
Opening Extract from...

A Time of Torment

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I

Like a dog, he hunts in dreams.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), 'Locksley Hall'

1

They're circling now, then falling, descending in a slow gyre, dropping so gently that their approach can barely be discerned. They are hawks in the form of men, and the one who leads them is a being doubly transformed: lost and found, human and bird; youngest of them, yet strangely old. He has endured, and in this endurance he has been forged anew. He has seen a world beyond this one. He has glimpsed the face of a new god.

He is at peace with himself, and so he will wage war.

Faster they come, the spiral narrowing, the three almost as one, their coats mantling in the chill fall air; and not a whisper of their approach, not a passing shadow nor a sparrow startled, only the stillness of a world waiting to be shattered, and the perfect balance of a life, perhaps, to be saved and a life, perhaps, to be ended.

The clouds part, pierced by a shaft of light that catches them in flight, as though they have attracted, however briefly, the attention of a deity long slumbering but now awake, roused by martial clamor and the raising of armies in the name of the Captain, the One Who Waits Behind The Glass, the God of Wasps.

And the old god will set His child against them, and the hawks will follow.

It was a long time since the Gray Man had considered the possibility of being caught, for the Gray Man did not truly exist. He had no physical form. He dwelt alongside another,

sharing the same skin, and only at the final breath might there have been a glimpse of the depths of his true nature, although even then he preferred to remain unseen, concealed in darkness. He was not above causing pain, although this was as much a matter of whim as any particular tastes he might have possessed. A death was only the beginning, which was why he had survived undetected for so long. He could make a kill last for years. Physical pain was finite, for ultimately the body would surrender the soul, but emotional agony was capable of infinite variations, and the subtlest of modifications might release from the wound a new torrent of distress.

In the persona he presented to the world, the Gray Man was a reverse chameleon. His name was Roger Ormsby, and he was small, colorful, and greatly liked. He was in his early sixties, with an impish humor. His hair and beard were white, but neatly trimmed. He proudly carried before him his little potbelly, like a happily expectant mother advertising the pleasure she takes in her burden. He favored red suspenders and vests of unusual design. He wore tweed in winter and linen in summer, preferring creams and tans but offsetting them with tastefully bright ties and handkerchiefs. He could play the piano, and waltz and two-step with ease, but inside Ormsby was a foul thing animating him as a puppeteer works a marionette, and only an expert might have detected the sterility of his renditions of beloved classics as his fingers moved across the keys, or the joyless precision of every move he made on a dance floor.

Ormsby did not discuss politics or religion. He took only frivolous subjects seriously, and as a consequence was much valued as a dinner guest. He was a happy widower, faithful to the memory of his departed wife to the extent that he would do no more than flirt with the less lonely widows of Champaign, Illinois, but not so in love with the ghost of his spouse as to allow the loss of her to cloud his spirit or the spirits of others. He was always in demand as a companion

for theater, movies, and the occasional light opera, and the absence of a sexual component to his relationships meant that he moved in and out of social situations with ease. He was a Friend of the Library, a member of the Audubon Society, a regular fixture at lectures on local history, and a generous – but not overgenerous – donor to good causes. True, there were some who disliked him, for no man can be loved by all, but in general such naysayers were regarded by the majority as willfully ornery, unable to accept that someone might simply be a force for contentment in the world.

And so Roger Ormsby bobbed through life in his vibrant plumage, advertising his presence, hiding nothing, but when he closed his front door behind him the artificial light in his eyes was suffocated, and the face of the Gray Man was pendent like a dead moon in the blackness of his pupils.

This is what Roger Ormsby did – or, if you wish, what the Gray Man did, for they were two aspects of the same entity, like a coat and its lining. He typically targeted his victims carefully, spending months in preparation. He had been known to engage in crimes of opportunity, but they were riskier now than they once were, because cameras were everywhere. In addition, it was difficult to gauge just what one might be appropriating in such a situation, for Ormsby required a very particular set of social circumstances from his victims. They couldn't be loners, isolated from their families and friends. He did not desire discards. The more beloved they were, the better. He wanted children who were cherished. He wanted teenagers from happy homes. He wanted good mothers of children beyond the age of infancy. He wanted emotional engagement.

He wanted many lives that he could slowly and painstakingly destroy over a period of years, even decades.

Ormsby made people disappear, then watched as those who loved them were left to wonder at their fate. He understood the half-life of hope: it is not despair that destroys us, but its

opposite. Hope is the winding, despair the unwinding. Despair brings with it the possibility of an ending. Taken to the extreme, its logical conclusion is death. But hope sustains. It can be exploited.

Ormsby's actions had caused some to take their own lives, but he considered this a failure, both on his part and theirs. The ones he killed were merely the first victims, and also the least interesting to him. He liked to watch those who remained as they tried to cope with what had been visited upon them. He knew they would wake each morning and briefly forget that which they had lost: a mother, a son, a daughter. (Ormsby avoided taking adult men. He was stronger than he looked, but not so much that he believed he could tackle a grown man, especially not as he grew older.) Then, seconds after waking, they would remember again, and that was where the pleasure lay for Ormsby.

He was not above goading, reminding, but that was a dangerous business. He had sent items to relatives in the mail – a necklace, a watch, a child's shoe – to enjoy the commotion that followed. He had forced children that he had taken to write letters to their mothers and fathers, informing them that they were in good health and being looked after. (Adults, too, might be persuaded to write similar missives, but only under threat of physical harm.) He might wait years before sending such notes, depending on the age of the child and the reaction of the parents. He dropped the letters in mailboxes far from home, often when he was on vacation, and always ensured they were not overlooked by cameras.

The Internet made it easier for him to monitor the progress of his real victims, but Ormsby was wary of leaving an electronic trail. He concealed his searches amid random examinations of newspapers and magazines, often in public libraries or the kind of cyber cafés frequented by immigrants. He did not attend public gatherings for the disappeared, or church services at which the congregation prayed for their safe return,

because he knew the authorities monitored such events. It was usually enough for Ormsby to know that the suffering he had inflicted continued unabated. If nothing else, the Gray Man had a vivid imagination. This was how Ormsby could survive for so long without killing: as the years went by, so too his store of victims increased. He could dip in and out of destroyed lives. He was an emotional vampire.

Now, as he drove home, he thought that this metaphor had a pleasing precision under the circumstances. He recalled a scene from Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, in which the Count returns to his castle and throws to his three vampire brides an infant contained in a sack. At that moment, the trunk of Ormsby's car also contained a child in a sack. Her name was Charlotte Littleton. She was nine years old, and represented one of his rare crimes of opportunity: a child playing with a ball as the afternoon sunlight died, an open gate, the ball drifting into an empty street of big houses set back from the road . . .

Good fortune: God – if He existed – finding His attention briefly distracted.

And inside, the Gray Man danced.

2

Ormsby's wife had died suddenly when she was in her early forties and her husband was in his mid-thirties. It was a blessing, of a kind. By then, Ormsby, the Gray Man, had already begun playing his long game, and was concerned that his wife, who was not a stupid woman, and even actively curious, might begin to take an interest in his activities. Sometimes he wondered if, had her heart not simply failed unexpectedly while she was testing the firmness of avocados at a sidewalk market – such a curious detail, and one that had led him to avoid avocados ever since – he might have been forced to get rid of her. He wasn't even certain why he had married her to begin with. He suspected he had craved some form of stability, given his own family background of divorce and acrimony, and a mother whose maternal instincts extended no further than occasionally taking it upon herself to heat some mac and cheese instead of delegating the task to her only son. Ormsby's relationship with his late wife had been affectionate, if almost entirely passionless, a situation that had not troubled either of them unduly.

But perhaps also, even then, he was already creating a framework for his life, and an identity for himself, that would arouse the least amount of suspicion: Roger Ormsby, contentedly if unexceptionally married, with a job selling painting and decorating supplies that required him to spend time on the road, staying in dull motels, mostly eating alone, but always watching, always listening.

He heard a thumping from the trunk of his car and turned

up the volume on the radio: a news program on NPR, which was just the kind of show to which a man like Roger Ormsby might have been expected to listen. He used to smoke a pipe too, puffing contentedly on it as he drove, but then he'd learned about throat and tongue cancer, and decided that Roger Ormsby would be sensible enough to let this particular pleasure go. He missed the pipe, though. It had given him something to do with his hands.

He'd have to kill the girl quickly, of course. The unplanned ones were always difficult. He might not have taken her had winter not recently crept into the air, giving him an excuse to light the furnace in his big old house. He'd spend the night questioning her, find out as much as he could about her family, then put an end to her: a single blow to the head, knocking her out cold, then strangulation. He didn't want her to suffer.

After that, the game could begin.

He fantasized about the months and years to come.

And the shadows that were following him, the arc of the hunters, went entirely unnoticed.

In a curious way, Ormsby had been inspired to pursue his particular appetites by base conflicts in lands he had never visited, and in which he had little interest on a political or social level. He had found himself fascinated by the actions of the military dictatorships in Argentina and Chile, which routinely 'disappeared' those with whom they differed, leaving the families to mourn phantoms, nearly certain that their loved ones were dead but unable to let go of them until they could identify their remains and lay them in the ground, although the chances of this were remote when the military's favorite methods of dispatch included dropping the bound bodies of living captives into the sea from aircraft, or, in the case of the Chileans, using railway ties to ensure that the corpses didn't float to the surface.

And then there were the Irish terrorists who dragged

widowed mothers from their homes and tortured them in secret before shooting them in the head and burying their bodies on some desolate stretch of beach. When the deed was done, they returned with clear consciences to their own families and communities, there to pass the desolate, orphaned children on the street, continuing to do so for decades after in a strange dance of murderers and victims, each party knowing the identity of the other but never confronting the truth of what had been done, and so the dance went on. Ormsby, who was depraved beyond comprehension, thought he might have enjoyed fighting for freedom if he could have passed some of his time so pleasantly: the misery for those left behind lay in not knowing, in uncertainty. It was sadism refined to its purest essence.

Ormsby's house appeared before him. He turned into the driveway and activated the garage door. The garage connected directly to the house through the utility room, which in turn had another door leading to the basement. It meant that he was able to move his victims easily, and without being noticed. He pulled into the garage, killed the engine, and hit the button on his key fob a second time, causing the door to begin its descent. He was already out of his car, and poised to open the trunk, when he saw that the door had frozen.

Ormsby stared at it. He tried the button again. Nothing happened. The door didn't even jerk slightly, as might have been expected if the mechanism had somehow become fouled. He took a flashlight from the shelf and checked the door's workings, but could see nothing wrong. The street beyond appeared empty, but the door was not even a quarter of the way down, and while the light was fading, it was not yet dark enough to guarantee that he wouldn't be seen by one of his neighbors if he tried to move the child.

Regardless of this, he couldn't just leave the door unsecured. The garage was connected to his house alarm, and the button on the fob automatically deactivated it. His home was now

vulnerable, and it wasn't as if he could call someone to take a look at the door, not with a child tied in a sack in the trunk of his car. The girl was kicking again: he could hear her, and the lid of the trunk shook with the impact.

He tried the button one more time and, miraculously, the door began to descend. He held his breath until it stopped again an inch or two from the floor. It wasn't perfect, but from outside it would appear closed. He'd worry about it again in the morning, once the girl was dead.

Ormsby turned on the garage's interior light. Only now did he open the trunk of the car. The child in the sack was wriggling, and screaming against the material. He'd managed to get cable ties around her hands by working fast, but not her legs. They remained free, and the best he'd been able to do was cinch the drawstring of the sack around her shins and tie it off. He'd been forced to hit her once to stun her, but he hadn't enjoyed it, and had no desire to do it again.

Ormsby spoke.

'If you keep making noise, you'll force me to hurt you,' he said, 'and I don't want to hurt you. Keep quiet and listen to me.'

The child stopped moving. He could see the sacking inflating and deflating where it was closest to her mouth. She was sobbing.

'I'm going to help you out of the car. If you struggle, you risk falling, and the floor here is hard. Also, if you try to lash out at me, you'll make me strike you, and I hate striking children. Nod if you understand.'

There was a pause, and then he saw the girl nod.

'Good. Now I'm going help you out of the trunk.'

He leaned in carefully, still wary of her, and he was right to be. As soon as she sensed him drawing close, she tried to swing at him with her legs, hoping to catch him on the head with her knees or her feet. Objectively, he had to admire her spirit, but he couldn't risk incurring a broken nose, or even

a bruise to his face. Any injury might be enough to raise suspicions, even in the case of harmless Roger Ormsby.

He stepped back.

'I warned you,' he said. 'Now you're going to make me do something that I didn't want to do.'

The girl began wailing and writhing. Ormsby was just drawing back his hand to give her a sharp slap on the head when the doorbell rang.

Ormsby listened. He wasn't expecting anyone. He could try to ignore the bell, and hope that whoever it was went away. On the other hand, if one of his neighbors had seen him pull into the garage they'd know he was home, and if he didn't answer they might begin to worry. The last thing he needed was for the police to be called.

And what if it was the police? Suppose he had been seen? The street had appeared to be empty and unwatched, but one could never be sure . . .

The bell rang a second time. Ormsby struck the girl once to subdue her before he closed the trunk again. He moved through the house, turning on a lamp as he entered the hallway. He saw a shape through the glass fan of the door: a tall figure.

Ormsby paused when he was still five feet away.

'Who is it?' he called, but received no reply.

Ormsby shuffled his feet and tried again.

'Who's there? What do you want?'

Finally, the voice spoke. It sounded to Ormsby like that of a black man.

'Delivery for Mr Cole.'

Ormsby relaxed.

'You have the wrong house,' he said. 'Cole lives in fourteen thirty-seven, across the street. This is fourteen thirty-six.'

'You sure? Says fourteen thirty-six on the slip.'

'Well, your slip's wrong.'

'Shit,' said the man, and Ormsby saw his shape ripple as

he took in the street. 'Don't look like anybody's home over there. Maybe you could sign for it, save me a wasted trip.'

Ormsby experienced a creeping sense of unease.

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I don't open my door to strangers after dark.'

'It's not dark yet.'

'Even so.'

'Shit,' said the man, again. 'Okay, you have a good evening.'

He went away. Only when Ormsby heard his footsteps moving down the path did he slip into the living room and ensure that he had departed. The caller was wearing a jacket, and didn't look like any delivery man Ormsby had ever seen, but as he paused at the sidewalk, Ormsby saw that he was holding a box. The man hung a right, and was lost behind the tall hedge that marked the perimeter of Ormsby's property. Ormsby waited, but he did not reappear.

Ormsby returned to the garage and opened the trunk of his car.

The sack lay limp and flat on the rubber matting.

The girl was gone.