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The Ritual

Written by Adam Nevill

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ADAM NEVILL

THE
RITUAL

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For Anne and our cub,
for making me and my life less beastly.

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The Gods are here, if they are anywhere at all in the world.

Algernon Blackwood,
from *The Willows*

I

BENEATH THE REMAINS

PROLOGUE

And on the second day things did not get better. The rain fell hard and cold, the white sun never broke through the low grey cloud, and they were lost. But it was the dead thing they found hanging from a tree that changed the trip beyond recognition. All four of them saw it at the same time.

Right after they clambered over another fallen tree to stumble into more of the scratching bracken, they came across it. Breathing hard, damp with sweat and rain, speechless with fatigue, they came to a halt. Bent from the weight of the rucksacks, bedding and wet tents, they stood under it. Looked up.

Above them, beyond the reach of a man standing upright, the dead thing sagged. Between the limbs of a spruce tree it was displayed, but in such a tattered state they could not tell what it had once been.

From the large rib cage drooped the gut, wet and blue in the light seeping through the canopy of leaves. The pelt was spread out across surrounding branches, holed but stretched taut in places. A ragged hem about a crumpled centre suggested the skin had been torn from the back in one quick ripping motion. And at first no head could be seen in the mess of blood and flesh. Until, in the violent red and yellow suddenness of hung meat, the bony grin of a jaw bone was

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picked out by them all. Just above it was an eye, big as a snooker ball but glazed and dull. Around it a long skull in profile.

Hutch turned to face the others. He always led the group as it staggered through the forest looking for the new trail. It was his idea to come through here. His face was pale and he did not speak. Somehow the shock of this sight made him look younger. Vulnerable, because this mutilated statement up above their heads was the only thing on the camping holiday he did not have an answer for. Didn't have a clue about.

Phil couldn't keep the tremor from his voice. 'What is it?'

No one answered him.

'Why?' Dom said. 'Why would you put it up there?'

The sound of these voices reassured three of them enough to start talking over each other. Sometimes answering questions. Sometimes just voicing new ideas. Only Luke said nothing. But as the others talked they moved away from the thing in the tree more quickly than they had approached it. And soon they were all silent again, but their feet made more noise than at any other time during the hike of the last two days. Because there was no smell coming from the corpse. It was a fresh kill.

ONE

FOUR HOURS EARLIER

At midday, Hutch stopped walking and turned to look back at the others; three colourful figures appearing insignificant upon the misty vastness of the rocky landscape they meandered across. They were spread apart along a plain of flat grey rock, smoothed like a footpath by the retreating ice a few million years before. Every set of shoulders on his companions was hunched, every head was bowed to observe the monotony of one foot before the other.

In hindsight, only he and Luke were fit enough for the three-day hike. Phil and Dom were carrying too much weight and the blisters on the heels of Phil's feet were now raw meat. Of more concern, Dom had twisted his knee on the first day in a vast boulder field, and after walking on it for a day and a half he now limped and winced with every step.

Through their discomforts Dom and Phil were missing everything of interest: the sudden strip marshes, the faces in the rock formations, the perfect lakes, the awesome Måskoskårså valley grooved into the earth during the Ice Age, the golden eagle circling above it, and the views of a landscape it was impossible to believe existed in Europe. Even in the rain and bad light the country could be astonishing.

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But by the afternoon of the very first day, Dom and Phil had their heads down and eyes half closed.

‘Take a load off, guys.’ Hutch called back to the other three. Luke looked up and Hutch beckoned with his head for Luke to catch up to him.

Hutch eased his pack off his back, sat down, and pulled the map from the side pocket of his rucksack. His back was aching from walking so slowly at the pace set by Dom and Phil. He could feel his irritation evolving into anger, manifesting as a tightening across his chest; it seemed to bustle behind his teeth too, as if his jaws were clamping down on a long hot monologue of curses he wished to rain down upon the two men who were turning this trip into what now felt like a death march.

‘What’s up?’ Luke asked, squinting through the fine drizzle that made his square features shiny. The rain and his sweat created a froth around his unshaven mouth and upon his blond eyebrows.

‘Judgement call. Change of plan.’

Squatting beside him, Luke offered Hutch a cigarette. Then lit his own with hands red as raw beef.

‘Cheers, buddy.’ Hutch spread the map across his thighs. He issued a long sigh that came from a deep place and hissed around the cigarette filter clamped between his teeth. ‘This ain’t working.’

‘This is my surprised face,’ Luke said, deadpan. Then turned his head and spat. ‘Ten bloody miles a day. That was all we asked of them. I know there’s been some rough ground, but they were done for day one.’

‘Agreed. So we need a new route. Got to cut this short now or we’ll end up carrying them. One each.’

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‘Fuck’s sake.’

Hutch rolled his eyes in conspiratorial agreement, but realized in this moment of weakness, he was probably only encouraging a similar tirade he’d sensed rising in Luke since they met at his flat five days ago. Luke just wasn’t clicking with Dom and Phil at all, and the physical hardship and terrible weather had added a whole new element of corrosive tension and sniping into the mix. Something Hutch had been doing his best to limit by remaining enthusiastic, patient, and with his sporadic optimistic outbursts about the weather changing. He could not take sides; could not allow division. This was no longer a matter of salvaging a reunion holiday, but one of safety.

Luke’s mouth went all tight and his eyes narrowed. ‘New shoes. Wrong socks. Phil’s even wearing jeans today. What did you tell him? Jesus Christ Almighty!’

‘Ssh. I know, I know. But breaking their balls is only going to make things worse at this moment in time. Much worse. So we need to put the safety catch back on. Me included. OK?’

‘Understood.’

‘Anyway, I reckon I got it figured out.’

Luke swatted the khaki hood off his head; lowered his face to the map. ‘Show me.’

Hutch pressed a finger to an approximation of where he believed them to now be floundering, and behind schedule, on the map. ‘Another afternoon and a full day in the rain up here is going to ruin things beyond repair. So forget Porjus. We’re just not going to make it. But if we drop south east. Here. Through this forest, which you can just see in the distance. See it?’ Luke nodded at where Hutch was pointing; at

a dark spiky strip of distant woodland, half concealed by drifting white vapours. 'If we slip through the section where it's narrow, here, we should come out near the Stora Luleälven River by early evening, maybe earlier. We can follow a trail along it eastwards. And downriver there's a couple of tourist huts at Skaite. Bit of luck and we'll be at the river by nightfall. If we shift it. We can walk downriver to Skaite tonight. Or, worse-case scenario, we camp by the river and hit the huts tomorrow morning. We can put our feet up for a day at Skaite and demolish Dom's Jack Daniel's before an open fire. Smoke some cigarettes. Then I'll look at arranging some transport back to Gällivare the day after. And in the forest this afternoon we'll be less exposed to the rain, which is showing no signs of stopping.' Hutch looked at the sky, squinted, then turned his gaze upon Dom and Phil; the twin huddled lumps, coated in Gore-Tex, seated and silent, just out of earshot. 'Not much walking left for this pair. So I'm afraid, buddy, that the expedition is over today, more or less.'

Luke gritted his teeth. His whole face tensed hard. He dropped his head when he realized Hutch was studying him.

Hutch was shocked at how much anger Luke had in him these days. Their regular phone calls, that Luke tended to initiate, often deteriorated into rants. It was like his friend could no longer internalize his rage and deal with it. 'Hey, anger management.'

Luke looked startled. Hutch winked at him. 'Can I ask a huge favour?'

Luke nodded, but looked wary.

'Like I said, cut the Slim Fast Massive some slack.'

'I will.'

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‘I know there’s some attitude there. Especially Dom. But they’re both feeling the strain right now. Not just this. Other shit too.’

‘Like what? They never said anything to me.’

Hutch shrugged; could see how disappointed Luke was to be in the dark about Dom and Phil’s domestic situations. ‘Well . . . kids and stuff. You know Dom’s youngest lad has a few problems. And Phil’s wife is a permanent state of ball-ache for the guy. There’s some trouble at both mills, if you follow. So go easy, is all I’m saying.’

‘Sure. No worries.’

‘On the bright side,’ Hutch said, trying to change the conversation, ‘we cut this crap in half today, then we get more time in Stockholm before we head back. You love that town.’

‘I guess,’ Luke said.

‘But?’

Luke shrugged. Blew smoke out through his nose. ‘At least here, we are on a trail we can see on the map. The forest is new ground. It’s off piste, mate. There are no trails marked.’

‘It’ll be a treat. Trust me. Wait until you get inside. It’s National Park. Completely untampered with. Virgin forest.’

Luke’s index finger tapped the map. ‘Maybe . . . but you don’t know what the ground is like in there. At least this rock is flat. There’s marshes in there, H. Look. Here. And here.’

‘We won’t go near them. We’ll just weave through the thinnest band of the trees, here, for a couple of hours, and *voilà* . . . pop out the other side.’

Luke raised his eyebrows. ‘You sure? No one will know we’re down there.’

‘Makes no difference. The Environment office was closed

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when we left, and I never called ahead to the Porjus branch. It'll be fine though. That's only a precaution for winter. It's hardly even autumn. There won't be any snow or ice. We might even see some wildlife in there. And the fat men couldn't walk on sponge for another two days, let alone rock. This short cut will halve the distance. We're still looking down the barrel at walking through the second half of today. And we'd need another whole day and evening to reach Porjus tomorrow. Look at them. They're done, mate.'

Luke nodded, exhaled long twin plumes of smoke down his nostrils. 'You're the boss.'

TWO

FOUR HOURS, TWENTY MINUTES LATER

Dead wood snapped under their soles and broken pieces were kicked away. Branches forced aside snapped back into those walking behind. Phil fell and crashed into the nettles, but stood up without a murmur and jogged to catch up with the others who were almost running by this time. Their heads were down and their shoulders were stooped. Twigs whipped faces and laces were pulled undone, but they kept going. Forward, until Hutch stopped and sighed and put his hands on his knees in a tiny clearing. A brown place where the dead wood and leaf mould was shallow and the thorny vines no longer ripped into socks or left burrs, impossibly, inside shirts and trousers.

Luke spoke for the first time since they'd stumbled across the dead animal. He was breathless but still managed to get a cigarette into his mouth. Only he couldn't light it. Four attempts he made with his Zippo until he was blowing smoke out of his nose. 'Hunter I reckon.'

'You can't hunt here,' Hutch said.

'Farmer then.'

'But why put it up there?' Dom asked again.

Hutch took his pack off. 'Who knows. There's nothing

cultivated in the whole park. It's wilderness. That's the whole point of it. I could use a smoke.'

Luke wiped at his eyes. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Bits of powdery bark kept getting under his eyelids. 'A wolf killed it. It was an elk, or deer. And . . . something put it in the tree.' He threw the packet of Camel cigarettes at Hutch.

Hutch picked the cigarette packet from the ground.

Phil frowned, stared at his feet. 'A forest has wardens. Rangers. Would they . . .'

Hutch shrugged, lit up. 'I wouldn't be surprised if we were the first people to walk through this bit. Seriously. Think of the size of the county. Twenty-seven thousand square kilometres. Most of it untouched. We're at least five kilometres from the last trail, and that's hardly ever used.'

Luke exhaled. He tried again. 'A bear. Maybe a bear put it up there. To stop things eating it. You know, on the ground.'

Hutch looked at the end of his cigarette, frowned. 'Maybe. Are they that big in Sweden?'

Dom and Phil sat down. Phil rolled a sleeve up a chubby white forearm to his elbow. 'I'm scratched to buggery.'

Dom's face was white. Even his lips. 'Hutch! I'll ram that map up your useless Yorkshire arse.' He often spoke to Hutch like this. Luke was always surprised at the outbursts, at the violence of the language. But there was no genuine hate in these exchanges, just familiarity. It meant Dom and Hutch were closer these days than he and Hutch. And he'd always considered Hutch to be his best friend. It made him envious because Dom and Hutch were better friends. They'd all known each other for fifteen years, but Dom and Hutch were just as close as they had been back at university. They even shared a tent. Both Luke and Phil felt short-changed by the

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arrangement; Luke could tell Phil felt the same way, even though it would be impossible for them to admit it without offending each other.

Dom pulled a boot off. ‘Some holiday, you tosser. We’re lost. You haven’t got a clue where we are, have you, you mincing fruit?’

‘Dom, cool your boots. Just about a click that way’ – Hutch pointed in the direction they had been scrambling towards – ‘you’ll be eating hot beans and sausage beside a river. There’s a quartet of Swedish beauties pitching their tent right about now, and getting the camp fire ready. Relax.’

Phil laughed. Luke smiled. Dom felt obliged to join in, but in seconds his laughter was genuine. And then they were all laughing. At themselves, at their fear, at the thing up in the tree. Now they were away from it laughter was good. It felt necessary.

THREE

They never found the river, and the mouth-watering dream of Swedish girls and hot beans with sausage dimmed like the September light, and then vanished along with any expectation of finding the end of the forest that day.

While the other three squatted in silence – Luke sitting apart from Dom and Phil, who wolfed energy bars – Hutch glared at the map again, for what must have been the fifth time in an hour. With a dirty finger, he traced the intended short cut between the Sörstubba trail they had abandoned at midday and the river trail. He swallowed again at the frisson of panic that had appeared in his throat as the light started to dim.

In the morning he had known exactly where they were on the map, where they were in the Gällivare municipality, where they were in Norrbotten County, and where they were in Sweden. By late afternoon, with the glimpses of sky through the treetops changing from a thin grey to a thicker grey, he was no longer certain where they were in the forest that intersected the two trails. And he never anticipated so much broken ground or the impenetrable thickets when he chose this route.

Which wasn't making any sense at all. They were no longer even following an approximation of a direct course; the sense

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of moving in the right direction stopped for him over two hours before. The forest was leading them. They needed to move south west, but once they were four kilometres deep it was as if they were being pulled due west, and sometimes even northwards again. They could only move where the foliage was thin, or where spaces occurred naturally between the ancient trees, so they were never moving in the right direction for very long. He should have compensated for that. *Shit.*

He glanced over his shoulder at the others. Maybe it was time for another judgement call: to go back the way they had come in. But if he could even find the haphazard route now, it would be dark by the time they returned to the place from where they had started at midday. And it would mean going past that tree again, with the animal hanging from it. He could not see the idea going over well with Dom and Phil. Luke would be cool with it. The forest made him uneasy too; he could tell. Luke's lips moved as he talked to himself; always a sign. And since they had been so deep among the trees he'd been smoking constantly; another bad sign.

At least the exertion was limiting the speculation on how the corpse came to be hanging from the tree. Hutch had never seen, read, or heard of anything like it; not in twenty years engaged in outdoor pursuits. It had confounded Luke too; he could tell his friend was still struggling with the mystery in silence. And also thinking exactly what he was thinking: *what the hell could do that to a large animal?* In his mind Hutch ran through images of bears, lynx, wolverine, wolves. No fits, but it was one of those. Had to be. Maybe even a man. Which seemed even more disturbing than an animal performing such a slaughter. But whatever had done that much damage to a body, wasn't far away.

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‘On your feet, men.’

Luke tossed his butt and stood up.

‘Piss off,’ Dom said.

‘Here, here,’ Phil added.

Dom looked up at Hutch. The lines at the side of Dom’s mouth cut deep furrows through the filth on his face; his eyes were full of pain. ‘I’m waiting for the stretcher, H. I can hardly bend my leg. I’m not joking. It’s gone all stiff.’

‘It’s not far now, mate,’ Hutch said. ‘River’s got to be close.’