

## *Oblivion's Shade*

By Ethan Strathdee

*When in cold oblivion's shade,  
Beauty, fame, and wealth are laid,  
Where immortal spirits reign,  
There may we all meet again . - William Walker, unnamed hymn.*

John Markham was not a happy man.

As he stood alone on the cracked asphalt of the empty train platform, breathing in the rain-tinged air and breathing out a miasma of coffee and cigarettes, he felt empty. It was an early November day, a mere two days after Halloween, and wind carried a smell of woodsmoke and rot and the ending of summer. The air was thick with mist, tendrils of which danced and flickered like cloth strips when stirred by the breeze.

John's cellphone buzzed through his jacket pocket. He produced it; glanced at the caller ID. It was Nelle. The condensation made it look as if tears were trailing from her eyes, sliding down the screen to wet his hand. He gave a hollow chuckle. Nelle hadn't cried since he'd threatened to divorce her three years ago, and he strongly believed that to have been faked. Her face, stern, unyielding and faintly reminiscent of a statue of the Duke of Wellington he'd seen in London, looked incongruous when wetted with tears. Indeed, he reflected, the Duke's famed quote at Waterloo was the attitude she'd applied to their marriage; "Hard pounding this, gentlemen. Let's see who will pound longest." She had, without a doubt. In consequence, he was now working at her father's car dealership, rather than at the British Museum (as an art historian) as he had wished.

A shattered half-pumpkin leered at him from across the railway, wedged beneath a dying hedgerow. Its face shifted through the mist, reminding him faintly of Marisa's after the car accident...

Now there was a thought he hadn't had for years. Not without reason (the gruesome result of that head-on collision had caused the coroner to commit suicide some three days after the accident). But he felt faintly guilty for having forgotten Marisa. If she'd lived, he might still be working at the Museum, married to her rather than the repulsive Nelle...

His phone buzzed, and he jumped. It was Nelle's father, Gordon, car dealer *extraordinaire*. Before he could think about it, he pressed answer. "Hello" he offered tentatively. "Where in the name of a goat's wrinkled behind are you?" Gordon screamed. "The seven o'clock train arrived five minutes ago, and I have *ten* clients in here. This is my biggest morning in years."

Not “*our* biggest morning”, John noted sourly. Then he glanced at his watch and cursed. It was seven thirty-five. Had he really been standing here for 35 minutes, and missed the passing of the train as well? Apparently so.

“Sorry, Gordon.” He said. “I’ll be in on the next train.”

“If you’re not, I’ll put strychnine in your coffee.” Gordon spat, and hung up.

John shrugged and pocketed his phone again, resolving to drink no more coffee at work. He looked across the railway again. The clearing mist had revealed the hedgerow clearly. Beyond it, John could see an empty and neglected backyard, filled with dead or dying weeds. Flagstones were smeared with moss, and fallen tiles lay propped against the walls. The house behind it seemed to gape out over this scene of urban desolation, with empty windows exhaling mist like the mouths of a many-headed dragon. The hedgerow blocked further view of the backyard.

John glanced down the hedgerow, and spotted, to his displeasure, a cat watching him from beneath the drying brown leaves. John had an ephemeral distrust of cats dating to his maternal grandmother, a Scot, who had told him malignant stories of the Piseag Saith, the evil feline spirit of the highlands. He remembered the scream of the wind as he squatted by the fire in her Inverness home, and for an instant the old woman’s voice seemed to crackle through the barrier of years.

“Now, child, the Piseag Saith is not to be taken lightly. It will steal your soul – if it can, and eat it. The way my cat eats mice – you know?” Young John, remembering the gruesome spectacle of a rodent dinner by the old lady’s cat, would shiver and draw closer to the fire. “It is customary to sacrifice to it in the fall, to keep it happy for another year. For its power is greatest when the spirit gates open on All Hallows’ Eve and the fog hangs low over the tarns. So –” and here she would break into a coughing fit, swig from a bottle of whisky, and turn on the TV to see the latest football match, which she would watch until she fell asleep.

Picking up a flat grey stone, he flung it at the cat, which vanished back through the hedgerow into the backyard. Shaking his head, John looked back at the house.

And nearly screamed. Standing at the window, looking at him with a beatific expression, was Marisa. John stumbled back against the urine-stinking rain shelter. With one hand, he dealt himself a heavy slap across the face. Cheek stinging, he looked back at the house.

She was gone, although the afterimage – a faint trace of long black hair and violet eyes – seemed to dance on his corneas. The mist whipped across the tracks as the wind picked up. Little droplets of rain splattered on the asphalt. John stepped down onto the rails, and came slowly up to the hedgerow. He looked over it.

The yard was unchanged. But in the middle of the yard, where the hedgerow had previously blocked his view, sat a chair. The grey light drifted across its smoothed wooden contours, polishing the tinges of memory from the reality of the object before him.

It was Marisa's chair. The chair that he had made for her in his workshop. He remembered cutting, sanding, shaping, gluing every centimeter of the object that sat in front of him. All his obsession with Marisa had been driven into the wood. And then three days before he was going to give it to her... the accident. The chair had ended on a landfill in Cornwall, he remembered. It had seemed a mockery of his hopes, his dreams, a warning from Death, saying "all that you can do, I shall undo."

He pushed through the hedgerow. When he reached the other side, there was a figure in the chair. Veiled in raven hair that fell over the polished wood, its back to him. He stepped forward, reaching, hoping hardly daring to believe. His hand was an inch from her shoulder...

His phone rang. The figure snapped out of reality in an instant, leaving the chair empty except for a pile of papers. Wrenching the wretched object from his pocket, John answered it. "Where the hell are you, you lazy excuse for an employee? A goddamn unemployment office would fire you for this behaviour. Two customers have left because of the wait. I swear, John—"

"Gordon", John cut in, "I am going to cut your throat." Then he threw the phone onto the tracks. He ran forward, stumbling over the cracked flagstones to the chair. Fumbling amongst the papers, he noticed something odd. All were copies of the obituary pages of newspapers. All dated from three years ago. He glanced at one, noting the name "Marisa Leblanc". He flipped through the others. All included Marisa's name. He stood up.

And Marisa was standing, facing him, in the doorway of the house. He rushed forward in three steps, grabbing her by the shoulders. She felt real, human, warm.

"How..." he began.

Then Marisa's face began to change. Skin turned orange and contoured, eyes gaped wider, eyeballs vanished, hair fell away into nothingness. He was left holding a jack o'lantern. Empty eye sockets stared with the orange, uncaring expression of a pumpkin. The mouth gaped open as if screaming. John gave a scream to match the pumpkin, a howl of utter despair that rose through the mist for a half-second. Then the tile hit him in the forehead with a spray of blood and a crunch of shattering cranium. He stumbled backward, falling onto the chair.

From the roof came a clatter of pebbles. A cat leapt down, fog-gray, trailing fragments of mist behind it, it seemed to fade in and out of the air. A second issued forth from the doorway, this one with fur as black as Marisa's hair. The shadow of

the doorway coated it. Matching each other step for step they advanced to the twitching body's feet.

John was looking up, it seemed to him, from the bottom of a mineshaft. Far above him, he could see the faint gray of the sky, confined by a long black tunnel that held him immobile. He reached up at the sky, but his arms failed to move. Then the grey turned red, the wet hungry red of a cat's throat.

"We will eat well this Hallows' Eve", said a pair of sibilant voices.