

Petty Cash

*“The fiend in his own shape is less hideous, than when he rages in the breast of man” –
Nathaniel Hawthorne*

I steal stuff for a living. In my defense, these scores are second and third homes up and down Colorado’s front range: Aspen, Breckenridge, Vail. For a while the money was good, but now I’m cursed. It was *Ouija* Board that finally did it. Ebony, inlaid with silver, and a brass planchette inset with a crystal lens through which to view carved gothic script. The spherical feet of the planchette were part of the same piece of solid brass, making it heavy. I can feel the triangular weight of that looking glass now, in my pocket as I make my way to a final job. It wouldn’t do to leave the planchette and the board together at home. Someone else might die.

When I first placed the planchette on the board, in my hideout after the robbery, I noticed the lens wasn’t transparent glass or acrylic, like I had seen on other mass-marketed talking boards. Rather, it was bulbous crystal that somehow *projected* the board characters, which were themselves varnished to the point of reflectivity and caught the faintest light, throwing deep color back through the crystal and across the walls of the living room where I had the board set up atop the coffee table. Otherworld geometries. Shards of pink and purple stabbed at the ceiling in the morning; the deepest blood-red droplets stained the floor at evening time. But between dawn and dusk I could rarely make out the board through the glass, and I couldn’t I read it at all after dark. The lens seemed to cloud over then, and even high-watt fluorescent ceiling light merely played against the cloudy blackness of the glass.

It was dusk that first time, in the suburbs north of Denver. The guys in the front room were playing a game of pool and Molly was sitting across from me on a beat-up couch, feet up, reading something spooky, smoking something skunky. Colorado dreamin'. She was perusing Crowley, or perhaps some Wiccan field manual. The board held my attention. Touching it was transfixing, as was the heft of the planchette. It didn't occur to me to try to use it though.

"What'd you get?", she asked in a bored tone, a common enough but still humbling question after the rush of B&E. Most of the time I was excited to share. Molly was the only one who knew about the burglaries or my real name. My fences, where most of my goods ended up, knew me as *Petty Cash*, a self-proclaimed alias cobbled together from two of my favorite rock'n'rollers, although they probably took it as my earning potential, since I never took down big scores. It was all quick turnaround stuff: Jewelry was best. Diamonds. Cash, but no one kept it anymore. Some antiques, if they were small enough that I could hike with them in my pack. Basically, stuff I could carry on the trail. Hiking into and out of the most rural locations was my niche as a crook, and it wouldn't do to have a stained wood chair leg or sticking out of a day pack, or to have an antique tea kettle strapped on. Cutlery moved. Hell, anything that could be melted down would fetch a price. That didn't include rare books, unfortunately. Molly would have been my biggest client if she had to pay for them. She didn't.

"Ouija board...", I muttered without looking up, too entranced just then to say more. The book was down at her side. She was staring at the board too.

"Never seen one like that before," she whispered, closing the volume, sans bookmark, and moving closer. She took the seat next to me on a cracked leather couch, leaving the upholstery springs in an antique chair squeaking. Someone broke what sounded a 9-ball rack in

the back room. The guys were getting rowdy. I would have to cut them loose soon. This wasn't the city, where you could make noise all night. They didn't know exactly what I did for a living, just that I was living underground, and the neighbors knew nothing, but they could be questioned. In a big building downtown, questioning has a way of resulting in answers. Couldn't risk a warrant when Joe Schmo next door gets a piece pulled on him and corroborates.

"Me neither," I answered Molly and turned the board to face her.

The traditional Latin was there on the board, forming an alphabet in gothic script that arched across the center of the polished face. "Yes" and "No" responses were at the bottom left and right corners. Standard Arabic numerals adorned the top third of the board. Otherwise, there was very little ornamentation, nor was there variation in the symbology from the *Hasbro* standby we all recognize from childhood sleep over parties and scary movies. Sun, moon, stars, and what looked like the surface of the earth functioning as a ground plane. Engravings filled the space between the primary board characters. But instead of "Goodbye", or "Farewell" – which I would soon learn signaled the end of any Ouija session – was a single word: "Run". I didn't like the sound of that. It made me nervous. Molly seemed thrilled by a board that might tell its users to abandon it. Great marketing gimmick, she told me.

"Let's play", Molly insisted, reaching for the planchette with abandon. I looked towards the hallway, where the boys were carrying on, deep in their cups. While half my front brain thought up the excuse necessary to step away and clear them out, the other half wanted to bury the board. She put her hand on my chin, guiding my head and my gaze back down towards the board between us. Then, two fingers from each hand were on the planchette, ready. We played. Soon, the planchette began to move. Many have known the feeling. I thought it was

Molly. She thought it was me. The first stage of a Ouija session, unsurprisingly, is skepticism. Surely one among us is moving the planchette? That's how they trick you into keep playing.

This person – this entity – called itself *Samuel*. Samuel was lost, or so it (he?) claimed, in individual characters words that formed words and sentences in turn. It took forever, and, if one of us was faking it, it would have required great patience. After I resigned myself to existence of this entity, I began to wonder why the planchette couldn't just move on its own, without us having to keep our hands on it, which would have made for faster conversation. Or perhaps Samuel could have simply sent an email by flipping bits in a server farm in North Carolina. We were speaking the questions out loud, after all. Anyways, we got a message from the other side or who the fuck knows where and this is what it said:

“Don't run. Don't ever run. That's what the board wants. It's the board that traps me. The man who crafted it was a psychopath. I'm trapped here. Don't you understand?”

We didn't. Then and occasionally afterwards, Samuel would call for us to answer. I don't think him – it – wanted to burden us by requiring responses, so these calls to action were relatively rare and seemingly rhetorical. But until we at least *acknowledged* the question that was put to Molly and I, with eye contact between the human players, the planchette would stop moving during these interludes, Molly would look at me and we would each wait for the other to reveal their hand in the deception at play. Then, inevitably, Samuel would move the planchette again, but without anyone touching it.

“Don't go to the Adams House”, was the next thing of substance that the spirit board told us. I was due there the next night. It turns out the Adams – nee *Moroni* - were connected.

One of my newer fences, a ragged motherfucker who went by *Chains* on the street - and who preferred the profit margins on gun running to the slow-drip returns of rare book trading - had sold me out. I glanced towards the main room. There were street guys in there, in my house right now. Fuck it. Can't think that way. I rarely dealt with the cops, but the criminal underground had its own phone system. If a target like Adams had mob ties, guys would phone it in. Trade the small fish for a big favor. I didn't know this in advance, of course, and my fence wouldn't have to let me know afterwards since I'd be conveniently dead. Petty Cash indeed. Behind my back they also called me "Small Time", another tidbit from the guys playing pool.

I get it. They could afford to cut me loose for all the bullshit collectibles that I would bring in. I doubt it was worth the trouble for them. These hoods were tired of trading in Pokémon cards, however rare, and second-hand Nikes, and heaven forbid, first editions of Poe or Rudyard Kipling. The fence and the Adams tried to set me up, but Samuel, the thing speaking to us from within the Ouija board, had come to my rescue with good information.

I had no day job, so the being in the board saved my livelihood as well as my ass. Ever since my business partners back East decided behind my back to dilute shares and transfer the patent on some fintech, I had vowed to avoid straight work and "the markets" forever. In America, the only respectable alternative is stealing. *Burglary*, never robbery. I didn't like to face my victims, and - given my athletic background and experience in the backcountry - I never had to. No guns. I would run (and have run; from silent alarms and guard dogs and warning shots) rather than fight. One option brought you home and the other made you dead.

As per my street name, I really was small time. At least to start. Lawn mowers. High-end strollers. Bicycles. Nice neighborhoods. Amazon packages left out for a week during ski trips. Park a clean, late model pickup on the next block and resell out of town. Pawn shops across the tracks didn't bat an eye at stuff that came from the yard. Easy come, easy go. But those were starvation wages, and the first year of my "retirement" I live primarily on fresh bread that was delivered to the back door of a cafe near the park where I camped.

I calculated that the bread would sit for an average of 16 minutes between the baker's drop-off and the arrival of the coffee shop's first shift. Plenty of time, if you had the skills to doctor the printed receipt that was left taped to the pallet. 8.5x11. Times New Roman. Default settings across the board, and nothing simpler to imitate, especially when the mark supplies the power and the WiFi. A baker's dozen became 12 loaves of fresh bread, and the customers were still getting fed and I was alive. Bread and water for the first year. Easier to source than honey and grasshoppers or fruit and nuts, I guess, but I'm not a bible character. I considered panhandling, or playing guitar, but – as a man once said - *begging is slow*.

But while dragging Trager grills from the back of a million-dollar houses I would occasionally catch a glimpse of a family bathed in blue light. On the walls of these homes were oil paintings, portraiture watching Netflix right along with the family. They would dig into their TV dinners with Arthur Price cutlery. Before them an 8k TV; below them Egyptian carpet. The good stuff was *inside* the houses, I soon realized, and I began to adjust my plans accordingly.

But the suburbs were tricky. People lived there. And when they were out, or asleep, their neighbors could see the beam of a flashlight and call it in. Not because they cared, but because they were bored, and it was more interesting than whatever was on TV. So, I got

serious about hiking. It had always been a hobby. Long walks. Fresh air. Everything good. Tall trees and exposed rock were always more interesting to me than manicured lawns and strollers. A year before I found the Samuel board, I started targeting rural vacation properties.

The easy part was the uniform. Self-proclaimed 'woodsmen' with unkempt facial hair and rock crawlers were spending two and three hundred bucks a pop at REI so that their pure breeds German shepherds could wear tactical sweater vests and carry CLIFF bars for their girlfriends in the dog park. Guys with rifles mounted on the glass behind the cab, those guys wore Walmart jeans and flannel, bought on sale, but they didn't get within 50 miles of Denver if they could help it, which was my territory. No, clingy NASA material was the norm on the trails outside town, not denim, which makes sense given the local dating scene begins and ends at the trail head. You had to have money to belong in the backcountry that close to town.

So, I saved up, bought a blue Patagonia shell and a nice pair of polarized sunglasses (really a better fit for SoCal, but worn unironically on the lower slopes of the Rockies). It was all pure flash, but I fit in immediately. Nowadays, I could pull my new Pendleton headscarf up to where the glasses ended, if I wanted to get past the odd park ranger stationed near the trailheads, not to mention the homeowners – my marks. But was pre-COVID, so no masks. But the home security systems were mostly bespoke and often out of service, if they were plugged in at all. There was basically no property crime at those altitudes, since these weren't targets.

My victims rarely made the news. Weed money would be the official explanation 90% of the time. Weed or not, everyone with vacation homes got their money the old-fashioned way: *mammon*. Easy come, easy go, police reports and nothing to show. And I wasn't so greedy anymore, just desperate. Samuel could tell, so he didn't stop when it came time to take my next

score, a 12 bedroom above the Flatirons, West of Boulder. They had a long driveway.

Meandering. I wouldn't be seen walking up, except on camera, which I had come to expect.

Doesn't matter though – I was coming through the woods.

This is where the REI membership doesn't help you: The actual hiking. When I got within a mile of my score, I would have to bushwhack. That's when you cut through the trees. In the off season, the brush between the trees wasn't just uncut grass. It was boggy muck; poison ivy; and thorns, head high. Think of it like a maze. A natural maze in the forest. Like in a hedge maze, if you run into a dead end, you backtrack. But what if you run into a dead end after an alarm had been tripped and your pack was full of stolen jewelry? You can see the problem.

It was November when I began conversing with Samuel and when the Boulder score came in. November is a transitional month. Cold, in the mountains, but not yet snowbound down slope. The holidays were beginning, and homeowners were traveling. Sometimes these second homes were the site of family gatherings. I had good info that the Carltons, my latest targets, would be spending Thanksgiving on the Gulf, in Biloxi. I was going in.

Instead of a neon tracksuit, I opted for high-end hunting gear, another trusty disguise. This was the next most common outfit outside of town after *yuppie*, since you didn't have to carry a gun. "Make My Day" laws in Colorado means that home invasion with a deadly weapon is a long sentence with a hole in your center mass though, and that wasn't my way regardless. So, if stopped, my story would be something like "looking for sign, I'm not armed".

Samuel advised me as to the location of loot. That is, what to take, and from where in the house. Things got weird. I was instructed to avoid the upstairs bedroom, the most obvious

spot for gold and jewelry and other sorts of handheld heirlooms that could be pawned. Instead, in painstaking, letter-by-letter instructions the night before, I was told to make for the basement. The unfinished basement. I would have been surprised if anyone but the maid or their personal chef had been in there since the place was built or purchased. No, where I was being led by Samuel wasn't anywhere the Carltons would have known about themselves. To a forgotten corner of the basement, draped in cobweb, is where the board led me.

There, amidst asbestic dust in near perfect darkness lay a peculiar piece of stone, completely unrecognizable except for its plum size. Polished, it would gleam black. Onyx. It would also give Samuel special powers; powers that would benefit us both. At least that's what it – what *he* – told me. I couldn't sell the tiny stone from the vacation house on the side of the mountain. Who dealt in uncut onyx this side of Tucson? But I could sell whatever Samuel helped me to steal next, at least that was the idea. Quid pro quo with a spirit board.

There was only one thing standing between me and untold riches: Samuel said that the unusual stone I had taken from the Carltons' basement had to be "activated"; turned on and infused with the board itself. There was a place for it: An irregular crevasse near the moon symbol the onyx might fit. But the means to set it were unclear. Samuel danced around the subject. "Vitality", he would spell out during a session, seemingly in earnest, which was no adhesive brand I had encountered at the hardware store. Or, "lifeblood", Samuel might say, during another session. I began to suspect that there were more than material qualities at play. There was a method, a very specific method, by which one might set such a stone in his board. The board was his by then, as was my life. In early December, I decided to cut myself.

It's nothing I'd ever done before or thought of doing – this self-harm. It would've been an easy rationalization in my startup days. I could have cut myself a little bit, to dull the psychological pain of cutthroat capitalism when the speed wore off. To regain control. Bloodletting for the bridge-and-tunnel crowd. I wanted to scream. Molly hadn't been at a session in ages. In fact, she hadn't been over at all. It was just Samuel and I conversing, in the backroom at odd daylight hours, when dust-choked light was visible at acute angles. Then pool at night with the boys if I wasn't on a job. Surely any planchette movement now was the subconscious motor control of my own psyche. I was punishing myself for what had happened back East. That had to be it.

But I had found the strange onyx stone that the board had told me to find, in the house on the mountainside. That had to count for something. That had to be worth a little blood, if only to confirm my sanity, or lack thereof.

I used a single blade shaving razor, off-brand, left over from a trip to Utah, which I had purchased out of desperation because they had no double or triple blade disposable razors in the small gas station that was still open at 10 pm when I visited there. It was a brutal shave then, even with cream. Now, against the back of my forearm though, I wasn't aware of the pain. Only the depth of the cut was shocking. Muscle. Maybe bone. I knew it had to be deep enough for a steady flow. To bind the stone to the board. Sam agreed. *Cut deep*, it spelled, before the act. I did. The blood flowed onto the board. I sat waiting, arm bleeding, for my next instruction. Blood dried on the board. Atop the blood I placed the polished stone, just beneath the moon symbol. There it stuck.

Molly had come by to pick up a few books. I noticed that the bookshelf she had claimed in the back room was increasingly spare. I think knew something was going on. Maybe she

thought it was work related. I had told her about Chains and being set up on the Moroni job. She was concerned but had her own life. Molly was a student, formally and informally, and it wouldn't do to fall too hard for a mid-level thief. So, even though we never discussed it, she was gradually cutting ties. Molly rarely slept over anymore, but I didn't mind. More time to speak with Samuel in the late afternoons, when the sun was low, and the spirit was most active.

It's much harder to draw blood from someone you love than from yourself. Samuel warned me about that. He said I had to be quick. There were no broken bottles or cactus patches nearby, and the landlord had salted the front walk, so there wasn't any ice to slip on and fall. I had to resort to another blade. This time it was dull. Purposefully so. And flimsy. I asked Molly to cut the beets for dinner, telling her I couldn't boil them first to soften. The beet juice would help to cover any blood that might be spilled, I thought. God help me. On the final beet, the board's planchette leapt from the tabletop near where Molly was cutting, impatient. It hit the floor with such a thud that she slipped and cut deep. Deep enough.

I hurried to help, shuffled her to the bathroom, before retreating to the kitchen, seemingly to grab a towel. There was enough that the natural slope of the 50-year-old rental house had pooled her blood at one corner of the cutting board. I poured it into a small measuring cup and placed it on a high shelf, then went back to help Molly bandage the wound.

There was no stone or any other obvious place for another stone on the board, but the wood of the surface of the board seemed thirsty, so I dabbed the surface with Molly's blood. At the deepest point of every character engraving, it pooled. When I woke the next morning, the blood was gone.

"Your blood is sweet."

“Let us work together and we can rule the world.”

I didn't like the sound of it. But Samuel was calling for more blood. I felt bled out, stumbling nearly lifeless from my bed in the morning, even though Molly and I had donated but a fraction of a cup combined. It was something else that was me. I knew it. While the spirit Samuel gained strength, we were weakening.

We had Chains over for pool under the pretense that it was Molly's house. He knew her and couple of the other guys I hung out with. Chains came with a grand in his pocket but not a cue. I hooked him up. It had been hollowed out and fit with a rifled barrel. Pretty simple to rig up a contact firing pin inside a pool cue. His technique made him a target. This was the critical intel I got from Samuel; the way Chains would handle the cue. He had an unorthodox style - something you would notice but forget to mention - he shot with the pool cue directly in front of him. Center mass. The rest of the setup was YouTube videos and gun shows.

I managed to stay out of sight, though I fantasized about walking out just as he was about to take a hard shot. It would have been difficult to time such a thing without surprising the victim, and I didn't want him to miss his shot. So, I listened instead.

“You can break, Chains”, said Molly's cousin, Sinclair. Chains used to beat on Sinclair's younger brother in middle school, but I don't think Chains remembered. Sinclair remembered. He knew about the loaded cue. It wasn't hard to get Chains to pick the cue either. He came late, and all the other cues were accounted for. Held tightly, in fact, but a half dozen guys seated on stools against the walls of my living room. I was in the bedroom, lights out.

“Nah, I’m gonna burn this first,” Chains responded to Sinclair. Chains’ answer was disappointing, but the nonchalance of his tone suggested he had no idea what was in store for him. Just another bullshit game in the suburbs.

“Alright man,” said Sinclair, feigning indifference.

The game began without a gun in play. Sinclair broke hard. The other guys drifted in and out of the kitchen, grabbing beers from the fridge or a smoke out back. I forbade them from smoking in front of the house for fear of spooking the stroller people that made up the neighborhood. Peeking through the bedroom blinds, I could see a couple of them out there now with Chains. They were looking West at dots on the mountain. Diamonds waiting to be plucked. First things first though. I needed more blood for my tip line. Chains went back in after what was left of his blunt to Molly. She didn’t flinch, and, watching her through the blinds, I regretted having caused her even an iota of pain.

“You ready to break?”, Sinclair asked again, having just won the previous game. Only Sinclair and Molly knew what was going to happen. I hoped there wouldn’t be anyone else standing behind him. It was a .45 round, after all. Couldn’t risk a derringer bullet on a big dude like that. Again, Chains demurred.

“Nah man. Why you want me to break so bad?”, he was chuckling but his eyes were alarmingly clear, given he had just taken a blunt to the head. Did he suspect something? Sinclair had his hands raised in that two handed gesture, shoulders back. *Chill out bro*. Chains bought it.

“Alright I’ll break your balls, Sinclair. Just like a broke your brother’s”. I almost stormed out of the bedroom right then. Not because I was mad at Chains for mentioning Sinclair’s baby bro. This guy was a born bully so no surprises there. No, I wanted to *restrain* Sinclair; to shut his

mouth before he gave up the ruse. The room fell silent, but I heard Chains moving into position. There was a sort of grunt, as he put some force behind his shot, then an explosion.

I made everyone hang out for an hour to be sure an neighbors' fears weren't exacerbated by people fleeing the scene. When the guys finally settled down and headed home, I searched for pieces of the gun cue, to hide the evidence. Nothing. No cops. Also, no gun. It's a miracle Chains was even hit, the way that cue exploded. I doubt the bullet killed him. Probably it was the rifle chamber that went through his chest and into the kitchen through the dining room wall. Either way, there was plenty of blood. More than Molly and I had sacrificed.

I sponged it up after the guys left with parts of the body. Molly was still there. She was watching me closely, as a squeezed the blood into a cereal bowl. I think she realized then about the episode with the beets. I put the bowl of blood in the fridge, out of sight afraid of what she might think or say if I fed the demon with her present. She didn't say anything, and she stayed until midnight, late for her in the time since Samuel had arrived, but she didn't stay over. Again, I think she knew. We barely spoke. I took her silence to be anger. For me, it was the board. It seemed to know what had happened in the house, even without me telling it. Telling him.

I fed the spirit Samual some of Chains' blood after Molly finally left. There a lot was more to work with this time, and I had trouble keeping it on the board, but the sides of the wood seemed just as thirsty as the top surface with the characters. By morning, a pint or more of blood was gone from this Earth. If nothing else, this Ouija board was great for hiding evidence. But I had no intention of getting into *wetwork*.

By that point, I was all about survival. Rarely was I leaving the house. Perhaps I wasn't allowed to. Undoubtedly, I was in the demon's grip. It was only the library that succeeded in

drawing me out. Notifications on my phone would periodically warn of late charges, and I would return the latest thriller from the “sizzler” section, before and after Samuel appeared in my life. There, shortly after the blood-letting incident with Molly, I wandered into the non-fiction section.

Oversized *folios* were my favorite when I wasn't browsing genre fiction, and a text titled *Japanese Folklore* caught my attention. In the bottom corner of an overfull book stack, where one had to bend down and then tug heartily to retrieve it, sat a volume of illustrations. Suushi's *Illustrated Volume of a Hundred Demons* described a catfish-headed monster –known from ancient times. This creature, *Nurarihyon*, appeared as an elderly man who favored luxuries he pilfered from rich merchant's homes. Rich tobacco, sake, and the like. These faerie tales alone wouldn't alone satiate Samuel's bloodlust, but perhaps there was a solution buried in the pages. An adversary, and one with the sorts of expensive tastes that I could relate with.

Samuel gave me another tip when I got home from the library, a reward for fresh blood. There was a rich family, up on the mountain. Same old story. The name rang a bell this time though: *Burbank*. I had seen an item in the Denver post about the Burbanks and their various philanthropic efforts in the museums and universities around the city. Profits from defense contracts can make you generous. In any case, the Burbanks were hosting a big party the following evening, and all the local brahmin would be there.

This was just the sort of party that Nurarihyon might find interesting. So, instead of following Samuel's advice, and approaching the property in the morning, when all the partygoers would be good and drunk, I decided on midnight, hoping to meet a *yokai* face-to-

face. I had a plan to get rid of that cursed demon board once and for all. To rid myself of the blood offerings that had so captured my life and those few around me.

It was dark that night, in the woods outside the Burbank's home, and I may have chosen an unadvisable route. I proceeded through a boggy marsh, up a stony embankment, across a field of thorns, all before I reached the Burbank property. By then, the cold had seeped into my very soul, or what was left of it. Lights were still on, of course. The party was still a party.

I entered through the front door, unafraid of being questioned. By that time – 12:21 – no one would question an unrecognized guest. The responsible hosts were passed out and only degenerates remained. I wandered the 10,000-foot home with a childlike curiosity. Rarely were my targets lit, and décor that appeared grotesque and farcial by flashlight appeared warm and inviting under vintage incandescent bulbs. The man I was looking for was in the kitchen.

My hunch was correct. There was an uninvited guest at the Burbanks' party. Nurarihyon was seated at the bar in the kitchen, facing the fridge. He appeared as I thought of him, as an old man dressed in black. Deep wrinkles framed a perpetual grin. His brows were furrowed, but in mirth. Seated comfortably, caviar and champagne lay before him, behind him extended his bulbous head. As the legends described, his head flattered towards the back, into a sort of duck tail. His eyes were glistening. I brought the spirit board from my backpack before approaching the bar where he sat, placing it before him. For a moment, and only a moment, he broke his gaze with the refrigerator and looked down at the board. Then he glanced at me, still smiling. He pointed at the board: "Run", is where is finger finally rested.

We never spoke a word aloud, Nurarihyon and I, but we agreed. Samuel would stay with him. They would be together, perhaps for all eternity, exchanging blood for the trappings of

wealth that so accumulated in the mansions that dotted the mountainside like starlight. I made my way home first down the driveway and then alongside the public road, like a hitchhiker, for I had nothing to hide. There was nothing else in my backpack and my dinner suit was underneath my Patagonia. Weightless, physically and spiritually, I thought only briefly of those two demons.

Sometimes now I feel despondent. And sometimes I despair. But I never feel like I did when I had the board or when the board had me. Lost. As if in a dark and silent wood. In deepest winter, with an unholy cold seeping into my bones. I hope never to feel that way again.

