



# The Sweetest Fruit

by Shawn Feakins

*August 7, 1920. Seville, Spain, and No Man's Land.*

Do you know what grenadine is? It's syrup. It is a sickly sweet, red syrup that some use to flavor their drinks. No one drinks grenadine by itself. It is only used to sweeten and cover the bite of alcohol that the living drink to deaden them to the world. To make themselves a bit more like me. Fuzzy. Indistinct.

Calliope once told me the word "grenadine" came from the French *grenade*, because *grenade* means pomegranate in French, and grenadine is simply thickened pomegranate juice and sugar. Isn't that funny? Here's a fruit, originally grown in the rarified suns of Iran: The Magical Middle East. It is found as far north as the Himalayas in India, where enlightened gurus dab their chins free of red, sticky nectar while reaching higher states of consciousness. Pomegranates are the color of divine peace, the color of sunsets over oceans.

Inside the fruit are red juicy pearls that have to be forcibly dug, not only out of its beautiful peel, but also out of the layers of bitter white curtains inside. One has to fight

in order to excavate those sumptuous seeds. As one does so, the hands become sticky with burst jewels and shreds of membrane. If one fails to be patient and eats a pomegranate incorrectly, half the seeds inside are broken and ruined and the few seeds left unmolested float in the bloody juices of their exploded brethren. Pomegranates are one of the most difficult fruits to eat, but also one of the most rewarding.

This strange, sun colored, magical fruit is picked and shipped halfway across the world. There it is processed and turned into something saccharine and inedible. Something beautiful becomes a gratuitous additive. It becomes merely flavor, a way simply to balance a cocktail, in order to hide what one really tastes.

But grenadine isn't entirely useless. It hides bitterness by counteracting the mixture with sweetness. It becomes a reference point. In order to truly appreciate the other flavors in the drink, one needs grenadine. Sweet, bright-red, grenadine.

No one drinks grenadine by itself.

Incidentally, the English word "grenade" was born of the similarity in shape of the miniature bomb to the magical fruit, and of its deadly shrapnel pellets to the tiny, precious, live-giving seeds.

"That was rather pathetic," Follie said, as she idly scratched her cat behind one set of ears. Patripat purred in contentment and hissed jealousy in tandem.

"At least *I* am doing something to get us back on our blistered and world-wearied feet." Freedomhowler counted the meager takings from the previous afternoon's show. In response, Follie put her feet up on a bench, an impressive feat given the sheer volume of cloth that exploded from the waist of her bustle. Bernhard grimaced at the clean shoes that hadn't seen a scuff of dirt since she had been forced to join the troupe.

“Well, try harder,” Follie sighed petulantly. “You may be used to living in the rough, but now that we’re together again I think your standards need to be raised.”

*Ain’t married life grand?* Wild Bill snickered.

Bernhard Freedomhowler turned pink and breathed a lick of flame. “If you haven’t noticed, we’re down a key player in our troupe! My Panacea went down with the ship, and yours is floating over the Himalayas by now.” Bernhard shook his head. “Still, I can’t be blamed for acts of betrayal which rattle the very stern and steady foundations of our economic and entertainment basis. I have gaps to adjust for! There are entire acts missing in our advertising narrative for which I must account, mend, and transfigure!”

“Bernhard, if you’re talking about Grenadine, then I don’t know what you’re going on about. I can understand that you’re upset with her personally, after what she did to you—to *us*. But really, what did that woman ever pull in financially? You said yourself she could barely read anyone with her ‘psychic abilities!’” Follie waved her hands and made spooky faces toward the air. “Honestly, you’re missing your medium. You still have the gun show, the strong woman and Norris. We can make more Panacea. What are you missing that can’t be replaced?”

“That’s it,” a voice said from outside the cart. Bernhard and Follie looked away from their argument and down to see Norris, kneeling on all fours in the dirt and looking up to the impresarios.

“What?” Follie asked.

“We’re missing our medium,” Norris looked out into the distance. It was getting dark. “Not our small or large. Our medium. Our happy medium.”

Follie snorted and both heads of her cat growled in sympathy. “Happy? She had a face like one doomed to an eternity of give enemas to cats!”

“Uh!” Bernhard shook himself violently. “Follie!”

“Well it’s true she...Where’s he going?”

They saw Norris, now standing on two legs, walking off into the night. "Norris?" Freedomhowler said. "Norris! Come back here boy!"

I was stabbed. Stabbed in the very stomach that I nurse this ghostly child in. It was two days after the carriage had left me coughing dust in Germany. I had only the clothes on my back and an endless supply of tears. My feet were cracked from walking in shoes not made for hiking. I was in a foreign land already hostile to my country of origin.

I begged for food and work. The first day, I was chased by two slaving youths intent on doing me unpardonable harm. The second day, after having slept in a barn that dripped rainwater and goose feces, I met a man who offered me a place to stay. He told me he worked in a hotel and their maid had just left. His brother also worked in shipping and he was confident I could get back to my mother's in Hull if I wanted. I cried with appreciation and gratitude.

He took my hand and led me into an alley and told me everything would be all right. And then he stabbed me with a kitchen knife. As I lay bleeding into the dirt, he giggled as he went through my pockets. Finding nothing, he kicked me in the head until I could cry no more because I had to save the breath to spit out teeth and blood. He ran and I expired soon after. The last thing I saw was a stray dog chewing on a rat carcass. The last thought I had was a wish for revenge against the man who left me to this fate.

It's a sad story isn't it? Poignant and tragic. It ferments guilty drips of feeling in people like an allergy. People sniffle. A knot forms in your stomach and you feel bad for the poor girl and her travails, and instantly want to see harm done to the man who caused all of this to happen to her.

It's really a shame that none of it is true.

Norris took his time walking the path, because he knew he could afford to. He scratched himself and lifted his leg against a tree to urinate. He hunted a rabbit. As night fell,

he ran and howled at the stars. And when he was getting sleepy, when the boundary between dreams and reality began to shift under the weight of the hypnagogic state, he started his journey.

The entrance was simple to find. There are thousands of them, scattered everywhere across the globe. Anyone can spot them, but most don't bother looking. They're in the hollow of a tree, or the corner of an unremarkable alley. They're in the shadow of a mourning widow's parasol. They're in the cracks caused by the moss and lichen that grow on abandoned homes and cathedrals. Or, in Norris's case, he simply opened the rusted door of the abandoned truck by the side of the road. He crawled his way through the cab, past yellowed pictures and a discarded doll, and pulled the handle of the passenger side door. When he crawled out, he breathed in the air. It smelled older, more charged. Dustier, yet ironically, alive.

And it smelled like salted meats.

*"Calliope!"*

Norris bound toward his friend and former clown of the traveling Medicine Show, who stood waiting for him on the dusty plain. He wore a plain cotton shirt and pants and a stylish bowler tilted at a jaunty angle. Norris leapt into Calliope's arms and began to lick him all over. This was hardly as affectionate as it sounded. Calliope's arms were greasy marbled salamis that peeked out from his sleeves and ended in stubby sausages. His head was a butchered hog's head emerging from the collar of the shirt. When Calliope spoke, the voice came from deep inside the golem's chest and not the pig's corpse-still mouth.

"Yes, yes Norris it is good to see—hey. HEY! Down boy! No! Nooooo!"

Norris leapt down and sat in the grass, eagerly masticating a sausage finger. "Sorry," Norris mumbled through bitefulls. Calliope's (now literal) pig eyes looked at the three and one half fingers he had left on his hand.

“*Sacre*,” The hog’s head shook from side to side. “I will be a poor guide to point the way if I have no fingers, *mon frère*. Come now, we have a ways to—NORRIS!”

Norris chewed on Calliope’s shoe to free the pastrami toes trapped inside. “Sorry,” he said. “I am—but you...you smell so good!”

Calliope sighed and tore off another finger to toss to Norris, who snapped it out of the air. Norris leapt up and down as he ran around and followed the meat golem as he walked.

“*Mon Dieu*, even dead I am still eaten by beasts,” muttered Calliope as he tore a hunk of pig’s ear off to keep Norris following.

So, now you know that this is a ghost story.

Often, when ghosts enter a tale, the narrative is littered with the hauntings of wronged women. These women exact revenge on cruel lovers for throwing them from a cliff in a fit of passionate anger, or for imprisoning them in a tower out of insane jealousy. These are women whose tears keep them alive long after their stomachs have shrunk from lack of food and love. They are women whose sorrow at being betrayed stretches the moment of their death to unpardonable eternities. They are women who legitimately have a bone to pick with their suitors, just as the fish and rats pick at theirs.

But I’m different. I barely haunt at all. In fact, I go about the whole ‘haunting’ thing rather badly. Mostly, I simply follow around my old friends and behave exactly as I did before. None of my friends even notice the difference (And did that hurt? Yes, thank you). Though, this is not surprising, as none of them paid much attention to me before.

And that’s the problem isn’t it? A man didn’t notice me, or pretended not to—which amounts to the same thing. How terrible is that? No, not the fact that I wasn’t noticed, but the fact that *that* fact made a difference in the first place?

Not only is my life and death determined by the actions of a man, but now my undeath? Even for those legitimate shades, I find the fact quite distasteful. It's banal. It's embarrassing. I'm actually quite ashamed that I'm still here, that the universe saw fit to keep me around simply to exact petty revenge on a forgetful and selfish man.

Really, aren't there better things to do?

No, I'm not going to tell you how I really died. It's rude to ask.

The pair looked out across the blasted grey field. Deep gouges had been cut into the earth and all vegetation had long disintegrated. Jagged bits of metal and barbed wire canvassed the landscape and Norris whimpered as he looked at the deep zigzag trenches dug into the ground.

"I don't like this place," Norris said.

"I know my friend," Calliope said. He hopped in place and the empty pants leg flapped in the air as he did so. Norris took a therapeutic bite of his leg-salami and whimpered again. Calliope waved a fingerless hand across the field. "That is the way to go, however. And it must be crossed."

Norris thoughtfully chewed. He nodded his head and grinned at the hog's head, which whistled in response. "Once more into the breach," he smiled.

"No *mon frère*," Calliope said sadly. "I am simply here to point the way," Norris looked at Calliope and the whistle continued. Norris leapt up and looked to the sky. "I can not make the journey for you," Calliope continued as the whistle became a screech that tore the air. "That is for—"

Calliope exploded as the shell hit the ground and Norris was blown back into the trench. Hunks of pepperoni, salami, bacon, hogs knuckles, and other butcher shop staples rained down around Norris. He screamed as he slapped the smoldering hog's head out of his lap and he heard another whistle slice the silence. Norris ran through the bay of the trench and dove for the turn of the traverse as another

shell exploded behind him and showered him with dirt. He huddled in one of the protective bays as a third shell detonated nearby.

Norris's ears rang as the shelling ceased. He peeked his head out briefly and within moments he heard the high whistle of incoming artillery. Norris howled and ran down the trenches, dirt and shrapnel bursting around him. He tripped over a stray coil of barbed wire and gasped as it cut into his leg. Blood ran down his hands as he pulled the barbed wire off and he painfully stood up. He was propelled backwards into the dirt by the next explosion. The trench walls had collapsed in front of him. Hearing the next bombardment coming, Norris scrambled out of the trench and ran toward the dead zone of no man's land. He dove into a trench and hunched over as the shells exploded behind him and singed his back. He howled and cried and screamed into the air.

*"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!"*

Norris panted and cried as he looked at his bloody leg and hands. Dirt caked the wounds. He knew the nub of the salient jutting out into no man's land was perhaps one of the most unsafe places to be, so he prepared himself to run when he heard the next shell.

But nothing came. Norris blinked and looked over the edge. After a moment, he heard the clanking of a massive mortar being loaded. Norris swallowed and shouted out into the war zone.

*"You cataracts and hurricanes, spout till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!"*

The sounds of reloading ammunition stopped. Norris stood proudly in the trench. He started walking forward.

*"You sulphurous and thought-executing fires, singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder, crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once that makes ingrateful man!"*

Norris strode across the war-torn field, walking boldly up to the enemy line. There were no soldiers there, no rifles

lining the trenches ready to shoot any charging soldiers. Instead, there was only a massive three-barreled mortar, smoke leaking out of the triple barrels still hot from fire. Impossibly large, it rested on a base plate as large as three men and the bipod stretched across the landscape. Norris stared, temporarily awed into silence by the size and potential destructive power of this beast. The mortar growled menacingly and began to turn under its own volition toward him.

“Rumble thy bellyful. Spit, fire. Spout, rain...” Norris said quietly as he approached the gargantuan weapon. It stopped its search and listened to Norris as he approached. “Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters. I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness; I never gave you kingdom, called you children. You owe me no subscription.” Norris reached out and caressed one of the smoldering barrels. As he spoke, the mortar purred and rumbled deeply as the three barrels dipped low to the ground as if reclining.

“Then let fall your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,” Norris whispered.

The guns heaved and sighed with exhalations of gunpowder smoke and oily fumes. It snored and a putter of sparks came out of the barrels. Norris pet the triple-headed guard-artillery and left it sleeping as he moved on.

Do you want to know the worst thing about being a ghost? Not actually dying. Well, yes, I had to *die* to become a ghost, but honestly I don't think death counts until you drift off to an eternal end. Really, one expects a shaft of light from above or the pits of flame to open up from below, or at the very least a gentleman in a pressed suit with wings holding a watch and asking you to move along. It's not too much to ask, I think.

You're going to keep asking me about it aren't you? Fine. I actually tripped on a dog and broke my neck falling down stairs. Happy now?

Norris continued his trek across the barren landscape. Occasionally he would see the whisper of a shape or hear the flickering of a voice but it always faded before he could locate it. The wind blew dust into his face and Norris walked on. He urinated. He slept for a little bit. His stomach growled and he growled back. And then he walked some more, always in a perpetual twilight.

When he saw them, they were waiting. Three demons guarded the way.

One of them looked at Norris with sewn-shut eyes and mouth. From within its soldier's uniform, Norris could see gangrenous stitches tracking across its skin in a sick parody of the battle lines drawn on maps. The stitches seemed to breathe and pulsate against the flesh.

The other stood frozen and still but wore a white robe that fluttered from some breeze only the garment seemed to pick up. It reached toward Norris and he backed way. Norris could feel desperation and a need for warmth emanating from the robe and it terrified him.

And the last was familiar. It wore a red suit and smiled with crimson teeth. It caressed the shaved red horns of hair and held his pogo stick as if brandishing a rifle. In this realm, he looked as if his muscles were about to erupt from his suit and his teeth elongated to impossible proportions. He was the Spanish pogo-stick wielding devil of Europe. Norris growled at El Diablo.

"I am the Scarred Meaningless Sacrifice," said the first with breath that leaked from its scars and crawled across the air.

"I am He Who Is Clothed In The Last Breath Of Dying Infants," said the other in a voice that exhaled in a rumble of grief.

"And you know me as...*El Diablo*," said the last.

The first of the two demons sighed. The second shook his head. El Diablo glared at them.

"*What?*" he snarled.

“Nothing,” said the second as he waved his hand and his robe licked the air. “Just...nothing. Go on. This is your thing.”

El Diablo turned fiercely to Norris. “You are a long way from home. A long way to travel simply to be lost.”

Norris remembered his reason for coming and stepped forward. “I am not lost,” he said.

“Really?” El Diablo said. He mounted his pogo stick and hopped over with squeaks that sound like whimpering dogs. “You come to the Land of the Dead of your own volition? Do you expect to be a savior? A hero?”

Norris looked out across the barren landscape as the hopping devil squeaked, eliciting hisses of protest from his two companions. “I don’t know what I’m expecting,” Norris answered, “But it has to be done. And if I have to pass you three to do so...then I will.”

“Consider this carefully, Man Who Pretends to Be Less,” El Diablo hissed. “We are powerful here.”

“I can show you the hopelessness of sacrifice and you’ll tear your eyes out so that you can’t see the true nature of this cruel world,” the scars of the first demon leaked.

“I can cripple you with grief so that you will tear out your own throat to keep from hearing your wails,” said the robed demon.

“And I will hop around you laughing as you go mad,” El Diablo said.

“Yeah, that’s real helpful...” the robed demon muttered.

El Diablo’s squeaky hops ceased. He stood perfectly balanced on the pogo stick and looked over his shoulder to snarl at He Who Is Clothed In The Last Breath Of Dying Infants. “Do you have something to say?”

“Why? You’re not going to listen,” the demon snorted (and it sounded like mourning wails) in reply.

“Guys, come on. We have a *victim* here,” the Scarred Meaningless Sacrifice whispered out of the stitched side of his mouth. Norris raised an eyebrow. He Who Is Clothed

In *The Dying Breaths Of Infants*, however, seemed to have had enough of it.

“All I’m saying is, that you aren’t very effective as a demon with that...thing,” he motioned with a fluttering, in-substantial hand toward *El Diablo*.

*El Diablo* snorted smoke. “I’m a *trickster* demon! This works better for me than a terrifying robe.”

“Well you got the joke part right.”

“Oh no,” *The Scarred Meaningless Sacrifice* put his hand over his sewn eyes and shook his head. *El Diablo* hopped past *Norris* and pointed furiously.

“See, that’s what I’m talking about, *He Who Is Clothed In The Last Breath Of Dying Infants!* You don’t *respect* me!”

“You’re a *DEVIL* on a *POGO STICK!* Of course I don’t respect you!”

*Norris* eyes darted left and right. He started backing away slowly, unnoticed by the bickering demons.

“Well we all can’t be perfectly evil like you!” *El Diablo* shouted. “Ooo! Look at me with my pretentious poetic name of suffering!” he waved his arms in the air. “I have to work SO much harder than you! It’s not fair!”

*The Scarred Meaningless Sacrifice* tried to come between the two. “Now let’s not say anything we can’t take back—”

“Oh, here we go! Here! We! Go! We’re both demons! What do I have that you don’t?”

“Your robe.”

“What about it?”

“It’s *woven!* Out of the *dying breaths!* Of *babies!* I’ve got goofy hair!”

*Norris* had originally planned to try to get out of sight, but soon realized it wasn’t necessary. The demons had utterly forgotten him. He watched them flail at each other for a moment before shrugging his shoulders and walking on.

“No, no, you’ve got the teeth. And a great suit! Doesn’t he *Infants?*”

“Hey, you work with what you got pal!”

When I explain it sounds tragic, certainly, but as far as undeath goes it's really quite embarrassing. You can lie to the living and they will believe anything you say, as if the dead are incapable of lying. But you can't lie to the dead. You see, we have seen glimpses of the beyond already, so lies take on a garishly obvious glow that blinds us with its obviousness. It's not worth even trying, which leads to all sorts of awkwardness.

Were you hung by your wicked mother-in-law? Killed by soldiers on your wedding day? Threw yourself off the tower because your lordly father wouldn't let you marry the peasant man of your dreams?

No. No, sorry. I haunted a man because he never really paid attention to me. He left me by the side of a road and I died. And I was lonely and missed my friends.

Ooo! Did he send an assassin?

No. No, I fell down the stairs and broke my neck.

Oh goodness! Did he push you?

No.

Then how did you—?

I...I was going to get some dinner and I tripped over the landlord's dog.

Ah. Was the landlord keeping you in bonded slavery?

No of course not! He was quite pleasant.

Uh-huh. Was the dog owned by—?

No. No, sorry. It was just an accident.

I see. Well. That's...um...very...

Yes, yes. I know.

No, no! It's all very tragic! It's just that...Goodness, is that the time? I'm so sorry, I have to go. There's...well, I'll just see you later, all right? 'Bye!

Sure.

"Hello Norris," said Grenadine.

"Hello," said Norris.

From the outside, the Tower that Norris had walked to was dark, depraved, and haunted. Its black Gothic spire pierced the sky and the ragged parapets attached to the sides sliced wounds in air that was kept a sullen prisoner by this feat of unholy architecture. Crimson and glinting stained glass peered, malicious and judgmental, at the tiny half-naked man standing in front of it. Norris scanned the horizon and saw dark, winged shapes fluttering around the top of the spire, watching Norris with eerie alertness. Norris whimpered, mumbled some T.S. Eliot to steel himself, and walked in through the gaping maw of the front door.

Inside, the Tower was impossibly small—no bigger than an English sitting room. In fact, it *was* an English sitting room. A pea-green tablecloth was draped over a modest table with four simple wooden chairs crowding around it. On the table was a cream-colored tea set, pink and blue flowers crawling on its sides, and the scent of Earl Grey tea and sliced lemons permeated the room. There was a small plate of fruits and creams; strawberries and sliced oranges and even a bisected pomegranate, spilling red pearls onto the chipped china platter. A single chair with a worn cushion of dull red fabric sat in the corner, where Grenadine sat reading a book and sipping her tea. She gasped and fanned her lips as it burned her, and she noticed Norris. She slowly set the cup down. That was when they greeted each other.

They stared at each other for a while: Norris looking around uncomfortably and scratching himself; and Grenadine sighing, looking away to purse her lips, looking back apologetically and kindly, and sighing again. The silence stretched past the expected and into uncomfortable, before languidly drifting into absurd (and briefly speaking to its neighbor “annoying”).

Finally, Grenadine cleared her throat and motioned to the tea and fruit on the table. “Would you like something to eat? Strawberries? Some tea?”

“No,” Norris said and shifted uncomfortably.

Grenadine nodded sadly.

"Pomegranate seeds?" she asked.

The two looked at each other. An anemic and unpracticed grin crossed Grenadine's face. Norris chuckled, which caused a titter to come from Miss Ashcom. Norris barked in laughter and Grenadine echoed it. She then laughed at her own parody, and then laughed at the act of herself laughing about her laughter. This caused Norris to guffaw and leak tears as Grenadine struggled to catch her breath from the absurd progression. It was a long few moments before the two could compose themselves.

"But Prosperina, guileless, innocent, had taken refuge in Death's formal gardens," Norris said as he wiped a tear from his eye.

"And as she strolled there, plucked a dark pomegranate," Grenadine replied. Norris nodded. "I've had more time to read." Grenadine set down her book and smiled apologetically as she picked up her knitting.

"It was funny," Norris said.

"Well, I find that when one is dead a sense of humor becomes essential. Otherwise, one turns into one of those wailing shades that haunt incessantly, and really that's so unbecoming," Grenadine tilted her head at a dropped stitch in the sweater she was knitting. "It also helps to have something to do."

"Such as becoming the queen of the underworld?" Norris asked.

"Well, that *is* something to do."

Norris stood there watching Grenadine try to salvage her project of yarn. He looked at the food hungrily, but he knew better than to eat anything here. "Grenadine...Are you...?" Norris stammered. Grenadine looked up at Norris and he sighed. "Grenadine, Bernhard thinks you have become evil."

Grenadine smiled and shook her head. "Isn't that always the way of men when they've been jilted? The woman just 'went mad for no reason!'"

“Well...you also made a bargain with the Devil, and stole the belt.”

Grenadine nodded and smiled and continued knitting. After a minute she looked up to notice Norris staring at her. “Norris,” she sighed. “Sometimes, bad things happen so that people will feel the need to do good things later.”

Norris cocked his head. He sat on the floor and tried to scratch behind his ear with one foot. “So betraying and leaving us...was a good thing?”

Grenadine looked off into the distance. “I hope so...”

Seeing that Norris wasn't satisfied, Grenadine put her knitting down and leaned over to give Norris scritchies. “Norris, they never knew what to do with me,” she said as Norris's leg thumped on the floor. “I mostly just sat around like a wet blanket while everyone else followed his or her path.”

“You were important!” Norris whined. “You kept us together, you...you took care of...of them,” he looked away. “You took care of me,” he said.

Grenadine's eyes watered as she pet Norris and he curled up at her feet. He sighed as her hands ran through his hair. “I will preserve myself,” she said, “And am be-thought to take the basest and most poorest of shape that ever penury, in contempt of man...”

“...Brought near to beast,” Norris continued, “My face I'll grime with filth, blanket my loins, elf all my hairs in knots, and with presented nakedness outface the winds and persecutions of the sky.”

Grenadine nodded and pointed to the copy of *King Lear* she had set down. Norris snuffled and buried his head down into himself. “I came to rescue you,” he mumbled.

“Oh, Norris,” Grenadine sighed. “I don't need to be.”

The silence started to collect again, but this time Norris saved it. He took a deep breath and looked up. “So you aren't coming back?”

“No,” Grenadine said.

Again the silence crept, but Grenadine dove into its path. "Are you going to be all right?" she asked him.

Norris sniffled. "No. But I'll live won't I?"

"Well, one of us should."

The truth is, I was phenomenally lucky. The part about the hotel owner is true; he was a kindly old German with a small, affectionate dog and he found me the day after I was abandoned. He cleaned me up and fed me and even offered to help me find a way back to the Medicine Show, but I wasn't sure. I was hurt that the man I cared for had left me, yes, but was it worth going back to where I wasn't wanted? Didn't I have more pride than that? I don't think I did, but I liked to think maybe I could someday. So I cleaned his hotel during the day, ate meals with the man and dog, and played with the dog every night before going to sleep in the room I paid for with my labor. After a while, the German offered me a job as the concierge. He even discussed leaving the hotel to me when he died, as all his sons had died in the war and he was simply waiting to join them. He was a kind, trusting man and I was brought to tears by this simple, unsolicited act of generosity and love. I could feel my burdens lighten and my life's trials leading to something positive.

And then, as we were walking up the stairs to dinner, the dog leaped onto me to lick my face. I set him down, but he wanted to play so much that he jumped around my feet. Trying to avoid him, I tripped on my dress and fell down the stairs. Two flights. My neck snapped as I hit the bottom.

The three demons sat in a circle facing each other. El Diablo had a pile of tissues in front of him and the Scarred Meaningless Sacrifice was patting him on the shoulder. He Who Is Clothed In The Last Breath Of Dying Infants looked sheepish and his wraith-robe coalesced around him.

*Sniff.* "Really?" said El Diablo.

“Yes, really,” Infants said. “Listen Diablo, I’m...I’m just hard on you because I don’t want you to sell yourself short. I mean you are capable of *SO MUCH MORE* than this.” He waved at the pogo stick. “You have such drive. Okay, I don’t get the pogo stick thing, but you made it work up in the real world and even had cultists. I mean I’m...” the demon looked away as his eyes misted with tears. “I’m *jealous*. That’s what I am.”

“Aw...Infants...” El Diablo reached over and put a hand on the demon’s claw.

“No, no it’s true!” he shook his head and his rumbling demonic voice cracked. “Okay, I’m really scary. And I can drive a midwife or a grieving mother insane. Like that!” The demon snapped his fingers. “But raiding a city? That’s bigger than I can ever—”

“Aw, now, don’t *you* sell yourself short Infants!” El Diablo chided and put his hand on the demon’s shoulder. The robes coalesced around the other demon’s hand and seemed grateful for the sympathy. “You’re not me. See, the pogo stick is *MY* way. It’s goofy, sure, but I’m a trickster-type. You’re a connoisseur. You’re a...a gourmet of Hellish torture. I mean that’s...that’s impressive. To me. And that’s the truth.”

El Diablo leaned over and hugged He Who Is Clothed In The Last Breath Of Dying Infants. The demon stiffened, then his shoulder sagged as he let out a ragged and cathartic sob. The two demons sat holding each other and crying out their frustrations. Blood leaked from the stitched eyes of the Scarred Meaningless Sacrifice and he looked at his two compatriots proudly. The three never even noticed Norris walking by them back the way he came, toward the land of the living.

“Well, it sounds like we’ve all gotten somewhere today,” The Scarred Meaningless Sacrifice said. The other two sniffled their agreement.

“And now I think it’s time for some comfort food,” he said as he stood up. “Who wants to roast some rapist genitals over the Lake of Fire?”

The demons cheered and hopped up and down in child-like glee.

But you see, I’ve been thinking about something since Norris visited (which was really very lovely of him, what a dear!). I once met a man in Paris that told me that looking for meaning in random events doesn’t help things. Things don’t always happen for a reason, they just happen. Things just *are*. It’s life: beautifully, wonderfully random life. It’s the randomness of death that gives life its meaning.

That’s a hard thing to accept. I saw so much death in the war. I saw so many young men lose their limbs and call out for mothers and wives. I saw burns creep up arms and fester till the boy screamed for death. I saw boys that seemed to be recovering just fine, die without any further mark on them, lying peacefully on their beds as if sleeping. I saw blisters pop and lips crack from poison gas.

I even let some boys die. Not because they couldn’t be saved, but because I thought their lives after this horrible series of moments would be unbearable.

That’s why I linger between life and death. Not because I hate Bernhard for leaving me, but because I hate myself for leaving those young men to suffer in their death throes with nothing to offer them but morphine and a pillow wet with tears and blood. I was so overwhelmed by all of the destruction, that I forgot...No it’s worse than forgetting their humanity. I simply didn’t care anymore that these were human beings who died and had dreams and families and liked ice cream and sunsets. I went beyond emotional detachment to emotional callousness. I became a cold, pale machine shaped like a young girl fluttering about their beds changing their dressings mechanically and unemo-

tionally. I was a shade. I was a callous specter lurking over their beds and taking their vitals.

I have always been a ghost. Dying just made that fact material.

“Norris!” Freedomhowler shouted. “Where have you been? Bad dog! BAD!”

Norris shambled up and shook off brambles and layers of dirt. Follie looked up from her reading and wrinkled her nose. “Oh, he stinks! He smells like he rolled in something that died!”

“E probably did,” Heather offered. “Ah’ll wash him. Come now ye silly wee moot.” Heather gently led Norris to a washbasin where she dumped out the laundry and filled it with fresh water. “Where’d ye get off to? Are ye all right?”

Norris felt the water cascade over his head and he sputtered. Heather was surprised by his docility during the bath, but she wasn’t about to complain. Norris looked across the landscape.

“Yes,” he answered. “I am.” He smiled up at Heather. “We all will be. Eventually.”

He licked Heather’s face and she laughed as he dunked him under the water.

So let them think I am an evil shade bent on revenge. Let those who still live fear my path. I know where I am. I know what I have done. I committed selfish acts and selfless acts. I died for no reason and so did those men in the trenches. All those young men of war die for no reason, despite what the world tells them. This is not meaningless or nihilistic. This is beautiful. Realizing this gives us the chance to grasp life for what it is: Our one chance to make our life mean something before a pointless, uncaring death.

I am not a prisoner. I am not cursed to live here six months of the year for eating pomegranate seeds, I live here of my own free will. I am not lost. I found myself in this afterlife and here I turn my sins into strengths. I transform this Hell into my own world. A world where people recount their ill deeds, stare at them honestly, and then scrapbook before going swimming and having a nice cup of tea.

Now, I'm going to sit and knit with my demons.

They're having a campfire and singing songs and it smells delicious.

