

THE TALLY STONE



Fiction Serial
by Gilbert Bouchard

Part I
October 18, 1953

Jerome had been gone only four days, only travelled sixty miles there and back, only buried a wife and son.

But four days was enough for the ivy crawling over the white washed walls to rupture like clogged diseased veins, and the whole house to ripen into a large jaundiced eyeball.

The eye accused, it taunted, it teased and above all it mocked. It echoed voices - the same voices

that had found Jerome mourning in his father-in-law's house - had eaten his meals with him at his father-in-law's table, tossed and turned with him under the thin grey CNR blankets on his father-in-law's chesterfield, and now had ridden home with him in his beat up '49 Chevy pick-up. Voices with no body, no lungs to propel them, just the echo, the last faint whisper before incomprehensibility: "I killed them, killed them with impunity, killed them with great care, killed them with grace and skill. And you, Jerome, couldn't stop me then, and can't punish me now. I did it Jerome. I killed them, pecked out their eyes, and ate the soft parts, then left the bones for

you to find. You couldn't stop me, couldn't, couldn't, couldn't..."

The eye that was once his house blinked, and Jerome gathered pebbles beneath its gaze. And one by one he shattered every window, every last pane.

By the time he had gotten around to tearing out the ivy, ripping it from the walls handful by handful, his daughter Annie had flown North, fleeing the barnyard, the gravel road back to town, the house where she and Joseph had been born, and her father, she ran away from her father ripping at the stubborn ivy till his hands bled and the spittle collected on his four day old stubble on his cheeks.

Annie ran through the pasture, through a narrow strip of wheat and an even thinner strand of birch saplings then stood catching her breath on the shore of MacDonald lake. Or at least the carcass of the lake which in its prime had been little more than a pond and now was on the verge of rebirth as a swamp. And she saw it again.

Medicine stone, MacDonald's stone, Satan's tally sheet, Warlock point, whatever, this stone that sat dead centre of the lake-soon-swamp was large, grey, and covered with lines and columns of scratches and geometric doodles.

Her mother, when chastising Annie, had often warned of little girls, fallen from the Grace of God, who gain the knowledge and had read the strange lettering - Lucifer's guest list, line upon line of damned souls - and then found their names trailing the lists.

Annie squinted, she couldn't see the bottom of the stone. She had to see the stone up close, she had to be sure her name wasn't there, wasn't a freshly chipped addition to ancient hieroglyphics. Lifting her faded calico skirt above her knees, she waded into the murk.

Jerome's brother-in-law found both bodies a day and a half later. Jerome's head had been nearly severed on the shards of the den's bay window, and his

daughter Annie he found sprawled on MacDonald's rock with an owl pecking at the cavity that was once a child's stomach with its talons wrapped tight around a frail calico covered arm.

Jerome's brother-in-law tried to shoot the offending bird but failed to get a bead on the creature, who circled the rock while he retrieved his niece's body.

Both father and daughter travelled thirty miles and were laid to rest on either side of two collapsing piles of clay, and like all dead things were soon forgotten.

October 18, 1983

No glass, no mix, Tracy didn't even bother taking the mickey of CC out of the ALCB regulation brown paper bag.

She couldn't cry anymore, just as she couldn't vomit anymore.

Tracy had vomited three times today, once in the shrubbery that circled the church-yard that swallowed up her mother's alcohol sodden remains.

She vomited the second time after the reading of her mother's will.

"Nope," she said, wiping her lips with an already retched hankie, "I don't want the farm put up for sale, I intend to live here."

And Tracy vomited the third time after calling Arnold and selling him her half of the ad agency. She vomited till globules of blood were all that she could summon forth.

Later she dragged herself past the garden and into a field of wheat stubble and buried Arnold's ring, clawing at the sods of dirt, shattering her nails, and jabbing dirt and chaff deep into her cuticles.

That was already hours ago, now Tracy drank, wrapped up in the night and a brown down sleeping bag, sporadically feeding green birch logs into a blackened Franklin stove. At least till the logs ran out and the mickey ran dry.

She tossed the empty into a rubbish heap in the shadows of the den and unzipped the bag with all the intentions of a shivering drunk bound to get another handful of kindling when she heard it.

A large trap door covered the opening to the loft across the den from the Franklin she was crouched before. A massive trap too heavy for her to lift, but she had heard it, undeniably she had heard it.

The trap had moved. Not much, but she heard it, she felt it move. Then a scrape, a tiny weak scuffle, and something rolled across the loft floor and tumbled down the wooden steps, tiny little echo after tiny little echo. Till it rolled out of the shadows and bumped to a halt at the foot of her brown down sleeping bag, a marble, chipped, milky, winking at her in the reflections of the Franklin.

A pause, and undertorn unfathomable pause, then another scuffle, another roll and tumble, then another, as dozens upon dozens of marbles rumbled, then tumbled headlong down the stairs.

The fire spat, as if by prearranged signal, and the tumbling marbles ceased, clean and neat, except for one solitary shooter that dived and echoed step by worn step.

The den melted into reddened shadows that enlarged, magnified the silence, till the trap slid back into place with a dust laden thud.

Tracy was too frightened to sleep, too frightened to even pull the sleeping bag up to her shoulders, but mercifully she passed out and woke, hours later, well into the morning.

She looked and all she found was a single marble, tiny, cracked and milky, a few feet from her sleeping bag.

To be continued

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