

PART I

An Unexpected Invitation

There are things in this world plain reason can't survive looking at straight on. Most men who go looking for truth end up settling for religion, or worse, science. Whichever fits better in their cigarette pack so they can take it out and show it off to the unlucky few who haven't found their own salvation yet, never noticing they're circling the same hole. But me? Well, I'm just not sure anymore. I don't expect to be believed, and I stopped needing to be a while back. But I need to write this. To leave my mark and prove that I existed.

It was early autumn of 2019 when I found myself working as a private investigator out of a small third-floor office on Burnside Street in Boston, Massachusetts. I had been on the job for only a year, and work had been scarce. I was hungry for any case that might manifest itself on my shabby and disorganized desk, which frequently doubled as my pillow.

Physically, I was not much to look at: a trench coat gone soft at the seams from too many nights leaning against too many doorframes, a fedora pulled low enough to keep the rain and other people's opinions off my face, and a pair of oxfords resoled twice over, scuffed with the residue of every gutter and church step I had ever loitered upon in pursuit of somebody else's secrets. I kept a bottle of rye in my desk for the same reason I kept a Colt under my coat: some conversations only go one way, and it pays to be ready for either kind.

My office kept its own kind of company. Dust hung suspended in the slatted light that fought its way through the blinds each morning, and that bottle of rye, three fingers lower than I cared to admit, shared a drawer with a stack of case files I had long since stopped alphabetizing. Below my window, the city carried on its indifferent business: the electric hum of delivery bikes replacing whatever growl an engine used to make, the hiss of an espresso machine from the café on the corner, the pale blue glow of

some stranger's phone screen reflected in the glass of the bakery across the street. A tinny trumpet solo drifted out of the little speaker balanced on my filing cabinet, an old Coltrane side I had worn thin on vinyl and now simply summoned from my phone instead.

In my line of work, you learn quickly that everyone is guilty of something. Innocence, I had found, was rarer than an honest politician and about as convincing. Love, when it appeared on my doorstep, usually arrived already rotting, dressed up in the perfume of some tragedy that hadn't happened yet. Money fared no better; it had a way of turning gentle men into wolves and wolves into the sort of men newspapers described as "community pillars." I had made my peace with this arrangement long ago. A man who expects the worst from people is rarely disappointed, and only occasionally surprised.

My mornings followed a liturgy of their own: black coffee poured with a hand that did not always cooperate, a cigarette lit before my eyes had fully adjusted to daylight, and an old ache behind my knees, not the toll of age but the leftover interest on a night on black water I preferred not to examine before noon. On this day, I had just entered the office and had yet to brew even my first pot of coffee when I happened upon a manila envelope that someone had unceremoniously shoved into the mail slot beside my door. I tapped a loose cigarette from my breast pocket, lit it covetously, and sat down to examine the unexpected parcel. Inside was a handwritten note dated October 13, 2019, along with a newspaper clipping with the same date, and a couple of photographs, which I will describe in detail shortly.

The letter read:

Dear Mr. Trench,

I was uncertain who else I could turn to, so I chose to trust in your reputation as a discreet and dependable investigator. Last night my boyfriend turned up dead, his body discovered in an abandoned factory outside of Serwick, Massachusetts. I cannot fathom for what reason this tragedy would occur, for when I last spoke with him, he had told me he was visiting his family in Boston.

I am certain he was murdered, though the local authorities claim there is no evidence of my suspicions. I have attached the news article and photographs of Stephen, along with the location where he was found. I sincerely hope you accept my request and discover what truly happened to him.

—Sarah Collins

Two photographs were clipped to the letter. One was of Stephen, a young and not unattractive man of perhaps twenty-five. His dirty brown hair was cropped short, and he sported a smile that made his emerald-green eyes shine with intensity. The second photo depicted a derelict old factory that seemed to be gradually sinking into the fetid marsh that surrounded it. An old iron sign, rusting and decaying, hung precariously on the side of the crumbling brick building, its faded message barely legible. “Monserta Glass” was the only discernible advertisement for whatever purpose the weathered eyesore had once served. It was a most unnerving sight and left me curious about this young man’s death.

The newspaper article shed some light on how he ended up in that pestilent location and what caused his untimely demise. It read:

October 13, 2019 • The Serwick Sentinel

BODY FOUND IN ABANDONED MONSERTA GLASSWORKS FACTORY

Police Say No Foul Play, Victim Likely Died Of Heart Attack

Late last night, a group of “Urban Explorers” discovered the body of Stephen Cartwright in the long-disused Monserta Glassworks Factory. The property manager has long requested that those looking to seek a thrill should look elsewhere due to the dangerous state of the condemned building. The discovery of a death on his property has “greatly disheartened” him, he said when asked for comment. Police are investigating the incident, however, they believe the victim was likely a simple daredevil who suffered a heart attack due to poor health.

The Chief of Police, Carl Sutton, had this to say when reached for comment: “It is very disappointing to learn that this young man disregarded all posted signage and paid the ultimate price for it. Our condolences go out to all of those who have been affected by this unnecessary tragedy.”

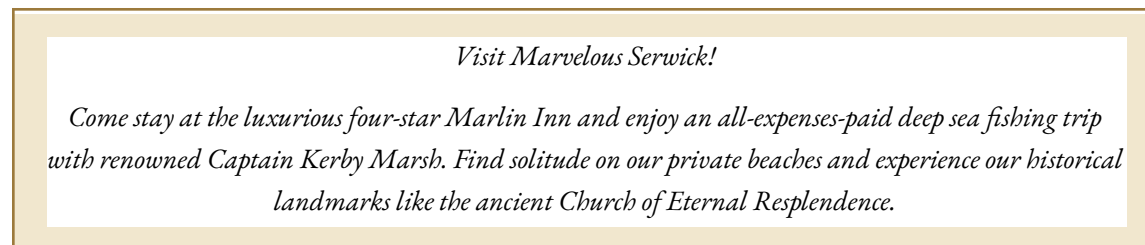
We will continue to update our readers as the story develops.

“A peculiar summary of the circumstances,” I thought, convinced Ms. Collins was correct about the abnormality of the surmised information. I knew from the moment I set that article down that I could not rest until I had at least spoken to this Ms. Collins and discovered what else she knew about the incident. To that end, I powered up my laptop and began my research, looking for any information that would help me begin my inquiry with an upper hand.

After a few hours of cursory research, I had accrued a small collection of information that helped define the edges of a still blurry picture. Firstly, the factory in question was revealed to be owned by an out-of-state property management firm, headed by a man named Harold March. However, phoning the number provided on their website got me in contact with the man himself, although his responses to my typical line of investigative queries didn't produce anything more than the generic responses that are all too common for a man who wishes to remove himself and his business from being associated with tragedy at all costs.

Next, I sought to learn all I could about the town of Serwick, Massachusetts. Again, I immediately felt thwarted by the sparse sum of available information I could locate, though a few articles did catch my interest. One was in the form of a dated travel brochure from 1987. In it was a two-sentence explanation of the town and a single black and white photograph.

It read as follows:



The attached photo depicted a small three-story brick building with a marquee out front, bearing the name Marlin Inn. Though grainy and faded, it was clear enough to catch my attention.

The next item of interest was a webpage dedicated to reporting on occult happenings and haunted locations. While I personally did not put much stock in the supernatural, I found the information lucid enough to hold some value. The author, who claimed to have once lived in the town of Serwick as a child, detailed strange incidents that had occurred there in 1994. The town's mayor, Ryan Kirk, had suddenly begun suffering from delusional episodes and claiming to hear the voice of God. He made bizarre demands of the town's Public Works Department, including the removal and destruction of all statues and mirrors, citing false idolatry and paranoia. The author's family had moved away shortly after, fearing the growing unrest in the town.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. I knew that even the coldest lead could kindle into a raging inferno of intrigue. It was time to get to work and make the call to Ms. Collins.

She answered quickly and was pleased to hear that I was willing to take her case. After exchanging pleasantries, I got down to business. "Tell me everything you remember about your time with Stephen leading up to the incident," I asked.

She informed me that Stephen had phoned her a week earlier, claiming a family emergency had arisen and he would be traveling to Boston for a few days. They had only been dating for four months, and she had not yet met his family, so his solo trip was not a shock to her.

When I inquired about any communication during his absence, she stated that they had only spoken on the phone once, and the conversation was ordinary and pleasant. She did not believe Stephen had been showing any signs of distress. The only other communication was a text message she received from him the night before his body was discovered. However, she believed the message to be gibberish and was unable to reach Stephen for clarification, as his phone was off and his voice box was full.

Curious about the significance of the message, I requested that she send me a copy to inspect its contents. What follows is the message, exactly as it appeared on my phone's screen:

Eckth S'reh Ocxrel. S'reh Mhith Trient Sh'ten.

42.66, -70.75

"Gibberish," I agreed, just as Ms. Collins suggested. However, my instincts told me that it was unlikely to be a simple accident. I then steered our conversation towards what Ms. Collins knew about Stephen's past. I needed to know his job, education level, anything that would help indicate why he found himself dead in that abandoned factory.

Ms. Collins stated that Stephen was a college student, like herself, and that they both attended Miskatonic University where they met. She informed me that Stephen studied Theology under Professor Weylin Griswold and that he otherwise maintained the average student life with no job to speak of. With nothing more to gain from conversing with Ms. Collins, I bid her farewell, saying I would keep her informed of any developments in the case.

Finally, I had a little bit to chew on, and chew I would. With additional information to refine my research with, I once again began navigating the endless corridors of the net, hoping to find more leads that could bring some level of clarity to my scattered thoughts.

Foremost, I endeavored to discover what I could of the strange and cryptic characters, which could scarcely be called a language, that appeared on Ms. Collins' phone the night before Stephen's body was discovered. What I found did little to alleviate my myriad questions and instead introduced even more uncertainty from which my head swam nauseatingly. No amount of searching returned a positive result, and I was left to assume the message was not written in any recorded language, written or spoken.

However, contrary to Ms. Collins' belief that the entire message was just random gibberish, I was able to put a value to the odd string of numbers that ended the message. Curiously, it was a set of coordinates that marked the exact location of the abandoned Monserta Glassworks Factory. Was Stephen aware of his imminent demise and therefore sent a warning to the one person he could trust? Or was there a more sinister purpose for this serendipitous occurrence?

Filing away that piece of evidence, I attempted to contact Professor Griswold of Miskatonic University. Calling his listed office number forwarded me to the desk of his secretary, Mrs. Reyes. A reasonably amiable woman, she informed me that the professor was currently on sabbatical and unsure when he would return. Not wanting to lose a lead, I employed some advanced interrogation tactics, to which the secretary reluctantly provided me with the professor's personal cell phone number.

Immediately ending my call with Mrs. Reyes, I dialed the number supplied to me for Weylin Griswold. What awaited me on the other end of that phone line was a horror so tangible that my head shudders uncontrollably at its mere recollection. For after a singular ring, my ear was greeted with a voice so unexplainably foul and irreverent that it dug into my ear canal like a gruesome worm, intent on infecting my thoughts with its mocking soliloquy.

"Mr. Trench," it spoke like a thousand voices rising in cacophonous laughter. "We have waited too long for your presence. Time grows short, and we dream eagerly for your prodigious return. The Sentry may have sunk, but you swam. For you know what wonders The Deep has to offer to those who propagate its will. When you face yourself in the effervescent glow of silvered waves, you will see what it is you have forgotten." The strange voice tittered before the line fell dead.

What virtueless prank could this Professor Griswold be playing at, I wondered. And how did he have knowledge of The Sentry? Very few people knew of my time working aboard that fishing boat, and even fewer were aware of the disaster that left me the only survivor.

I still remember it clearly, the night of July 21, 1994. We were experiencing a reasonably calm voyage in Sandy Bay, just east of Rockport, Massachusetts, when an unexpected squall of rain picked up like a violent reproach to our presence, pelting our meager ship with savage ferocity. Then, from the starboard side of the ship came the dreadful sound of squealing metal as a colossal wave impacted the rusting hull like a thunderous portent of imminent suffering, the nightmarish tempest sinking The Sentry with remorseless violence, leaving me and my crewmates to flounder helplessly in the brackish sea waters like temporary buoys.

Of the intervening hours, I have no recollection, but certain impressions have embedded themselves in my unconscious soul and often plague my dreams like technicolored flashes of a surrealist painting depicting a postmodern dreamscape to rival that of Dali. What I do recall was being discovered on the gently whispering shores of Mass, where the Ipswich River meets the foreboding ocean. I was then rushed to Beverly Hospital, where I was assessed for any physical or mental injuries, though no amount of modern science could dredge up the reason for my miraculous survival and return to dry land.

How this Professor Griswold knew of my incident and why he mockingly revealed this insight to me so cryptically was my only question now. But answers, like happiness, are easy to seek and difficult to discover.

Immediately redialling the number left me with a queer feeling of bafflement, for I was greeted with the robotic voice of a prerecorded message informing me that the number I had dialed was no longer in use. Assuring myself that I had dialed the number correctly, I redialled it several more times only to receive the same "Out of Service" message. This revelation left me shaken as I wondered what feverish delusion could have caused me to experience such a strange auditory hallucination, which at the time was the only rational explanation I could muster. Maybe my mind was finally slipping from the damned morphine pills I had been sustaining myself on since the incident. Or was I truly embroiled in the opening stanza of poetic coincidence whose elegant prose I could not fully understand or appreciate yet?

And so, like a victim told to dig their own grave, I chose to make the monumental decision to travel to Serwick. It was in that moment that I stepped forth from the solid ground which I stood on and found myself plunging endlessly into the cosmic abyss of uncertainty. Finding the quickest route by car from Boston to Serwick, I packed myself a kit containing my heavy Colt .45 automatic pistol, a bottle containing 40 60-milligram morphine pills, a bottle of whiskey, and my notebook. I then headed out the door, following an ethereal call which both motivated me and foretold of my inevitable sorrows.

