



*"It's a curio, some dark gothic
dream bottled and painted
in shades of night."*

-- Mark Lawrence

TOM & NIMUE BROWN

HOPELESS, MAINE

NEW ENGLAND GOTHIC

FEATURING THE SHORT STORY COLLECTION

ODDATSEA

BY KEITH ERRINGTON

HOPELESS, MAINE

NEW ENGLAND GOTHIC & ODDATSEA

Tom & Nimue Brown
&
Keith Errington

HOPELESS, MAINE: NEW ENGLAND GOTHIC & ODDATSEA
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PART ONE
— ANNAMARIE —

The Hiring Fair

With the bunting up, and a few banners in place, the orphanage still didn't look cheerful. Reverend Josiah Witherspoon stalked amongst the tables, finding things to criticise. It started to rain, but they would continue anyway. They always did, even if no one from the town turned up. That had happened more than once, Annamarie recalled. At least this would be the last one for her. One way or another, she was leaving. The previous summer, she had run away twice, only to be brought back. It wasn't even like she was a proper orphan – she had a mother and grandmother on the far side of the island. They had thrown her out when she turned ten. *Bitches*. Not that she wanted to live with either of them. Going it alone would suit her just fine, but people kept interfering. *Bloody people. Do they have nothing better to do?*

“Hi Anna. Are you going to the hiring fair today?”

She smiled at the lad who had approached so quietly to ask her. Of all the people she'd been stuck with in the orphanage, he was the only one she liked or respected. He had integrity, and a good heart. Admittedly, he could be pedantic and stuffy at times, but she didn't mind that.

"I am. If anyone turns up to hire I'll be surprised. Though I can't think I'll get many offers even if there is a crowd."

"I hope you find something good."

She shook her head. "I'm not getting my hopes up. You on the other hand, are clever. Someone's bound to want you for something, Emanuel."

The young man looked down at his shoes. "I've had an offer already."

"Really? I'm so pleased for you." She meant it. He'd had a hard life in his sixteen short years. His parents and both sisters had died in a flu epidemic, leaving him to be raised by his grandfather, who then died as well. Emanuel was a solitary, miserable youth, and with good reason.

"I've been asked if I'll stay on here, as a teacher, an assistant."

Annamarie blinked in surprise. "I thought you hated the place?"

"I do, but perhaps if I stay, I can help to make it better, for the others."

"You're a good soul," she said.

"Reverend Witherspoon said he might even make a priest out of me one day. I'm not sure if he was joking."

"I don't think he ever jokes."

There were five of them at the hiring fair – three girls, and two boys – all of whom were deemed old enough to leave the orphanage's comfortless shelter. They had their meagre belongings packed. Missy Aubergine left almost at once, but she had the advantage of being wholesomely pretty, and able to show off all the things she had made. Annamarie had no talents that she knew of. None that anyone would employ her for at any rate. She smiled at Hilda Stubbs, a fat girl with bad skin. "If no one picks either of us, what say we set up a house of ill repute together?"

Hilda blushed, looking horrified and embarrassed in equal measure. They knew all about houses of ill repute. Reverend Witherspoon preached against them regularly, and Annamarie

had done her own research on the subject. Anything the Reverend disliked held a certain appeal for her. The odds were that no one from the brothel would turn up recruiting, although she rather hoped they would. It would be worth it just to see the look on the Reverend's face when she left with them.

Two shop owners arrived together, fired off questions about weight and numbers, and left again. Annamarie could have answered accurately, but didn't want to. Being stuck in a shop would be about as bad as being stuck in the orphanage. If no one picked her, she would head off alone at the end of the day, and make her own fortune.

She shivered, feeling as though a winter breeze had blown into the summer's day. Looking up, she saw Vincent O'Stoat regarding her. Annamarie tilted her chin up and hoped he would move on. Every few years, the old man from the big house would show up and take a girl away with him. What happened to them after that, no one knew. There were rumours in the orphanage, stories spun on cold dark nights to frighten the youngest children – that O'Stoat ate the girls he hired, or that he sacrificed them to a demon that lived under his house. He was their bogeyman. Whatever happened, girls who went with him were said to vanish.

Annamarie wondered if anyone noticed. They were just poor orphans after all. Who would care if he did eat them? If he took her, no one would mourn. Her family would say good riddance, assuming they even heard. Tales about life on the island filtered through to the orphans in fragments. They had restricted contact with the rest of the world, and precious little insight. Annamarie knew just enough to suspect she was missing out on a great deal. *Today that changes. Everything changes.*

"Good afternoon Mr O'Stoat." Reverend Witherspoon advanced like an unsteady shadow.

"Good afternoon Reverend. I need a new girl."

"Of course, of course." He surveyed the two. "We only have these."

Hilda moved a little closer to Annamarie. They'd never been friends, but faced with O'Stoat, they were now allies and sisters.

"One rather fat, one too sharp looking," O'Stoat observed.

"Of the two, Hilda has the better temperament. She's not very clever, but she is diligent and biddable. Annamarie... has little to recommend her, I'm afraid."

She smouldered with resentment at his words. No amount of being talked about as though she were an object could ever make the experience bearable, and there had been a great deal of it.

O'Stoat steepled his fingers as though in prayer. "I'll take the fat one then."

At her side, Hilda whimpered.

Annamarie tried to think of something reassuring to whisper. "Don't worry. You can always run away."

Hilda shot her a look of sheer desperation. She was not the kind of girl to run, and they both knew it.

"Come along then," Reverend Witherspoon ordered. "Don't keep the gentleman waiting."

Annamarie wondered if she would ever see the girl again. *If no one picks me, I'll go there tonight and help her escape!* The scheme pleased her. She'd been waiting a while to lash out against her seniors, and liberating Hilda would be a nice way to start.

For what felt like an age, she stood around with the spotty boy who had spent the last few years pulling her hair and calling her 'Hannah-merely' and imagining he was being funny. She had found some solace in the past by adding beetles to his food whenever she had the chance. Today he looked edgy and did not bother to inflict his dull excuse for humour on her.

A couple of men in working gear arrived and eyed the lad. Whatever they did clearly involved labour. Annamarie kept her face straight. The useless boy couldn't even forage effectively for

stew ingredients, much less work with his hands. Like everyone else, Spotty Jones wanted out of the orphanage, and would no doubt take whatever he could get. They took him, and she quietly ill-wished his departing back.

Being the last one left, she wished she could just walk out of the place. *No changes here then.* Whenever there was picking to do, she tended to find herself left at the end. *Could be worse. O'Stoat or a career with old Wither? With a bit of luck, I'm on my own.* They were clearing up the stalls. There would be all the excitement of seeing who had guessed the weight of the bucket of frogs, and then orphanage life would get back to normal. Only it would do so without her being there. It gave her a slightly hollow feeling.

The Reverend headed her way, with Emanuel in tow. This was a conversation she didn't know how to have. Bending down, Annamarie picked up her bag, and wondered where to spend the night. As she straightened her back, a short, black clad figure marched through the orphanage gates.

"How dare you come here?" She'd never heard the Reverend sound so angry before. His was a cold, seeping anger that she knew to fear.

"It's hiring day, isn't it?" the diminutive, aged woman said. Her voice rang with authority. Annamarie paid attention. Mostly people did not challenge Reverend Witherspoon like that. The woman had already won her respect.

"We're finished," he said, his tone pure ice.

"What about her?" the odd little woman pointed at Annamarie.

The Reverend turned, slowly, and eyed her. The expression on his face did not inspire confidence. "You want her?"

"She's what I'm here for."

He shrugged dismissively. "It's not like anyone else has a use for the little trollop. She's yours. Now get out of my sight."

Annamarie followed the small woman out through the gates. For a moment, she hesitated, glancing back over her shoulder.

Emanuel stood watching her, his expression pained. There had been no chance to say goodbye, but she waved. He responded in kind, turned, and walked away. "I'll see you around," she whispered to his retreating back. They'd been friends for years; adult life wouldn't change that, she felt certain.

"You're Annamarie, daughter of Clara, daughter of Evaline?"

"That's me, yes."

"We've not met before, but I believe I'm a distant cousin."

"Oh."

"I'll give you a year. If you're any good, you can stay and I'll teach you. If not, you're on your own, understood?"

"Fine by me."

They were heading for the woods, she realised. Orphans were not supposed to go into the woods, although she had sneaked there quite a few times during her night escapes. "What is it I'm going to be doing?" she asked, hoping it wouldn't be too dull.

"You my girl, if you have the talent for it, are going to be a witch."