

## **Don't You Know There's a Sickness?**

On the third day of November, in the year 1929, the lighthouse keeper lost his mind. Old Bill McCreary's sanity may well have hit the rocks long before this — I suspect some time during the war, or shortly thereafter — but that was the day the people of Shale-by-the-Sea took notice. They began to smell something fishy, you might say, up there on the headland.

‘I seen him around back of the abattoir,’ Pat Hubbard, the local butcher, told me, ‘Sniffing at the bins, middle of the night. Thought it was a fox at first, so I took my shotgun. Near enough gave me a heart attack when I seen him on the ground, scuttling about in the buff.’

‘So he was-’

‘Naked as the day he were born,’ Pat said. ‘Crawling around on all fours, like some sort of crazy rat creature. Tried to burrow his way through the old skip where we throw out all the bad meat. I whistled at him, the way you'd whistle at a dog what's misbehaved. He pokes his head up, and he's got this rotting leg of lamb between his teeth. That's when I seen his eyes. And Reverend, I don't say this lightly, for I know you'll think me a madman, but they weren't the eyes of a regular human being. These eyes were something else entirely.’

‘No, Pat,’ I said. ‘I don't think you're a madman. Thank you for letting me know.’

‘Well, I didn't know anyone else who'd believe me. Bill McCreary's always been a good man. Although we don't see too much of him, he's always been a good man.’

‘That’s what makes it all so hard to believe,’ I said. ‘So I gotta ask you again, you’re absolutely sure it was him? Couldn’t have mistaken him for another fella?’

Pat looked me square in the eyes. ‘I’m sure as eggs is eggs,’ he said.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Thanks, Pat.’

Three days later, Sally Smyth caught Bill scratching at the back door of the bakery. He was stark naked. His hands were like claws, and he was sniffing and snorting at the crack in the door. He even tried digging at the ground beneath it, before Sally shooed him off. And where Pat the butcher had emphasised Bill’s devilish eyes, Sally reported having seen teeth as long as fingers, sharpened into points and poking out every which way across his filthy, bearded face.

A week later, a shot was fired in the night. A crowd had gathered behind the abattoir. I was only in my dressing gown and slippers, and the winter air was biting.

‘Come, Reverend,’ Pat said. ‘It’s happened again. Caught him sniffing around the skip. Bastard scurried away back up to his lighthouse before I could get another shot off. And I tell you, Reverend, he moves damn fast. Faster than I ever seen a man move before, especially a man of his age.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I believe it’s time you and I pay Mister McCreary a visit, don’t you agree?’

So Pat and I climbed the hill to the East of the village, up towards the headland where McCreary’s lighthouse stood. The lighthouse was still operational, and it continued to spread its beam in a wide arc across the land and sea. I suppose if ships had started perishing on the rocks below, questions would have been asked of Bill McCreary sooner. But for now, the lighthouse was a lighthouse, and the lighthouse was alight. Everything appeared to be in order.

Everything, that was, except for the big white 'X' adorning the lighthouse keeper's door. I knocked once, twice, three times. A line of chalk transferred itself onto my knuckles, and a papery white dust drifted steadily to the ground. 'Mister McCreary!' I called. 'Open up! It's Alan Greenwood, I've come to ask you a few questions. Pat Hubbard's here with me. We know you're holed up in there, Mister McCreary. Come on out. We just want to talk.'

I looked over at Pat. 'You keep that shotgun pointed at the ground,' I told him. 'Bill's a little paranoid, last thing we want is to spook him.'

'If it's all the same to you, Boss, I think I'll keep it right where it is. You haven't seen what he's like. I'm not taking any chances.'

'Keep your finger off that trigger, at least,' I said. 'McCreary! Come on out!'

The hinges of the door cried out like a bird in the midst of being de-winged. A flickering lamplight emanated from the smallest of cracks, across which several iron chains were pulled to tension. The bridge of Bill McCreary's nose was poking through. His eyes were wide, though they were not so crazed as Pat had described. 'Whaddya want?' he said.

'We just want to talk, Bill,' I said.

'You should leave this place. It isn't safe,' he said.

'No?' I said. 'And why isn't it safe?'

Bill's eyes flittered between Pat and I as though they were trying to wriggle free from his skull, as though something behind them were giving chase. 'The sickness,' he said. 'God, don't you people know there's a sickness?'

'A sickness?' I said. 'Bill, there's no sickness here. No one in the village has come down with any sickness.'

'The sickness!' he cried. 'There's a sickness here! God, can't you see there's a sickness?'

I said, ‘Did you draw this cross, Bill? This cross on your door? Mind telling us what it means?’

‘It’s the sickness,’ he said. I could see the saliva seeping through the gaps in his teeth, and although it was November, a thick coat of glistening sweat had gathered on his wrinkled brow. The smell from inside was suffocating; faeces and rotting meat.

I nodded, and said, ‘The sickness, huh? You mind opening the door? You can tell us all about this sickness.’

‘No! No! Leave! Go on, get out!’

‘Bill, we’ve had some complaints. Pat here saw you going through the skip outside the abattoir last week, and again tonight. I hope you won’t take offence if I tell you your behaviour has been putting folks on edge.’

‘No!’ Bill McCreary cried. ‘Go away! Don’t you know there’s a sickness?’

‘Now listen here,’ I said, taking a step closer. As I did so, I realised the smell coming from inside was, in fact, coming from the lighthouse keeper’s mouth. ‘I haven’t forgotten how you served in France. You served with honour, by all accounts, and everyone down there in Shale knows it. But this, what you’re doing right now... This is not honourable. So you can either open the door and let us hash this out like the good, honest men we are, or I can telephone the police. What’ll it be?’

McCreary said nothing. I placed my hand on the door in an attempt to push it inwards. That was my gravest error. The lighthouse keeper’s arm shot through the gap in the door, and his nails dug deep into the flesh of my wrist. The whites of his eyes pulsed in his skull, and thick red lines crept outwards from his pupils. He pulled me in close, and whispered, ‘France. I still hear them. The rats. The rats in the trenches. My God, the rats! They followed me

home, Reverend. They followed me here. I hear them in the walls. I hear them in my head. I can even hear them in yours.'

Those were the last words the lighthouse keeper ever spoke to me. Pat pulled the trigger and the door with the white 'X' splintered. Bill McCreary cried out from behind it. The cry curdled, and became a high-pitched screech.

The lighthouse keeper flew through the door and landed on the dew-covered grass at Pat's feet. The clothes on his back were tearing, and the exposed skin beneath began to sprout thick, wiry hair. His hands curled into claws, and his teeth grew and snapped at the air. His jaw opened wide, and his head crept backwards until it was flat against his spine. His teeth were talons, and they buried themselves into Pat's fleshy neck like needles. After that, the butcher's head was gone.

The lighthouse keeper dragged Pat's body into his lair, and a long pink tail swept the grass in his wake. I have no qualms in admitting I ran. I ran to the church, back down the hill, barred the doors behind me, and collapsed on the cold stone floor. When the police arrived in the morning, they found no sign of the lighthouse keeper. Nor did they come across Pat's headless body.

I gave a brief statement. It had to be brief. I could concentrate on nothing but the scratching and scurrying within my skull. I could hear them in there, and I could hear them in the walls. And sometimes, when the sun goes down, I can feel them trying to get out.