

# **The Gaki**

**A Story of Bizarre and Ravenous Hunger  
By Stephen Mark Rainey**

Hardly anyone knew about the Copper River gatherings, and those who did kept them a closely guarded secret. For one thing, the law catching wind of the events would have quickly spelled their end, and for another, in their aftermath, few attendees ever found themselves in any condition to give an accurate accounting of their experiences. My initiation came by way of an acquaintance from the Cataract Club in Beckham, a man whom I knew only as Jester. Over a period of months, he and I had immersed ourselves in frequent, spirited philosophical discussions in the shadowed corners of the club, and one night, with a somewhat dramatic flair, he divulged to me the existence of the riverside events. Intrigued — and assured that students from the college where I taught psychology were strictly prohibited — I decided to accept his invitation.

I made my first expedition to the river on a Saturday night near the end of summer, when the breeze coming out of the mountains had just begun to turn cool. Per Jester's instructions, I drove about five miles out of town and down a little-used spur road off the Barren Creek highway until I reached a particular mobile home park. There, I knocked on the door of trailer number nine and, in what I considered a rather comedic ritual, spoke the word "brazen" to the kindly, bespectacled matron who answered. Upon receipt of my fifty dollars, she directed me to follow a narrow footpath into the woods, which I did, only to encounter a gentleman with indiscernible features who asked me the time. "Ten," I replied, even though it was eleven-thirty, and he waved me on, wishing me a pleasant evening. Continuing down the path, I soon saw the lights of many tiki torches arrayed along the riverbank, and as I drew close to them, I detected the unmistakable, woody scent of marijuana; the thicker, sweet tang of hashish; and other unfamiliar, heady aromas that somehow suggested more to me than they actually meant.

Gradually, I began to make out numerous, dark-shadowed figures milling among the trees, their faces sporadically highlighted by the flickering torches. No music rose above the whispering breeze, but choruses of tree frogs, crickets, and distant whippoorwills provided a mellow soundtrack far more pleasing than any manmade noise. Despite the clandestine air and occasional suspicious glances directed at me, I received a warm enough welcome from a rather gaunt young woman serving absinthe, and in short order, with a cup in hand, I felt reasonably comfortable among the close-pressing hemlocks, glowing torches, and half-seen figures sprawled here and there under influences that I, even at my most audacious, would be unlikely to sample.

As I wandered close to the riverbank, listening to the melodious gurgling of water, a figure came tottering out of the darkness, almost colliding with me: a tall, lanky young man, stumbling along like a reanimated corpse, face ashen, eyes half-closed, apparently lost in some drug-induced fog. He shambled past without saying a word, but a moment later, a familiar voice called my name, and another figure materialized from the shadows. I soon made out the narrow, angular face of my friend Jester.

"Well, David," he said, giving me a cordial nod but refraining, as always, from shaking my hand. "I'm pleased you came."

I gave him a thin smile. "Hard to resist, in spite of the price of admission."

"No one ever leaves here feeling cheated, I can assure you. Most of my business is repeat."

“So, I take it there’s more to this than wandering the riverbanks getting stoned?”

“Of course,” he said with a little laugh. “There are plenty of...unusual...ways to indulge one’s self here. All one has to do is look. Walk with me, why not?”

Falling in a step behind him, taking care to avoid sloshing absinthe on my clothes, I kept an eye on his back as he glided down the trail toward a golden glow some distance ahead, which I soon identified as a large, boxlike tent, dimly lit from within, presumably by candles. We stopped in front of it and he gestured to its entrance.

“Why don’t you step inside? I imagine you’ll find it stimulating.”

A faint light in his eyes made me wonder briefly if I were being played for a fool, but having come this far, I saw little choice but to partake of my host’s offerings. I downed the last of my drink, grimacing at the too-strong anise flavor, and placed the empty cup in his waiting hand. With a stiff, curt bow, he pulled back the tent flap, and I stepped into a small oasis of candlelight and sweet, intoxicating aromas.

On a long ottoman upholstered with plush, red velvet, two black-haired young women sat together, their arms entangled in a suggestive embrace. Both wore robes of some clingy, web-like fabric, and their pale faces were painted in dark shades of gray and green. Perhaps attractive beneath the vampiric façades, they now appeared garish and vaguely repulsive, and I barely withheld a snicker at their affected, quizzical gazes.

After a long, unblinking examination of me, one of them finally smiled, exposing two rows of polished, blue-white teeth. “You don’t consume humans do you?” she asked, her voice thin and musical.

“Can’t say that I do.”

“Good,” she said, her face softening with relief. “I dislike prey that shares my appetite.”

“So, you’re a predator?”

“Yes, and so are you, but at least you’re not my competition.” She smiled again and motioned to a canvas camping chair next to the ottoman. “Have a seat.”

I slid into the chair and said, “My name’s David.”

“I know.”

“And you two?”

“We are just...your friends.”

I shrugged. “Have it your way. Anyway, I’m pleased to meet you — such as it is.”

“Likewise.”

“Does your friend talk?”

“No.”

“Doesn’t that get boring?”

“Never.”

I realized that the two pairs of eyes still had not blinked, and the fixed gazes — especially from the silent one — soon became disconcerting. I wondered if Jester had

expected me to find these women sexually arousing; if so, he had seriously misjudged my character. I wasn't quite sure where to proceed from here, but before I had time to give it much thought, the silent woman lifted a hand, and in it I saw a long, silver needle. Without warning, she plunged it into her companion's flesh, just above the collarbone, in the vicinity of the carotid artery. I started, nearly falling backward in my chair, but the stricken woman merely smiled at me. The other began to work the needle in and out of her skin, in a grotesque parody of sexual rhythm.

"Good God," I whispered, my mouth suddenly bone-dry.

"You don't believe in God," the woman said, matter-of-factly. "You haven't since you were ten. You have no faith in a higher power because it doesn't conform to your logic."

"Ah, you've been talking to Jester. Theology is one of our favorite topics of conversation."

She ignored me and continued. "You don't believe in reward or punishment in a life after this one, so you strive to experience everything you can in this world. You do good deeds because you recognize the importance of contributing to society. You have spiritual values, even though you deny a spirit. However, you frequently indulge your animalistic nature, often without regard for others or your own physical well-being."

"That probably describes most of this country's population. But I can't say that I indulge in anything quite like that." I pointed to the needle moving bloodlessly in and out of her flesh.

"You've not left here yet."

That statement sent an electric thrill through my body. Now the silent one offered me a wicked grin and extended a long, oddly striated tongue, which moved slowly and stiffly over her lips. It took me a moment to realize that the striations appeared to be small bones, like miniature metacarpals. To my further shock, I saw that its pink tip bore a thin, razor-like barb. The woman leaned forward and ran the tongue around the base of her companion's throat; where it passed, the barb sliced deeply into the pale skin, but no blood issued from the wound.

My initial amusement was quickly turning to something else.

"Extraordinary," I said, barely able to form the words. "If nothing else, you have a flair for drama."

"There is more to come," she said, smiling far too sweetly at me. "But I'm right about you. You might as well admit it."

I shook my head noncommittally "Jester knows me. You know Jester. I'm not impressed."

She leaned disconcertingly close to me and patted the seat of the ottoman. "Why don't you come sit with us?"

"I'm fine where I am."

"How rude," she said with a look of dismay. "It's not as if we intend to do you any

harm. Not really.”

“What do you want?”

“To get to know you. Your desires. Your ambitions.”

I glanced at her companion, and the silent creature’s eyes seized mine and bored into my brain, so intently that I felt pressure building behind my forehead. I could hardly blame it on a single cup of absinthe, unless it had contained something else. “Well,” I said, “I’m thinking that my most immediate ambition would be to get myself another drink. Elsewhere. So, if you’ll forgive me.” I started to rise.

The silent woman stopped moving the needle, and the other’s face, for the first time, turned cold. She laid a spider-like hand on my forearm. “No. I don’t think we will.”

I pulled my arm away and stood up, a little too quickly. “Seriously. Thanks for the diversion, but I’m afraid this isn’t quite my speed.”

For a moment, I thought the woman was going to spring to her feet and pounce on me. She did not. Instead, she pushed her lower lip into a childish pout, and her eyes punished me with a bitter, regretful stare. The unspeaking one recommenced her work with the needle, and a low hum began in her throat — an eerie musical tone that hardly sounded human. More like the sound made by vast numbers of cicadas when they awoke to infest the land every seventeen years.

I pushed my way out of the tent, briefly blinded by the darkness, the ghostly song spinning around me like a silken web. As my eyes began to adjust, I started toward the beckoning lights of the tiki torches, alert for any sign of Jester, who I imagined would be watching me from some place of concealment. During all our discussions, I had never detected in him any sense of humor, but if he had one, I should have known it would be cruel. I had to confess that the vampire act had somewhat unnerved me, and with a mixture of loathing and admiration for the women’s talents, I glanced back at the tent, almost, but not quite, feeling rather foolish.

To my surprise, two pale, gleaming faces hung framed between the tent flaps, the heads cocked at such acute angles they barely looked human. The half-hidden eyes bored into mine for several seconds, and then the apparitions vanished, leaving me strangely rattled and half-doubting my senses.

A voice called, “David,” and the eerie song fell abruptly silent. A lean, flame-limned face appeared in the darkness near the river, eyes shining faintly.

I jerked a thumb back at the tent. “That’s some show in there.”

Jester stepped into the torchlight, gave me a thorough look up and down, and said, “I’m surprised to see you so soon.”

“You are?”

“I expected you to be engaged, you might say, for quite some time.”

“Sorry.”

A flicker of disappointment passed over his features. “So, what did you see?”

“What do you think? It’s a little early for Halloween, isn’t it?”

He gave me a saccharine smile. “You think it was a trick. You should know me better than that. There are no tricks here.”

“Well, whatever you like to call it. That pair in there — they’re quite a find. Where do they come from?”

His expression might have convinced anyone else he didn’t know what I was talking about. “Just so you know — it’s rare that any two visitors see the same thing. Nothing static would be very worthwhile, now would it?”

“Not for you, I’m sure. So what do these people pay the big bucks to come here for? Not just to drink and get sedated.”

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“On who you are. Most of these...they’re just fodder for that which is beyond them. As long as they feel fine for a while, they’re happier for it. You, though...you’re here looking for something. So tell me. What did you see in there?”

“You tell me what I’m looking for, and I’ll tell you what I saw.”

“Always sporting,” he said. “Well, since your breakup, you’ve gone to clubs, experimented with mind-altering substances, explored religion, had a lot of empty sex. You’re looking for gratification for your soul. You’ve devoted yourself to your teaching, but that only goes so far. The only thing, the only person, who’s ever fulfilled you is Melody, and she’s gone. So you feel lost, and you’re looking for something to make you feel like you again.”

I shook my head, lost in his assessment. After so many months, he knew everything about me, but I still knew little about him. “Melody isn’t just gone. She pretty well hates me.”

“Why?”

“Even when I was fulfilled — with her — I was always looking for more. I can’t stop it. I suppose I’ve always been that way.”

“Endless hunger. A gaki.”

“Eh?”

“Please. Tell me what you saw in the tent.”

I sighed. “Two women. One who liked to talk and one who liked to do strange things with needles.”

Jester raised an eyebrow. “You saw two?”

“More than one, less than three. Yes, two of them.”

“Interesting.”

“So what’s a gaki?”

“A hungry spirit.”

“Show me one that isn’t.”

“But you don’t believe in spirits.”

I chuckled. “Not in the same sense that you do. Let’s say I believe in cravings of the mind. We’re all looking for something more than we have in this life, whether it’s material or otherwise. For most people, it’s something beyond the material.”

“There is only one, by the way.”

“Eh?”

“What you saw. There is only one.”

“I think you need to visit your eye doctor.”

“Oh, I’ll take your word for what you saw. Just remember that the eyes can lie.”

“I don’t know why I ever bothered to give you the time of day,” I grumbled, setting off again toward the absinthe server. “At least you offer good drink. And you damn well should, given what it cost to come in here. With what I earn, don’t expect to see me out here again for quite a while. You want to talk, you can drag your ass into Beckham.”

He glanced back toward the tent, his face strangely shadowed. “Enjoy your drink,” he said distractedly. “We will see each other again very soon.”

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For weeks, the memory of my experience at the river haunted me, particularly the image of those two ghostly faces peering at me through the tent flaps. In my dreams — even during my waking hours — the woman who had spoken beckoned me continually, while the silent one’s face pressed close to the other’s, lips spread to reveal the tip of her grotesquely barbed tongue. In the halls of the psych building, on the university grounds, sometimes even in my classes, I imagined I saw them, standing or walking together, their gleaming eyes peering at me from beneath their long, dark hair.

During that period, I did not encounter Jester again, so one lonely weekend, unable to do otherwise, I returned to the river. I paid the elderly woman at the trailer, gave the improper time to the sentinel on the trail, and made my way through the darkness toward the maze of flickering torches. I immediately noticed a distinct dearth of people gathered among the trees, and the young woman serving absinthe appeared sullen and preoccupied. She failed to so much as wish me good evening, and when I inquired about Jester, she merely pointed into the darkness near the river. As I wandered down the path, I found no sign of the tent’s telltale glow, and a cold lump of disappointment swelled in my stomach — the very fact of which unsettled me all the more.

I walked around for perhaps fifteen minutes, unable to locate Jester, seeing only a handful of figures reveling in the torchlight. Something other than a mere lack of attendees had changed here; a spirit, I thought wryly. Finally, I went back to the woman’s table, procured a cup of absinthe, and planted myself beneath a tree near the former site of the tent, morose and committed to anesthetizing myself for the remainder of the evening.

I had yearned to find answers, but the fates had decreed otherwise.

“Screw the lot of them,” I muttered aloud and drank deeply.

“You’re in the wrong place,” a familiar voice called, and with a little thrill of hope, I looked up and saw Jester perched on the edge of the trail.

“Ah, there you are. Everyone hiding tonight?”

“Moved on, mostly. Things are changing.”

“How so?”

“Because of you, I expect. You denied a kindred spirit. You angered it, and now it’s out there somewhere, roaming.” He pointed in the general direction of the town. “I’ve no idea if and when it will return. I’m disappointed.”

“There’s a load of horseshit if I ever heard any.”

“You’re here, aren’t you? And you’re looking for answers. I’m surprised it took you this long.”

I lifted my cup. “I had a hankering for absinthe.”

“You’ve seen it, haven’t you?”

My eyes held his only reluctantly. “What do you mean?”

“It was my mistake, I suppose. I misjudged you. I expected you to engage it. For the two of you to feed on each other. A wonderful symbiosis. Do you know what a rare thing that would be?”

“The gaki?”

He nodded. “Believe it or don’t believe it. But you’re here, and to me, that says it all.”

“Let’s just say for argument’s sake that you’re right. How did you come by this thing?”

“It was in Japan, several years ago. The spirit came to me and I engaged it. A most incredible exchange, I can assure you. From there, it became something of a traveling companion. Now, I organize these events, to bring it sustenance. I’m sure you’ve realized it’s not the drugs and alcohol that make these people the way they are. They’re simply prey.”

I remembered the words of the woman in the tent — and having thought of one young man as a walking corpse. “That’s ludicrous.”

“You haven’t looked at recent obituaries, have you? Of course, they wouldn’t mean anything to you, since you don’t know the names of the people who come here.”

The weight of his words slowly settled upon me, and though I still didn’t actually believe him, I saw him now as a rather detestable creature. “So you’re saying you offer up other people’s lives — just like that, with no thought of the consequences?”

He smiled thinly. “You think I don’t consider them? I know the consequences, especially for me. If I didn’t do what I do...”

“So you brought me into this? You’d have given me to this ghost of yours with no more care than you’d squash a bug?”

“It’s not like that. No, I hoped you’d join me. Become a partner in enlightenment, so to speak. In mastery over...these vermin.” He made an expansive gesture, which I assumed

encompassed his clientele.

I had pegged Jester as somewhat misanthropic when we first met, but now I felt certain that he was madder than a hatter and possibly dangerous. He claimed to have underestimated me, but that was trifling compared to my gross misjudgment of him. “If there’s any truth to what you say — that people who’ve come here are dying — you’re quite mistaken if you think I’d want any part of it. Frankly, I think you’re deluded. How could you hope to escape the notice of the authorities?”

“There’s nothing to link any deaths to me. They will appear natural. Heart attacks. Strokes. Even cancers in some cases. The beauty is that death doesn’t come immediately after the gaki feeds. It takes time. And it leaves no trace that forensic science can detect. The most that will come of it is the medical examiner scratching his head over the sudden rash of ‘natural’ deaths.”

“All it would take is some astute detective work to connect the victims with you, don’t you think?”

“So what?”

I realized I was challenging him as if his story possessed an ounce of credibility and began to feel foolish. Back at the Cataract Club, debating such a hypothetical scenario might have been stimulating, but out here, faced with his apparent mania, I found it too morbidly fanciful.

“You claim not to believe,” he went on. “But you’ve been seeing things you don’t understand, and you came to find out why. Well, I’ve told you. Whether you accept it is your choice.”

“At the very least,” I said, “the evidence of your gatherings here could cause you some...difficulty. No wonder you want to involve me. You don’t want a partner. You want a scapegoat.”

“You’re mistaken, David. But again, it’s my fault. I had assumed that, once you were faced with incontrovertible evidence of something beyond your understanding, you might take the initiative and re-examine your perceptions. Your fundamental beliefs. You’ve denied yourself that opportunity, and I can’t predict what may come of it.”

“I admit that I’ve had some unusual experiences. But you expect me to be gullible enough to fall for parlor tricks. I had hoped for better from you.” I downed the last of the absinthe and dropped the cup into his hand. “I guess I should go. Sorry to disappoint you. This time, I don’t imagine I will be back.”

“No,” he said, giving me a long, puzzled look that I suppose must have been, for him, regretful. “I shouldn’t think so. Well, I can’t say I haven’t enjoyed our time together, David. I have. Despite what you think of me now, I hope there won’t be any hard feelings.”

I shrugged. “I don’t hold grudges, if that’s what you mean. If I see you at the Cataract Club, well, maybe we’ll have a drink. But that’s it.”

“I doubt I’ll be going back there.” He turned and started toward the darkness, but then

he stopped and said, “Be careful. It’s out there, you know.”

“Whatever you say.”

“It has unfinished business with you. You may yet see it again.”

“And how does one go about shooing away a gaki?”

“One doesn’t.”

With a disgusted sigh, I left him and began the long hike back toward my car. I saw no sign of the man who had been guarding the trail, and I wondered if he’d given up and gone home as well. When I reached the end of the woods, the mobile home appeared dark, and mine was the only car left beside it. The absinthe had left me feeling wobbly, if clear-headed, and I got behind the wheel with no qualms about driving. But when I shoved the car into gear and slowly started moving, the world seemed somehow topsy-turvy; I knew the driveway descended toward the road, yet I distinctly perceived it as ascending into darkness. And once I reached the asphalt surface, my headlights barely penetrated the thick veil of night, forcing me to lean forward and strain my eyes to negotiate the winding road.

I hadn’t gone far when a glance in the rearview mirror caused me to nearly careen into the woods. There, plainly visible beyond the rear window, hung a leering, chalk-white face, dark eyes staring impassively at me, the faintest suggestion of a second, blurry visage wavering behind it. My foot involuntarily hit the brake, and though I wasn’t going very fast, the car skidded and fishtailed dizzily before grinding to a halt. Then, before I quite realized what I was doing, I was out the door and standing in the middle of the road, peering intently into the darkness behind the car, searching for any sign of something, anything, that might account for what I had seen.

There was nothing. Only silent, towering trees painted red by my taillights and impenetrable walls of shadow. The air seemed much chillier now than it had at the river, the car’s engine rumbled and ticked impatiently, and I felt strangely small and exposed out here, ashamedly unnerved by my vision and a terrible, mounting urge to accept Jester’s “explanation” at face value. When I clambered back into the car and started driving again, my eyes focused more frequently on the mirror than on the road ahead.

By the time I arrived back home, I felt as if I had been physically beaten, my nerves as taut as a fraying rope, and once inside, I locked all the doors and closed the window blinds so that nothing outside could peer in at me — namely, the “nothing” that, somewhere between the river and home, I had come to believe in as firmly as I believed in the emotionless neutrality of the moon, whose light shone through the slats in the blinds as if searching for a lost, empty soul to illuminate.

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Several days passed uneventfully, enough so that I could focus on my teaching and consign my experiences at the river to the remotest corner of my consciousness, where they couldn’t escape to rattle my composure. For the first time since my divorce, I actually found myself the object of a woman’s affection, and for a series of evenings, which I might

have otherwise whiled away in the bowels of the Cataract Club in Beckham, I enjoyed the company of a young woman named Kimberly Eubanks, who managed the downtown bank where I frequently did business.

On Friday night, following a particularly satisfying dinner date with Kimberly, I returned home to find my neighbor, Paul Workman, standing on my front porch, apparently having just knocked on my door — which in itself wasn't unusual, since we sometimes got together for drinks, but the irate scowl on his face surprised me. As I got out of the car, he walked toward me with a reproachful shake of his head.

“You don't have company, do you?” he asked.

“No, why?”

“What's the idea leaving your stereo blaring while you're gone? Jamie's not feeling well, what with the baby coming, and she can't rest with all that racket. Never heard such a thing in all my life.”

I shook my head, perplexed. “I didn't leave my stereo on.”

He glanced back at my house. “Well, it stopped just before you drove up. But there was crazy music coming from in there, no mistake.”

“What kind of music?”

“Some kind of electronic stuff, I guess. A weird tune, with all kinds of wailing and chirping going on.”

A cold fist closed around my heart. “What?”

“Yep, for the last hour, right up until you got here.”

My throat constricted so that I could barely speak. “It's not my stereo. I don't know what it could have been.”

“You all right? You're pale.”

“Just surprised. Want to come in for a drink?”

He shook his head. “Nah, I need to get back.”

“All right. Sorry you were disturbed, but it really wasn't my doing.”

“Okay,” he said with a shrug and turned to go. “Well. Check your system. It did come from your house.”

I mumbled an affirmative, and as I let myself into my house, I held my breath to catch any sound that might issue from within. All was quiet, and I went through each room, checking behind doors, the closets and shower stalls, even the cabinets in the kitchen and bathrooms. No sign of any intruders; not that I expected to find any. I clung to the thinnest hope that Jester had somehow managed to rig another of his parlor tricks specifically to unnerve me, but that rationalization no longer retained an ounce of either solace or validity.

I poured myself a glass of straight bourbon and, rather than close myself inside, went out to the front porch, where the chance of mobility, should the need arise, offered me some semblance of comfort. The breeze coming down from the mountains had turned quite cool, and the sound it made in the trees reminded me too clearly of the terrible song I had heard

that first night at the river as something beyond my kin wailed its fury after me.

Walnuts had begun to fall as the wind bent the branches, and they sounded like erratic footfalls as they struck the yard and rolled down the slope toward the porch. I took a long swallow of bourbon that brought water to my eyes, and through the crystal veil that fragmented my vision, I made out a huge, black walnut tumbling down the hill toward me, seemingly growing larger as it drew nearer. Long after its momentum should have died, the dark oblong rolled on, growing bigger and blacker, bouncing higher, and just as it reached the porch railing, it expanded like an instantly blossoming flower to become a tall, pale, wavering thing that shimmered weirdly in the cold, hoary moonlight. Then, like crepe paper being torn by invisible hands, this pillar of milky plasma split into two distinct forms, and a few seconds later, two pairs of familiar, horrible eyes were gazing down upon mine.

“I told you I would not forgive you,” said the vocal of the two, the feminine voice airy and musical. The other figure raised its hands, and something in them glittered in the moonlight.

The women moved so quickly that, before I could even sidestep, four serpentine arms encircled my body. One cool hand slid up my neck and began to stroke my face, and another to massage my chest with slow, tender fingers. At that moment, I realized that perhaps all was as it should be, for the gentle caress of the hungry demon’s hands felt quite heavenly, and in these throes of ecstasy, I ceased my struggles and resigned myself to whatever was bound to come.

Soon, behind the two women, my eyes apprehended a huge black mass, slowly shifting and pulsating as if it were breathing, and a pair of long, indistinct appendages that blended subtly into the women’s flowing black hair. I realized then that they were only marionettes, two insentient shapes manipulated by some external power: a thing so vast and alien that to even think of engaging it in a contest of wills, as Jester had supposedly done, was enough to send one howling mad with laughter.

And for some long time, that was my personal state of being.

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I searched for Jester for weeks. He never again appeared at the Cataract Club, and when I went to the river, the woman at the trailer claimed never to have seen either him or me, and only the vaguest traces of those nocturnal revels lingered in the forest. I discovered his whereabouts quite by chance one evening, when Kimberly and I had gone to dinner in the neighboring community of Aiken Mill. As we were walking to my car, a glance through the window of a corner tavern revealed to me a lone, slouching figure, which might have remained anonymous had a waitress not chosen that moment to place a fresh candle on his table. Refraining from confronting him then and there took considerable effort, but knowing that now was not the time, I found satisfaction in the certainty that I now had the means to track him down with relative ease.

My opportunity came the following night. Rescheduling an outing with Kimberly for

another evening, I drove to Aiken Mill and visited the tavern where I had seen him. True to form, he was there, sitting at the same table, carrying on a half-hearted conversation with an inebriated-looking patron at the bar. When he saw me, his face went chalky white, but he remained seated and somehow managed a little smile.

“Good evening, David. I’m surprised to see you. Are you well?”

“Well enough. I didn’t know you’d moved to Aiken Mill.”

“It seemed the thing to do.”

“I’m sorry you decided to close down the river events. They might have yet proven most enjoyable.”

“I don’t have the same interest in them anymore. Things have changed, I guess you’d say.”

“I’ve noticed.”

He swallowed hard, his eyes studying me warily. “So what are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d pick your brain for some pointers. I’m considering reviving the gatherings, or something akin to them. Perhaps even here in Aiken Mill.”

“I see.” His voice had gone hoarse, his complexion another shade whiter. “David, if you’ll excuse me, I need to go to the restroom. I’ve had several of these.” He pointed to his half-empty glass of whiskey.”

“I’ll be here.”

I gave him thirty seconds before I followed him. When I entered the restroom, he had just managed to pry open the small window that evidently led to an alley between the buildings. On the grimy tile floor, the murky yellow overhead light threw long, grotesque shadows, and when he saw that mine resembled his own former traveling companion, he drew from his boot a long, razor-sharp blade. He succeeded in slashing me several times, but his efforts came to nothing, for I no longer bleed, and he no longer breathes.

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If you enjoyed this story, please check out Mark’s collection, *The Gaki & Other Hungry Spirits*, from Dark Regions Press

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