

KISSED WITH MADNESS

(A POST SCRIPT TO THE OTHER SIDE OF DESPAIR)

By David Maurice Garrett

"Father, you obviously believe people have souls, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that places have souls?"

"Hmmm, I don't think so. I guess I've never really thought about it."

"Well, I do. I know they do."

"You do?"

"Yes, and that's the nature of my sin."

"How's that?"

"Because I helped a man, um, relocate a place's spirit to a new place."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite follow."

"It was a nasty place. A nasty soul. And it had outlived the people who had lived there. It was suffering with loneliness. So I helped the man with what needed to be done. I helped the place's soul."

"What man?"

"I don't really know the man. I can guess. He was probably just an incarnation of Him, though. That really doesn't matter. What matters is the place."

"What place then?"

"The soul of Shockley House."

"Shockley House. I don't believe I know it."

"And you wouldn't. Like I said, it was a lonely place that no one visited any longer."

"And I'm to understand that you moved the house?"

"No. Not the house. I told you, it was the soul of the place. The malignant, horrible spirit of Shockley House."

"And now it resides somewhere else?"

"Yes. Now it is the spirit of Rathbone Asylum."

"But that's here."

"Yes. I know."

Dr. Carlson: "What's the story with Patient Dithers? The one everyone calls Old Charlie. Has he ever been communicative or has he always been catatonic?"

Dr. Harris: "Oh, Old Charlie used to be very much the talker. His unresponsive state was a gradual thing. I'm afraid he's completely gone to us now, but his tale is quite bizarre."

Dr. Carlson: "Bizarre how?"

Dr. Harris: "Do you know the story of Shockley House, Lisa?"

Dr. Carlson: "Shockley House. Now there's a name I haven't heard in a while. The legend of an old haunted asylum up in Denver? A cautionary tale of horrifying and barbaric psychiatric practices that someone told me in school, I believe."

Dr. Harris: "Well, it's not a legend, even though the place is no longer standing. In many ways it was the forerunner of this place. Walter Rathbone acquired the property and had it demolished before relocating here in Castle Rock and building our institution."

Dr. Carlson: "Really? I had no idea. But what does that have to do with Old Charlie? Was he a patient at Shockley House?"

Dr. Harris: "No, not a patient then. He used to be a police officer and was the first to arrive on the scene the night that Dr. Matthew Remy went crazy, killed a resident and a nurse, and then committed suicide."

Charlie Dithers sat at the bar peeling the label off of a beer while he watched the neon sign in the window flicker and buzz. He had lost count of the hours he had been sitting there sucking down beer and thinking about the last few weeks of his life. He had seen all kinds of crazy shit in the eight years he was a cop, but that night at the old Shockley place made the other stuff pale in comparison.

There were so many hellacious images that fought for a spot in his memory but the one that haunted him the most was the face of that lunatic nurse with those things jutting out of her eyes while she giggled and pushed the dead body of the doctor swinging from the roof.

He tried to go back to work and pretend that that night would recede into a mishmash of all the other demented things he had witnessed, but the nightmares were relentless. And they didn't just come at night, either. Throughout the day they popped unbidden into his mind and he was forced to dwell on them day and night.

After a couple of weeks he decided some vacation time was in order. He never told his sergeant why. He didn't need the fellows at the station knowing he was getting thin skinned and recommending he go see a shrink. That was a career killer. Instead, he made some lame excuse and pretended everything was hunky-dory.

And this was day three of vacation. He lit another cigarette and watched a tall, lean man walk in the bar. For some reason he couldn't quite place, Charlie's first impression was that the man was sinister.

The man scanned the bar and then took a seat several feet away. The barkeep, emerging from the back with an armload of beer asked, "What'll you have, friend?"

"Bourbon and Coke." The man's voice was deep and slow. He sat down and turned to look directly at Charlie. A wave of discomfort slithered through Charlie. The man reached out a hand and said, "Officer Dithers, my name is Walter Rathbone. I would like to talk to you about the Shockley House."

"Look at her, Charlie. She's been kissed with madness. Now that her eyes are ruined, what do you think she really sees?"

Charlie fidgeted uncomfortably and tried to force himself to look at the woman. She sat in an easy chair with her legs drawn up, her arms hugging them as she rocked back and forth ever so slightly. She was gaunt and still had a bandage wrapped around her head that covered her eyes. Her mouth was open and she sang a low mewling song that was barely audible.

Charlie thought back to the last time he had seen Edith, the nurse he had found in the upper room of Shockley House with those horrible instruments protruding from each eye as she laughed maniacally, covered in her own blood.

Charlie looked at Dr. Rathbone and said, "Sees?"

"Yes, she sees a different world now, Charlie. What do suppose that world looks like?"

"I don't know. I think she's off her rocker. She's lost it."

"Obviously she's mad," Rathbone said as he stroked his black goatee. "But that doesn't mean that her world is any less real than this one. Even a lunatic's world has structure. There are rules and laws; a coherence that allows for her story to continue. We're all but characters in a story that gives our lives meaning. Does your story have meaning, Charlie Dithers?"

Charlie didn't know how to answer that. He thought it did, but lately, things were altering the narrative in a way he didn't like and didn't fully comprehend. Was this man just messing with him? Was it all some elaborate scheme? Or was this man really trying to show him something that would help explain all the madness?

Charlie's head was throbbing and he was tired of the place where Rathbone had brought him. Just being with Edith, seeing her this way, made him want to get away and have a drink.

"What do you want from me?" It was the only thing Charlie could think to say.

"I want you to understand."

"Understand what?"

"Their story. Their language. I want you to understand what happened that night. It is the only way you'll ever have peace of mind."

Rathbone leaned down close to Edith's ear and whispered something that Charlie couldn't make out. Edith's mouth snapped shut and she stopped her rocking. As Rathbone stood up Edith began to giggle.

"Come on, Charlie. Let's go get you that drink."

As they walked out, Edith's giggling beat in time to the pounding in Charlie's head.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous to meet him," Charlie said as he wrung his hands. He and Rathbone sat on a park bench. Rathbone had one leg crossed over the other and his arm stretched across the back of the bench. He looked as relaxed as a cat napping in the sunshine. Charlie, on the other hand was a nervous wreck. He sat forward with his elbows on his knees, legs shaking, and his eyes darting here and there.

"Well, you haven't seen Dr. Ballinger since that night," Rathbone said, as if that explained everything.

"What do I say to him?"

"I think it would be best if you let him begin; then you'll know what to say."

"Was it his idea or yours?" Charlie said.

"Honestly, Charlie, it was my idea; although, Keith Ballinger didn't completely understand that he needed to pass along a message to you until I helped him see it."

"A message? What kind of message?"

"I'll let him deliver it. Here he is now."

Charlie looked around but didn't see anyone approaching. Confused, he said, "Where?"

Rathbone raised an arm and pointed upward. "There."

Charlie's gaze followed his finger across the street to the top of the building. Charlie could see the man pulling himself up onto the low wall that enclosed the roof of the tall building. It had to be at least 15-stories tall. Charlie shot up and began to shout as he ran towards the street and waved his arms. A few people paused to regard Charlie. As he neared the street several pedestrians realized what he was yelling about. By the time a small, shocked crowd began to form, Ballinger was standing atop the wall with his arms outstretched.

And then he was falling.

Charlie Dithers watched in horror as Keith Ballinger struck the pavement with a sickening thunk.

"The story goes that when General Larimer came down to the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek to begin staking claims for what would become Denver City, he was approached by an Arapaho Indian named Little Dog. This was in November of 1858. Little Dog warned him about a certain place that the land speculator was trying to sell claims for settlement.

"You can guess which plot of land that was. It was where Shockley house would be built. But the reason that Little Dog gave Larimer is the interesting part. You see, that piece of land had a bad reputation that far back – and likely even much further back than the 1800's if truth be told.

"The Indians shunned that place. Legend says that bad things befell those who crossed that place. Madness and death were born there and all who were tainted by it poisoned those around them with it. These things I know to be true. Don't ask me how I know this; but I do."

Charlie Dithers wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He had just lost the contents of his stomach upon the ground and was still bent over the vile mess upon the ground. He closed his eyes and fought to regain his normal breathing.

What the hell had he just witnessed?

Many times he had thought about killing Rathbone because he knew he was a monster, but he had just seen a true monster. Not a despicable human who could be called a monster. But a living, in-the-flesh monster.

Now he knew that there was no way he could kill Rathbone. Not after what he had just seen emerge from the blackened and charred remains of Shockley House at the behest of that demon Walter Rathbone.

Rathbone had brought Charlie and a man named Demetrius Hob to the old place. Poor Hob was a basket case. He was barely coherent and constantly twitched and shook. Rathbone told Charlie that Hob was one of the few survivors of that night at Shockley House. Charlie faintly remembered the man. Everything from that night was just a jumble of horrors and nightmares, so it was hard to say.

As they stepped through the debris, Rathbone bade for Hob to sit down while he and Charlie continued to step through the rubble. And then Rathbone placed his hand on Charlie's shoulder causing him to stop. Rathbone pointed towards the spot where Hob sat and then he called in low, crooning voice some twisted, alien phrase. For a moment nothing happened. Charlie looked between the two men confused and then he heard it.

From beneath the ground there arose the sound of shifting earth and debris being thrown aside. And then the thing emerged. It was a sickly pale worm-like creature with the face of a grotesque parody of a human – maybe an ape. It had appendages. Not mammalian or insect appendages, but slithering, rope-like tentacles with barbs or thick hair. How many, Charlie couldn't say. It rose above Hob who just looked at incomprehensibly. The thing opened its maw of needle-like teeth to an unbelievable size. Then the beast fell upon him.

It was a ghastly, sickening scene to behold with blood, gore, and the loud crunching of bones. Rathbone began to laugh and that's when Charlie lost his stomach.

Dr. Harris: "Charlie, you said you weren't there the night Shockley House burned down. How do you know about it then?"

Charlie: "He told me all about it."

Dr. Harris: "Who? Rathbone?"

Charlie: "Yes, of course. He said it needed to happen in order to prepare the way. He would've made me go too but I was hiding from him. He probably knew where I was and would've made me go if he really wanted me to."

Dr. Harris: "I see. Why do think you are so important to him, Charlie?"

Charlie: "It's not that I'm important to Rathbone. God, he detests me. I'm important to that thing."

Dr. Harris: "In what way?"

Charlie: "It's inexplicable, really. For some unknown reason, I can speak to it."

Dr. Harris: "Like, another language?"

Charlie: "Something like that. It's nothing I ever learned. It just comes to me unbidden. But we were talking about the night that Shockley House burned down."

Dr. Harris: "Right, go on."

Charlie: "The one he really needed that night was Donald. He was one of the surviving patients that was there the night that Remy lost it."

Dr. Harris: "So, Rathbone took Donald to the house?"

Charlie: "Yes. He made Donald the sacrifice. He sent Donald into the house; deep into the basement and somehow had him trigger the explosion that caused the fire and destruction."

Dr. Harris: "So Donald died in the house?"

Charlie: "Oh, yes. It was the plan all along. Rathbone planned every little step."

Dr. Harris: "For what purpose, Charlie?"

Charlie: "To clear the way so that I might bring the white worm here to Rathbone Asylum."

From that moment on, it spoke to Charlie in a low, mental crooning that circled his brain incessantly saying,

"Ah Charlie I can't begin to thank you enough for all of the sacrifices you've made to bring me here. You do know just how important our work is don't you? Let me try and help you see things in the proper perspective my boy. All of these poor souls are blessed with the ability to see worlds beyond the one that most men experience. They are called mad yet they are not truly. They are gifted. And it is I who help them to fully experience the glory of the world they escape in to. Every life has a story, a narrative that gives meaning to their world. Can it be helped if they are called insane just because that other realm is fractured and disjointed? It requires a certain power to provide that coherence to the world they are distanced from. Some would call it an alternated dimension. I imagine their frustration when they can only access that other dimension in bits and snatches. That is what is maddening. I merely help them crossover and experience those other dimensions to their fullness. While it might appear that they are just prisoners of this horrid place in reality they are mostly off writing their true life stories. Exploring, adventuring, struggling, loving, fighting, living a full and richer life. Come now Charlie and let me help you share their stories now. Have you found the Yellow Sign? I long for Hali and the cloudy depths of Demhe . . ."

THE END