

THE TEMPLE

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The Temple

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THERE, again, the vexing, mysterious sound!-a faint mewling cry followed by a muffled scratching, as of something being raked by nails, or claws. At first the woman believed the sound must be coming from somewhere inside the house, a small animal, perhaps a squirrel, trapped in the attic beneath the eaves, or in a remote corner of the earthen-floored cellar; after she searched the house thoroughly, she had to conclude that it emanated from somewhere outside, at the bottom of the old garden, perhaps. It was far more distinct at certain times than at others, depending upon the direction and velocity of the wind.

How like a baby's cry, terribly distressing to hear! And the scratching, which came in spasmodic, desperate flurries, was yet more distressing, evoking an obscure horror.

The woman believed she'd first begun hearing the sound at the time of the spring thaw in late March, when melting ice dripped in a continuous arrhythmic delirium from chimneys, roofs, eaves, trees. With the coming of warm weather, her bedroom window open to the night, her sleep was increasingly disturbed.

She had no choice, then, did she? - She must trace the sound to its origin. She set about the task calmly enough one morning, stepping out into unexpectedly bright, warm sunshine, and making her way into the lush tangle of vegetation that had been her mother's garden of thirty years before. The mewling sound, the scratching - it seemed to be issuing from the very bottom of the garden, close by a stained concrete drainage ditch that marked the end of the property. As soon as she listened for it, however, it ceased.

How steady the woman's heartbeat, amid the quickening pulse of a May morning.

Out of the old garage, that had once been a stable, the woman got a shovel, a spade, a rake, these implements festooned in cobwebs and dust, and began to dig. It was awkward work and her soft hands ached after only minutes, so she returned to the garage to fetch gardening gloves-these too covered in cobwebs and dust, and stiffened with dirt. The mid-morning sun was ablaze so she located an old straw hat of her mother's: it fitted her head oddly, as if its band had been sweated through and dried, stiffened asymmetrically.

So she set again to work. First, she dug away sinewy weeds and vines, chicory, wild mustard, tall grasses, in the area out of which the cry had emanated; she managed to uncover the earth, which was rich with compost, very dark, moist. Almost beneath her feet, the plaintive mewling sounded! "Yes. Yes. I'm here," she whispered. She paused, very excited; she heard a brief flurry of scratching, then silence. "I'm here, now." She grunted as she pushed the shovel into the earth, urging it downward with her weight, her foot; it was a pity she'd so rarely used gardening implements, in

all of her fifty years. She was a naturally graceful woman so out of her element here she felt ludicrous to herself, like a beast on its hind legs.

She dug. She spaded, and raked. She dug again, deepening and broadening the hole which was like a wound in the jungle-like vegetation. Chips and shards of aged brick, glass, stones were uncovered, striking the shovel. Beetles scurried away, their shells glinting darkly in the sunshine. Earthworms squirmed, some of them cut cruelly in two. For some time the woman worked in silence, hearing only her quickened heartbeat and a roaring pulse in her ears; then, distinctly, with the impact of a shout, there came the pleading cry again, so close she nearly dropped the shovel.

At last, covered in sweat, her hands shaking, the woman struck something solid. She dropped to her knees and groped in the moist dark earth and lifted something round and hollow – a human skull? But it was small, hardly half the size of an adult's skull.

“My God!” the woman whispered.

Squatting then above the jagged hole, turning the skull in her fingers. How light it was! The color of parchment badly stained from the soil. She brushed bits of damp earth away, marveling at the subtle contours of the cranium. Not a hair remained. The delicate bone was cracked in several places and its texture minutely scarified, like a ceramic glaze. A few of the teeth were missing, but most appeared to be intact, though caked with dirt. The perfectly formed jaws, the slope of the cheekbones! The empty eye sockets, so round... The woman lifted the skull to stare into the sockets as if staring into mirror-eyes, eyes of an eerie transparency. A kind of knowledge passed between her and these eyes yet she did not know: was this a child's skull? had a child been buried here, it must have been decades ago, on her family's property? Unnamed, unmarked? Unacknowledged? Unknown?

For several fevered hours the woman dug deeper into the earth. She was panting in the overhead sun, which seemed to penetrate the straw hat as if it were made of gauze; her sturdy body was clammy with sweat. She discovered a number of scattered bones – a slender forearm, curving ribs, part of a hand, fingers – these too parchment-colored, child-sized. What small, graceful fingers! How they had, scratched, clawed, for release! Following this morning, forever, the finger bones would be at peace.

By early afternoon, the woman gave up her digging. She could find no more of the skeleton than a dozen or so random bones.

She went up to the house, and returned quickly, eagerly, with a five-foot runner of antique velvet cloth, a deep wine color, in which to carry the skull and bones up to the house. For no one must see. No one must know. “I am here, I will always be here,” the woman promised. “I will never abandon you.” She climbed to the second floor of the house, and in her bedroom at the rear she lay the velvet runner on a table beside her bed and beneath a bay window through whose diamond-shaped, leaded panes a reverent light would fall. Tenderly, meticulously, the woman arranged the skull and

bones into the shape of a human being. Though most of the skeleton was missing, it would never seem to the woman's loving eye that this was so.

In this way the woman's bedroom became a secret temple. On the velvet cloth the skull and bones, unnamed, would be discovered after the woman's death, but that was a long way off.

