Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Trigger Warning

Short Fiction and Disturbances

Written by Neil Gaiman

Published by Headline

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Trigger Warning

SHORT FICTIONS AND DISTURBANCES

NEIL GAIMAN

headline

Copyright © 2015 Neil Gaiman

The right of Neil Gaiman to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 2015
by HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4722 1768 4 (Hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4722 1769 1 (Trade paperback)

Typeset in Zapf Elliptical by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

A Lunar Labyrinth

We were walking up a gentle hill on a summer's evening. It was gone eight thirty, but it still felt like midafternoon. The sky was blue. The sun was low on the horizon, and it splashed the clouds with gold and salmon and purple-grey.

'So how did it end?' I asked my guide.

'It never ends,' he said.

'But you said it's gone,' I said. 'The maze.'

I had found the lunar labyrinth mentioned online, a small footnote on a website that told you what was interesting and noteworthy wherever you were in the world. Unusual local attractions: the tackier and more manmade the better. I do not know why I am drawn to them: stoneless henges made of cars or of yellow school buses, polystyrene models of enormous blocks of cheese, unconvincing dinosaurs made of flaking powdery concrete and all the rest.

I need them, and they give me an excuse to stop driving, wherever I am, and actually to talk to people. I have been invited into people's houses and into their lives because I wholeheartedly appreciated the zoos they made from engine parts, the houses they had built from tin cans, stone blocks and then covered with aluminum foil, the historical pageants made from shop-window dummies, the paint on their faces flaking off. And

those people, the ones who made the roadside attractions, they would accept me for what I am.

***

'We burned it down,' said my guide. He was elderly, and he walked with a stick. I had met him sitting on a bench in front of the town's hardware store, and he had agreed to show me the site that the lunar labyrinth had once been built upon. Our progress across the meadow was not fast. 'The end of the lunar labyrinth. It was easy. The rosemary hedges caught fire and they crackled and flared. The smoke was thick and drifted down the hill and made us all think of roast lamb.'

'Why was it called a lunar labyrinth?' I asked. 'Was it just the alliteration?'

He thought about this. 'I wouldn't rightly know,' he said. 'Not one way or the other. We called it a labyrinth, but I guess it's just a maze . . .'

'Just amazed,' I repeated.

'There were traditions,' he said. 'We would start to walk it the day *after* the full moon. Begin at the entrance. Make your way to the center, then turn around and trace your way back. Like I say, we'd only start walking the day the moon began to wane. It would still be bright enough to walk. We'd walk it any night the moon was bright enough to see by. Come out here. Walk. Mostly in couples. We'd walk until the dark of the moon.'

'Nobody walked it in the dark?'

'Oh, some of them did. But they weren't like us. They were kids, and they brought flashlights, when the moon went dark. They walked it, the bad kids, the bad seeds, the ones who wanted to scare each other. For those kids it was Hallowe'en every month. They loved to be scared. Some of them said they saw a torturer.'

'What kind of a torturer?' The word had surprised me. You did not hear it often, not in conversation.

'Just someone who tortured people, I guess. I never saw him.'

A breeze came down towards us from the hilltop. I sniffed the air but smelled no burning herbs, no ash, nothing that seemed unusual on a summer evening. Somewhere there were gardenias.

'It was only kids when the moon was dark. When the crescent moon appeared, then the children got younger, and parents would come up to the hill and walk with them. Parents and children. They'd walk the maze together to its center and the adults would point up to the new moon, how it looks like a smile in the sky, a huge yellow smile, and little Romulus and Remus, or whatever the kids were called, they'd smile and laugh, and wave their hands as if they were trying to pull the moon out of the sky and put it on their little faces.

'Then, as the moon waxed, the couples would come. Young couples would come up here, courting, and elderly couples, comfortable in each other's company, the ones whose courting days were long forgotten.' He leaned heavily on his stick. 'Not forgotten,' he said. 'You never forget. It must be somewhere inside you. Even if the brain has forgotten, perhaps the teeth remember. Or the fingers.'

'Did they have flashlights?'

'Some nights they did. Some nights they didn't. The popular nights were always the nights where no clouds covered the moon, and you could just walk the labyrinth. And sooner or later, everybody did. As the moonlight increased, day by day – night by night, I should say. That world was so beautiful.

'They parked their cars down there, back where you parked yours, at the edge of the property, and they'd come up the hill on foot. Always on foot, except for the ones in wheelchairs, or the ones whose parents carried them. Then, at the top of the

hill some of them'd stop to canoodle. They'd walk the labyrinth too. There were benches, places to stop as you walked it. And they'd stop and canoodle some more. You'd think it was just the young ones, canoodling, but the older folk did it, too. Flesh to flesh. You would hear them sometimes, on the other side of the hedge, making noises like animals, and that always was your cue to slow down, or maybe explore another branch of the path for a while. Doesn't come by too often, but when it does I think I appreciate it more now than I did then. Lips touching skin. Under the moonlight.'

'How many years exactly was the lunar labyrinth here before it was burned down? Did it come before or after the house was built?'

My guide made a dismissive noise. 'After, before . . . these things all go back. They talk about the labyrinth of Minos, but that was nothing by comparison to this. Just some tunnels with a horn-headed fellow wandering lonely and scared and hungry. He wasn't really a bull-head. You know that?'

'How do you know?'

'Teeth. Bulls and cows are ruminants. They don't eat flesh. The minotaur did.'

'I hadn't thought of that.'

'People don't.' The hill was getting steeper now.

I thought, *There are no torturers, not any longer.* And I was no torturer. But all I said was, 'How high were the bushes that made up the maze? Were they real hedges?'

'They were real. They were high as they needed to be.'

'I don't know how high rosemary grows in these parts.' I didn't. I was far from home.

'We have gentle winters. Rosemary flourishes here.'

'So why exactly did the people burn it all down?'

He paused. 'You'll get a better idea of how things lie when we get to the top of the hill.'

'How do they lie?'

'At the top of the hill.'

The hill was getting steeper and steeper. My left knee had been injured the previous winter, in a fall on the ice, which meant I could no longer run fast, and these days I found hills and steps extremely taxing. With each step my knee would twinge, reminding me, angrily, of its existence.

Many people, on learning that the local oddity they wished to visit had burned down some years before, would simply have gotten back into their cars and driven on towards their final destination. I am not so easily deterred. The finest things I have seen are dead places: a shuttered amusement park I entered by bribing a night watchman with the price of a drink; an abandoned barn in which, the farmer said, half a dozen bigfoots had been living the summer before. He said they howled at night, and that they stank, but that they had moved on almost a year ago. There was a rank animal smell that lingered in that place, but it might have been coyotes.

'When the moon waned, they walked the lunar labyrinth with love,' said my guide. 'As it waxed, they walked with desire, not with love. Do I have to explain the difference to you? The sheep and the goats?'

'I don't think so.'

'The sick came, too, sometimes. The damaged and the disabled came, and some of them needed to be wheeled through the labyrinth, or carried. But even they had to choose the path they travelled, not the people carrying them or wheeling them. Nobody chose their paths but them. When I was a boy people called them cripples. I'm glad we don't call them cripples any longer. The lovelorn came, too. The alone. The lunatics – they were brought here, sometimes. Got their name from the moon, it was only fair the moon had a chance to fix things.'

We were approaching the top of the hill. It was dusk. The sky

was the colour of wine, now, and the clouds in the west glowed with the light of the setting sun, although from where we were standing it had already dropped below the horizon.

'You'll see, when we get up there. It's perfectly flat, the top of the hill.'

I wanted to contribute something, so I said, 'Where I come from, five hundred years ago the local lord was visiting the king. And the king showed off his enormous table, his candles, his beautiful painted ceiling, and as each one was displayed, instead of praising it, the lord simply said, "I have a finer, and bigger, and better one." The king wanted to call his bluff, so he told him that the following month he would come and eat at this table, bigger and finer than the king's, lit by candles in candle-holders bigger and finer than the king's, under a ceiling painting bigger and better than the king's.'

My guide said, 'Did he lay out a tablecloth on the flatness of the hill, and have twenty brave men holding candles, and did they dine beneath God's own stars? They tell a story like that in these parts, too.'

'That's the story,' I admitted, slightly miffed that my contribution had been so casually dismissed. 'And the king acknowledged that the lord was right.'

'Didn't the boss have him imprisoned, and tortured?' asked my guide. 'That's what happened in the version of the story they tell hereabouts. They say that the man never even made it as far as the Cordon-bleu dessert his chef had whipped up. They found him on the following day with his hands cut off, his severed tongue placed neatly in his breast pocket and a final bullet-hole in his forehead.'

'Here? In the house back there?'

'Good lord, no. They left his body in his nightclub. Over in the city.'

I was surprised how quickly dusk had ended. There was still

a glow in the west, but the rest of the sky had become night, plum-purple in its majesty.

'The days before the full of the moon, in the labyrinth,' he said. 'They were set aside for the infirm, and those in need. My sister had a women's condition. They told her it would be fatal if she didn't have her insides all scraped out, and then it might be fatal anyway. Her stomach had swollen up as if she was carrying a baby, not a tumor, although she must have been pushing fifty. She came up here when the moon was a day from full and she walked the labyrinth. Walked it from the outside in, in the moon's light, and she walked it from the center back to the outside, with no false steps or mistakes.'

'What happened to her?'

'She lived,' he said, shortly.

We crested the hill, but I could not see what I was looking at. It was too dark.

'They delivered her of the thing inside her. It lived as well, for a while.' He paused. Then he tapped my arm. 'Look over there.'

I turned and looked. The size of the moon astonished me. I know it's an optical illusion, that the moon grows no smaller as it rises, but this moon seemed to take up so much of the horizon as it rose that I found myself thinking of the old Frank Frazetta paperback covers, where men with their swords raised would be silhouetted in front of huge moons, and I remembered paintings of wolves howling on hilltops, black cutouts against the circle of snow-white moon that framed them. The enormous moon that was rising was the creamy yellow of freshly churned butter.

'Is the moon full?' I asked.

'That's a full moon, all right.' He sounded satisfied. 'And there's the labyrinth.'

We walked towards it. I had expected to see ash on the ground,

or nothing. Instead, in the buttery moonlight, I saw a maze, complex and elegant, made of circles and whorls inside a huge square. I could not judge distances properly in that light, but I thought that each side of the square must be two hundred feet or more.

The plants that outlined the maze were low to the ground, though. None of them was more than a foot tall. I bent down, picked a needle-like leaf, black in the moonlight, and crushed it between finger and thumb. I inhaled, and thought of raw lamb, carefully dismembered and prepared, and placed in an oven on a bed of branches and needles that smelled just like this.

'I thought you people burned all this to the ground,' I said.

'We did. They aren't hedges, not any longer. But things grow again, in their season. There's no killing some things. Rosemary's tough.'

'Where's the entrance?'

'You're standing in it,' he said. He was an old man, who walked with a stick and talked to strangers. Nobody would ever miss him.

'So what happened up here when the moon was full?'

'Locals didn't walk the labyrinth then. That was the one night that paid for all.'

I took a step into the maze. There was nothing difficult about it, not with the bushes that marked it no higher than my shins, no higher than a kitchen garden. If I got lost, I could simply step over the bushes, walk back out. But for now I followed the path into the labyrinth. It was easy to make out in the light of the full moon. I could hear my guide, as he continued to talk.

'Some folk thought even that price was too high. That was why we came up here, why we burned the lunar labyrinth. We came up that hill when the moon was dark, and we carried burning torches, like in the old black-and-white movies. We all did. Even me. But you can't kill everything. It don't work like that.'

'Why rosemary?' I asked.

'Rosemary's for remembering,' he told me.

The butter-yellow moon was rising faster than I imagined or expected. Now it was a pale ghost-face in the sky, calm and compassionate, and its colour was white, bone-white.

The man said, 'There's always a chance that you could get out safely. Even on the night of the full moon. First you have to get to the center of the labyrinth. There's a fountain there. You'll see. You can't mistake it. Then you have to make it back from the center. No missteps, no dead ends, no mistakes on the way in or on the way out. It's probably easier now than it was when the bushes were high. It's a chance. Otherwise, the labyrinth gets to cure you of all that ails you. Of course, you'll have to run.'

I looked back. I could not see my guide. Not any longer. There was something in front of me, beyond the bush-path pattern, a black shadow padding silently along the perimeter of the square. It was the size of a large dog, but it did not move like a dog.

It threw back its head and howled to the moon with amusement and with merriment. The huge flat table at the top of the hill echoed with joyous howls, and, my left knee aching from the long hill-climb, I stumbled forward.

The maze had a pattern; I could trace it. Above me the moon shone, bright as day. She had always accepted my gifts in the past. She would not play me false at the end.

'Run,' said a voice that was almost a growl.

I ran like a lamb to his slaughter.