

UNHOLY GHOST
GRAHAM MASTERTON

When I first came south to Miami, I was planning on staying no longer than three months. My old friend Marcos Hernandez had asked me to take care of his house in Coral Gables while he was touring Europe with the Joe Morales Mariachi Orchestra, and I looked on it like an extended vacation. It never occurred to me that I would be seduced so quickly by the sunshine and the ocean and the girls in their miniscule bikinis – not to mention the envelopes stuffed with fifties which Florida's elderly widows would press into my hands in a return for a glimpse into their very predictable futures.

It never occurred to me that I wouldn't miss for a moment the endless grumble of Manhattan's traffic and the brontosaurus honking of firetrucks and the jostling crowds on the sidewalks and my musty-smelling walk-up loft on W 13th Street. I never thought that I would have no urge whatsoever to return to those idle mornings in Think Coffee, setting the world to rights with the would-be artists and the unpublished poets and the laptop warriors, as well as the dreamy-eyed girls with their bandannas and their spiky black mascara who didn't realise that the Beatniks had died out half a century ago and still thought that Allen Ginsberg might come walking through the door at any moment.

Marcos had returned from his tour, but he had generously allowed me to stay in the dinky guest cottage at the end of his garden, which looked like Snow White used to live there, only it would have been too small to accommodate more than her and three out of the seven dwarves, tops. I had a bedroom and a living-room and a shower, as well as a kitchenette that overlooked Triangle Park. It was a pretty rudimentary place to live, all rough stucco and whitewash and Mexican rugs, and Marcos and his pals kept me awake most nights playing *huapango* music and laughing and stamping on the floor. All the same the cottage was clean and it was secluded and it was free.

I finished my day's fortune-telling at 5:30. While she had tutted and twitched and suspiciously sucked at her dentures, I had told Mrs. Edwards at the James Hotel that she could look forward to golden times ahead. To be fair, I knew that she was sitting on an investment portfolio worth more than three hundred million dollars, and with that kind of wealth it's pretty hard to be glum for very long. After Mrs. Edwards I had given one more reading to Mrs. Bachman in Hialeah who was lying on her sickbed with a feeding tube up her right nostril and five Persian cats on her lap who continually hissed at me as if I were the Grim Reaper come to take their meal-ticket away.

Both times I used my Tarot cards instead of the Parlor Sibyl. I didn't want any *Catastrophe* or *Scourge* or *Tuérie* cards coming up again, especially since Mrs. Edwards always paid me double my normal fee and Mrs. Bachman was ready to snuff it at any moment, and I didn't want to be held legally responsible for scaring her to death.

I knew that I had to find out if those Parlor Sibyl cards would still be the same when I looked at them again,. On my way home, however, I put off the evil moment by dropping into John Martin's Irish Pub on Miracle Mile for a pint of Guinness and a Johnny Walker chaser. OK, I admit it. I needed some Irish courage before I looked through the deck and tried to work out how some of the most optimistic of fortune-telling cards had become so threatening and so grotesque.

My old acquaintance Kathleen O'Sullivan was already at her regular table, and I went across to join her. John Martin's is oak-paneled and low-lit. Although it has a long bar but plenty of intimate corners, too. Kathleen was enjoying her usual Johnny Walker Black. She was a chisel-faced woman in her mid-seventies, with an unkempt tangle of gingery-gray hair that was badly in need of another dye-job and protruding teeth with a gap in the middle. She was wearing a dark green satin dress, with a silver crucifix around her neck. She looked like the Irish fairy that timelessness forgot.

"What's the story, then, Harry?" she asked me, as I sat down at the table next to her. "Holy Mother of Jesus -- you're looking awful *dark* today, boy"

I knew better than to lie to Kathleen. I may have been the Incredible Erskine, Foreteller of the Future, but Kathleen was the real deal. She didn't need cards or a crystal ball to tell you what was going to happen to you two weeks next Tuesday. She only had to look at your aura. She only had to *smell* you. I wouldn't have let Kathleen tell my fortune even if *she* had paid *me*, because I never really wanted to know my own fate.

"Hey, it's just been one of those crap days," I told her, taking my first swallow of Guinness.

"By 'crap' you mean one of those days when Mother Nature refuses to behave herself the way you expect her to, according to the rules? One of those days when a little red devil jumps up from behind you and goes *boo!* and frightens the beJesus out of you?"

"You got it," I nodded. Then, "What are you looking me like that for?"

"You have a droopy foam moustache." She reached across and wiped it away with her fingertip. "It would suit you, a droopy moustache like that. Make you look like General Custer."

“Well, I guess General Custer and I have a lot in common. We both had trouble with Native Americans.”

“There’s some trouble brewing up around you right now, sure enough,” said Kathleen. “I could see it, as soon as you walked in the door.”

I looked at her narrowly. Her eyes were grayish-green, and for some reason they looked more like an animal’s eyes than a woman’s. A female wolf, or a mother cougar. Knowing, and understanding, but ultimately heartless. That was what always unsettled me about Kathleen. She was never afraid to speak the truth, no matter how much it might hurt you.

“I read a woman’s cards this morning but the cards turned out weird,” I told her. Like I said, there was no point in trying to deceive her. She would have known straight away that I was lying.

“What do you mean, *weird*?”

“Some of the cards were totally different from the way they should have been, Different pictures on them, different names. Like *Death*, for example, that’s the nine of spades, and it should have had a picture of Death on it. Instead it had some scared-looking guy lying in bed with his legs all scaly.. And then there were six or seven cards at least which I swear to God I have never seen before, with people stabbing each other and setting light to themselves and some girl having nine-inch nails knocked into her eyes.”

Kathleen was thoughtful for a moment, with her fingernail tracing an invisible pattern on the tabletop. Who knew what she was tracing – a shamrock, maybe, or a pentacle? One figure to bring luck, one figure to stir up the Devil?

“You know what’s happening to you, don’t you?” she said.

“No, I don’t. I’m not psychic. But -- you know, *hey*, don’t quote me.”

“You’re being *warned*, that’s what it is. Whoever is warning you may be still alive or on the other hand it’s more than likely that they’re dead, because they can see things that you can’t see. But somebody who cares about you is trying to tell you that you could be in genuine danger.”

“Sorry, Kate. I don’t agree. I’m not being warned. I’m being *threatened*. If ever I saw cards which told me to keep my *schonk* out and mind my own business or else I’m going to wind up blinded or mutilated or dead, then these are they.”

“Do you have the cards with you by any chance?”

“Unhn-hunh.. They’re in my car. I locked in the glovebox in case they change into vampire bats or something and fly away.”

Kathleen raised her unkempt eyebrows.. “You know what they say about books, Harry? A book is just a block of paper until you open it up. It’s the same with the cards. Until you start turning them over and reading what they have to tell you, they’re just a stack of pasteboard.”

“Well, that’s the way they can stay for the moment, so far as I’m concerned. I’ve still got the heebie-jeebies about them. Right now I just want to sit here and have a drink and forget about what happened. I’ll take a look at them when I get home. With any luck they’ll all be back to normal, the way they should be.”

Kathleen said, “You can buy me another drink if you like. You’ll be needing one yourself, too. That darkness you’ve got around you, that’s showing no signs of fading away, so it isn’t. It’s as black as smoke, Harry, believe me, and in fact I’d say it’s growing blacker and knottier by the minute.”

I beckoned to the waitress to bring us two more drinks. Then I leaned forward across the table and said, “Kate...if those cards still look this evening the same way they did this morning, I’m going to burn them, or throw them in the bay, the entire damn deck. Whatever’s going on – whether I’m being warned or threatened -- I don’t want to know about it.”

Kathleen took hold of my hand and gently squeezed it. “You can’t ignore it, Harry. Your life is gong to change so much. The wheels are already in motion. It’s too late now to jump off the train.”

I loved the Irishy way she pronounced “wheels” as if it were “phwheelce” but it didn’t make me feel any better about what she was saying. I was half-tempted to go to my car and bring back the Parlor Sibyl cards to show her, but I felt as if that would be an admission that I was genuinely frightened of them.

We drank another drink, and then we drank another drink after that, and Kathleen told ne about the Cóiiste Bodhar, the Irish Death Coach which waits outside the house with its door open when somebody is about to die, because once it has arrived on earth it can never return to the underworld empty. That lifted my mood a whole lot, I can tell you.

Before I went, though, Kathleen grasped my forearm and said, “I’m not messing with you, Harry.” She pronounced “with you” as “witcha” which I thought was highly appropriate. “You do have the shadows dancing around you, boy. You can’t ignore them. So watch your step and watch your back and watch where you’re going and keep any eye out for any trouble. Something dreadful is approaching, I can promise you that.”

I wasn't exactly drunk by the time I arrived back at Marco's house but I did manage to knock over a Grecian-style concrete planter with my front bumper and tip out the yucca that was growing in it, followed by a heap of potting compost. I weaved my way around the side of the house, tilting from side to side as I did so, and then I moonwalked across the back yard and on the fifth attempt I managed to jab my key into the guest cottage door.

With exaggerated care, I placed the deck of cards in the center of the glass-topped coffee-table in the living-room. Then I went through to the bedroom, slung my sweaty djellaba over the back of the wicker chair that stood in the corner, kicked off my Gucci loafers and fell backward spreadeagled onto the bed, which let out a crunchy groan of complaint.

I closed my eyes for a moment but I didn't fall asleep. The cards from the Parlor Sibyl were whirling around in my head like some off-key carousel. *Death, Murder, Riot and Catastrophe*.

I guess you could accuse me of being a cynic, the way I tell old ladies' fortunes and charge so much for it, but I do believe in the so-called "supernatural." Or rather, I don't believe that there's a point where the natural ends and the supernatural begins. I've witnessed enough bizarre and inexplicable events in my lifetime to know that our whole daily existence is supernatural, from morning till night. The supernatural in fact is just the weirder end of natural. It's only a question of degree.

We think it's "supernatural" that we humans have a spirit inside us which can still exist after our physical bodies have bought the farm. At the same time all of us are hurtling around in a vacuum at sixty-seven thousand miles an hour, while also rotating at more than a thousand miles an hour, with no adhesive on our feet to keep us on the ground, and yet we call that "natural."

If people ask me about the supernatural, I point to the moon floating unsupported in the sky and say *quod erat demonstrandum*, I rest my case. You think your grandmother's ghost appearing in your bedroom at night is more supernatural than the moon floating around unsupported? Well, not my grandmother's ghost, anyhow.

Even if spirits are real, which they are, I don't believe that we should allow them to threaten us, or harm us, or tell us how to live our lives. They're dead, right? They've had their chance. Now it's *our* turn, at least until we're buried, or cremated, or cast into concrete balls and dropped into the Atlantic for fish to fornicate on.

But I found those Parlor Sibyl cards deeply unsettling, I have to admit. I was sure that they were threatening me, but I didn't understand why, and that's what made me feel so disturbed. It was like receiving an anonymous phone call with some whispery voice saying

“*We’re coming to get you, my friend,*” and having no idea what you were supposed to have done wrong, or who you were supposed to have done it to, or what their revenge was going to be.

I opened the bathroom cabinet to see if I had any Alka-Seltzer but the carton was empty. I remembered that I had used them up after my last evening at John Martin’s, talking about horse-racing with my new friend Gus and drinking to his latest winner, and then to the winner before that, and then to his losers, and so on.

I stared at myself in the mirror for a long time. There are times when you can look at yourself and wish that you were someone else, and that your life was completely different. Why are we stuck in the same body, all of our lives, from maternity ward to funeral home? I would never know what it was like to be football star, or an African-American, or a woman.

I went through to the kitchenette to see if I had any bottled water left in the fridge but there was nothing to drink except three bottles of Coors. Beer would have to do. I was so dehydrated that I felt that I felt as if I had been eating tablespoonfuls of dry sand all evening.

The cards were still waiting for me on the coffee-table. I could see them through the half-open kitchenette door, in their pink-and-red box, emblazoned with a picture of an old French biddy in a bonnet and spectacles. I pried the top off a bottle of beer and took three long swigs before I went through to the living-room and confronted them.

“OK cards,” I told them. “Trying to put the frighteners on me, are you?” I let out an extended two-tone burp, and then I added, “You’re not dealing with any kind of greenhorn here, so be warned!”.

I sat down on the worn-out saddle-leather couch and stared intently at the box of cards, willing each individual card to return to its original form before I opened it up. From the direction of Marcos’ house, I could hear *huapanguera* guitars and clapping, and occasional bursts of laughter.

“OK cards,” I cautioned them.. I was beginning to sound like James Cagney. “I am going to open you up now and spread you all out on the table, and you are all going to be normal. None of this *Riot* and *Scourge* and *Catastrophe* crap. You got me?”

I picked up the box, shook out the deck of cards and began to arrange them on the coffee-table in rows of seven. I used this layout for any of my clients who wanted a more detailed answer to whatever their immediate problems happened to be, rather than a long-distance prediction. It showed *specifics*, rather than themes. I was hoping that it would give me an idea of why the hell I was being threatened, and where the threat was coming from.

The first three cards were fine. *Homme de Loi*, the Lawyer. *Maison de Campagne*, A House in the Country. *Perte d'Argent*, Loss of Money. These were all cards that I had turned up for my clients time and time again.

The fourth card, however, was totally unfamiliar. A pale plump woman was running naked down the aisle of some kind of cathedral, wearing a crown of thorns around her head. Her body was criss-crossed with scarlet stripes, as if she had been whipped across her breasts and her stomach and her thighs. Behind her, there was a tall stained-glass window, but there was nothing religious about it. Dark purple glass had been used to form the image of a devil, with horns and dragon-like wings and slanted red eyes.

Immediately below the stained-glass window there was an altar, and in front of the altar stood the gray-bearded man, with a Bible in one hand and a stick in the other – a stick which had hanks of hair hanging from it. In this picture the man was wearing a gray priest's biretta on his head and a surplice, although this too was gray.

The card was titled *L'Hystérie*. I hazarded a guess that this meant *Hysteria*.

Suddenly I didn't feel so woozy any more. I picked up the card and examined it closely. It appeared to match the normal cards in every way, apart from its subject-matter. It was printed in the same faded colors -- reds and yellows and blues -- and it was just as worn from years of repeated handling.. Yet I had never seen it before and I had no idea how to interpret it. *Hysteria*? Jesus. I think I'd be hysterical if I had to run naked down the aisle of a church, covered in blood.

I cautiously laid down another card. This, again, was a regular card from the Parlor Sibyl deck -- *Divertissements*, which had a picture of a young woman in a bonnet dancing with a harlequin and drinking champagne. But the card after that was *Des Ravages*, showing a small weeping child sitting on top of a huge pile of decaying bodies, which were either naked or dressed in tatters. The bodies had attracted scores of carrion crows, which were pecking out their eyes and tearing at their intestines.

In the far distance rose a high, snow-capped mountain, and for some reason it seemed familiar, although I couldn't immediately think why.

I went through the whole deck, laying down the cards faster and faster until I had set out all fifty-two of them – seven rows of seven and one row of three. About two-thirds of them were unchanged from the original Parlor Sibyl, but the rest showed scenes of slaughter and plague and suicide and some of them depicted the grisliest tortures you could ever imagine. A small boy was screaming as three moustachioed chefs were pushing him feet-first into a meat-grinder, while his mother pleaded with them to stop. A naked man had been impaled up

his ass with a thick thorny branch while two laughing girls were cramming his mouth with handfuls of turkey feathers. This card was simply called *Silence*. One of the weirdest cards showed a man in a long bloodstained apron sawing a boy's head in half, right the way down the center of his face, and yet the boy was still sitting up straight in a kitchen chair and smiling inanely, rather like Alfred E. Neuman on the cover of *Mad* magazine. The title of the card was *Les Deux Visages*.

Once I had laid all of the cards out, I sat back and stared at them. How the hell could this have happened? Maybe somebody I knew was playing a really obscure practical joke on me, and had sneaked into the cottage when I was out and changed some of my cards. But I didn't really know too many people in Miami, and I couldn't think of anybody who would want to creep me out that much – let alone anybody who had the imagination to think of it, or the energy to carry it out. Apart from that, these new cards would have been very expensive to design and print.

Somehow the cards must have changed spontaneously, all by themselves. Maybe some of the original cards had been printed with an ink that disappeared at a certain level of humidity, revealing a different picture underneath. But if that were true, how come fewer than twenty cards had been altered, and how come it had never happened before? I had owned this deck for at least six years and the humidity in New York City in the summer easily beat that of Miami Beach.

I was still sitting there taking occasional swigs from my beer-bottle and trying to figure out where all these grisly cards had come from when I heard a soft rattling noise coming from my bedroom. It sounded like the blind being drawn down. I sat up straight and listened, but all I could hear was Marcos and his friends playing their guitars and *zapateado* dancing, which meant that they repeatedly banged their heels on the floor.

I waited a few seconds longer. Nothing. But I had just started to pick up my cards again, one by one, when I heard another noise, a creak, as if somebody had stepped on a loose floorboard.

I put down the cards and walked across the living-room to the bedroom door, which was about three or four inches ajar. Inside, it was almost completely dark, and this suggested that the blind had been closed, even though I hadn't done it myself. I usually pulled it down just before I went to bed, to block out the streetlights from Triangle Park. The streetlights weren't particularly bright, but they shone through the leaves of the yuccas in the park and when the breeze blew in from the ocean they cast strange flickering shadows on the bedroom ceiling, like witches and dancing monkeys. They didn't worry me too much, too tell you the truth,

but whenever Sandy stayed over she said that they scared her, like having a nightmare about *The Wizard of Oz* when she was a kid.

I thought I heard a rustling sound, so I pushed the door open a few inches further and said, “Hey! Is there anybody there?”

I had been advised by a detective from the Miami/Dade police not to warn an intruder that I was carrying a gun, even if I was. The first thing that an intruder will do if he thinks you’re armed is to shoot you first. Think about it -- if you were an intruder, wouldn’t you?

I waited. No response. I pushed the door a little more and said, “If there’s anybody in there, you’d better come out right now. If you haven’t taken anything, or done any damage, then we can just call it quits. OK?”

Still no answer. I strained my ears and thought I heard another rustle, but Marcos and his friends were making too much noise for me to be sure..

I guess the most sensible course of action would have been to shut the door and lock it and call the cops, but for starters the key was on the inside. Not only that, any intruder would have had to climb in through the window, so they could just as easily escape the same way. On top of everything, I was feeling tired and ratty and semi-hammered and the cards had shaken me badly, and I didn’t have the patience to be sensible.

I didn’t give any warning. I kicked the door wide open and reached inside for the light switch. The light went on, but almost instantly the bulb popped, and the bedroom was plunged into darkness again.

In that split-second, though, I had glimpsed who or *what* it was standing in my room. It looked like a nun, in a black habit, but her face was completely covered, or else she was standing with her back to me.

I stayed where I was, in the doorway, feeling as if my skin was shrinking. The nun didn’t move, or speak. She was standing right in the center of the bedroom, but it was so dark in there that I could only just make out her silhouette against the blind.

“Come on -- who are you?” I said, trying to sound authoritative. In reality, I probably sounded as if I had three Johnny Walkers too many. “What the hell are you doing in my house?”

The nun remained perfectly still, and said nothing.

“Do you *want* something?” I asked her. “Is it money you’re after? What?”

No reply. My heart was beating hard, and I still felt unnerved, but I was beginning to think to myself: *whatever she’s doing here, she’s only a nun, or somebody who’s dressed*

like a nun. She's about six inches shorter than I am and if she really is a nun then it's very unlikely that she's carrying a concealed weapon.

"OK," I said. "I'm going to go over to the side of the bed and I'm going to switch on the bedside lamp. I'm not going to harm you. I'm not going to call the cops. I just want to find out who you are and what you want. You understand me? *Calmate, OK?*"

Gingerly, I stepped into the bedroom and edged sideways toward the bed. I kept my eyes on the nun the whole time, in case she decided suddenly to rush out of the door, or attack me, but she stayed where she was.

I reached the nightstand beside the bed, groped for the lamp and knocked it over onto the bed. "It's OK," I said. "That's just me being clumsy. Everything's cool."

I picked the lamp up, found the switch-toggle and pulled it. The bedroom was all lit up now, but the nun had vanished.

Immediately, I went to the door, thinking that she must have run out of the bedroom when I was picking up the lamp. But there was no sign of her in the living-room, or the bathroom, or the kitchenette, and the front door was shut, with the safety-chain still hooked up.

I went back into the bedroom and lifted up the blind. The main window was shut, and only the narrow fanlight was open, so she couldn't have escaped that way. Besides, she too would have had to lift up the blind, if she had wanted to climb out of the window. That would have let in the streetlight, and I would have seen her. My attention had only been distracted for milliseconds.

I went back into the living-room. I opened up the large pine closet where I hung my clothes, but there was no nun crouching inside it, amongst my shoes. I checked the shower-stall in the bathroom, and stuck my head around the toilet door. Not a sign of her.

I unlocked the front door, went outside and shone my flashlight around the garden. The air was warm and fragrant and Marcos' guests were beginning to say *buenas noches*, laughing and shouting and slamming car doors. But there was no nun, anywhere.

Looking up, I saw the moon above me, hanging unsupported in the light-polluted sky, like it knew something but wasn't going to tell me. I stared up at it for a while, and then I went back into the cottage and closed the door, and locked it, although I didn't know how that was going to keep out a nun who could apparently walk through solid walls.

I finished picking up the cards and sliding them back in their box. Earlier on today, I had felt like burning them or throwing them into the bay or finding some other way of disposing of them. Now, however, I put them away in one of the drawers underneath my closet, and locked it. However much they disturbed me, maybe the cards were the key to what was

going on. Because *something* was going on, and that was for sure. I'm not a genuine psychic, but I could feel it in the air.

I went back into the bedroom, and sniffed, and I could *smell* it, too. A flat stale cinnamon aroma.. I thought to myself: *if nuns could really vanish into thin air, and leave a smell behind them, that is exactly what that smell would smell like.*

Excerpted from PLAGUE OF THE MANITOU

To be published by Severn House Publishers

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