

SPIRITS OF THE NIGHT

There was a time in the town when you could walk out alone at night and not have to fear anything. You could leave your doors unlocked and your car in the driveway without worry. You could drop the kids off at the cinema downtown and not think a thing of it. Or stroll through the park on a Saturday evening without watching every shadow or movement in the evening twilight.

But no more. Now, doors barred the entrances along with the windows. Residents hurried home lest they be caught outside after dark, and cars were secured in their garages as cats and dogs were brought in from outside. People watched in terror as the sun would sink low on the horizon, leaving the community vulnerable to the clutches of the night.

This was a town gripped by fear, foreboding so powerful and pervasive that it was evident in every stare in the residents' eyes. They would sit in their living rooms, mindfully watching the evening news on television or at their dinner tables, eating silent meals of penance. And listening, always listening.

The wind would brush through the streets blowing the gutters clean of leaves and debris. The wind would bring with it the cool air, the small voice, the lost souls of the past. And they would pass down from street to street, grasping for any living entity that dared to be out after dark. After their time in the light of day that was no longer theirs. Parents would bar and shutter the windows against the curious faces of their children, who wished to gaze out at the spectral parade that pasted by their houses. Come away from there, they would command, fearing even a glimpse from the ethereal visitors would portend dreadful consequences. The darkness was not for their eyes.

So the night would pass with terror and resignation. Night after night, the pattern would remain unchanged. The town was accustomed to the strange sojourn of their visitors and had resigned itself to sharing the night with the unearthly. Until he came to town. Elliott was his name. He was slight in stature and unobtrusive looking. He easily went unnoticed in crowds and was always fidgeting with his clothes, hair or watch band. It was a nervous habit left over from his childhood. He walked along the streets, head bent, always looking at the ground, straight ahead, as if some gigantic sink hole would suddenly appear and swallow him whole. He was a nondescript, inconsequential little man.

Except for the power. He had this unusual ability to talk to the dead. Elliott had discovered the gift when he was a child. He heard voices and responded to voices that

others could not. His parents were convinced at an early age that Elliott was possessed, insane or, at the very least, strange. They took him to psychiatrists, priests, shamans and doctors. He was declared sane and competent and released to his parents' custody.

But the voices continued. That was the most important reason for moving to the town.

He had heard about the evening visitors; now was the time to test his ability. Could he

really communicate with the terrors of the night? Or was his reality an illusion?

He moved into the town in late autumn. The leaves had turned and fallen from their branches as the season was giving way to the onslaught of winter cold. Elliott had spent most of his life in the tropical ambiance of the south and found the northern weather

harsh and unappealing. Most of the townspeople were as disagreeable as the cold.

It was a week before he dared to venture out after dusk. The wind had begun to blow through the streets and every living soul seemed to have disappeared from the landscape. The howling came from the west; it was a high pitched shrill vocalization

brought by the wind. Elliott could feel it in his mind as clear as the wind rushing through

his hair. His cheeks became stony cold and his eyeballs ached. Still he stared into the

encroaching darkness as the howling persisted. From the east they came, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them. They danced and floated through the night air, passing down the street, coming closer with each minute to Elliott. He watched in awe as the

spirits rose and glided with the wind, weaving ethereal vapors through trees and fences, growing ever closer.

The final rays of sunshine were caught in the web of darkness and disappeared into the

western sky. The moonless night engulfed him and the howling became more distinct. He

peered down the street and his eyes widened. He could see the ethereal bodies of the

dead, floating up the street, a mass of gossamer appendages, luminescent in their spectral transparency. They drifted down the road, passed barred homes and locked gates, floating as feathers blown in the evening gusts. They wound around trees and through hedges, passing by osmosis through solid objects. Watching the parade as it passed him, he noticed the opalescent shimmer of the figures as they continued down the lane. Soon the specters were out of sight and Elliott could breathe again.

They had paid him no heed. They had floated passed him and didn't even seem to see

him. He had forgotten, in his shock, to open his mind to their thoughts. He sensed their

presence but partly in the confusion and partly out of fear, he had estranged himself.

The next evening, he again stood upon his porch and watched the procession. This time

he closed his eyes and listened. He listened to the hundred voices that spoke to him

from the celestial forms as they glided past him. They spoke to him of death, unrest and

discord and the inability to travel beyond this world and into the next. They spoke of the

hurt and disdain of being trapped. So melodic, so melancholy were their pleas that Elliott found himself touched. The forms whirled around him and past him and on into the moonless night, crying in their bewilderment. And Elliott cried for them.

When the last spirit had left his field of vision, he walked back into the house. There had to be a way to help them on their journey, he thought, some way to assist them in finding peace, the peace promised to all by the finality of death. He wiped at his wet cheeks; he wasn't aware he had been crying.

The following evening, he stood not on his porch but in the middle of the street. Not a branch stirred on the grand old trees and not another living thing did he see. He stood quietly and patiently and finally, could discern in the distance, the luminescent forms as they made their way up from the town square. He stood and watched as they came ever closer, undulating their way up the street. The wind began to howl and the leaves on the trees bent to touch his hair. Still he stood, watching.

The first spirit to reach him glowed with a radiance that took Elliott's breath away. He watched as it danced around him, up into the black night and down again, swirling in sparkling patterns around him. Then it stopped suddenly, drifted in front of him and hovered. It was the face of an angel that stared into his eyes, the most cherubic features he had ever seen. He watched intently as the spirit swayed not two feet from him and the heavenly face smiled a beautiful smile. Elliott smiled back. He had not opened his mind to the specter and when he did, it was too late. The color changed instantly from pink iridescence to a dull milky gray. The angelic face distorted into a grotesque withered grin, the eyes sunk low in their unearthly sockets and the mouth widened showing a blood red gash where the angelic smile had been. Elliott was frozen in horror as the specter moved closer, its eyes the color of flame. It engulfed his body swiftly and the pain was briefly intense. Elliott cried out, the sound reminiscent of a whipped dog. Then the specter moved up and off; Elliott fell hard onto the pavement. He moaned once, rolled over and breathed no more.

The spirits continued down the tree lined street and out of town.
