says softly, “I'll help you. I brought some painkillers, too.”

She allows him to tip the glass to her mouth, the water flowing over the lip and down her chin in dribbles. She sits up suddenly, screeching and flailing again. Surprised, Jack drops the glass to the floor, and the pills are lost under the bed in a sea of backwash and shattered glass. She screams at him in a string of jagged noises that no one but Jack would understand. “Fucking cold! I told you I don't like it cold, Jack! Jesus Christ, don't you give a shit about me at all?”

Jack stays calm, hoping this will pass. “Of course I do, honey. You know that. The heating tank is broken, so the water is cold. I'm sorry.”

She throws the covers off her, exposing what's left of her body. Jack hopes she doesn't see him cringe at the sight of it – it looks mummified, brown and withered. Skin stretched awkwardly over misshapen bones, covered in a map of wrinkles and boils. He can see her organs slithering underneath like bloated snakes. “Fuck you and your water tank! I'm fucking DYING, Jack, and you want to give me drugs? You want me to go to sleep so you can go outside and live your life, is that it?”

Jack's thin membrane of patience has a pinhole in it. “Erin, please stop. You're screaming at me. I love you, you know I do. I'm not going anywhere.”

She collapses in a blubbing mess on the bed, her head tilted upward to shriek at the ceiling. “Don't lie to me, Jack, PLEASE don't do that! I know what you think of me. You hate being here. You can't even look at my body anymore. Remember how you used to stare at me for hours, Jack? Now I'm disgusting and sick, and you don't want me anymore. I don't see why you stay, Jackie. If you're so unhappy, you should just go.”

“Stop it, Erin.”

She bolts upright again, her dead eyes staring him in the face. “Why? We both know it's true. You can't stand me anymore. You think I'm ugly, and a stupid bitch for getting sick in the first place, don't you?”

The membrane snaps. “Enough!” He throws the folding chair across the room, and ignores the clanging noise it makes against the concrete wall. “I'm tired! I'm tired of being treated like a goddamn villain when all I'm trying to do is help you! You want to get better, then quit wasting your energy jumping all over me with your hurtful bullshit, and go the fuck to sleep! PLEASE, Erin, just lie down, and let me help you!”

She laughs. “You think you know what pain is? Fuck you, Jack. You really want to help me, then grow a pair and do what I asked you to do a month ago!” She's lying down now, laughing softly to herself. “DO it, Jack. You'd be doing both of us a favor, and you know it.”

Jack's really angry now. “No. I told you already, I won't do it. I can't. Don't ask me again.”

Her laughter dies out, and there's a period of long silence. She doesn't make a move in such a long time that Jack thinks she's finally gone, and he prays for it to be true – but her voice quashes his hope yet again.

“I hate you, Jack. You're a selfish pussy.”

He grabs his coat, and heads out the door. Outside, he can hear her low, desperate wailing, and he joins her with his own sobbing, head buried in his hands.

—5—

A chain of burned-out apartment buildings sat mostly vacant, populated by rats, roaches and vagrants. On the ground floor of a nondescript building on the corner, a pack of junkies fought over a vial of greenish slime. One of them uttered a few curse words and stumbled out the broken door, bumping into a dark figure on his way out.

“Sorry, Jack. Didn't see you.” He pushed his way past, withdrawal pain doubling him over as he walked.

“I get that a lot, Morris. It's okay.” Jack moved past the group and went up the stairs, a smoke hanging limply from his mouth, and a kerosene lamp in his hand. Behind him, a chorus of strained, nasal voices.

“Hey, Jack... you gotta smoke? Crust of bread, maybe?”

He ignored them as he always did, and went into the apartment where he spent the bulk of his time. Inside was a collage of photos and papers, stapled and taped to the walls. There was no furniture, save a dusty, ratted chair in the corner that he didn't sit in. Other than that, the space was empty.

The window was covered over with a black trash bag to keep the sunlight out. Jack didn't need a light – he saw perfectly well in the dark – but he lit the lamp anyway. He was expecting company, but he didn't hear them come in. He was busy studying the photos, like he always did. Every day for years, looking for patterns. Something to indicate where she'd strike again.

Six victims, brutally tortured. From first to last, the killer had become more violent. Angrier. Less concerned with easing their pain, and more intent of inflicting and prolonging it. “She wanted them to suffer,” he said to himself, thinking he was alone.

“We know that much.” Burns' voice cut through the gloom. “That is one pissed off bitch you married, Jack. What we don't know is --”

Before he could finish, Jack had him pinned to the wall, hand at his throat. His voice was calm, but there was a wrath in his eyes that made Burns wish he hadn't had that second cup of coffee. “Don't talk about her like that. *Ever*. This isn't my wife, you under-

stand? My wife is dead. This – thing – whatever it is, it's not her. Not anymore.” He released Burns and turned away from him. “Erin wouldn't do this. She wasn't--”

“Jack, look.” His eyes shifted around the room, scanning the photos. Jesus Christ, he thought, this guy's obsessed. Not that I blame him. He noted the arrival of Davis, who glanced at both of them suspiciously. “Jack, I didn't mean anything. It's just, you know.”

Jack nodded. “You're right, though. She is angry. I've been trying to find a pattern – anything that might show me where she's going to strike again, but it's not there. There's no telling who'll die next... but when it happens, there won't be much of whoever it is. All we know is that the victim will have the cancer, just like Erin did.”

“There's no way to determine who the next victim is going to be,” Davis said, “because the red cancer is random. How many women live in the city? Of those, how many are going to get the disease? Thirty, maybe forty percent? This angle's getting us nowhere, Jack. We're wasting time.”

Jack spun on his heel. “Don't you think I know that? Don't you think I've looked through these files a million times? There's nothing here, goddammit! I'm beating my head against a fucking *wall* and she's probably out there right now, tearing someone else apart because of me!” He tried to control himself, but he'd kept it in for too long. “I don't know what to do, Davis! I made a murderer out of her, don't you see? I *created* this thing, and it's killing people! Ripping them apart like wet paper! Do you know how much I want to stop her? To *end* this?”

Davis took a step forward. “Easy, Jack. I know. We all want to put her away, believe me. But we need to come at this from a different point of view. Start clean. Right?” He waited for Jack's nod of agreement, and continued. “Okay. Now, you said she was a – ghost, is that right? Some kind of ghost?”

“An 'eel',” Burns added. “He said she was an 'eel'.”

Jack nodded, lighting another smoke. “Yeah. She's an eel. Liquid nightmare, brought to life. I know, because the photos told me. If you look at the victims, they were all bound at the wrists and ankles, but there was nothing at any of the crimescenes to tie them to, and tying the limbs together would have forced the victim to curl into a ball. Hard to work with a subject that's tightened up like that, especially if they're not secured to anything.”

“So?” Burns was growing impatient. “So what? How'd she do it, Jack?”

“Tentacles,” Jack said. “Eels are the only type of ghost who has them. She held the victims down with her own tentacles, and went to work without fearing they'd escape.”

“Okay,” Davis said, “so we're dealing with an eel. How do you kill it?”

Jack paused. “I don't know if we can. Eels are living nightmares. They feed on your negative emotions, and as long as you're afraid of them, they survive, and get scarier. I don't know anything beyond that.”

There was a pause, and then a *CLIK* as Burns' lighter burst to life, causing Jack to flinch. Burns put his hand up to calm him, and puffed a cigar. “So if this thing's a living nightmare, can't we just... I don't know, wake it up, somehow? Interrupt the nightmare and end it?” As soon as he said it, Burns wanted to kick himself. Stupid. You should go home, fatso. You're in over your head.

Jack glanced up a second, his eyes lost in thought. After a moment, he said, “I can try.”

Davis was confused. “What are you going to do?”

“I'm going to go home. To where she died. I haven't been there since... since that day. I think going there will give me some answers.”

Burns pulled out his gun, checking to make sure it was loaded. “We're going with you. You can't do this alone.”

“Agreed,” Davis added. “Knowing what she did to those women, there's no telling what she'll do to you. You need backup, Jack.”

Jack shook his head. “No. This isn't your fight, it's mine. I'm already... you know. But I won't let you guys get hurt.”

A pause again before Jack finally walked out the door and into the dark street, leaving Davis and Burns standing in the empty apartment, surrounded by a mosaic of crime scene photos and evidence bags.

“Screw this,” Burns spat. “I’m not standing around with my thumb up my ass. Time to go be a Ghostbuster. You comin’?”

Davis chuckled. “Why the change of heart, Burnsy? I thought you didn’t like ghosts.”

“I don’t,” he replied, chomping his cigar, “but like it or not, Jack’s my partner. You don’t leave your partner to swing in the wind. Are you coming or not?”

Davis pulled his coat tight around himself. “Right behind you – but I’ll drive. I’ve seen you in action -- you’re crazy.”

—6—

September, 2000.

Jack looks like hell. He doesn't feel much better, either. But he's smiling.

He's smiling because of the power he holds in his hands. The cool, smooth metal of the gun is comforting. He's felt so weak for so long – emotionally drained and beyond exhaustion – for a moment he feels like he could move a mountain, and it makes him smile through all the pain and torment he's suffered in the months that have passed.

He's smiling because he's finally going to fulfill his wife's dying wish. Through the whole ordeal, he's done everything he could to help her, and she got worse. He put himself in danger countless times to get her the things she needed. The pills, the medical supplies, even the clean water, all of it useless against the horrible, ugly disease that is eating her from the inside out. With this gun, he can end it in less than a second. She'll finally be at peace.

Mostly, he's smiling because he can't wait to do it. The bitch needs to die, and he hates her so much that the thought of killing her is making him genuinely happy. He hasn't been able to sleep in weeks, for fear that she'll wake up in the middle of the night and attack him. God knows where she summoned the strength. She's bitten him, slashed him with gnarled, yellow fingernails. Stabbed him in the arm with the IV needle a few times, always hurling curse words and garbled curses at him. Torturing him on purpose, and descending into a fit of insane hacking giggles. She loved to torture him, because she knew he'd never retaliate. This would never end, and there would be no peace for either of them. Only sleepless torment, and the knowledge that she would never stop until he got the balls to put a bullet between her oily black eyes and shut her up.

Today's the day. No more guilt over not having a miracle cure. No more shame over hating her, no more forcing himself to kiss that leathery, scabbed-over forehead and utter words he didn't mean. No more choking down a mouthful of bile as he lifted her slick, infected carcass to change the bedsheets. No more ugly, selfish rationalization about how she'll get better if he just endures one more day. No more lying to her, and no more lying to himself.

It didn't take him long to get the weapon the night before, but it took the rest of the night to find a bullet. It was the first time Jack's been away from her overnight since the cancer was diagnosed. She's going to be horrible about it, accusing him of abandoning her, calling him all manner of awful things. Spitting, snarling at him. She might even summon the strength to hurl the bedpan at him like a disgusting Frisbee.

But it won't matter, because he'll walk in, point this steel talisman at her, and focus all of his white rage at her in a flash of thunder. It'll finally be over, not because he's finally let go of the woman he loves, but because he just can't take it anymore.

He's enjoyed the euphoria of it long enough, he decides. It's time to get it done. With a final deep breath, he slowly turns the knob and walks down the stairs.

The first thing that hits him is the smell. It's so powerfully wretched that his eyes immediately flood, and he fights the urge to gag. “Erin,” he says through a fit of coughing, “I’m sorry... I know I was out late, but I got something for you... oh, God please don’t be angry with me...”

He expects her to cut him off, but she doesn't. When his vision clears, he pulls the front of his t-shirt up over his nose and mouth to keep his breath. “Erin? Are you awake? We need to talk, hon--”

His words are cut short by the scene in front of him, causing his mouth to open in a flood of screaming that he doesn't notice right away, and won't be able to stop for awhile.

He's screaming because he's never felt so disgusted in his life. The bedpan's been dropped to the floor, and there is human waste covering almost every wall. Clearly she awoke in the night and erupted in a fit of rage at his absence. The entire apartment is painted in it. Through his screaming, Jack's gag reflex gets the best of him, and he vomits all over his shirt.

He's screaming because she's not in bed anymore. She really must have been angry, because she tried to get out of bed to go after him. Her body lies sprawled on the floor at the foot of the bed, limbs splayed out in impossible directions. Every bone he sees is broken, and there's blackened blood all over the floor, so infected by the greasy disease that it bubbles like lava, belching tiny clouds of hot death-steam. He screams for the pain she must have felt, both in breaking her poor, withered frame and in the frustration of not being able to get up again. For the last time in his life, he feels pity for her.

Mostly, he's screaming because she's dead, and her head is turned toward him in a burning stare of hatred. Left with no more living flesh to eat, the disease that gorged itself on her body has escaped out of its holes. Her eyes have ruptured like rotten eggs, gray matter and ocular fluid oozing from vacant sockets. Her other organs are a putrid stew in her exposed rib cage. He can't stop staring at her – it – for several minutes, and he can't stop screaming. This is nothing like the countless crime scenes he's been to. This is far, far worse. Her body isn't even human anymore.

Jack is huddled in a ball in the corner of his basement apartment, surrounded by pestilence. He's rocking back and forth, eyes wide open, staring at nothing. Tears of exhaustion and anger stain his unshaven cheeks, and his screams don't end for a long time. Holding his knees, he rocks back and forth for hours, slowly letting his mind unravel like a ball of string. He knows he'll go completely insane if he keeps this up. He knows if he stays down here for long enough, the cancer will slither into him and he'll suffer the same fate Erin did.

He doesn't give a shit. He's a failure. He couldn't end it for her. He couldn't even get his own sick justice. She's gone, and he's left to wallow in the mess like the coward he is. Maybe he'll do something, but not until he's done screaming.

When the wave of panic finally subsides, there is silence. Jack stands in his filthy apartment, barely able to keep from falling down with fatigue. He doesn't want to leave here, and he doesn't want to stay either. All he wants to do is sleep. He's so tired.

So tired.

It takes him a while to notice the gun in his hand, and he smiles. Before putting it in his mouth, there's a last glimmer of hope that his wife is somewhere nice, waiting for him.

Maybe the story will have a happy ending after all.

—7—

“Hay-zeus *Christ*, Davis,” Burns said through a mouthful of sandwich, crumbs dusting the torn leather seat, “your car is a mess.” He picked up a folded napkin from the floor, wiped his face with it, and threw it and the sandwich wrapper out the window. “I’d expect this kind of filth in my own car, but you? This is just sick, man.”

Davis didn’t answer. He was focused on navigating a Lincoln Continental through a narrow alley – a task he thought was like shoving a golf ball through a straw. The ocean of litter was overwhelming, though Davis still shot Burns a glare for throwing his trash out the window. Some people never change, Burns thought. “So, how do you know where we’re going? Jack tell you?”

“You don’t forget a place like that. Jack used to help us out before the shit hit the fan, taking cold cases, that type of thing.” Davis’ voice was strained. He was upset. “When everything went down the tubes, the first thing I did was start gathering my men. If we could keep the force together, we could – I don’t know. Maybe reclaim some order in all the chaos. You were on the list, and all the guys we had before.”

“So,” Burns said, “what took you so long to find Jack?”

Davis swerved around a garbage can, his eyes darting all over the alley, scanning for potential hazards. “I couldn’t find him,” he said. “I’d knock on the door of his place, but no one ever answered. He never mentioned that his wife was sick – hell, he never even mentioned having one until the killings started. When someone reported gunfire near that address, I went over right away, and found

the two of them dead.”

“God damn,” Burns said. “Jack said he couldn't bring himself to do her, so... what happened? He comes home, finds her dead, and then does himself? Or did he do himself first, and leave her to die later?”

Davis nodded. “No idea. Jack found me a lot later, and to this day he doesn't go into details. I didn't know what to think at the time. The place was an unholy cesspool. Blood and shit everywhere. Jack must have gone insane in that little room, watching her waste away like that. There was barely anything left of her, like she melted or something. I've never seen anything like it,” he said, parking the car next to a narrow corridor in the alley. Down about ten yards was a door that had the word MAGGOT spray painted on it. “And I've seen a lot of freaky shit, Burns. Not the least of which is you eating.”

Burns raised a stout middle finger. “Yeah. So, what do we do now? Wait for Jack to come back out?”

Davis gestured at the locked door. “Don't ask me, Burnsy. This is your sting, remember? You were all gung-ho about covering your partner's back, so it's your call. Do we go in like cowboys, or wait here?”

Burns took a minute to think it over, and with a deep breath said, “We wait. Jack comes out, we pow-wow. Anything happens before that, we go in.” He opened the window, and lit a cigar. “Besides, I don't want to go in there. No telling what kind of shape the place is in.”

Jack stood just inside the doorway for a long time, frozen at the top of the stairs. For years he'd avoided the place, for fear of what it would do to him. After the awfulness that he had escaped, he found himself wandering the empty streets of the city, a vacant spirit with little memory. He knew his name, and that he was a detective. He remembered that he was in love with a woman, and that she had died – but beyond that, a heavy cloud of fog obscured everything else. He had no home, no past. He was a ghost named Jack, and that was all he knew, other than that a certain area of the city, specifically the basement apartment in which he now stood, was OFF LIMITS, and he could never go there. That place was the foulest, most horrible thing in the world. It was his Hell, and he must do everything in his power to stay away.

When people started dying, Jack's nightmares began. He never really slept anymore – part of the package of being among the 'restless dead' – but whenever he closed his eyes for too long, there would be a face staring at him from the back of his eyelids. An awful, leathery face that laughed at spat at him, black sludge oozing from the eyes. It was always there, taunting and tormenting him, and he had no idea who the face belonged to, or why it hated him so intensely.

He could open his eyes and make it disappear, but there were other things, too. Triggers in the world that would terrify him for no reason. Fire, no matter how small, scared him. Even the glowing ember at the end of his cigarette made him uneasy, and open flame was enough to make him run like a scared rabbit. Gunshots terrified him, sending him fleeing into dark corners where he'd hold his knees and rock back and forth, whispering gibberish.

When the killings began, Jack's memory sprang back to life. He remembered everything in grisly detail, right down to the horrid things he'd thought about the woman he once loved, and the bullet that tore through the back of his head. All of it played in his mind like a horror movie, repeating over and over again. And the face, now that he knew it was hers, was all the more terrible. He knew her. Loved her. Put his hands and lips on her with real, almost tangible passion – and in the end, he couldn't love her enough to release her from the prison of her disease. It was all his fault, all of it, and that was why he'd finally made the decision to come back. He had to face it – her – one last time, and do whatever it took to end it.

And now he stood at the top of the stairs, knowing what he had to do. He descended to the first stair, expecting to see what he knew would be there: the remnants of an ancient bloodbath, two bodies – once lovers – dead on a filth-soaked floor. The smell of rotting death still lingered in the air, but Jack didn't notice. He didn't see the bodies or the viscera, nor the rats and other vermin that had made homes in them. He didn't see the manic face staring back at him from the floorboards, or the fact that the gun still sat in Jack's cold, skeletal hand.

Nor did he notice the long, slithery tentacles pushing out from between the bricks in the wall, from out of the drain in the sink, and through the cracks in the ceiling. He saw something entirely different, and it gripped him so hard that he didn't even hear the door slam and lock behind him.

Hours went by, and the men in the car had fallen asleep. They awoke to the sound of a man crying – huge, wracking sobs, followed by a string of wails. Someone was in terrible pain; gut-wrenching anguish that forced Burns and Davis to bolt upright and immediately grab their guns.

“What the hell was that?” Davis sat up abruptly, ashamed of falling asleep. “Burns, what the hell --”

“It's time,” Burns said, throwing open the door and bursting from the car like a cannonball. “Help me get this door open.” They threw themselves against the thick door over and over, until rusty hinges whined in submission and wrenched from the wall. The men ran into the basement apartment, only to freeze in shock and revulsion at what they saw.

Jack was crying, and a creature – a ball of tentacles with mouths, black eyes and cracked, leathery skin – had him tightly wrapped in its coils. Tiny filaments sprang like white hairs from its center, wriggling through the air like frantic, hungry worms. They burrowed into Jack's eyes, ears and mouth, sucking greenish-black ooze from every hole in his body while legions of roaches, rats and maggots watched in awe.

Jack didn't struggle. He just lay there suspended in the air, sobbing in agony, oblivious to the two men who stood paralyzed with horror.

—8—

Present Day:

Somewhere in the deepest parts of himself, Jack knows that none of it is real. His last memory of the apartment is seared into the back of his eyelids, the whole grisly tableau replaying for him in gut-stirring detail every day for half a decade.

He knows the truth: in a hidden basement in the core of Hell, he'd watched the love of his life turn into a shrieking, vomiting demon until he could barely stand to think about her. He'd been tormented, pushed to the point of homicidal insanity. When he'd reached such a state of desperation that he was willing to destroy her, he'd waited too long, and come home to find her a rotting corpse on the filthy concrete. He remembered that.

He remembered the gun, too. The cold metal in his hand that made him feel like a warrior, and the hardness of the barrel against his teeth that made him feel like a failure. He remembered the deafening thunder of the discharge, and he even remembered the flash of agony as the bullet tore through the back of his head and put his slick brains all over the wall. All of these memories are burned into him, and there are no illusions that can wipe them away.

The part of Jack that is built on reason is well aware of these things, and will stay stubbornly aware of them – but as stoic as it is, it has no power. Right now, Jack's heart is in control, and it doesn't give a shit about ugly memories and terrible fates. It sees what Jack wants to see, and what the creature in the room wants him to see. In this room, the place where two conjoined souls had loved, hated and died, there are no rotted corpses on the floor, home to insects and rats. The walls and furniture are unstained by filth, and even the creature itself is different, not at all the horrid mass of organs and tentacles that outsiders would see. It wants Jack to see things as he would like to remember them, not as he should.

Jack wants that, too. He's frozen at the top of the stairs, overcome by the smell. The putrid stench of rotting meat is replaced by the gentle aroma of vanilla and buttermilk – the skin cream she used. The apartment is pristine: not so much as a cobweb or speck of dust, the whole vision bathed in the red-blue-white of the Christmas lights strung along the walls. The creature has been very thorough.

And what a creature she is, Jack notes. She sits on the ratty couch, her naked body wrapped in a blanket, under an ocean of perfect red curls. Her eyes penetrate him, and the two of them don't speak for a long time. Jack hears the door slam, but he dismisses it as a sudden draft. He's beyond entranced, standing utterly immobilized by how radiant she is. Every detail of her is perfect, right down to the imperfections. She's just as he remembers her, all those years ago. His knees fight to keep from buckling, and for the first time in forever, Jack has tears streaming down his face. His heart wants to believe they're tears of joy, but his mind insists that they're pure terror. When eternity passes and the dialogue begins, the two sides are still deadlocked.

“Erin,” Jack whispers. Not a question. A statement. A quiet proclamation of his favorite word. The only word that means anything to him.

“Hello, Jack. It's been a long time.” She's smiling, her voice sweet and sincere. She wants this to be as perfect as he does. “I've

been waiting for you.”

The sound of her voice makes Jack’s heart start beating again. Suddenly warm. He can’t think of the right thing to say, and while his emotions struggle with it, his reason sneak attacks. “You died,” he says. “I watched you die, for months. Then other people died, because of – because of us.”

Her cherub face has a slight frown in it, but her eyes never lose their kindness. “I’m sorry, Jack, for all of it. The hurtful things I said, the pain I put you through. After awhile I couldn’t control anything – it’s like the disease, I don’t know... owns me. I never would have done any of those things. You know that.”

Jack’s at the bottom of the stairs now, and doesn’t remember getting there. The wind is howling outside, smashing against the door. Any worse, he thinks, and the door will come right off the hinges. He nods. “I know. I knew I’d lost you long before everything got really bad. But I kept trying, just in case. I thought if I waited long enough –“

“We’ve both waited long enough, Jack.” She stands, and approaches him on long, perfect legs. She’s so alive, not a mark of sick on her. So pure. “Aren’t you tired, Jack? Don’t you want to rest? I know I’m exhausted. All I want is for it to be over, and you’ve come home, and it can be OVER, Jack. Isn’t that what you want?”

Jack’s logic is screaming, throwing itself against the walls of his mind in a desperate attempt to wrestle Jack’s attention. Jack knows it’s there, but ignores it. “God, Erin... I’m so tired. You don’t know how hard it’s been to separate you from... ‘it’. Every time I close my eyes, all I see is death – I can’t take it anymore. I want to be here with you, but –“

Her finger on his lips silences him. “Then be here with me. Let go of everything else, Jack. We were supposed to be happy, and all of that was taken away from us. All that joy we could have shared, ripped away by the world and its diseases. Be here, Jack.” The blanket falls to the floor, and Jack’s tears – both kinds – turn to torrents of awe. “Be here with me. Have all the joy we were meant to have. Please, Jack. For me – for us.”

Jack knows she isn’t real. As entrancing as the vision is, as much as it tears at his guts with all of its details, he knows that it’s all a lie, and that if he wanted to, he could dismiss it away and see the filthy, lying parasite underneath. He’d see that it wants to consume him, little by little: just enough to sustain itself and allow him to heal, so it can carry on eating. It wants him to stay here so it can feed, and Jack would be the only host it will ever need. He knows full well the danger he’s in, and the horrible fate that awaits him if he surrenders — but Jack’s heart just can’t bring itself to break any more, and he kisses her anyway. He wraps her in his arms and hugs her so tightly that he can feel her ribs straining, kissing her so hard that he can feel her teeth against his own. A blissful warmth envelops him, and he’s afraid, but her hands and lips and curves insist

it’s okay Jack, I love you more than anything, please just hold me and no one will ever hurt again, I promise

and he believes. He knows he’s got no other choice, and nowhere else to go. Nowhere else he’d rather be, so he closes his eyes, and surrenders. On the back of his eyelids is a new vision: random flashes of memory, from times and places when the two of them were most happy. Birthdays, holidays, late nights in dark movie theatres with wandering hands and hungry lips. He sees her vulnerability, her strength, her fight to survive against impossible odds – a fight she eventually lost.

He sees the last moments of what she saw before the cancer took her completely and she slipped away into the darkness. In her eyes, a brief flicker of sorrow, and then that same, gentle kindness that she gave him whenever she saw him walk into a room. She left him the same way she always greeted him: with love, and understanding. Her last words mingle with those of the creature as it makes love to him, their souls forever intertwined.

“I love you, Jack.”

And that’s when Jack starts to bawl. All of the emotions he’s been carrying for years; all his pain and unshakeable misery, all his grief and guilt and shame, bursting from him in an unstoppable flood. The last sound he’ll ever make is a warcry before his emotions slaughter his logic and reason. He can hear the door rip from its hinges and crash down the stairs, but he doesn’t care.

I’m so sorry, Erin... I’ll never leave again, I swear to GOD I’ll never let anything hurt us I love you so much...

Jack can hear new voices in the apartment: Davis and Burns. He knows they’ll try to kill the creature and save him, but he knows they can’t. Its need – their love – is too strong. Nothing can break what they have; not bullets, not cancer... not even death.