



C U R T M C D E R M O T T

Fall Foliage
By Curt McDermott

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He slowed at the rocktop, pleading with his body for calm. Every step like lifting a stone, the air so thin it had to be willfully drawn. Why was he here, back where even the landscape was ready to crush him?

Tangled gray clouds churned in the sky above his own tangled strands of gray. The stormy summer that had drained away weeks before left a dirty film behind, one that bled color from the world. Before him, a crazy-quilt tableau of fall leaves hung loosely in their sockets, poised to smother the slender skidway that led to town. Wayward breezes from the valley, scraped and clawed by rows of jagged branches until only their ghosts remained, made the muted oranges and reds shiver above his head. He'd heard the noise before, when TB had eaten a friend from the inside out: a death rattle.

Back in Troy, auctioning the house seemed like a good idea when he'd had it, drunk and lying on the floorboards of his apartment. He was broke— after rent, down to his last seventeen bucks— and, for all the grand election promises of '32, nobody seemed to be in too much of a hurry to change *his* situation. He vaguely recalled screaming his case to the radiator, railing about ownership and a man's rights and what's mine is mine goddamnit. He'd felt so right, so justified, as if four decades of interest had accrued on an investment he'd simply forgotten about.

He couldn't rail now. No breath, choking on the hammerbeat of his heart. What little noises he made—exasperated gasps and sighs, involuntary groans of a protesting body— were devoured in the gray silence of the forest, made blasphemous by the faraway shushing of the Swift River. No, now, against the granite-gray backdrop of Washington, he felt exactly as he had 42 years before. Trivial. Childish. Impotent.

He had seen Ruth that night, when the radiator stopped listening and the flask was drained. In a dream, seen the miserable pinched tightness of that body. So restrained, so timid. That perpetually confused smile, like she didn't know whether to yell or cry. Exasperating! How could he rage at such an idiot? How could he make her understand what a mistake she'd been?

In his dream, she was smiling that same, stupid smile. He felt his anger stirring once again, until something about her gesture struck him as unnatural. Stiff. Lips arched and thin. Eyes not really alive, but alight. Then he saw the angled pine boards that framed her face and remembered with sudden, stupefying clarity that she was dead. In her coffin, in the ground, under a suffocating gray shroud of New Hampshire sky, she was dead and she was smiling.

Waking from the nightmare, he'd whittled down the remaining hours of that lunatic night staring at his hands, at his arms, at ropy muscles twined around bone, at the creases and dark spots of his aging flesh.

Now, hunched and panting on the rocktop, he grimaced at the familiar tang of bile. However insipid she might have been, he didn't like thinking of her dead— and lately,

ever since his railcar had gone thundering across the Connecticut into Lebanon, he'd done his share of that sort of thinking. His upper lip raised reflexively in a sneer, revealing a row of teeth like crumbling tombstones. Brown, etched and stained with a hundred poisons—sediments of a life spent exactly how he'd wanted to spend it.

Chill autumn air fingered the seams of his clothes and poked its way beneath. Ahead of him was the hollow, that place so packed with pines even the sunlight seemed like just another kind of shadow. The silence there you could drink; that silence you could drown in. Hiding beneath the bony boughs the first night—after Ruth's frantic, faraway squawking had bubbled down to a series of hiccupy sobs, then to the front door drawn closed in defeat—he felt it lapping at his body, pouring itself over his nose and mouth in thick ribbons. Like he'd done something so goddamn wrong the whole forest was trying to cover it over.

Lovesick, 19 years old, he'd jumped on the first thing with the right pieces and parts. She'd known it, too, and didn't fight him off. And then he was married—staring at the back of her head bobbing up and down, stupidly, as she cut vegetables for their dinner; watching her clumsy fingers grope at the ties of her dress; feeling his stomach roil at the quiet wet noises she made with each breath. Hating her.

Every day with her was a day wasted, a day stolen from his youth. Sitting in his chair each evening, nodding and smiling at the endless flow of nonsense from her mouth, he imagined fifty more years of imbecilic conversations about the weather or the railroad or the unpredictable price of corn—fifty years of a slow and unimportant death. With a sadness that shook his heart, he realized his best days had already passed. While slumbering happily through early manhood, he'd awoken to find himself chained to a rock. Dead weight. A grinning half-person content to live, die, and rot on the same 80-acre slice of the universe.

He'd made his plans by the time her mother had moved in, though that puffed-up bag of a woman made sure he didn't lose any courage in carrying them out. *Eliza*. God, but she was ugly! The little pigsnout face, eyes pushed together as if caught in a vice. Mouth always puckered tight in disapproval. The thing with the Chevalier girl had set her against him forever, had “encouraged her to assume a more supervisory role” in her son-in-law's affairs. In the shadow of that beast, he'd felt more infantile than ever. Her casual comments always hid meanings sharp as razors; in her glances he could feel the damning fire of judgment. In fact, when he thought of it, that's exactly what she reminded him of—with her hair drawn back tightly, her mouth turned down, constantly frowning, the woman was simply the latest in a long line of grim-faced New England judges, ready to rid the world of another misbehaving youth.

His life in the cabin became a slow suffocation. After word got out of how poor a husband he'd made—thanks, no doubt, to the flapping lips of his mother-in-law—working the fields became his only source of joy. He'd rise hours before the two of them that summer, cheerily shivering in the chill of early morning to avoid making conversation with either woman. He'd tear muscles and skin in a masochistic attempt to

remind himself that his body was young, capable—meant to be pushed and used. When the sun had gone down and he'd run out of excuses to remain outside, he'd often linger at the window, working up the courage to enter his own house. Illuminated there in the lantern light, the image of the two modest and proper women juxtaposed against his own general filthiness served as another comforting reminder: he did not belong.

As autumn came on, then, he'd begun to panic. No crops meant no work, and no work meant hours, days, months in the house. At best, nodding and agreeing. At worst, staring at his toes to avoid the piercing gaze of his adopted mother.

"I'll be back in a little while," he'd said.

And he'd run, that cold October night, to the place where his weary legs were dragging him now. To the hollows. To the quiet. To the little clearing in the brush that gave him a glimpse—that night and the week thereafter—of the lantern Ruth had left burning in the window. For him. For her silly, little-boy husband. So all the world could know.

The goddamn lantern.

If he'd felt any impulse to return after learning she'd died, it'd quickly been squelched by the thought of the church packed row to row with thousands of mourners cursing his name. Hell, if he'd come within a mile of the service, they'd have probably ended up burying two Colbaths that day.

That lantern had done more to slander him than any person could—and in the process, it transformed Ruth into the very picture of victimhood. He was sure she'd lit it at her mother's suggestion; after a week in the woods spent freezing under his tarpaulin and drowning in the quiet, it was the goddamn lantern more than anything else that kept him from going back. In its light was the piercing shame he had been made to feel—shame, he'd realized, he could choose to leave behind.

So he did.

Drinking friends in Dartmouth, the first transient stop on a journey to reclaim his life, told him what happened next. On sales travels back east, they'd heard of the poor Colbath woman who'd never lost faith, who'd kept a lantern lit in her front window for the husband she knew would return.

It was then he decided to leave New Hampshire.

Weeks became months; months, years. He got jobs cutting trees, milking cows, working the canals. Wherever he traveled, he asked railmen and vacationers about his old home; amazingly, most of them had heard the story—*legend* now—of the loyal wife of Passaconaway and her eternal flame. Some folks, they reported, were even making the hike up from *Conway* just to see the goddamn thing for themselves!

He could imagine the gasps of incredulity. *Look there, see how loyal she is? Who could do such a thing to someone so pure?*

And so he'd boozed, he'd gambled, he'd explored all stripes of women— done things wild enough to make that fling with young Ms. Chevalier look downright straitlaced— in an endless attempt to escape the lantern glow of that prim white cabin and regain the freedom of his lost youth. Through the blurry prism of inebriation, guilt became fuel, motivation. He began to live for a single goal: to outlast that lantern.

That *goddamn* lantern. Now, after more than 40 years, finally, assuredly extinguished.

As he shook free of the thoughts that had pulled his old bones down the trail, he realized he'd entered the hollows. And though he hadn't experienced it in nearly half a century, he immediately sensed that strange and familiar *thickness*. Stifling, yet cold. Like the air had suddenly gelled to an icy, translucent ichor.

The pines had grown massive in his time away; their trunks formed a twisted archway above serpentine roots that broke and coiled through the soil. Curving along the sides of the path, they reminded him of some sort of perverse ribcage in which he was ensconced. Thoroughly chilled, he willed his sputtering body to pick up its pace, all the while cursing himself for feeling so childish.

At his age, sweating wasn't something he did anymore; after years of brutish labor, his body simply seemed to have lost the ability. He was exhausted and on edge, though, and habit saw him crumpling and smoothing the bristly flesh of his face with knobby fingers, running a palm across his substantial forehead to dry the droplets that weren't there. He seemed unable to keep his eyes from skittering back and forth across the path— he'd begun to feel like the pervasive silence was almost *pregnant*, as if a vast and terrible concert was about to begin.

He reached a sharp jag in the trail just as the thickening gray announced the approach of early evening. Here the skidway widened, pinning the pines at either side and offering an autopsied view of the gritty nothingness of the sky. As much as he hated the suffocating silence of the hollows, something about this sudden panorama seemed equally menacing; here, he realized, he was completely exposed.

He stumbled along for a minute or so, consciously steering his thoughts away from the leering darkness and quiet that lay just beyond the edges of the path. And then suddenly, there they were. What he had come to see and yet been so very afraid to see, the stark concrete finality of their granite forms rising above mounds of overgrown grass. Ruth's family tombstones— centuries of Russells dating back to before the War of the Rebellion, even before the Revolution. They would both be here, Ruth and her god-awful mother.

Ahead, the skidway snaked slightly to the south, skirting the gravesite by a few feet. Amid the worn and crumbling grays, he spied still-gleaming white. A simple cross, more marker than monument, loomed just above the grass near a solitary maple.

His legs brought him to the stone and buckled when he'd reached it, though he didn't remember telling them to do so. Above, an anemic gust of wind rattled the maple's curled leaves, managed to drag a few from their limbs. In the resounding quiet, they sounded on the grass like tiny, hushed footsteps.

The sound brought his mind to another place he hadn't wanted to visit.

Once, shaking off a particularly bad drunk in the Rutland jail, he'd thought of Ruth's tiny feet and cried. Feet, of all things! The way the little toes fit inside each other, the miniscule nails, the elfin shoes she kept near the door.

She'd been young, too.

Bawling like a woman, he'd wondered what she was like, if she'd grown up any. It was a dumb thought, and later, when released, he'd beaten the Wales St. bartender to a bloody mess for selling bad spirits.

He didn't want to think about those things now.

He stooped beside the stone and brushed the weeds to the side. Though he knew exactly what he would find, the shock of seeing Ruth's name passed through his face like an electric current. Rock-solid proof of her being— here she was tangible, here she was more than just the ghost who haunted his thoughts.

Tiny cross, though. Tiny cross.

Tiny feet.

He suddenly felt very tired and confused. This little ruth, he reminded himself, was the RUTH he so despised, the chattering idiot who had sent him on a decades-long quest for freedom.

He squeezed the rock in his hands, traced its length with his finger. Drifting a palm across the cold, stony face, he felt something else written below her name. When he parted the grass and read the hidden inscription, a cynical smile slashed through the expression of mute reverence that had begun to creep across his face.

She'd had the final word. *A faithful wife, now and always.*

Eliza's influence, no doubt. This was the RUTH who'd made his name a punchline from Providence to Portland, who had shamed him into running from his own rightful home.

Buried here was the harpy who'd kept that goddamn lantern glowing for every slack-jawed gawker to see.

Good riddance, he thought.

An old and familiar anger was happily roiling in his gut, and for the first time that day, he popped the stopper on his flask and took a long gulp. The initial gush of liquid warmed and quieted him, and the seventh reminded him how comfortable grass could be, especially after a long October hike. Propping his boots on the grave, he stretched his bone-thin arms behind his head and wriggled into the weeds. Here he could finally rest—he'd never have to run from anyone or anything again. Wrinkled curtains of flesh fell across jaundiced eyes, and soon he was asleep.

It was not a pleasant sleep.

He dreamed of quiet without end, blackness so thick he could breathe it. He choked as it clotted in his throat, filled his lungs with something cold and solid. He felt his rib bones compress, start to snap, under a shifting mass he didn't immediately understand.

Then a hand—a filthy, wriggling thing that squished when it wrapped around his. He could feel pieces of it slough off as he tried to pull free from its grip, but the icy, wet fingers simply squeezed harder.

She was with him.

Then he saw her. As the weight of the soil—it was soil!—swallowed his scream, Ruth pulled her face to his. Her eyes were aflame, two lanterns of piercing yellow light. She was smiling again.

Only the echo of his shriek still sounded as he wrenched free of the nightmare; the rest had been devoured by the slinking darkness of evening. Panting, shuddering, he kicked against the grass with old-man legs until he sat upright against the tree. Tears left cold trails on his cheeks.

Bled from the sky were the grainy grays of afternoon—now, in their place, only blackness pierced by starlight.

He cursed himself loudly, then, for being old and tired, for possessing a fool mind that drifted so often to bugbears and hobgoblins, for forcing himself to navigate the rest of the trail in the dark. Mostly, though, he swore just to hear the familiar sound of his own voice in that seeping quiet. The dream had unnerved him, and boyish or not, he could sense that something was distinctly different—more agitated, disturbed—about the woods he found himself in.

He stared again at the graves, glowing dimly now in the reflected light. Their angles seemed curiously sharper, their bulk more menacing. He reached out, instinctively, to

touch the tiny cross near his hand, then thought the better of it. Rolling onto a knee, he pushed his creaking joints off the ground and stood up.

It wasn't the scuffling noise that so shocked him— a life spent working outdoors had accustomed him to the occasional snapping and creaking readjustments of nighttime. Nor was it the smell that suddenly filled his nostrils: the blood-iron tang of wet earth. Rather, it was the subtle movement just outside his range of visibility— a sort of *shifting* of the darkness— that so disquieted him; as a frequent drunk, he was used to ignoring the tricks of his eyes, but this was something different. He squinted as the inky mass slowly took shape against a backdrop of black.

Something was coming down the trail.

He was sprinting before his mind fully registered the fact. His muscles screamed their protest, shouted reasonable explanations like “Bear!”

so slow never seen no bear walking so slow on two legs like that

and “Deer!”

deer jump deer run deer don't just walk right at you swaying shuffling

and “Logger!”

just one man in the middle of the night why the hell didn't he yell when I got up

But no explanation could allay his fear. There was something *wrong* about the thing he saw, something that shifted and drooped and advanced with the blooming intensity of a wicked idea.

The autumn air cut his throat. Where was his heat?

His boots caught the edges of granite that jutted from the trail; each sent him tripping and flailing ahead. In the fevered panic that had overtaken him, he imagined the path was littered with tiny shoes. He had to force the idea from his mind.

The house. The house was close.

The thought gave him unexpected confidence. And though the wizened old man who lived somewhere in his brain told him not to, though ancient and swollen veins stiffened his neck and the rough trail demanded focus, he chanced a glance back toward the graveyard.

Regret, immediate and cascading. Glowing in the gloom not 20 yards behind, the unearthly glint of two small eyes. Like tiny fires.

A surging pulse snapped his head back. Ahead, quivering in his sight, were the apple trees, the stable, the sharp proper whiteness of a home he'd known mostly in dreams. Slow emotional acclimation was a luxury he couldn't afford; his interest in the home was now confined to its possession of four sturdy walls.

He crashed into the door with all the strength his bird-like frame could allow. Cobwebs and their occupants danced across his face as the rusted lock gave way, and he toppled over onto pine floorboards grooved and gouged from a lifetime of anxious pacing. The weak, moonless starlight couldn't pierce the darkness here, and he realized with sinking horror that his eyes would be useless.

The study, then— to the right, he'd be safe in the study. Only one window and one way in. He crawled on his knees across an entryway he could barely remember, bumping against unfamiliar pieces of furniture and knocking a chair to the ground. In the quiet, the crash echoed like a gunshot, and as the noise drained from the walls, he thought he heard tiny scuffling noises at its edges.

He swept his palms along the floorboards, slicing them with sharp slivers of pine in an effort to locate the doorjamb. After long minutes of searching, scanning, he brushed the rounded corners of the threshold— the safety of the study lay just beyond. Straining into the black emptiness ahead, his fingers probed for the wall, the desk, anything he could use to brace himself as he stood. They slid into something wet and cold instead. He squealed as the thing came loose in his hand and plopped to the floor.

The old man threw himself backward, smashed against something massive— the far wall?— and felt a rib snap. The air was sucked from his lungs; daggers of pain dug at the wall of his abdomen. The sensation was blessedly crisper than fear, though, and he sprang up, charged at the wet thing with anger and strength he'd forgotten he had.

Where he expected impact he found only air, and again his thin frame careened through the darkness and crashed to the floor. He kicked at the nothingness with grasshopper legs, groped about for something to wrap his fingers around, use as a weapon. His head rocked on its creaking hinges, still scanning, searching.

A glow at the far end of the room. There, illuminated in the feeble phosphorescence of the window, the outline of a lantern. *The* lantern.

The book of matches was in his palm even before his flailing limbs could drag him across the floor. He flew at the lantern like a madman, sending the glass lamp shattering against the wall.

With fumbling fingers, he struck a match and held it to the wick.

Perhaps the fetid reality of the sight before him was too incomprehensible; perhaps some reptilian part of his brain sought simple escape. Whatever the case, he imagined the view from the hollows. The sudden flare of light. The lantern, afire again like it had been on so

very many nights. His broken body, hunched and trembling against the window. The rotting, quivering thing that stood over him.

He forced himself to see it, forced his mind back into the room. A moldering shroud hung loose from one shoulder, melting into the shock of gray hair that shot from its skull. Drooping mounds of flesh sagged from the sharp bony angles of its nose and cheeks. The sickly light of the lantern flickered in its eyes— eyes that dribbled from their sockets into a mouth now unable to close. A mouth that was smiling.

“Now and always,” Ruth whispered, the rattle of dried leaves in the wind.



About the Author

Curt McDermott is a high school English teacher and lover of ghost stories, comic books, and the Oxford comma. He and his wife live in New Hampshire with a dog and several ducks. See more of his stuff at **hallowpen.com**.