

“Caveat Emptor”  
by Nathan Barnett

I'd almost forgotten the night. It was in late Spring and I sat up late in the parlor listening to a savage rainstorm which made the stout walls of my home shudder and sent torrents of water flowing over the windows so the night beyond was doubly obscured. For three days already it had been coming down constantly and that night the rain poured harder instead of slackening, like God had forgotten any earlier understanding and all prior commitments were void. It was a Saturday night and my house keeper was off for the night. The house seemed large and very empty. I'd tried to finish some work brought home from the office, but between the ferocious rain and the late hour my imagination kept running away with me until finally I gave up and, setting aside my papers, I pulled out a magazine, one of the better horror fiction monthlies on the market. Flipping through it listlessly, an advert caught my eye, one of those cheap, bulk ads packed in between the Scientologists and a lurid photo announcing “Beautiful Asian Girls Seeking American Men for Penpals.” But this one was different:

**For the *True Horror* Connoisseur!**

We are pleased to present a once in a life-time opportunity.

Individually-crafted subscriptions.

Not for the timid or squeamish! Expensive but authentic!

For the one-of-a-kind collector! Guaranteed to satisfy!

Check One:

Vampyre! \_\_\_\_      Night of the Dead \_\_\_\_      Something wicked . . . \_\_\_\_

All major credit cards accepted

Allow four to six months for delivery

Now I'd always fancied myself as a collector of obscure books and, being troubled by insomnia, novels and anthologies slipped by at a steady clip. My tastes lately had turned to horror, having recently rediscovered Stoker's *Dracula*, and I was hungry for more. I made a mark, entered an account number, and scribbled the address across an envelope without a second thought. With an bolt of energy I threw on an old Macintosh and darted out into the deluge in my slippers to drop envelope et al. in the post box standing sentry beside my door. I returned to my wingback chair breathless and sopping, but excited.

It seemed harmless enough at the time, a moment of boyish impetuosity quite unlike me. I am, first and last, a man of the world, having traveled and read broadly, divorced but only once; I live well but alone, preferring to keep my own counsel rather than listening to that of another and am almost never lonely. Some years earlier I'd been made a full partner in a large corporate legal practice which subsidizes generous investments left me by a widow aunt. My home is a comfortable brownstone in the heart of one of the city's old neighborhoods. A century oak stands to one side of steps ascending to a stout oak door boasting a brass lion's headed knocker Philip Marley would have been proud to transfigure. From the street one looked up at an inviting bay window with leaded-glass borders. Halfway between the first and second floors a stained-glass window lends light to the stairs within. The second story is occupied by three huge, high-ceilinged bedrooms and two spacious baths. One bedroom I've converted into my library, not to be confused with the parlor below. All in all it is a cozy place with a tradition of being haunted as my real estate agent had informed me with a rueful grin. I'd supposed allowed hauntings increased market values and he'd flashed a wide, innocent, smile. The place had that friendly ambiance to which a restless spirit might lend a touch of mystique--provided, of course, he remained within civilized bounds of, say, chill spots and an occasional misplaced coffee mug. Some years before the time in question, a year after I received my inheritance, I'd moved in with my then-wife, Marilyn. Since then the house, if not the marriage, had proved extremely satisfactory.

Now as I said, I'm what I call a man of the world. I put little weight in what I can't see although I delight in stories of mystery and suspense. To my way of thinking, occasional flights of fancy are essential to the healthy maintenance of an active mind, but the morning after my whimsical indulgence I conceded this shouldn't extend to mailing credit card numbers off to an unknown mail-order companies. Glancing at the ad, I noted that prices weren't even listed for these alleged subscriptions and as the sun burned through the residual cloud cover, I considered canceling my credit card but finally decided I was over-reacting. The

company was probably legitimate and if not I had legal recourse, being then pretty savvy on credit law, and that was the last I thought of it.

Uneventful months flipped by. Summer faded and Fall progressed in an admirable brilliance of goldens and chill mornings. It was on one of these that I sat down for a cup of coffee at the little diner a block or so from my home. I think it was a Saturday. An odd, shabby looking fellow sat three stools down from me, the only customer besides myself. He was one of those indistinctly aged people, between thirty-five and sixty dressed in a badly-worn high school letter jacket the affiliation of which I didn't recognize. His dirty blue jeans and day-glo orange hunting cap, one earflap down, left him suspect of derangement. His scraggly, pitted face hadn't been shaven in days. When I glanced over he smiled a crooked grin and nodded.

"Mornin'!" he exclaimed too loudly. "You live around here?" I admitted I did and he slid across the intervening stools, shuttling his hefty breakfast in front of him like a shuffleboard disc.

"Were you aware, sir," he began with over-loud, conspiratorial excitement, "that your house is built on the site of the ancient grounds of a pauper's graveyard? Why yes, it's true! My Aunt Estella was telling me just this last Thanksgiving--over the turkey, no less!--that this neighborhood had been set down--plop!" he smacked the back of his spoon into his gravy-sodden biscuits to demonstrate how it was set down, "--in the middle of the old pauper's graveyard where they stuffed all the poor who couldn't afford burial." His febrile eyes held my own so I couldn't quite excuse myself or even respond. "More or less just tossed 'em in the pit and threw dirt over 'em!" He paused a moment in reverent silence. I quietly hoped he'd switch to the weather but he loudly ejaculated, "Yup! Not a pretty picture, all those bodies rottin' away down there. Hundred years worth!" Another pause. "More!" he leered at the tall, chrome coffee urn, imagining it.

"How did she come across this juicy information? Your aunt, I mean," I asked dryly, noting my coffee had gone cold.

"Oh, Estella's studying at the university, history or arc'tecture or something! She's the clever one, she is. Our Estella's been going to university for years now. Smarts!" he pointed to his temple to demonstrate where those smarts resided in their Estella.

"Well that is something, then, isn't it?" I replied, not wanting to offend.

"Thaddeus Hornshwaggle!" he exclaimed, thrusting his hand at me with almost violent energy. For a moment I wasn't sure whether he was accusing me or speaking in tongues or perhaps had me mistaken for someone else. At last I realized he was giving his name. I smiled and gave mine, extending a hand with some trepidation. He worked it up and down like a pump, "Pleasure to meet you!" he cried as he relinquished my abused limb.

"The pleasure's been all mine," I lied draining my coffee cup hastily, "but I'm afraid I've got to be going. Fearful lot of work to do this morning!" Another lie, but I was suddenly desperate to be out in the sun light and fresh air, immediately.

"Oh!" he exclaimed with a note of disappointment, looking around to see if anyone else was present. Even the waitress had vanished. "Well, see you around then!" I smiled with difficulty but a chill shot through me and I silently prayed he wouldn't as I counted out the price of my coffee.

Outside I breathed deeply. Despite his easy banter and a puppy-like affability, the man seemed innately unwholesome. Perhaps it was merely the subject matter; I'll confess I didn't care for the idea of sleeping over the moldering remains of generations of destitute dead. How could all that sorrow and loneliness from countless shattered souls fail to contaminate the dirt they now comprised?

Standing the diner's long window I furtively glanced back in to where my new acquaintance sat on his stool with the same broad and broken grin on his face, staring directly back. He waved eagerly and I replied as congenially as possible before hurrying on my way.

The peculiar incident seemed easily forgotten, but that evening, for the first time in my adult life, I felt apprehensive about turning off the bedside lamp. The novel I read couldn't hold my attention but I lay there studying the white surrounding the letters rather than put it down. Finally I forced a chuckle and set it aside, recalling the queer twinkle in the fellow's eyes as he imagined the moldering multitudes lying below. "All those bodies down there!" he'd cried. Though very sleepy, I postponed the darkness even longer. Getting up, I filled a glass of water to set next to my bed. Then I walked over to the window and looked down at the quiet street below. The wind was gently shaking the bare Century oak beside my steps, upsetting the shadows cast by the refurbished gaslights. I disliked the silent phantoms it set dancing on my ceiling and hastily closed the blind.

“No sense delaying,” I chided myself and slipped between the sheets, took a sip of water, and turned out the lights. My heart seemed faster than usual and for a moment I’d wished I were religious so I might pray, but I was tired and then asleep.

One is rarely aware he is asleep, only that he has awoken. I did so dramatically, sitting bolt upright in the darkness of my room unable to recall what had woken me. The air seemed stifling, permeated by a smell of decay and horrid rot. Had there been a noise? Was the plumbing running amuck? Perhaps something was outside. My heart was straining against my ribs, blood throbbed at my temples, and a minuscule drop of sweat worked its way down the uneven ladder of my spine. With the blinds drawn the darkness was as complete as the silence.

For a full minute I remained motionless. Perhaps some night sound or even a prowler had disturbed me? It must have been the dead of night and nothing trouble in the perfect stillness. At last I resolved that it had been a nightmare or some inconsequential sound from the street conspiring with my imagination. I fumbled about on the bed side table and finally located my watch behind the water glass. It was one of those digital timepieces with a button-activated light and, pressing it, I saw the time was 3:24 a.m. Some trick of that dim glow made me think something was in the room and I instinctively reached for the lamp. With a click I was momentarily blinded by the glare.

In the years since I’ve marveled that the mind can be caught so off guard by terror as to lose the ability to shield itself. A detached and fully sensitive portion of my mind considered the middle of my bedroom unhindered and awesomely aware. Where a gradual prehension might have violently unseated my senses, this sudden revelation failed to elicit any defensive response. Now that I know such moments can occur, I have no desire to endure another with complete lucidity and have ever since slept with a small light aglow in my room. This will perhaps surprise some, but as I lay there with my body trembling and my heart I am sure stopped for a full minute, I was within myself wishing to swoon or else that the bulwarks of my sanity would crumble and I would be spared by madness for even a moment. Then, and perhaps even, now, I would have gladly exchanged a large portion of my certainty of self for a few seconds less terror.

The thing standing there appeared solid enough., an animate skeleton I suppose. Every part of the thing showed evidence of a long burial: old, brown bones with tatters of moldering skin caked by black clay, many a bone cracked, here and there ribs broken off leaving ragged edges. The flesh left on the thing glistened with oily slime while its grey skull retained a few slimy strands of hair matted with dirt. The right side of the head was laid completely bare and had suffered a crushing dent, either in dying or during some later desecration. Only a couple teeth hovered in the black hollow of its slack-jawed mouth. It stood perhaps five feet tall, stooped at the shoulders, and held its arms in the crooked, almost timid posture assumed by sleeping children and severe trauma victims. A few moldering tatters of clothing remained while elsewhere all flesh had rotted away leaving gaping holes through the abdomen so that as it slowly turned to face me I glimpsed my bureau beyond and through it.

When I first saw it, the sexless, rotting cadaver was facing my wardrobe. When the lights came on it rotated to see who had discovered it. Facing me, I could study at length the horrible condition of its corpse. It moved a few faltering steps closer to better see what was quivering amongst the bedsheets and blankets. Its eye sockets were completely empty and as I stared, my amazement redoubled as a small snake, brownish-grey in color, poked curiously from one hole. The shambling horror stopped and reached up to its face with unsteady hands, a haphazardly connected collection of bones. As they approached, the little snake slowly extended its body, revealing two or three inches which undulated sinuously before the hands caught hold. The small reptile was slowly drawn clear of the socket, roughly eight inches long, and then allowed to writhe free of the bony fingers whereupon it fell to the ground and slithered off with offended dignity. Then the horror resumed glaring at me.

A general haze of evil seemed to surround the thing, perceptible not by its actions but rather by mere existence, loudly declaring defiance to the sacred axiom that the dead must lie still. That pupilless gaze met mine as an equal without right. A sense of malicious humor arched its maggot-chewn brow as it delighted in my bewildered terror. The mold about the chaps, I’m sure, was reminiscent of a gloating smirk.

But it did not stay long. I remained rigid as it turned from me and ambled unsteadily towards the door. Beyond, in the half-light cast by my shaded lamp, I discerned other things, vaguely human, shambling past my open door down the corridor towards the stairs. They were not all of them distinct. Something moved by at floor level reminiscent of a paraplegic dragging himself with hands alone. Another skeleton paused to await the ghoul which had studied me there in my bedroom, more haggard and broken than my acquaintance. He lacked an arm and barely half its ribcage remained. One battered fragment levitated free

of the rest yet turned with it in tandem as the hideous pair departed. At last they were gone and still I sat there in bed. They had left no trace but I now and again thought I heard something in the house below.

“Get up,” some part of my brain wordlessly commanded the distant body. Nothing happened and I struggled for voice. It was slow in coming but finally I managed to croak, “Get up while you can still rush down and catch them--get up or you’ll never sleep again!” It was good advice, but I lay perfectly still; the shaking of my limbs growing steadily. Having weathered the worst so hideously in tact, entirely sane, now my consciousness lingered idiotically on the space where it had been. I had not been asleep though I mouthed a silent prayer that perhaps I had been.

When dawn at last came I still sat there staring at that patch of brownish beige carpet. A razor-thin wedge of sunlight cut into my range of view and slipped inch by inch across the floor. Finally I was distracted by the ringing of distant chimes. The first idea to enter my mind was church bells, then I wondered if anyone had wound the old clock on the mantle, and finally I mused upon how long I’d sat without moving. I pushed the blankets back from my legs and sat up to find every muscle in my body was knotted. With grim protest they let me to slide off the edge of my bed towards my slippers but I’d grown so numb I could not work my feet into them.

The chime rang out again. It was my doorbell and I at last recalled who and where I was, that this was my own bedroom, that someone rang for my attention. With great difficulty I hobbled down stairs, struggling to pull an old smoking jacket over my pajamas. When at last I reached the door, pulled back the blind, and looked through the leaded glass, the front stoop was empty but a small envelope bearing my name in dark letters rested upon the mat.

After an interminable series of ordeals, I sank onto a kitchen chair with the envelop in my hands which had finally stopped trembling. The envelop itself was of thick paper, like parchment made from magnificent creamy fibers knit with gold threads. It had heft and was sealed with sealing wax in a grand style neglected since the beginning of the century. An elaborate monogram had been pressed into it and I had to study it a moment before I could discern the letters: *TH*. A table knife, neglected the night before, still lay on the table and I used it to pry away the wax without breaking it, wanting to preserve the novelty of the thing. Inside was a sheet of parchment of the same quality as the envelop. The handwriting was as ornate as any I have ever seen:

**Thank you for enjoying *True Horror***

**What a wonderful setting! It has been truly delightful serving you and we hope you’ll allow us to entertain you again in the future. Please find enclosed a voucher for half-off on your next subscription.**

As I sat there in the late morning sun a new, deep shuddering disturbed me and before I knew it waves of laughter were echoing against the white cabinets of the kitchen and tears ran down my face. I remembered that long-forgotten, late-night subscription and an ancient wisdom entrusted us by way of example during our first year in a Latin course: *Caveat Emptor*, “let the buyer be ware.”

I signed the enclosed receipt for the price of the subscription then set about preparing my morning coffee, another satisfied customer.