



Forward

Greetings, and welcome to my laboratory—the place where I create cauldron-bubbling fables and monstrous tales from a bevy of ingredients too horrifying to comprehend.

To be honest, I don't believe I've ever written a story about monsters except for “Tinfoil Bullet” featured in *Monsterthology 2*, and it's not included in this collection. So why am I talking about it? I don't know. What I did include is a gathering of short stories and flash fiction that I've written over the last few years.

Although this is not a Halloween collection, a few of the stories revolve around the spooky holiday—the best holiday, in my opinion. “The Pumpkin Carvers,” “Smiling Jack,” “Bonnie,” and “That Time of Year,” celebrate All Hallows Eve in all its orange and black glory.

A few other themes you'll find here range from a creepy family that arrives at a boarding house in “The Boarders,” a businessman who decides to date a ghost in “Dinner, Drinks, and Ectoplasm,” and a possessed priest who hunts his parishioners during his nocturnal hours in “Lynn,” to name a few. Many have been sitting on the shelf for some time, so I decided to release them all in one place to further implement my plan of world domination by poisoning the masses.

I'm currently working on more ideas to rot your mind. And as my father used to say when I was a kid, “Phil, stop watching those horror movies. They'll rot your mind.” I didn't listen.

Be on the lookout for my upcoming novel, *The Poe Predicament*, released by Foundations Publishing, and also *Worst Afterlife Ever*, published by, well, I'm not sure yet. But

I'll keep you posted on that. You'll find the first few chapters of those two novels in the back of this book. Enjoy, and I love feedback, so drop me a line and let me hear your thoughts.

You can get in touch with me on my website at www.philthomas.net and sign up for my mailing list so I can further control your mind. You can email me at extraordinary117@gmail.com. Follow me on Twitter at [@philthomas](https://twitter.com/philthomas) and Facebook at facebook.com/phil.thomas.50115

And if the mood strikes you, check out *What Are You Afraid Of?*—a horror and paranormal radio show that I co-host with author T. Fox Dunham. It airs on Friday nights at 9:00 on Para-X Radio, and you can find the complete episode list on our show's website at www.whatareyouafraidofpodcast.com

There you'll find interviews with wonderful guests such as Lloyd Kaufman, Katrina Weidman, Joe R. Lansdale, Grady Hendrix, Greg Bear, Daniel Krause, and many more. We'd love to have you—because the basement isn't full yet.

I hope you enjoy the collection.

Phil Thomas

October 2020

This book is dedicated to my mom and Colleen and Ryan and Jamey and Fox and another Ryan and Matt and that lady at the supermarket—I didn't set the fire on purpose.

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This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales, or organizations is coincidental.

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The Darker Season

(Based on real events)

Not a soul could be seen. The beaches were empty. The welcoming rows of storefronts were dark. The amusement rides were silent. Luke and his cousin Jonathan stood at the base of the Giant Ferris Wheel on Morey's pier and marveled at its stature.

One of the last relics of its time, its surroundings had been replaced long ago by flashier rides and attractions. Every few moments, the circular metal structure creaked and swayed, reminding them of its enormous presence.

It had been many ocean tides since he'd stepped foot on Wildwood's boardwalk. The last time proved itself too painful, and it took six long years for him to return comfortably. He decided to give it another attempt when his cousin, Jonathan, asked to accompany him to the Jersey shore on a cold January weekend. Jonathan had grown-up in the Midwest, having no access to the beaches or ocean, so Luke felt obligated to chaperone his cousin's first visit.

They checked into The Avalon Motel—a place he and his family stayed when he was growing up. After they located their room, the first one next to the bottom-floor office, they unpacked and locked up before heading to the boardwalk. Luke received an alert on his phone about an approaching snowstorm as they made their way from their temporary residence to Morey's Pier.

As they stood at the base of the Giant Ferris Wheel, listening to the gentle creaks, the first snowflakes began to fall. “It’s too bad we can’t ride it,” Jonathan said, admiring its circular height.

“It’s January,” Luke countered. “I don’t think either one of us wants to be up there right now.” They left the Ferris wheel behind and moved past the bumper cars and Sea Serpent and The Musik Express—with a k—approaching the main boardwalk.

Conditions escalated, and they agreed to head back to the motel to get warm. But as they exited the pier through a wall of flurries, Luke noticed a giant advertising billboard overhead that he’d not seen since he was a child. A cartoonish picture of Count Dracula and a giant bat rested between the forgotten words: *Now better than ever, Castle Dracula.*

“It can’t be,” Luke said, staring at the impossible, experiencing a spasm of denial. After he shook the uneasiness, they proceeded to a section of the boardwalk formally known as Nickels’ Midway Pier. The pleasant aroma of popcorn and hotdogs began to ride the gusty winds, and the distant sounds of organ music crept through.

Luke recognized the music to be Bach’s Toccata and Fugue. It was Dracula’s theme. And appropriate for this occasion because once the cousins reached the end of the pier, the same castle advertised on the billboard somehow welcomed them. Luke felt his energy plummet, and his vision pinpricked when he realized that Dracula’s Castle had rebuilt itself to its original grandeur.

Its blood tinted windows glared back at them as they approached the entryway to the castle. And the raised drawbridge echoed a release, crashing just inches from where they stood.

“Whoa,” Jonathan said. “Look at that!” But Luke didn’t share his cousin’s enthusiasm, especially when the statue of the infamous vampire rolled out on wheels and stopped on the

right-side balcony. The small light bulbs in its eyes flashed green and red while its arms stretched out, turning and pointing in Luke's direction.

"That's odd," Jonathan added. "Does this operate all winter long?" Since this was Jonathan's first trip to Wildwood, he wouldn't have known the difference, but Luke had visited the coastal resort every summer with his parents and siblings since he was five-years-old. And he knew that this was not only strange—but also impossible.

The castle had burned to the ground in the early morning hours of January 16th, 2002. Nothing was left. But here it was, existing on the anniversary of its demise, eighteen-years-later.

What did it want?

"Step right this way," a smooth voice whispered from somewhere. Luke craned his neck to the drawbridge, just as a nebulous figure in a black-hooded-robe and skeletal face-makeup materialized from the castle's entrance and made its way across the bridge. The grim reaper apparition seemingly glided on air, carrying a realistic-looking scythe.

Jonathan smiled and clapped Luke on the shoulder. "Hell yeah," he said. "We can kill some time until the storm passes." Luke shook his head and pulled Jonathan aside. He took a deep breath and whispered, "This building shouldn't be here."

Jonathan raised an eyebrow and glanced up at the castle. "I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but here it is."

"It means that the structure burned down almost twenty years ago."

Jonathan looked down at his cousin, and the expression on his face told Luke that he was losing his mind. "So, this is a ghost castle," Jonathan continued. "Is that what you're saying?"

Luke pondered the question for a moment, realizing any response would make him sound crazy. "Yes, that's what I'm saying," he replied, looking deflated. "There was nothing left."

“Luke,” Jonathan spoke up, “a torched castle can’t just reappear. What you’re claiming is impossible. I’m going in. You can either wait here or—”

“Gentleman,” the grim reaper interrupted, “the time is now.”

Jonathan flipped his hood up to curb the numbing sensation on his face and started toward the apparition.

Fate had dealt its ugly hand, and Luke reluctantly followed, seeing no other choice. Not only was he frightened, but a part of him was also curious. He had buried a secret long ago. A secret that he’d kept hidden for almost twenty years.

A range of childhood memories returned to Luke while they followed the figure across the bridge and into the first darkened room of the castle where a portrait of Count Dracula hung. His eyes were still, but they appeared to watch Luke wherever he went.

The ghostly tour-guide marveled at the portrait as if it were a showroom car display. He explained to Luke and Jonathan how the vampire had been unhappy with the current state of his castle. How boardwalk visitors now walk by like it no longer exists, ignoring it altogether.

The specter appeared to only look at Luke when it spoke, burrowing its kill-shot eyes into his. “The master is planning something big, I can assure you,” was the last thing he said before leading his guests out of the circular room and down a long hallway. It had been decorated to resemble a medieval castle, complete with suits of armor lined along the hallway passages, battle axes on the walls, and hanging chandeliers with dancing flames and phantom groans that lamented through the castle hallways. It was just like Luke remembered. The interior’s past had come alive, reverting to the way it had been.

At the end of the corridor was a skeleton sitting on a throne between two suits of armor, stomping its feet. It was obviously fake, probably constructed of plaster and paste. But after the

group passed and turned left, Luke heard its stomping pattern shift, as if it were standing and walking towards them. He decided not to check.

When they arrived at the half-way point, Luke encountered the same dark passageway that resulted in a panic attack as a young child, prompting his father to escort him out through the emergency exit.

In its smooth voice, the figure pointed at Luke and said, “Many a man and child have been reduced to tears at the sights and sounds of what we’ve experienced thus far. Isn’t that correct?” Luke felt white shock strike through his body. He didn’t know how the guide could possibly know a thing about him.

The reaper only answered Jonathan’s questions, and anytime Luke made an inquiry, he simply ignored him and continued with his duties. Uneasiness pressed down on him as they continued deeper into the heart of the castle, and Luke got the sense that he would never leave.

After a few more harrowing rooms—one of which required Luke to climb into Dracula’s rudimentary casket so he could experience how the legendary vampire spent his days—they exited via the drawbridge and into the continuing blizzard. Jonathan appeared to be walking on air from the experience, but Luke was just elated to have made it out in one piece.

Just as the cousins were about to emerge onto the boardwalk, the phantom spoke up. “We are not finished with our tour, just yet,” it seethed. “I must insist that you accompany me on the castle’s underground boat ride. It’s just right down there.” He motioned to a wooden staircase that descended to a moat where various paddle boats floated, attached to steel underwater tracks. There was no way Luke was about to push his luck a second time. “The master is waiting, just beyond the tunnel,” the reaper added.

Luke turned to Jonathan, who simply shrugged his shoulders and said, “Let’s do it, cuz. We’ve already gone this far.”

“Thank you for the tour,” Luke said to the phantom, “but I think we’ve already taken up enough of your time. We should get going.”

The looming guide stood stock-still, twisting the scythe in his bony hands. “Time is something I have plenty of,” it moaned. “I have too much of it, in fact. You must now come with me.”

Before Luke knew what happened, the phantom reached out and clutched his wrist with its bone-cold hands, squeezing into his skin until it felt as if his ligaments would tear. He attempted to pull away, but the reaper’s grip tightened, twisting and digging.

“Okay,” Luke relented, nodding and looking up into the ghoul’s blank eyes. “I’ll go with you.” The figure eased its grasp, allowing him to break free. Jonathan wore a grin, assuming that the reaper had remained in character for effect. Luke knew differently.

He felt it.

He concluded that if he took that ride, he would never make it out. Through thin breaths, he hung back from the phantom and quickly, carefully, explained his most guarded secret to Jonathan as they followed their escort down the stairs and towards the rickety wooden boats.

“Why are you telling me this right now?” Jonathan asked.

“Because I’ve never told anyone before. I have a feeling that—”

“That’s enough talking,” the phantom interrupted, turning to them, flipping the switch on the wall, snapping the ride’s motors to life. The boats swayed and vibrated on the steel rails, ready to make their departure. “Now enter the vessel.”

Jonathan glanced one more time at Luke and attempted to climb aboard. The figure held out a wrinkled palm. “Wait,” it moaned with soft-spoken intensity, moving his hand towards Luke, extending a bony finger. “Only Luke.”

“But,” Jonathan protested.

“I said, only Luke.”

Luke knew that he had never given his name, nor was it ever spoken in the reaper’s presence. But he fulfilled his destiny and willingly climbed into the boat, leaving Jonathan to wait by the entrance.

Terror sang in Luke’s veins as the motor sputtered, and the reaper guided them down the inky moat, past the lion’s head fountains attached to the castle’s stone wall. He only turned once to his cousin before the tunnel’s darkness consumed them.

Jonathan waited for hours at the castle gates. No Luke. He left the motel door unlocked that night, hoping he’d return. No Luke. He went back the next day, but nothing remained. No castle. No moat. No boat ride. No Luke. He thought about the secret his cousin had told him. At the time, it seemed ludicrous, but now there was no mistaking the truth. Castle Dracula hadn’t just accidentally caught fire; it was intentionally burned down by two adolescents. One of the teens responsible was a fifteen-year-old named Luke Briars. Adolescent clemencies only remain for so long before they eventually catch up.

And Jonathan knew that Luke and the castle were together, somewhere.

That Time of Year

It was the first day of October in the small coastal town of Rockport, Massachusetts, and the locals were hard at work decorating their respective properties. Styrofoam tombstones, cheap cardboard skeletons, and harvest displays began popping up all over. At the same time, their mayor, Paul Taylor, was busy transforming the old vacant library into a haunted house for the "youngsters," as he called them.

As the whole town gradually turned black and orange, Detective John Sturgis was unable to share their enthusiasm. His nineteen-year-old daughter, Cynthia, disappeared in late August while returning home from a late-summer party with her boyfriend, Rocco.

Sturgis always despised him and immediately placed blame on the delinquent by throwing him to the top of his suspects' list. Deep down, however, he knew that Rocco wasn't responsible. This was a phenomenon that repeated itself every autumn in his town. Like clockwork, a resident would mysteriously go missing, never to be seen again. The first being Lucy Chambers back in 2005. It was the only significant black mark on the community and the one thing the detective had dreaded for the last fourteen years on the force. And now it had become personal.

Five agonizing weeks had passed, and still no trace of Cynthia. If the past were any indication, those weeks would almost certainly turn into years, and his daughter would be just another victim on the growing list of statistics. As time slipped by, it had become more

challenging for Sturgis to function daily, so he took a leave of absence from the force to care for Cynthia's mother, who had suffered a full nervous breakdown after the first week.

On the second day of October, Sturgis was returning home from his morning coffee run and passed the spacious property of Mr. Pritchard, who had already unboxed all of his Halloween decorations and prepared his property two weeks prior for his favorite holiday. He had started with the interior before moving outside to his front lawn, where he established himself as the town's most elaborate decorator with scaled life-size replicas of zombies and ghosts and mummies and scarecrows, each with a disturbing depiction of torture or mutilation. Some of the creatures were carefully seated in vintage rocking chairs with others chained up or secured in padlocked stocks.

It was an annual occurrence that started shortly after Mr. Prichard had lost his wife to breast cancer. Still, every year since her departure, the townspeople could look forward to a new addition to his collection, which now equated to an appropriate fourteen pieces displayed behind his secured wrought iron fence—one decoration for each year that had passed.

The detective wasn't sure what had made him pull his car over to the side of the road that particular day to soak in the creepy atmosphere. It might have been fate or a low whisper in his subconscious, but as he left his car and walked to the front gate, he smiled for the first time since Cynthia's disappearance. The iron gate was unlocked, so he slipped in and circled around the property, admiring the goblin that sat along a tree branch, and the zombie that stood along the walkway, arms outstretched, seemingly searching for more brains.

An eerily familiar sight then caught his eye on the life-sized emerald witch shackled to Pritchard's tree. On the woman's left wrist was an elaborate tattoo of a black cat and the number 13 below it—the same tattoo his daughter had acquired earlier that spring.

As Sturgis entered the property and approached the witch, his skin pimpled at the realization that the arm wasn't made of plaster or fabric, but human skin. While sweat beaded on his forehead, he carefully pulled back the pointed nylon hat and lifted the rubber mask, laying his eyes upon the grey lifeless face of Cynthia. As he jumped back and assessed the other decorations on the lawn, he immediately concluded that these were the same folks that had delivered his mail, waited on him at the local supermarket, or fine-tuned his vehicle during annual inspections. They'd become a part of the twisted old man's permanent collection. He gingerly unmasked a tall ghost and scarecrow that were seated on a wooden bench, the familiar preserved faces of Bob and Donna Reilly slammed him like a steel girder as their unnatural grins and clouded sapphire eyes sliced back at him.

As he impulsively reached for his sidearm, he caught dead air, and a "click" sounded behind him. The officer spun and noticed Pritchard securing a padlock on his iron fence, a pistol tucked inside the waistband of his sweatpants. The old man grinned and slowly started towards him, cocking the hammer, aiming it towards Sturgis. "My displays are meant to be enjoyed from street level," Prichard said in a glassy voice. "I can't imagine what you must think of me." Sturgis remained stock still, only raising his hands slightly. "I'm really not as bad as you might think," Prichard continued. "My displays bring joy to so many people each year. All of the faces you recognize here; their sacrifice hasn't been for nothing."

Sturgis broke himself from a numbing trance, glaring at the old man through kill-shot eyes and whispered, "The witch here, that's my daughter, you son of a bitch." He sensed the rage coursing through his veins like poison. As a cop, he was sworn to uphold the law. But as a father, he wanted to kill this fuckin' prick.

Prichard lowered the gun at the realization. "You mean, you're Cynthia's father?" Sturgis nodded, his vision pinpricked, his fists clenched, and he knew that there would be no arrest made. There was no other scenario but to see the old man dead. "Oh my," Prichard added, "she was a lovely woman, and I'm sorry for your loss. But that is why I wanted her for my display." Prichard walked to the tree where Cynthia's body was shackled. "Look at her, resting so majestic, immortalized, and frozen in time. I think she can bring more joy in her resting place than she would otherwise. Don't you agree?" Sturgis felt something snap inside. He rushed towards the old man, hoping to commandeer the firearm and discharge a strategically placed bullet between his eyes.

The whole scenario happened so quickly but played out almost in slow motion. When Prichard noticed Sturgis lunging towards him, he raised the pistol, but not before Sturgis grappled his arm, twisting it back and slamming his wrist against the tree. The firearm broke from the old man's grasp and landed on the lap of Cynthia. Her body hunched forward despite the shackles as the men struggled. Sturgis palmed Prichard's face and slammed the back of his head against the tree—over and over.

As far as Sturgis was concerned, he wouldn't need a gun after all and was more than happy to kill the old man with his bare hands. After the fifth or sixth slam, Sturgis experienced an odd sensation on the nape of his neck, and then another on his top right shoulder

He craned his head and noticed a syringe dangling loosely from his flesh, the plunger depressed, its contents emptied. He made a desperate struggle to grasp the pointed instrument, but quickly comprehended he was unable to control his actions. His arms felt like fifty-pounds of rubber, and his legs lost all sensation, failing him, collapsing underneath, landing him on his back. He then stared straight up into the afternoon sun that beamed through the tree branches.

And the last thing that Sturgis saw was Prichard hovering over him before his world fell to dusk.

The detective's car was discovered three days later in a wooded area off of Route 9. For the rest of the month, Mr. Pritchard wore a sinister smile because that particular autumn, he'd acquired not only one, but *two* decorative trophies for his collection. He displayed them together.

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