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Edited by Stephen Jones

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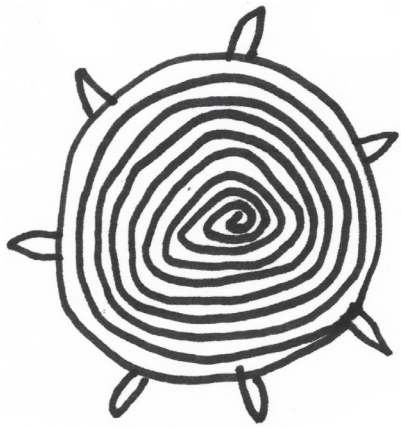
HORROLOGY

The Lexicon of Fear



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For Johnny –
a true scholar of Horrorology

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The Library of The Damned

IN THE LIBRARY of the Damned there exists a certain bookcase, hidden away amongst the remotest shadows of this vast depository of knowledge, where the most decadent, the most blasphemous, the most sacrilegious tomes and documents sit upon a dusty shelf, their very existence all-but-forgotten except amongst a very select few.

Here you will find, sitting side-by-side, such arcane titles as *The Book of Eibon* and *The Book of Iod*, the *Celaneo* by Professor Laban Shrewsbury, the Latin version of the *Cthäat Aquadingen*, *Cultes de Goules* by the *Comte d'Erlette* Francois-Honore Balfour, *De Vermis Mysteriis*, the *Dhol Chants*, an uncensored edition of *The King in Yellow*, the Mad Arab's *Necronomicon*, the *Pnakotic Manuscripts* and their various *Fragments*, both the nine handwritten volumes of the *Revelations of Gla'aki* and Antonius Quine's corrected single volume, the *Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan*, the only remaining copy of the *Testament of Carnamagos* fastened with hasps of human bone, the suppressed seventh tome of the Englishman's *Libros Sanguis*, and the original German edition of Friedrich von Junzt's *Unaussprechlichen Kulten*. The forbidden knowledge contained within those pages is kept imprisoned between their covers and away from the curious eyes of mankind.

Only a very special few know of their existence, and amongst even that chosen cabal, fewer still have ever visited that shadow-haunted corner of the Library and dared to remove a book from where it sits and look upon the secrets contained therein.

It is said that amongst those Seekers After Truth who have gazed upon those profane volumes, some were driven mad immediately, while others tore out their own bloodied eyes rather than peruse the writhing calligraphy a heartbeat longer than they had to.

And on those forgotten shelves, amongst those titles that should never be named, there is one grimoire that is said to be the most terrible, the most hideous of them all. That book is the very Lexicon of Fear itself.

Within its seductively soft and supple pages are the words of terror themselves, made manifest by the tales they may recount to the unwary reader.

How is it, you would ask, that I should know all this? Once, long ago, I was a lowly student of the ancient science of Horrorology, able to come and go as I pleased within those unhallowed halls. I was one of those very Seekers After Truth who dared to pierce the veils of darkness and discover what lies beyond man's comprehension.

And with that forbidden knowledge finally came an understanding. I could no longer allow such truths to remain hidden any longer. And so it was that I committed the greatest of all sins – overcome with a misplaced sense of righteousness, I visited the Library and, when I was certain that I was unobserved, I tore a sheaf of pages from the Lexicon, quickly departing that place before my crime could be discovered.

But discovered it of course was.

How could I, with the knowledge I have accumulated, ever think it would be otherwise?

And so I fled, determined that one day I would share these pages with the world. That perhaps in some way, once the horrors contained therein were exposed to the light of day that maybe then, and only then, their power would be banished and the Librarians will no longer pursue me with their elongated snouts and curiously waving appendages.

But now, after countless eons, they have finally found me. I hear their high-pitched clacking in my dreams, and I know that they are close. I do not have much time.

So now it is time to share these pages with you. These are the words that comprise the language of horror itself, and the tales they tell are not for the neophyte or the fainthearted.

But be warned: once you have read them, there is no turning back. They will remain seared into your mind forever, their subtle terrors slowly twisting and worming their way into your subconscious until, you too, know the true meanings of fear.

But by then, my friend, it may be too late for us both . . .

accur'sèd *a.* 1: having very bad luck. 2: being placed under or as if under a curse. 3: ill-fated. 4: damnable. 5: involving misery. 6: (colloq.) execrable, greatly or strongly disliked. Origin: Middle English *ac-ursed*, from past participle of *acursen* to consign to destruction with a curse, from *a-* (from Old English *ā*, perfective prefix) + *cursen* to curse. First known use: 13th century. Synonyms: blasted, confounded, cursed (also *curst*), damnable (or *ac-curst*), goddamned (or *goddamn* or *goddam*), infernal. Example: *When you believe that you have been given or inherited special powers which can be used to cause harm to others. Such as circus clowns . . .*

ACCURSED

ROBERT SHEARMAN

I

WHENEVER SUSAN PITT went to the circus a clown died, and she wasn't entirely sure that it was a coincidence. She mostly thought it was. It had seemed a coincidence when she'd been a little girl, rather less so in her late teens and early twenties. And now she'd turned forty, and the world seemed flatter and greyer and just so very *real*, and she was firmly of the opinion it was a coincidence after all. Much of the time, anyway. If she stopped to think about it.

Coincidence did seem the most likely explanation. And that's because: (a) The manner of the clown deaths had nothing in common with each other (save for the fact the clowns did, indeed, die). (b) She never had any personal interaction with the clowns, she did nothing to distract them or alarm them. She just sat in the middle of the crowd, none of the clowns showed any inclination to pick her out from it. Except that last clown, maybe, and that was arguable. (c) Three clowns over a ten-year period sounds a lot, but isn't really enough to establish any pattern; a scientist would want her to kill a fourth clown at least before agreeing there was any precedent.

She hadn't killed a fourth clown. She hadn't visited a circus in years.

It wasn't something that haunted her. She'd been with Greg for twelve years now – six married, six not – and she'd never even brought the matter up. Not even as an anecdote – it wasn't a subject she avoided, circuses and clowns weren't things they had natural cause to discuss. He was an estate agent, she worked part-time in a bank. She hadn't even mentioned it on

one of those first few dates, when they had both been so awkwardly casting around to find things to say. And that was a shame, because it might have made the date more interesting, and Susan seem more interesting too – and yet not a shame, really, because Greg had married her anyway, so what did it matter? Susan just hadn't realised that clown death was an arresting topic for conversation. Susan wasn't really a very gifted conversationalist.

In fact, when it boiled down to it, Susan wasn't very gifted at anything. She had passed her exams at school, but none with distinction. She could drive a car, but liked to keep off the motorways. They were glad of her attendance at work, but never much noticed when she took a day off. And Greg would come home each and every night and she'd have prepared him a perfectly adequate meal and then they'd have a perfectly adequate evening together, watching TV and holding hands and then going up to bed. 'I'm a bit useless,' Susan would sometimes joke, 'really, I don't know why you put up with me!' And Greg might laugh.

And sometimes she'd think of those poor dead clowns, and yes, of course it was all a coincidence. But she might get a *frisson* of, what? Guilt? Fear? Even a little pride? Because just maybe, somehow, she'd been responsible after all. This was hers. She had a gift. It wasn't much of a gift, but really, Susan would take what she could get.

II

The first death was one of her earliest memories. Indeed, it may even have been her earliest. Because all those infant birthdays and infant Christmases, hugging Grandma, learning to walk and sleeping in the cot – she couldn't be sure they weren't just stories she'd been told. But no one talked about the clown, and the recollection of his death hadn't been distorted by pictures in a photo album or repeated anecdotes, and some of it was still so clear in Susan's mind she felt she could almost touch it.

She'd been four years old, maybe five. Her parents had taken her and Connie to the circus. She didn't know what the occasion had been. Maybe there wasn't an occasion. She was still young enough her parents would give her treats for no reason. She remembers finding it all a little overwhelming – the huge tent they had to enter, all those people

crowded about. Strong smells of animals and candy floss and body odour. She'd been frightened by it, and excited too, and she remembers deciding whether or not to cry or to enjoy herself. She remembers this being a conscious decision. She decided to be happy.

Most of the acts blur into one, and this is where her memories *are* distorted – lions and trapeze artists and elephants being led around the ring trunk-to-tail, maybe these are just things she expects from a circus, she's seen this stuff on TV.

Then there were the clowns.

There were three of them. Or at least three – it isn't the actual act she remembers so well. There were pratfalls, and they squirted each other with water, there were bits of juggling. What Susan found engaging was that they seemed to be a family. There was one older clown, and the others she took to be his children. The children were sillier and louder than their father, they were the ones who kept falling over and getting wet and being hit by planks of wood. And the father was dismayed by their behaviour, he wanted to take the act seriously. He might try to sing a song, but it would be interrupted by the other clowns' hi-jinks; his was the juggling that was destroyed by clumsier clowns than him. And each time his good intentions to make the audience happy were vandalised, he bore it as patiently as he could – he shook his head sadly, sighed, looked out at the boys and girls and shrugged. What can you do? he seemed to say. Isn't this just what life is like? He had a white-painted face like the others, but it was almost as if he didn't know he was wearing it – the joke was on him, at least the rest of the clowns knew they were fools.

And there was this one moment when he had five batons in the air, and there was such a fierce look of concentration on his face – and then it just stopped – and he hadn't been knocked over by another clown, and he wasn't distracted by a cream pie to the face – he just stopped, so suddenly, he just gave up. He let the batons fall to the ground. He took a couple of deep breaths, Susan can still see him doing that, and how he put his hand to his chest, and how slow and deliberate those breaths were. And yes, it was still funny, just how seriously he was taking it all, even such a silly little thing like breathing.

He walked slowly to the side of the ring. He righted a stool. He sat on it. The rest of the act carried on around him in its perfect inanity,

and he watched it, the stupidity of it made him wince. And that was funny too.

Then, when the act was done, and the other clowns beamed at the audience and took their bows, the old clown didn't get up to join them, and Susan didn't find that so funny, she thought it a bit rude.

The clowns left the ring. One of them first went to the old man and offered him his arm, and the old man grasped it, and stumbled to his feet – and even now there might have been some last comic business, the young clown would pull his arm away at the crucial moment and let his exhausted father collapse to the floor. But he didn't.

At some point later Susan had to leave – it wasn't anything serious, it was probably for the toilet. Mummy went with her. And they were outside now, and it was dark and it was cold, and Susan could still hear the action going on inside the big top, and she wanted to get back there as soon as possible, she didn't want to miss a thing. But her attention was drawn to a van with flashing lights that she now knew was an ambulance, and there was a man on a trolley, and she knew it was a man because his hand was peeking out from under the sheet. And two of the clowns were standing near, and they weren't being silly now, their faces looked so adult like their father's.

'No, no,' said Mummy. 'Come on.' And she gave Susan a little tug, but when Susan refused to move Mummy gave up and let her be.

The clowns saw them, and one of them began a reassuring smile. And then just sort of gave up, and looked away. Mummy took Susan back into the big top, and at the end all the performers appeared in the ring and took a bow – but not the clowns, not any of the clowns, not even the ones who hadn't died.

Susan found all of this very interesting, and on the way home in the car asked about death, and what happened when people died, and whether Mummy or Daddy would die too. And Mummy and Daddy were behaving very oddly, and were being too nice, and that was silly because Susan wasn't crying, and Connie wasn't crying either, Connie never cried about anything.

Daddy began talking about how death happened to us all and that no one knew what it meant or why it happened, and Mummy said, 'Shut up, shut up.' And she turned to the girls in the back seat, and she said, 'Mummy

and Daddy are never going to die, we'll be here for you for ever.' And Susan knew Mummy was trying to be kind, but she was actually fierce and frightening.

The second death was the funny one. Even in Susan's darker moods, if she thought of the second death she couldn't help but smile.

This time it was definitely a special occasion – Connie's twelfth birthday, which would mean that Susan was only nine. Connie said she was too old for a circus, but she was allowed to take four of her school friends with her as guests, and that stopped her complaining. She didn't want Susan to go too, it was her birthday treat, not Susan's, and once upon a time Mummy would have told her off for being so unkind, but it was her birthday so she let it ride. Or maybe Mummy was just distracted. Mummy was distracted a lot back then. Anyway, Susan went to the circus as well, and so did Daddy – the marriage was in its final stages, it was probably the last thing they all did together as a family.

The big top wasn't that big, not as big as Susan remembered from years before. There weren't any elephants. There was a lion, or maybe it was a tiger, and it seemed old. There was a trapeze artist, but the trapeze wasn't very high off the ground, and there was a safety net. The clowns weren't funny.

'It's boring,' said one of Connie's friends, and Connie agreed a little too loudly, and an adult sitting a row behind told them to shut up, and Mummy and Daddy let him.

The trapeze artist lost her footing, and fell from the high wire, and somehow missed the safety net altogether, and landed upon one of the clowns. The clown didn't even look up, that was pretty funny, he'd never even seen what hit him! – even funnier was the way his body was spread-eagled beneath the acrobat's bulk, arms and legs stuck out like a starfish. It's almost as if he had planned his death pose for comic effect, it was brilliant, and some of the audience actually clapped before they realised it was an accident. Winded and bemused, the trapeze artist got to her feet. The clown didn't.

They had to cancel the performance at that point, and Susan's other main memory of the evening was how angry Daddy became trying to get a refund. 'Whatever happened to the saying, "the show must go on"?' He

didn't get any money, but at last got a voucher for free tickets for a future performance, and he was happy with this little victory. The family never used them, of course, and besides, the divorce was finalised two months later.

It must be said, neither of these clown deaths had been especially alarming. And it could even be argued there had been some practical benefit to both of them. The first had provided a useful life lesson to Susan at just the right age when she wouldn't feel threatened by it. The second had cheered up an otherwise disappointing evening.

The third death was something entirely else, and in retrospect, could have been so easily avoided.

'Do you want to go the circus with me?' Connie had asked. Susan was surprised. Connie was seventeen years old now, and wanted as little to do with her younger sister as possible. At best she seemed to find Susan's existence a pointless irritation, something put upon the Earth to embarrass her in front of her friends. That Connie was speaking to her at all was an honour.

'The circus on the common?'

'What other circus is there? Well, do you want to, or not?'

And the truth was, Susan didn't really, and very nearly said no – ought to have said no. It was cold and raining. Mum was out having dinner with someone from work – she said it was just dinner, but even Susan knew it was a date. Connie was looking after her, but Susan knew that under normal circumstances she wouldn't see her sister at all, she'd be barred from the sitting room where Connie would be playing music with her friends; and that didn't matter, she was resigned to a quiet time on her own, utterly on her own, in her bedroom, just the way she liked it.

Connie looked impatient now, and Susan couldn't bear that, she didn't want her sister to get cross. 'Yes,' she said. 'All right.' And Connie nodded, without a smile, as if she hadn't been the one who suggested it in the first place, as if Susan now owed her a favour.

They walked to the common, Connie let Susan share her umbrella, but only if Susan agreed to hold it. Even though it was raining, the common was still full of families, of children running about the arcades and getting spattered with mud. 'Can I have some candy floss?' asked Susan, and

Connie gave a tight smile, and said she could have one later, maybe, if she were good.

Connie paid for both tickets, and that was generous of her. Susan wanted to sit near the front, but Connie preferred the view from above, so that was that.

The circus was called Flick Barker and Son. The twist was that the ringleader was also a clown. He walked into the ring, red coat and tails, white face and gloves, all confidence and charm. He introduced himself, then introduced his son. The son came running on eagerly to join him. The son was dressed the same, but could only have been ten years old. He looked like a midget copy of his father – he stood beside him, looking up at him, beaming with pride and love.

There were no animal acts. Susan knew they had been made illegal some time ago, and she liked animals and knew that was a good thing. But without the animals there would only be people to watch, and they were never as interesting.

After each act the two clowns would emerge from separate sides of the ring, taking the applause as their own. 'What do you think of it so far, Little Flick?' the father would ask, and the little clown would roll his eyes and shrug. 'Well, don't worry, we have better acts to come!' Then the older clown would joke about the poor quality of the last performer, and apologise to the audience. The strong man was an ex-convict on the run. The tumbler wasn't well rehearsed, just drunk. The Russian acrobat girl was someone he'd bought cheap from a dodgy ad in a girlie mag. He'd waggle his fingers, and gurn at the crowd, and people would laugh, but his son would laugh the most of all.

It was supposed to be endearing. To Susan, it seemed fantastically cruel.

The children at school didn't bully Susan so badly any more. Not since she'd shot up in size, and become so large and lumpen. Not since Claire Hardy had gone that little bit too far, and Susan had lost her temper and thumped her so hard in the face that she'd been bruised for weeks. Susan was put in detention, of course, and a warning letter was written to her mother – but the kids never tried to hurt her again. But still she knew how they despised her, the nicknames they called her behind her back, that they would never be her friends.

She recognised the same streak in the clown. That there was no kindness in him. That for all that he treated the audience as friends in confidence, he despised them. That he despised his son too, there was no love in those big smiles and easy banter.

At last Flick the Elder said to his doting son, 'Does nothing satisfy you? Isn't there *any* act you might enjoy?'

And the son looked a little bashful, and put his finger shyly in his mouth. And then pointed at his father.

'You want *me*?' said Flick, in mock surprise. 'What do you think, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls? Is it time for the star performance?'

Little Flick led everyone in an affirming cheer.

'All right,' said the clown to the boy, and he put his hand upon the child's shoulder in what looked very nearly like affection. 'Just you wait, son. I'll give you something that'll knock your little socks off.'

'Hurrah,' said Little Flick.

'This evening,' Flick told the audience, 'we have all witnessed some mediocre juggling, a few magic tricks a child could see through, some stunts barely worth the name. I'm astonished by your patience. I'm astonished you haven't demanded your money back, started a riot, started a revolution! I thank you. You are kind folk, one and all. You *deserve* something better. You *deserve* me.'

He took from his pocket some balls. 'Prepare to be amazed,' he said. 'Not just three balls. But four!'

He hadn't thrown the first ball into the air when he suddenly seemed to stop stock-still.

The balls dropped to the ground. And it was so delicious, the smug confidence that had never left his face all evening was gone. Doubt flickered across it, then fear. Susan could see it. The whole audience could see it.

Flick staggered forward a few paces, then stopped again. Didn't just stop – jerked to a halt, as if his puppet strings had been pulled hard and tight.

Susan stared down at him.

And breaking through his white face – thin and red, it looked like string, no, now fatter than that, worms. Red worms. Struggling out of his skin, and out, out into the spotlight.

Flick began to scream.

And it wasn't worms, it was blood, but the way it flowed was so thick and wormy! – squeezing out from the face in a dozen different places – the blood was finding the cracks in the make-up, and the force of it was breaking those cracks into fissures, the white face was flaking off and behind it was only red.

The clown put his hands to his face as if to cover his shame. As if to push the blood back inside. As if to, what? As if to tear off the skin itself so it would all stop, stop this, stop this.

And Susan still stared down, and she felt it within her, she knew that she was doing this. This was her *gift.* And if she could only turn away from him the clown would be all right, the clown wouldn't have to die. But she couldn't turn away. She didn't turn away. Turning away wasn't part of the gift, the gift had its limits, she didn't *want* to turn away. Her forehead throbbed, and it hurt, but it was a good hurt, the pain was so strong and she was the one in control of it. She fumbled blindly for Connie's hand, but Connie didn't take it.

'Help me!' cried out Flick, and it was shrill, and it was the last coherent sound he made. Where's your swagger now, you white-face bastard? You bully. You fraud. He jerked forward again. He swung his body towards the audience. He stabbed out one hand – one finger, he pointed directly to where Susan was sitting.

And maybe the effort was too much for him, because that's when he finally toppled over. Flat on his face, and that in itself was a mercy.

There was screaming all around, of course, and some people were fighting for the exit. Still more, like Susan, sat dazed and still.

She turned to Connie, and Connie's eyes were bright and livid, and her face was red, and Susan supposed she was furious. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

'You don't tell Mum about this,' said Connie. 'You don't tell *anyone*.'

And there in the ring, little Flick gazed at his father, his own white face hanging limp in comic surprise, still looking so proud, still waiting for an act that would knock his little socks off.