

[To Download, click icon above, or right-click page and “save as”]

A literary tale:

FOUND*in*ATTIC

Gothic Horror Story
in the style of
EDGAR ALLAN POE

By Alan R. Graham

©1990

“Mum, I Found this in the Attic”

An envelope had scrawled upon it: Return to Sender, addressed to,

Ms. Lillian Drummond
The Ashfold
Credence Hill
Berkshire

The contents: A hand written letter which read as follows ...

142 Bent Lane
Ealing

23rd April, 1928

Dearest Lilly,

I have been fighting incessantly over the last few nights with this notion of contacting you, dislocating bed sheets in an effort to make up my mind, thoughts sweeping this way and that in what can only be described as a deadly waltz with destiny. My throat dry, though from a discourse which is oft times merely a whisper, I toss and turn amidst this tangle of material which carefully wraps me like a straight-jacket upon my mattress. I awake, if I were only sure I had indeed been sleeping, and scream silently into the disheveled madness of a room whose walls are illuminated by every gas and oil lamp I could find in this dingy flat I must call home; for I cannot bear to lay my head in darkness.

This sickness I have developed, not in any way linked to a known medical disorder, does not have any bearing on my decision to contact you. But I must tell you of it. It must, I have concluded, be of a cosmic kind, floating in solar winds from planetary system

to gaseous turmoil, plotting treachery and deceit upon the next unsuspecting galaxy in its path. The pain it inflicts is intense, but not strictly physical; there is pain in the interpretation of what one might assume to be reality.

I am weak, I always was. As a small lad every bug or fever known to man had rested for a while within the confines of my body, to sink their proboscis deep into those pink, fleshy walls, perversely; an act of supremacy, my body succumbing to those alien juices, halogens, rheums – whatever – almost willingly; I, the cordial host, welcoming guests to dine, to conceive, to flourish and to thus multiply. Yet I did not die, never once. Why, when so many others had had their lives dislodged from under them by the slip of a rug, could I not have been mercifully pronounced dead? Was I being groomed for greater things? Was there some higher, cosmic order deliberately keeping me alive..? A toy perhaps, a research vehicle lying here while probes and prying eyes penetrate my smallest orifices in the name of progress. Oh, yes, that had been done. But why mess with the mind? I could bear the physical pain, if that were all it was.

A fly alights on my eye ball to suck its surface dry, holding open my streaming lid with spindly legs, then to regurgitate its last meal upon my retina so that I may see... And thus I am forced to witness Hell: heaving doors and vile odors, appendaged walls, and a spewing forth of nonsense which corrupts my very soul. These visions must surely be a rare privilege to behold, peculiar to only those few like myself who have been deemed suitable; visions so extreme that forms otherwise hidden within the folds of normality become visible to me and only me.., in this, my wretched world.

Throughout the room, where I have now spent the last few months trying to make some order of the madness, not one thing lies in its place. Books surround my bedside, scattered with perfection. Some face down, others open and face up with pages folded asymmetrically, a jigsaw puzzle of wit and wisdom upon which I am afloat in my ship of sheets. Draws hang – half gaping at the ceiling, with clothes peeled out, drooping, like melting snow on

the branches of a pine – from an old oak chest on which beakers too tired to remain standing lie insensibly about an empty vodka bottle. Two smashed clocks linger illegibly beside one another on the floor in the far corner of this room, surrounded by empty cans of beans. And all around them have fallen, from two small cracks half way up the wall, flakes of plaster, like confetti at a funeral.

One object alone sits pure and serene, lost in this mayhem. It is as disturbing as it is alluring. It is my youngest daughter's birthday gift: Podgie the panda bear, which I bought her on the evening I ventured into the streets for the last time about a month ago. My wife, soon after leaving me, for fear that I might somehow influence our three children with my obsessive behavior, sent them to Bristol for private tuition. She has refused to retrieve the Panda, even though I have written more than once, saying it is inappropriate and need I be reminded how uncomfortable Julia and James will feel to have the whole affair “regurgitated”, especially by their own father.

I have no idea what my wife is talking about. What of little Deirdre if she doesn't get a present from her father? Alas, the Panda now sits on my bedside table beneath a creased and yellowing lamp shade. It stares at me and wonders what I am and what I will become and nurses me with tales of picnics in the grass and playing leap-frog, of tumbling down a bank into the purest pool of water, with our hearts pounding and our eyes screaming with delight.

Lately, however, these tales in which I take refuge have become untrustworthy, even deceitful at times. I fear my sickness is of a contagious form, and it will not be long before poor Podgie is as ill as I. I have noticed recently a flaw in the stitching and a baldness below the left eye. What follows must surely be a debilitation of the senses born of such hollow pain no creature should have the right to endure – stuffed or otherwise.

Sorry, I'm babbling again! But how can I make sense of an ailment which has no explanation, which came from nowhere save for the weeks and months in which sleep has denied me its ecstasy.

I do not fear death, I fear life. How long will I continue to be chained to eternity, dragged naked behind it across this terrain of agonising existence? My head is numb. Thoughts of relief bounce off an impenetrable barrier; my body too tired to crawl its way to the window four storeys up from the busy pavement and graciously throw itself to the hungry street below; my wallet too lean to afford the bullet required to disengage my mind from this torment.

...Oh, please... not again! Here come the needles. I know them and their subsequence well. Helpless, I wait, feel the flutters of anguish, even before those bluntly pointed objects make their move. Now pushing, they plunge deeper each time into the passages of my inside, jabbing – rhythmic in delight to cause such pain – somewhere within that empty gutter down below. The pain now gloats and bellows like a bucket in a shallow well, calling for my rectum to open... as but a mere trickle of colourless slime seeps into my pajamas.

Is this not a common illness Doctors! Tell me how..., how I can urge my heart – which changes tempo like a jazz quartet – to stop..., to end the piece? Yes, it fluctuates quite willingly, often falters for a while or two and I begin to lose consciousness. It feels so cozy; my eyes dilate, my neck chills and a purple cloud fills my entire cranium to bursting... only to have it all swept aside as quickly as it had swelled by one feeble pump of my emaciated heart. Death was spared me once again you might think, but you cannot possibly imagine a fate so hideous. I am crying out desperately for it but Death has no ears. 'Tis not I who should be spared this death, 'tis Death, apparently, who wishes to be spared of me!

Daylight brings no relief. I could hope that I might wake from this nightmarish envelope, but no such luck, still stuck, the morning bringing with it no horizon. Like an eager salesman in a carpet shop the festering sun eyes me up through a chink in the drawn curtains whose cheerful, floral pattern laughs at my distress. I shiver in the heat of the sunlight, my brow is damp and puckered though I cannot see – and do not wish to – the contorted grimace

which would stare back at me from the other side of silver.

Just once two weeks ago, or was it three, I did hobble down the darkened corridor of this old Victorian house – late at night when all sane tenants are asleep and oblivious to such terror as now befalls me – to peek at the faded, brown stained mirror hanging loosely above the sink in our shared and dirty bathroom facilities. I cannot hope to explain the vision that was set before me, but that I fell convulsing and drooling to the floor like an old dog having ingested rat poison hidden under a cupboard. Hours later I was brought around by the echo of a police klaxon slicing through the building, and managed somehow to regain control of my feet. I shuffled back to my room with one arm against the wall and my head tilted forwards for fear of being seen, my eyes filled with tears. What I had witnessed in that mirror was not me, yet it must have been for it was I who had confronted the reflection: a monstrous dripping mask. Who, me? Yes it was I, the eyes were mine - dear God to think, since then, what I must look like now as I sit here writing to you.

You must be wondering who I am, why I have written to you, and what a person of your situation could possibly do for such a wretched form of half-life. Let me tell you while I still have strength in this left hand of mine, the scrawls from which may hamper your interpretation of the narrative but which remain true. I beg you please to be considerate. If I should seem bizarre from time to time and lead from one thought to the next without association; should my pen descend the page in gibberish or lose control and slip awkwardly; it will only be my mind searching for strength to lay out the truth – as only I can see it – which sometimes appears to awful to recollect.

I will begin at the beginning. I can still remember how lovely she looked, though for most of the day I only saw the long mellifluous, fair hair pouring down her back like the Falls of Glomach. She sat three rows ahead of us and to the left, by the window overlooking the school yard. You must remember Jasmine, that glowing creature whose presence would light up the classroom

like a million stars each time she walked in. I doubt you would remember me, however, the small, eight year old boy with the bruised knee caps and the runny nose, frail and blank, just another useless head on a pair of spotty shoulders. I sat next to you once, remember? That time Engles was caught flicking a rubber band at the blackboard and was sent to the front of the class for a week. We had to exchange places and I was promoted to your row. I admired you, you were always admired – by everyone. You were just, that was your strength.

I can look back on those days however unhappy I was at the time – was it 35 or possibly more years ago – and still recall exact feelings, precise sensations, yet my memory of events and the bridges between them seem to have faded. So, too, have the faces which braved those moments, dissolved. Like yours, I must confess; I try but cannot draw certain features to the surface. Silly, somehow! And yet there she stands, Jasmine, and I can see every curve of her glorious frame, each fold of her dress, count each and every eye lash as clear to me now in my memory as she was then.

Have I jogged your memory? Please, I beg you to hear me out even if these events seem unfamiliar. Consider: it was along time ago..., but what is time, when memories like rainbows can arc across its distance and place one, as though it were today, in decades past. It would be too presumptuous of me to think that I, a mere slug in your garden of roses, should be etched in memory... anyone's! But Jasmine, surely she would be a blossom, a multi-coloured memory of quality sublime whose tongue outstretched from sweet nectar's depth demands attention of any mind, and whose luscious petals moist from dew call us when 'er we seek a favour on which to linger for a while. Well?

The day Jasmine did not show up for class was a peculiar one, not that I can say for sure whether it was raining or whether the sun had cleared the sky – that I remember a certain dullness, I can be certain. The odd thing was that our teacher – Ms. Haggard wasn't it, with the grayish brown hair streaked back in a pony-tail and a tiny squashed face – never once commented on her absence

and carried on as if all were present. Even after a week or so it was never brought to our attention as to the reason for Jasmine's sudden departure from school. I can still recall a feeling of heaviness, as if the classroom ceiling were much lower than before. No matter, a few days post I was subject to a voracious temperature and was bedded for two weeks, and upon my return of course, with only one week left of the summer term, I and all the other children had much too much on our minds. Sweet Jasmine was lost.

Once, during that summer holiday I think it was, we rode past her house; not a usual direction to take through the affluent neighborhood in which she lived – I think the carriage driver was avoiding a flood in Richmond – and I noticed the curtains were a different colour. We had been there before, on her birthday, and I distinctly remember the cast iron, spiral staircase in the library where we had all played King-of-the-Castle. You became the King and crowned Jasmine your Queen. Then, for one brief moment I was the happiest creature alive when she bent over the railing with her outstretched hand and touched my shoulder. I shivered. She smiled straight into my eyes and opened her lips with melodious rapture, proclaiming me her Royal Jester! I turned crimson; to this day I still have a persistent rash on my cheeks due to the moment when my blood must have boiled with that embarrassing honor bestowed upon me.

Year after year went by and not a trace of Jasmine. We all imagined she had moved away with her family, a frequent occurrence and not one of much concern to small children; which is precisely what happened to me in the year of my eleventh birthday. We never saw her again after that day in May, and doubtless no one since from that class of proteges. I had often wondered where she might be, what she might be doing and how she occupies her time: On some cruise, possibly, out in the Aegean Sea, mapping coastlines; or an archaeologist in pursuit of a lost city in the Andes, trapped for days in a canoe with diminishing supplies and fierce heat; her hair, though knotted by salty sweat, still radiant, her lips still moist, her eyes still glowing with thoughts of far off promise.

But this was not to be the case, I later learned and wished I never had. All those day-dreams and romantic scenarios where I had played the leading role and she my star, were to be blown away by a simple draft from my study door which caught me one evening last year while I was bent on finishing a proposal for the City Planning Commission.

It was dark outside my window, as it was in my study illuminated only by a single candle on the window sill to my left. I always worked with the curtains open and could no longer see the silhouette of our Sugar Maple in the terraced, back garden. The only sign that distance did in fact continue beyond my window pane was a spider busily constructing an invisible trap for those unfortunate moths lured to this corner of the universe by my flickering candle. The children were asleep and my wife was already in bed – probably reading *Wuthering Heights* for the seventh time. Abruptly, light from the corridor outside my study drew a line across my desk. I assumed that my youngest was having trouble sleeping, it was common at that age – she was only eight – and she had pushed open the door behind me, so I continued my work telling her to go upstairs and lie down with her mother.

I waited for the line of light to fade from my papers and a click from the door latch announcing its closure, but neither occurred. I repeated the earlier remark to Deidre and entered the last few words of a sentence I had been working so hard to complete, then, as I still did not notice any movement by the time I had replaced my pen in the holder by the ink well, I stretched my body up in the chair allowing the blood to circulate and the muscles in the small of my back to regain their normal elasticity. Bending my head back to a point where another inch would have found me with loss of balance and all over the floor, I extended my right arm toward the door.

I could not see the door, my eyes could scarcely see the line where the ceiling meets the wall above the lintel, but I felt the tiny hand of my daughter close about my own. The candle spluttered on the last morsel of wick beneath its flame..., and died. Pulling her

gently towards me, I released her hand and wrapped an arm behind her back and into the folds of her nightgown. She was close to me and her long hair brushed lightly against my chin. Slowly, I turned towards her and the light from the corridor caught me in the eyes. The old springs in the chair twanged. I buried my face in her shoulder with my other hand taking the weight of the head she had released into my palm. For the longest time we remained in this position, motionless; she was cold so I hugged her tight, her little frame bending under the strain of my embrace and her ribs adjusting themselves to the contours of my chest.

Even now, that first moment of realization.., the tingle down my spine, the burning sensation in the tips of my ears, a loss of feeling in my toes.., I can almost say I enjoyed: a powerful rush of adrenaline brought about by something so unexpected that any relief, no matter how absurd, was welcome. It was in that moment I thought I had suffocated my own daughter. I realized that she had not been breathing nor her little heart beating for quite over a minute. I released her immediately, but she clung to me. I tried to stand up and shake her off but my body refused to comply having been constricted for so long in one position. Then I began to feel a little better, knowing that her refusal to let go could only mean that she was alive and well, and I calmed down enough to formulate a verbal response in my head.

I am not an imaginative person, my request was going to be the same as before; perhaps prepared in a slightly different manner, delivered with a little less severity, maybe... But I did not have time even to open my mouth, she had somehow anticipated my desire to communicate and from the depths of time's vast cavern a voice drew itself a thousand light-years across the galaxy and said with a giggle, "Hello, my Royal Jester!"

At that exact moment – it could not possibly have been coincidence – as my head tilted sideways on its path to the floor and blissful unconsciousness, blurred vision caught sight of my wife standing in the doorway. I opened my mouth but heard nothing, it was only later that my words were returned to me in the form of

ridicule and disbelief.

You must understand, dear classmate, I am not the superstitious kind, nor member of any profane cult nor ritualistic coven. I do not accept skepticism, nor do I let myself consider the phantastical, and I have never touched on nor read about any other ancient mumbo - call it what you will. No, I am a practical sort, taking only what is laid before me, that which I can see, touch, hear and smell as being of an absolute nature. How then was I to react, when in my arms a body falls whose skin and hair are as real as yours or mine, yet who is not of this time nor place; tell me please if I am mistaken, but would not any sane person react as did I?

God knows my wife had tried to pity me. For months following this event fresh flowers would appear by my hospital bed, with assorted chocolates piled high upon the side table. I was at Barnwood Asylum, so I was told, in the leafy countryside. But still I refused to accept insanity, or as doctors would have me call it: a momentary lapse of reality. You see, beyond the mental, no one had an answer to my physical disorder, that was the puzzle. I quickly deteriorated, while learned medics from every county and discipline passed through my ward in an effort to be the first with a diagnosis. I remember so very little, just bits and pieces, vague journeys from one room to another. Some times I would wake up calm, other times screaming. More corridors; clothes peeled away, lights and faces peering down; one day it was a bath full of eels, next day it was buzzing in my ears; cages surrounding me, the turning of screws; cold steel on skin.., flashes of heat, muscles taut to ache, crackling sounds of a bonfire on Guy Fawkes night... And then that awful smell.

Apparently none succeeded, and I was abandoned to statistics in a closed book; spoonfuls of pink powder twice a day and an hour every other week with a local mind mechanic; that is, until divorce and a drained account drove me to seek refuge within these four walls. Now here I lie, desperate to communicate before each cell in my body is ravaged beyond recognition. And death? This pill, my sickness, too gruesome even for the devil to swallow.

I have but a few words left to write, perhaps the most important. Time: a quest which haunts the horizon of our advancing technology, and within which may lie the evil of my paroxysm. This is how I had begun to understand my sickness during those past months of turning over and over thoughts in my mind. My wife assured me there was nobody alien in my study that night. Of course not, how could she have seen Jasmine, a plasma from the past connected inexplicably with only those things she had been in touch with from before. My wife had never been in the same class nor in the same town – I checked – all those years ago, so naturally she would not have been able to see Jasmine. I, on the other hand, have always been connected to her, this is how time and matter work.

But it was not only Jasmine who had traveled the distance, it is my belief I, too, had, for one instant, severed the strands of time and space and returned to hear her voice. How? I know not. Why we had come to cross that unknown space between moments, to meet – if it is correct to suggest that – maybe I will someday discover? But what is certain is that my body will never recover. Hear me: I believe I may have uncovered what ails me. My body is on a course of uncertain destination brought about by a phenomena I can only describe as lag. My physical being, through the experience of a time transference, has returned to misjudged coordinates. I am almost certainly a victim out-of-sync with his prescribed surroundings, the result being of a subtle but devastating consequence.

There is more. I have seen the crux.

I have seen Jasmine since that night, yes, here in this very flat. Yesterday she came. She jumped up on the window sill and laughed terribly. She had brought with her a memory that I did not know belonged to me, it had been sealed away, too grotesque, no doubt, for innocence to bare. But now the horror, free. For the love of mercy, it was a childish prank! As if the locked door to an attic had suddenly been pulled open, I could now see that whole sickening tragedy unwind and could do nothing to save her.

Dear God, how could it have occurred? Why did she jump up there on the sill? I was pulling at her sash; why did she struggle... was she laughing, did she try and back away? Jasmine, the window... the glass, the pane is cracked... will break, will fall... Jasmine?

Though it is now too late for self-pity, too late to right the wrong, why do I not feel relief? I should – should I not? I am in a revolving door that returns me to the interior each time I make an effort to escape. I am bound by a legacy I cannot disperse. I lie here immersed in the past, as I write these final words to you; seeing it, feeling it, living it, with each bounce of her bottom on the end of my bed. She clutches Panda, smiles, and tares me up.

I beg of you, please, consider my request. If only to convince myself that I am not insane you must come at once to my address, for you, too, must be able to see her... If not, then I am..., mad!

Yours expectantly,

F. Smale.

THE AUTHOR:

British born, Alan Graham has spent his whole life traveling, his father having been in the diplomatic service. He is a wildlife photographer/filmmaker and published author of novels in the genres of speculative fiction and thrillers. He has also written countless articles for international prints including BBC Wildlife Magazine, Travel Africa and International Living over a career spanning 30 years. His most successful TV documentary “The Affairs of Hares” was filmed entirely in the wilds of Devon, England, between 1996 and 2000.



He owns and manages Witzoo Wildlife Sanctuary in Belize, where he rehabs and soft releases injured and orphaned animals for the Forestry Dept. of Belize. He will be retiring to the UK shortly.

Title: Mum, I Found this in the Attic.

Author: Alan R. Graham

Copyright Protected, 1990:

No unauthorised use of the contents of this short story permitted.

Website: www.alan-r-graham-author.com