

Willowside

by Robert Alexander Wray

Rows of birch trees line your journey to the Hamden Rose estate. Your driver smoothly and almost disarmingly drives up the road to the legendary property. You wonder at the angel statue in front, noticing its overarching size and graceful beauty. Once out of the car, you wander towards the angelic figure, not heeding an internal warning to avoid touching it. As you feel the torso, it seems to alter color. The bruise-like blue that greeted you appears to gradually meld into a scorched green, especially along the face. You stand back and stare at its posture: one wing dips, the other lifts. One arm reaches for an embrace, the other arm, with its hand of missing fingers, is a gesture of threat. You turn towards the house museum, which looks not only haunted but shocked. Entering the celebrated writer's home in an almost careless way, you remark to yourself that you'll depart the place more respectfully later on...It turns out there is no later on.

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"I'm here for the Hamden Rose lecture."

The woman in the front booth, this scary doll-like creature with large doll eyes that seem made of glass, looks at me and says, in a somewhat hostile tone, "The lecture?"

"Yes. Where do I go?"

She points me in a general direction, and with a breath of ecstatic relief, I realize I've been given license to explore and 'get lost' before having to make it to the room where the lecture's taking place.

I start walking blindly, and indeed like a lost soul, as I wander to the desired area. After opening a few false doors into banal closets, I return to the woman at the booth with the pair of eyes too big for her face. Her pageboy doll hair, helmet-like, hangs lifelessly straight and down, as if defying the world to move even one black strand.

“Excuse me, do you mind if I ask you about that strange angel statue out front? It’s eerie.”

While clamping all lids possible shut on little souvenir coffins, she replies, “Strange angel?”

“Yes, the angel. Its presence radiates anger. The statue seems to say: Don’t talk to me or my angry faceless daughter ever again!”

“Oh,” she states, “you mean Alice.”

“Alice is the angel’s name?”

She nods. “Alice has many weird myths and stories surrounding her that can give one chills.”

“Such as?”

“I’d rather not go into it. Most of the stories end with someone being...I don’t want to say the word.”

“Can you just, maybe, spell it out?”

“The word begins with the letter p, and ends with d.”

“...Possessed?”

“You’re sharp! You didn’t touch her, did you?”

“I did.”

“Why’d you do *that*?”

“Well there aren’t any signs warning me *not* to. I just had a strong desire to make contact with it.”

“Oh. Yeah, that’s bad.”

She looks down and suddenly seems transfixed by the floor.

“So, have I sinned on this? Was touching it a bigger decision than I thought? Hello?”

An odd groan of laughter comes from her, then silence, then finally: “Sorry, was just noticing how dirty the rug is. It’s got to be taken outside and thrashed and beaten.”

“Can you answer me? Am I cursed?”

She looks at an antique wall clock. “You have some time before the lecture starts. I take it you want to look around, tour the rooms, the garden, the cemetery and so forth?”

“I’d like to. Especially since I flew hundreds of miles to be here. Hamden Rose is in my personal bag of writer heroes, but now I’m very bothered. Do you have any advice?”

“Whatever you do, don’t ever find yourself alone and/or isolated. It’s usually at those times, when no other people are about and you’re most vulnerable, that she’ll try to invade your body and steal your soul in retaliation for touching her. Other than that, have fun!”

I repeat her guidance to myself as I resume my exploration of the house and grounds: “Don’t ever find yourself alone.”

The lights flicker.

* * *

As Elisa peered into the first room to see if anyone else was inside, she couldn’t help feeling, despite her flustered state, so happy to be there, to be touching history like this.

The faint strains of what she believed was Chopin (one of his nocturnes possibly) drifted through the historic space as she observed, much to her relief, a variety of people present.

An elderly attendant with gray wiry hair stood in a corner, seemingly lost in thought. Three women wandered through, remarking on the paintings that lined the red walls. A young lady and gent made reverential comments about manuscripts encased behind glass, murmuring “oohs” and “ahs.”

Elisa crossed the threshold and strolled around the crimson room. But only after a vase of lilacs was placed on a table, and the young lady and gent were seated on a pink divan, while the attendant tried to explain a fact to the three women who wore variations of brown ribboned dresses which made them look like UPS packages put through a shredder, did Elisa notice the scent of rotting meat. The personages in the paintings looked down at her from above as if to exclaim: “Get out! Get out of here!”

“Pardon me, sir,” she began, interrupting the attendant, “but can you tell me what that odor is?”

Her stance of worryment over such a thing surprised him, and his surprise surprised her. His eyes bugged out, and his broad reddened face, which matched the red tint of the walls, twitched.

“What odor?” he shot back.

“Oh, never mind,” she said, thinking better of it. “Maybe though you could tell me where the Chopin music’s coming from? I don’t see any speakers anywhere. It’s almost otherworldly sounding.”

He looked at her questioningly. “You mean the Schumann?”

After a silent panicky moment of blankness, she took note of his wrinkled skin, which seemed to be coated with an almost invisible layer of dirt, indicating a state of poverty perhaps.

“Do you know where you’re going, madam? Are you lost?”

Nonplussed, she apologized to the attendant and the women. “I’m sorry for intruding. Can you show me where the bathroom is?”

“This way,” he said, leading her to a door which opened out onto a grand hall with eye-entrancing décor.

Elisa smiled with delight. “Oh my, the utter epic-ness of the place. I imagine it must be so much fun to work here.”

“I don’t technically work here. I volunteer.”

“You volunteer?”

“Yes. Everyone at this estate is a volunteer or works for very little. They only have their love of Hamden Rose.”

“Oh, I love him too,” she beamed. “Such a towering figure, he gave so much to the world through his stories. He wrote about broken souls and darkness, but he had light as well. He’d leave you feeling lifted.”

The attendant laughed. “Actually, I’m not crazy about him. I just do this to kill time.”

He went into how he read only one of Hamden Rose’s short stories, a tale which she recognized as his classic *Of Ghosts and Faded Flowers*, a tragic piece that he said was just way too melodramatic.

“It’s all just so melodramatic. By the end, you should feel for the writer who commits suicide. But, you just want him to...get it over with.

Shoot already! And after that, you want to shoot yourself. But I found money in the book jacket, so, that was nice.”

Elisa nodded politely. “So, which way is the bathroom?”

He pointed her towards the end of the hallway.

With that she walked out, not hearing the vase of lilacs suddenly smash itself against a wall, breaking into shards.

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Needing to go to the restroom badly, you head down the hall at a fast pace, mainlining the splendor of the dark scarlet walls accented with gold tassels and trim. Constant smiling on your part, a feeling of ‘how neat, my gosh’ emanating through your face. You’re amazed at it all, but you realize how sickeningly ‘in awe’ you are as well.

Music still coats the air, spices it. Whether it’s piped in or real though, it now sounds ominous. And the period three-piece suits and dresses tapestried on the hallway walls, hanging seemingly mid-air, are kind of frightening. They’re like ghosts hung up as a type of paranormal punishment. Reminding yourself not to be alone, you slow down as you pass by a series of people—boys laughing, a couple in a sad state (“I don’t want you to think I’m one of those girls you have to spend tons of money on”), grouchy old ladies (“Edna, why do you always smell like Fig Newtons?”)

Just as you’re about to reach your destination, you hear a strange knocking coming from the room across. It’s followed by the voice of a young girl: “Help me! Somebody help me! I’m stuck in here!” You get the vibe of a horror film. A seemingly innocent little girl asking for help who is, alas, not innocent and not even a girl. The knocking continues, as do the cries for rescue: “Please, someone, open the door! The handle fell off and I’m locked inside! Please!”

You can’t help noticing as you look left and right that the hall’s now nearly devoid of people. In an instant of mixed emotions, you go to the wooden door and open it. And standing there, with a doorknob in her hand, is a very young and darling child with blond hair and large almond eyes. Her small face is a blend of both fear and relief. Such sweetness and

such lostness at the same time. She gives you the doorknob and dashes away.

Gazing into the room, you see a huge painting of a figure who's reminiscent of the young girl you just saw, but grown up. On its frame are the words: "The Unknown Mother." All at once, you feel the presence of someone on the other side of the open door. You close it, and sure enough, staring right at you is the woman from the booth with the big glassy eyes which make eyeglasses seem superfluous. You stare back, speechless for what feels like minutes. After you look away to see her nametag, she says, "Ah, you couldn't hold the stare, could you. You just couldn't hold it."

"No, Celia, guess not."

She grabs the doorknob out of your hand and walks past. As you continue on to the bathroom, Celia stops, and in an attempt at humor, calls out, "Where you going? Don't you know that's *my* bathroom?"

* * *

I sit in the stall, trying to speed my bladder along as I realize I'm in this lavatory "alone and/or isolated," as Celia phrased it. Clearly though, this shouldn't count. But suddenly, the lights in the bathroom go out. Darkness falls everywhere. I wave my hands, trying to trigger the motion sensor. No dice. Having no devices on me that illuminate, I finish up my business the best I can in the dark, and stand.

And then I hear the creaking of footsteps. I feel my heart stop as they slowly get closer. Then I see a pair of women's shoes, glowing and from a decidedly different era, protruding under my stall door. A voice which I recognize as that of the young girl I just saw, whispers menacingly:

"Were you calling me?" Shocked and startled, my head races with questions—Who are you? What do you want?—which I don't dare ask.

She repeats herself: "Were you calling me?" I hear the latch turn, and the door screech open, then instantaneously all the lights click on as someone enters the restroom. No one, I see no one before me. I unfreeze and promptly leave, mouthing a silent thanks to the older lady who unknowingly came to my aid. I am getting, to put it bluntly, the fuck out of here.

* * *

It immediately occurred to Elisa as she hurried down the empty hallway that everyone by now was probably at the lecture. After yanking open several doors to pointless territory, she mumbled to herself, “Shit.” Lost, and having no idea which way to go, she entered a random room, hoping that it’d lead to an exit.

She rushed by a tilting bookshelf with gravity-defying books situated therein, outspread editions of Hamden Rose’s novels braced back by string, like pinned butterflies; then, more books artfully stacked and arranged, most of the volumes charismatically laid out in tones of rubbed-rum brown.

Oh my God, she thought, I’d hug all these books if I wasn’t running for my life.

* * *

One wing dips, the other lifts. One arm reaches for an embrace, the other arm, with its hand of missing fingers, is a gesture of threat.

* * *

Looking at the precious books at every turn, symbols to me of both divine and human love, my breath gets taken away as I hear the familiar notes of the haunting music that’s been as prevalent as birdsong, as passing clouds. I see a piano in the far corner of the room, and playing it is Celia, the woman with the incredibly scary pair of eyes and a scarier face to go with it. I wonder if she’ll help and show me the way out. She pauses, turns, and examines my presence. “You aren’t going to leave us now, are you?”

I go rigid in silence, unable to use speech.

“Sick of all the rich tourists that parade through here, flaunting their wealth? In my time it was considered bad taste. There’s a sinister, terror-filled side to the wealthy that people don’t get. It’s not all dining at country clubs and eating caviar with women named Pepper.”

“Yes,” I agreed, finally able to form words. “There’s a terrifying level to it. But that’s not why I’m leaving. You were right about the angel. It’s...it’s evil.”

“Would you like me to tell you a story concerning the angel? I bet you’d appreciate it. It’s okay, we’re safe.”

* * *

“Do you see that faded brown book with the ribbed spine?” Celia asked.

“*Willowside*?”

“Yes, that’s the title. Pick a passage from it and read. Any passage.”

For Elisa, *Willowside*, the story of a doomed romance between a casket maker and a girl from a well-off family, was dear to her heart. It was her first exposure to Hamden Rose and gave her a lifelong thirst for his work.

After thumbing through a few pages, she picked out a passage and read: “Boats pulled in and out of the harbor while Marlena sunned herself on the dock. The hollow clinking of lines, of water caressing the sides of the boats, of tiny flags fluttering in the sea salt wind, sent her messages of sleep.”

“Guess whose memory that is,” Celia said. “Guess the source.”

“Um, Hamden Rose?”

“Read the dedication,” she grimaced.

Elisa flipped through the beginning of the book. “There isn’t any.”

“Nope, there isn’t. Hamden was supposed to write a dedication to his wife Adelaide, but he changed his mind. What you read is based on her life. She was a gifted artist, a blazing rocket from hell, but she loved Hamden deeply and devoted everything to helping him create. Why he cut her out and denied her credit is a mystery. It broke her heart. So, she cursed everything he loved. Including the statue, Alice, named after their firstborn and frustrated child.”

As she talked, Elisa could imagine Celia’s lips in a wild howl. She sensed a history of tears, the wail of a sad scream behind her words.

“May I ask the specific nature of the curse?” Elisa inquired.

“Oh, you know, just the usual basic curse of wishing someone to never feel fully here and gradually slip away into nothingness and disappear off the face of the earth.”

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I wonder how she knows all this. And then I make a troubling connection. “Your name, Celia... That’s an anagram of Alice.”

“Well,” she said with a grin, “aren’t we clever.”

Focusing on her hands, I see that she’s missing two fingers. I bolt towards the door, but she materializes right in front of me, blocking my way.

“Fancy meeting you here...in my childhood home.”

* * *

You feel one of your shoulders scrunch up towards your head. One arm reaches for an embrace. The other arm, with its hand closed into a tight fist, is a gesture of warning. Your hair rises and spreads itself out, shaped as if you were lying on a pillow. An unnatural voice, sounding hellish and damned, parts from your lips:

“Strange angel? You mean me. Many myths, stories surround me that’ll give you chills. You brought back all the old stuff in my brain, Elisa. I’m multitalented. I know music, the arts. I only deal with dark subject matter. Dark. Dark. Extreme. Severe. That for me is real. You will split apart from yourself. You will never be whole or resurrected. You’ve blown something big. You will feel tears of sorrow in every utterance. You will feel weak. I’m destroying you. Let yourself destruct. Before, you lived in the void of empty admiration. Now, you are the void itself.”

Elisa levitates, her eyes enlarge in horror as her mouth forms a silent scream



In a nutshell, ROBERT ALEXANDER WRAY likes making things and figuring it out later. He's a graduate of the Iowa Playwrights Workshop, has won awards, and his plays have been produced all over. Other works include: *All is Always Now*, *Melancholy Echo*, and *Bullet for Unaccompanied Heart*. He's based in Charlottesville, Virginia.