

The Case of the Lighthouse Shambler

Terror is Our Business, #1

by Joe Lansdale, 1951–

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For Karen.
For Mom: You were right about everything.

Introduction

Dana Roberts, Her Kith and Kin

When I was growing up I read all kinds of fiction. I was especially drawn to horror and the fantastic, science fiction, the odd and the weird. One branch of horror and weird fiction I particularly enjoyed was the psychic investigator.

There were a number of investigators I liked. John Silence, for one, created by Algernon Blackwood; Carnacki, the ghost finder, the creation of William Hope Hodgson; and later I discovered Seabury Quinn's Jules De Grandin adventures. The Night Stalker TV show was cut of the same cloth, and I loved it, especially the pilot that led to the series, scripted by Richard Matheson, based on the work of Jeff Rice. Lord Dunsany's Jorkens tales also deserve a nod. There were others, of course, but these pop to mind, and are therefore most likely the greater influences.

I also liked non-series stories where someone would go into a bar, or into a club, always a men's club back then, and they would be sitting around talking, and then someone would tell a story about a weird experience. These stories often had a narrator that framed the story, then let the actual teller of the tale take over, and in the end the narrator would return and wrap it up.

As a writer, I am known primarily in the horror world for things that don't quite fit into the normal approach to horror, but in the last few years I've had the bug to write more "traditional" tales, and I have written a number of them. The Dana Roberts stories are among the more traditional.

Unlike the psychic investigators I grew up reading, my investigator is female. All of the ones I read growing up, and as a young man, to the best of my memory, were male. Fiction was dominated by the male hero for a long-long time. I wanted to do a story with a female lead that was also a psychic detective, or in Dana Roberts' case, an investigator of what she calls the "supernormal." She doesn't believe in the supernatural, but she does believe in unknown worlds and mysterious puzzles that are caused by natural phenomena that we think of as supernatural. In this way, these stories owe more to Lovecraft than M.R. James. Strictly speaking, like the Mythos stories by Lovecraft, these are, in a way, science fiction, as there is supposed to be an explanation that would prove them to originate out of scientific knowledge yet to be discovered and confirmed. But, as with Lovecraft, the tone of the Dana Roberts stories is very much horror. In fact, one of the stories, *The Case of The Ragman's Anguish*, is openly Lovecraftian.

Most of the stories I write have humor in them in one form or another. Even a lot of the darker ones. That is not exclusively true, but is a big part of what comes out when I write. Whistling past the graveyard.

I tried to make the Dana Roberts stories a bit soberer in tone than a lot of things that have come before by me, and I accomplished this for the most part. I also managed, at least in the first couple of stories, to use a narrator who introduced us to Dana, and like those stories I mentioned before, they would be told at a club.

After a bit, however, I found this framing device unnecessary for her tales. It was better when she told them directly without it, and when this collection was first conceived, I thought I would eliminate it from the stories where this method was used, but as I reread them for publication, I realized the concept was too integrated to be detached naturally. I would have had to rewrite the stories so much they wouldn't have been the original tales. I left the framing method, but didn't add it to the later Dana Roberts stories.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, as they used to say, my daughter Kasey and I were asked to do a story together for a Christopher Golden anthology, and we did. Kasey created a character called Jana, began the story, and then we traded it back and forth by email, taking turns building and revising until the story was complete.

Working this way, we wrote a story titled "Blind Love," which was nutty as a squirrel's den. We liked it so much we decided to write another story about Jana, and we also decided to have her join up with Dana, to put humor in the adventures, and to give Dana a kind of Watson-like partner. Like Watson, Jana is not without her own skills.

So, the first part of this book are stories about Dana, told by her, and in some cases, framed by an outside narrator.

Blind Love stands alone, but it's a great introduction to Jana. It allows for a better understanding of who she is for future stories, where she and Dana team up to solve what can only be described as very unusual mysteries from beyond the veil. But Kasey will have her say on Jana in her introduction, so I will leave that to her.

Included here, besides the original Dana Roberts tales and the stories that include Jana, is the first appearance of *The Case of the Ragman's Anguish*, written exclusively for this collection.

My advice on reading these stories, due to a necessary similarity in structure, is not to read them all at once, but to read one daily, or one weekly, until you've read them all. I think that is the way to enjoy them best, but if you're a gobbler, and would prefer to gobble them down one after the other, I won't discourage you.

Will there be other tales of Dana and Jana?

Time will tell.

Joe R. Lansdale
Nacogdoches, Texas
September 8th, 2017

The Case of the Lighthouse Shambler

I guess you could say it's a kind of an organization, but we think of it as a club, but it's not just a men's club. Women come too. Or at least a couple do. And then, of course, there's Dana Roberts. She was our guest.

The club is simple. We meet once a month to chat and have drinks, eat a little bit of food. Sometimes we invite a guest. We always make an effort to have

someone interesting, and not just someone to fill the slot. We'd rather not have a guest than have someone come in and tell us how to dry lumber or make strawberry jam.

Fact is, we vote on who our speaker is. When Dana Roberts came up, I didn't actually plan to vote for her. I didn't want a supernatural investigator there, as I find that kind of stuff silly and unbelievable, and mostly just annoying.

There are all the shows on TV about ghost hunters, and psychic kids, and so on, and they make me want to kick the set in. I guess it's good business, making shows where it's all shadow and innuendo. People saying they hear this, or they hear that, they see this, or they see that, and you don't actually see or hear jack. You just got to take their word for it.

Another thing, when they do have something, it's a blurry camera image, or a weird sound on their recordings that they say is the ghost telling them to get out of the house, or some such. I don't become more of a believer when they do that, I become less of one. The sounds just sound like one of the investigators getting cute, and the images look a lot like my bad vacation photos.

But the rest of the members pushed Dana on me, and I was outvoted, so on Thursday night, right after we had a general meeting, talking about a few things that had to do with the club, Dana showed up.

She was a tall woman in her forties, and though she wasn't what you'd call a model, there was certainly something about her. Her face was shaped nice and sharp by her cheekbones, and she had a wide full mouth, and eyes that looked right through you. She had shoulder-length blond hair. She looked to be in good shape, and in fact, looked more like a physical trainer than someone who chased spooks and such.

She went around and shook hands with everyone, and said thanks for inviting her. While she's doing this, all I could think about was that our club dues were paying for this. We always give a stipend for speakers, and sometimes it's pretty sizable if the guest has some fame. I didn't know how much the treasurer had agreed to pay her, but whatever it was, I thought it was too much.

Dana Roberts is famous for her books, her now and again interviews on television. I will give her this, she didn't do TV interviews much, and she wasn't someone that was always popping up in the news or predicting this or that, or saying a body would be found near water or that the murderer has a name that has a J in it.

When it was time for drinks, we went into the big room, which is part of Kevin Dell's house and library, which is where we always retire to. There's no smoking at our club, and it's usually right about half way into our two to three hour talk or discussion, that we let the smokers go outside and suck some burning tobacco.

That was a bad rule, I thought, as it could break up a good presentation, but it was the way we maintained three of our members, and though I would just as soon see them go, Kevin, who was also our treasurer, liked their dues as much as anyone else's, 'cause it paid for our food and drinks and occasional guests.

Anyway, we're in the big room, and we're about to start, and Dana said something that sort of endeared me to her right off.

She said, "Now, if you watch all those ghost shows, and those people who predict the future, or find dead bodies, or missing people, then you'll be

disappointed. I should also say I can't stand those fakirs. What I do is real, and the truth is, I don't care if you believe me or not. I'm just going to tell you about my most recent case, and you can take it or leave it."

There were some nods around the room, and Kevin said, "Certainly. Of, course."

Then we settled into the chairs and the couch, a few seated themselves on cushions on the floor, and Dana took the guest chair; the most comfortable chair in the room. She leaned back and sipped her drink and looked at the ceiling.

"I'm going to tell this how it went, as best I can. Keep in mind, I don't think of myself as a ghost hunter per se, nor do I claim to be psychic. I'm a detective. A detective of the supernatural. Most of what I encounter isn't real. It's a mouse in the attic, or some kids wanting attention by throwing plates or some such thing when people aren't looking, scratching themselves and saying the devil did it.

"Let me say this too. I'm not religious. I don't believe in God. I'm an atheist. But I do believe there are things we don't understand, and that's what I look into. I believe that religious symbols are often just symbols of power—as far as the supernatural is concerned. It's not religion, or an exorcism, anything like that that effects the supernatural. It's the power those things possess when they are used by those who believe in any kind of magic or religion that makes them work. The idea of religion has thought and purpose and substance, even if the religion itself is no more real than a three year straight win by the Red Sox.

"I like to give my cases a name when I write about them, and I gave this one a name too. It's a little exaggerated, I admit, so I'm not entirely immune to the melodramatic. I call it, *The Case of the Lighthouse Shambler*. Cute, huh?"

With that, she took a sip of her drink and Kevin dimmed the lights. There was a glow from the fire, but it was a small light, and flickered just enough so you could see who was who in the room. Shadows jumped along the side of Dana's face as she spoke.

Due to the bit of celebrity that I have as an author and investigator, the popularity of my books, I am often offered jobs that deal with the supernatural, or as I prefer, when it's real, the supernormal. As I said before, the bulk of these turn out to be something silly, or a hoax, and because of that, I always send out my assistants, Nora Sweep and Gary Martin, to check it out. I don't even do that if what's being suggested to me sounds uninteresting, or old hat, or deeply suspicious, but every now and then I come across something that might be genuine. More often than not, it isn't.

But if a request hits my desk that sounds like it might be of some curiosity, I send them first to check it out. One of the queries was from a Reggie, whose last name I will not reveal. Reggie had a lighthouse he claimed was infected. Those were his words. In his email to my web site, which is how we obtain most of our queries, he said that the haunting, if it could be called that, had occurred as of late, and that he felt it more resembled the sort of things I dealt with than so-called ghost hunters. He added that he wasn't one who believed in life after death, or hadn't before all this, but was certain that whatever was going on was beyond his explanation, and that the lighthouse, which he had been converting into a kind of home, had only recently been subject to the events that were causing him to write for my assistance. It was intriguing, and I've always been prone to an

interest in lighthouses. I find them an odd kind of structure, and by their nature, perched as they are on the edge of the sea, mysterious.

Anyway, I sent Nora and Gary over for a look, and then forgot about it, as I was involved in a small case that took me out of the country for few days, and was easy to solve. It turned out to be a nest of birds inside an air vent, and nothing supernatural at all. I collected my fee, which was sizable, and disappointing to the couple who had hired me, who felt certain the wife's old uncle was responsible and was trying to speak to her from beyond the grave in a fluttering kind of way because he had died without teeth. The flutter, of course, was the beating of the bird's wings.

I won't give you the location of the lighthouse, as that is a private matter between myself and the client, but I will say it was located along the Gulf Coast, and had once been important for ships, but had long since been abandoned. For a time, it was a tourist site, but it drew few tourists, and then it was sold to my client, Reggie, who had begun to remodel it to make a home for himself and his soon-to-be wife. However, after a few days working alone in the place, breaking up the ground, and repairing an old stairway, he began to have the sensation that he was being watched, and that the watcher was, in his words—malignant. He didn't feel as if it were looking over his shoulder, but was instead at the bottom of the winding metal stairs and was looking up, as if it could see through the top floor and spy on him at work.

He had no reason to think this, other than sensation, but he felt that as the day wound on, as the night came closer, the watcher became more bold and more present, if you will. When it was just dark, Reggie heard a creaking on the metal stairs, which was startling to him, as he had locked the door at the bottom of the lighthouse. Next he heard a slow sort of thudding on the stairs. So certain was he that someone was there, he went out on the landing and looked down. He could see nothing, but he could hear a kind of labored, angry breathing, and he noticed that the metal steps leading up would take turns bending with pressure, as if someone heavy were climbing up, but there was nothing there. It frightened him so, he locked the door at the upper entrance—for he had built a wall and placed a door there for a bedroom—and backed away from it, waiting. Then there came a sound at the door like someone breathing heavily. This was followed by a light tapping, a delay, and then a scratching, not too unlike, he thought, a dog wanting in. And then the door began to bulge around the hinges, as if it were being pushed, and he felt for certain it was about to blow, and whatever was on the other side, whatever was pushing and breathing and scratching, would soon enter the room in a rush.

Well, there was a trap hole as well, in the middle of the room. He had built it and attached an old fire pole there for fun. He dropped through the opening and slid down the pole by way of exit, and looked back up. He couldn't see the landing, really, but he could see it partly, and there was nothing there. Nothing. When he got to the bottom of the pole, he was brave enough to go to the base of the stairs and look up. That was when he heard a kind of screech and an exhaust of wind, and the stairs began to quiver, and something, most assuredly, even though he could not see it, was hastening down after him.

He broke and ran, feeling certain the thing was behind him. Once, he glanced back and saw what he said was an unidentifiable shadowy shape, and then he came to a point where all of a sudden his fear was gone, and he slowed down and turned around and looked. And there was nothing there. It was as if there had been a line of demarcation between fear and sanity, and he had crossed it.

This was what Reggie told me in his email, and as I said, it was intriguing enough that I sent Nora and Gary for a look, and I went about my other business.

When I was back from Europe, I asked my assistants about the lighthouse. They had been enthusiastically waiting on me, and told me quite firmly this was the real deal, and that I would be interested, and Reggie seemed willing to let go of the proper fee to find out the cause, and if at all possible, banish it.

They had gone there during the day and placed talcum powder on the stairs that wound up to the top, to the light, which was still workable, and they had come back the next morning to find, as Reggie had said, someone, or something, had gone up the steps and left prints in the talc, though neither thought the prints were foot or shoe prints. They couldn't quite explain what they thought they were. They had photographs, and my first thought was that in some of these, they looked a little bit like the hooves of a goat. In other photos, the prints were quite different, and less comparative to anything I could think of.

The following night, they replaced the talc, locked the upper door, and stayed at the top. What followed for them was an event exactly like that Reggie had experienced, only they had seen the shadow of something through the crack under the door, pacing in front of it like an anxious parent waiting for a child to come home.

"It was a feeling like I have never experienced," Nora said. "And working for you, I've experienced a lot. But I felt, quite surely, that beyond that door was something purely evil. I know that's silly, and not particularly scientific, but that's how it was, and I was frightened to the bone."

Gary agreed. He said the door began to heave, as before when Reggie was there, and the two of them took to the fire pole and slid down. No sooner had they reached bottom, then whatever was at the top of the stairs shifted loudly, and came charging down the steps with a wild sound somewhere between a burst of breath and a screech, the stairs vibrating as it came, the steps seeming in danger of coming loose of their bolts.

"I think that whatever is there is building its reserve," Gary said. "That a night will come when it will come through that door, and going through the hole in the floor, sliding down that pole Reggie installed, will just not be enough. Whatever is there, wants whoever is inside that lighthouse to not be there. And my feeling is, once it builds its presence to a crescendo, something horrible will happen."

My assistants often experience incredible things, which is their job, but the way they talked, it was clear to me that they had been thoroughly impressed with the thing in the lighthouse, so we packed our bags, and on Reggie's dime, we flew out there, rented a car and drove the rest of the way to our destination.

In the daylight the lighthouse was interesting, but seemed far less than sinister. Of course, that is often the situation with these kinds of cases. You can't judge them quite as well in the day. There are certainly horrors that exist in broad

daylight, but the bulk of the supernatural seems to prefer nightfall, if not particularly, the witching hour.

Reggie, as we planned, met us at the base of the lighthouse, shook hands, exchanged a few pleasantries, and then he gave me keys to the place, shook my hand again, as if he thought it might be the last time, wished us luck, and went on his way.

Since my assistants had already convinced themselves there was something in the tower, I didn't bother with the talc, or other measures of that sort, but instead sent them to town with a lunch order, and went to the top and looked around. The summit of the lighthouse, at least that part that was livable, had been remodeled as a bedroom, and the glass that wound its way about did nothing more now than provide a view completely around the circumference of the lighthouse. It was a lovely view, and I could see why Reggie would want to make this the master bedroom, turning other areas of the tower, eventually, into other living spaces. It would indeed make a unique home.

There was a bathroom slightly to the side, built into a kind of cubicle, so as not to be pressed against the glass and diminish the view. I went there and washed my face, more to understand what was what, and then examined the "fire hole" in the floor, and the pole that went straight to the bottom of the tower. I slid down it, and when I reached the floor, I looked back, noted that I could see through gaps in the stairs the upper landing, which was purposely pocked with holes so as to provide for the drip of water should it ever invade the upper quarters. A problem perhaps, if this was to be turned into a home, but not my concern. I'm a seeker of the supernatural, not an architect.

Climbing back up the stairs, I was suddenly accosted—that's the word that comes to me—by a feeling of anxiety. This is not new in my business, but as Nora and Gary explained, it was different here; stronger and more absorbing. I felt for a moment as if I might turn and bolt to the bottom and race out the door. Again, not all that unusual, but what was different was how hard I had to work to make myself climb to the top of the stairs. Usually, I can shake off those kinds of feelings with less effort than this took. I also felt an odd sensation as I climbed, near the bottom of the stairs anyway, on the left side, and that was a sensation of air that at first seemed cool, and then gave me a feeling akin to dry ice, which is so cold it can burn. My arm was freckled with goose bumps until I had gone up at least six feet from the floor.

In the top room, the sensation of fear did not go away, but it did subside considerably, enough for me to move comfortably about the room. Looking out the window, I saw that the light on the water was bright, and night was some time off, and it calmed me.

It seemed to me that whatever was here was not only dangerous, but somehow the stairs were its main area of strength. This didn't mean that it was weak away from the stairs, but the stairs were its prime location, and the area where its supernatural connection was most profound.

I decided not to spend the night in the lighthouse the first night, but instead sent Nora and Gary to the library, and any other source of information they could locate, to find out about the history of the lighthouse. I left the lighthouse several

times during the day, and went back as it neared nightfall, and each time, I felt the presence in the building was growing more observant of my actions.

That night I watched the lighthouse from a distance, observing the upper windows, which were not lit up, and the light, which was no longer functioning. I tried to imagine how it had looked during its era of operation.

As the night fell, my vantage point from a nearby hill, where I sat with a cool drink in a lawn chair looking through binoculars, revealed to me a flash inside the upper darkness. I leaned forward. I saw it again. The flash moved before the window in a bobbing fashion, and then it was gone.

I had an idea that it had raced down the stairwell. I also determined from prior experience, that the light I saw would not be visible up close, and would in fact be the manifestation of the thing, if viewed from a distance. Up close and personal, it would be the presence itself that one would have to confront, lit or unlit.

That night, I retired to the hotel and read the information that Nora and Gary had provided for me, while they shared a room next door. They thought because they each had a bed in their room, that I believed there weren't any shenanigans going on. Actually, I suspected that they had been intimate for some time, and for reasons known only to them, didn't want me to know. I decided not to question their reasoning, or reveal my suspicions—which were founded on evidence—and I'll add to that statement that they are now married, so anything I'm telling you now does not matter, not that I cared in the first place.

In the notes they provided, there was nothing particularly interesting about the lighthouse. I read from a book on a history of the locale, to see if anything else might stand out as a catalyst for the thing on the stairs. Nothing jumped out at me. There had been a share of shipwrecks, in spite of the lighthouse, and there had been one famous one before its existence in the early seventeen hundreds.

That offered a note of interest. The problem was, there wasn't anything of detail on the wreck, other than an unnamed ship had collided with the rocky shoreline, and that on examination of the wrecked vessel, a man named Greenberg was located alive, and all others on the ship were found dead, and due to their condition, it was assumed they had been killed, and in fact cannibalized, as the ship had been becalmed for weeks at sea, and all food had been exhausted.

The article said Greenberg had committed the murders with an axe. When they took him off the ship, he said it had not been him who had committed the crime and the cannibalism, but was something else on the ship. A demon that he said lived in a brass jug—his words—and it was there now, and that it had been assigned to protect him when he did a good deed for an Arab trader. He thought nothing of it at the time, and merely thought the jug given him was a nice item that he would sell when he arrived on the mainland. But the demon in the bottle seemed jealous and upset and chose to protect him, even when he felt he did not need protecting; the mere presence of anyone near drove the thing in the bottle to frenzy, and that its main purpose was to dispatch anyone nearby, so that it might return to the tranquility inside the jug. That was his story, and as you might judge, it wasn't taken seriously.

The ship was in terrible shape. It was searched, but no demon was found, nor was a brass jug located. Most of what could be salvaged was salvaged.

Nora and Gary's research showed that the ship dealt in antiquities, and that the crew was well experienced, and becalmed or not, there should have been enough food on board. The survivor was duly tried and hung, and that was the end of him. If he had a protecting demon in a jug, neither jug nor demon presented itself at his last moments as he stood on the gallows.

I think you might see where I'm going here, as I have discovered in my investigations that old trinkets or odd items, like a brass jug, might in fact have some connection to the supernatural. But since it was not recovered, and there wasn't any evidence of Greenberg being protected from even so much as a rope burn, there was little to go on.

I looked over maps and documentation to locate the exact site of the shipwreck, but there was nothing that could be fully determined. On a hunch, I went to the butcher shop and bought some soup bones and some animal skin, and a pint of calf's blood, and went to the lighthouse and began to search around the concrete floor near the stairwell.

I didn't necessarily expect to find anything, but I did satisfy myself, with a thermometer, that the air on the left side near the floor was quite cold and it wasn't my imagination. Still, the cool air there presented a sensation different from that of the garden-variety presence one sometimes encounters in these sort of spots; the kind of presence that is commonly called a ghost or spook.

I climbed the stairs with an uncomfortable consciousness of being observed, and made my way to the top room and closed the door. There, I set down the plastic bag containing the soup bone and skin, removed my shoulder bag and took out my tools, and went to work.

I first placed the bone on the floor, and placed the stretch of hairless animal skin beside it. I set up a camera on a shelf in the room, the sort sometimes referred to as a Nanny cam—a hidden device parents use to make sure their nannies are acting accordingly with their children. I then placed a mirror on the floor beside the bone and the skin, moved back, and drew a circle with blessed chalk. Now, the blessing isn't necessarily a Christian one. In this case, the chalk had been blessed by an African wizard who chanted over it with words of juju; to simplify, juju is an African term for magic and spells. I drew a large circle about ten feet in circumference with white chalk, and inside of it I drew around its edge in other colors of chalk, each blessed by different priests, wizards, rabbis, and so on, symbols of power. These symbols do not belong to any one theology, but are in fact, universal in the supernatural. I covered the inside of the circle with flour, not blessed, just plain flour, and then placed another soup bone and piece of skin in its center. I sprinkled more flour all around the circle so that it was next to the first soup bone and skin I had laid out, and then poured the flour on the floor as I backed toward the door and the stairway. I sprinkled it on the landing, stopped and looked down the stairs. It was not yet night, so I hadn't been followed up the stairway, and forced to exit by means of the fire pole, but I certainly felt the thing's attendance in the light house.

It could see what I was doing, I was sure, but if this thing was what I thought it might be, its nature and design would consign it to certain decisions. I went down the stairs, and I will tell you, quite frankly, it was hard to do. I found near the

bottom that I was leaning away from the side where it was cold. But as a last test, I stuck my hand out in that direction, and felt the air hit me as briskly as if I had poked my arm into a meat freezer. I kept it there, and the cold turned so cold it felt hot, and my arm began to feel singed, as if I had been too close to a fire. I pulled it back before the heat became too intense, and the confirmation of the kind of cold that was there gave me yet another clue to what might be there.

I went out into the daylight, and I was grateful for the heat of the sun.

As I was, in a sense, gaining artillery range on my specter, I didn't stay in the lighthouse that night either. I felt I needed another night of information before I made an attempt to remove the thing. I knew too that if I was right, what was in the lighthouse, and why it was there, would make it a most deadly enemy. I didn't take this lightly.

Next morning, I took Nora and Gary with me, for they had been lying quite low in their bedroom, doing what you might expect. They were not altogether eager to go, which had nothing to do with facing danger, but had considerable to do with their libido.

Inside the lighthouse, I showed them the cold-hot spot, and then we went upstairs. The flour on the landing was disturbed, and there were marks in it that looked hoof-like in spots, and dog-like in others, and there were those other marks I had seen in their photographs that reminded me of nothing I could describe.

In the room, the flour was bothered, and in fact, it looked as if something had rolled in it. The bone and skin were there, but they had changed. The bone had grown meat on it, and the skin had grown fur. The mirror was cracked, and when I picked it up, the image of the intruder, as I expected, was still frozen in the glass.

I showed it to Nora and Gary, and I would try here to describe what we saw, but it was indescribable. But, I will come back to that later.

The circle was only slightly disturbed, and I could see where the chalk had been pushed at, but not actually broken. Inside the circle the symbols were as visible as when I wrote them, and the bone and skin there had not changed at all, except to putrefy a little. I had them removed, and refreshed the circle where it showed some minor contact, and then I examined the Nanny cam.

There was nothing present in the film but the flour being disturbed and the mirror cracking. Whatever had caused this was invisible to film. I knew that in person, it would not be invisible, but would have a very visible and menacing presence.

We went away and had lunch and waited until it was close to an hour before dark.

We went up the stairs, and this time the air was very cold and uncomfortable, in that dry-ice manner.

At the top, I had Nora and Gary get inside the circle and sit down, cross-legged. I sat with them. They had actually brought a sack lunch with them, with bottled Cokes, and though I started to admonish them for it, they had brought enough for me as well, so we all sat there eating fried chicken from a bag, drinking Cokes.

As we ate, I said, "It hasn't been deadly before, but tonight will be different. We have caught its image in the mirror. It can't tolerate that."

"You call that an image?" Gary said.

I said, "What we are dealing with is a jinn, or something like one. A demonic presence that resides in another dimension, and enters into this one by way of a device to which it has been confined. Like a brass jug."

"The Greenberg story," Nora said.

"Bingo," I said. "The demonic figure I'm talking about has the power to regenerate meat on bone, hair on flesh," I said. "But do not let that fool you. This is not a positive power in the universe, or the dimension from where it came. It hates being in the jug, or bottle, or container, but it's cursed to be drawn to just that. It can come out if called, or if the container is destroyed, but it must return to a container if one is presented to it."

"You mean if the jug were found, it would have to go back inside?"

"Exactly," I said. "There is an ancient line by an anonymous Arab wizard that reads something like, *And when the mouth of the container is presented, and a request is made, then to its prison it must return.*"

"But we don't have the jug," Nora said.

"No, we don't. And that presents a problem. All I have is protection spells, and one juju spell that has proved powerful in other situations, and I hope will serve us as soundly this time out."

"Hope?" Gary said.

"Well," I said, "having not tried it on a jinn, having never dealt with one before, I must consign the idea to that area labeled: Speculation."

Long shadows had begun to crawl across the floor. The feeling of something observing magnified greatly.

"How did you know it was a jinn?" Gary asked.

"I was clued by the air at the bottom of the stair. Supernormal manifestations often present themselves by a chilling of the air, even in the hottest of places, but this spirit, its air is so cold it burns. That is the trait of a jinn, and they are often credited with the hot winds that blow across the deserts of the Middle East. That face you saw in the mirror, that is only a momentary presentation. It can shift its features, its shape. It is powerful. At some point, a commanding wizard, someone who understood dimensional spells, trapped this creature in a brass jug, and then he consigned it to the protection of someone he felt he owed a favor. Someone who unfortunately thought the idea of a jinn in a jug was all talk."

"That would be Greenberg again," Gary said.

"Absolutely," I said. "For whatever reason, the protector of Greenberg—this jinn—felt that it had to protect his master from, well, everyone. It didn't judge if they did anything to Greenberg or not. Its nature is ferocious, and it's a nasty sort of creature. It's possible it did what it did just because it could. So, it ran rampant on the ship, and my guess is somehow, after all the slaughter, Greenberg, its master, was able to have it go back in the jug, where it was stopped up tight."

"Like a fly in a Coke bottle," Nora said.

"Exactly," I said. "I'm surmising a bit, but after it was contained in the jug, the ship ran aground, having no one to sail it, and the damage the jinn did looked like axe murders and cannibalism. It wasn't. Greenberg told them the truth. But no one believed his story, and he was hanged for the crime. I don't think even he understood what he had. He popped the cork, the jinn came out, and started to *protect him*. It was so full of passion and hunger and anger, it tore the crew apart."

Greenberg most likely had been given a spell by the Arabic trader, and though he had thought nothing of it at the time, he remembered it, and by speaking it, he caused the jinn to return to the confines of the jug. But too late for the crew.”

“Where’s the jug?”

“Ah, and here I speculate again, though quite well, I venture to say. It was lost in the shipwreck, buried in the sand, and in time, sand was packed over it. The jug was sealed, and therefore so was the jinn. The lighthouse was built on top of the jug, and where Reggie reinforced the stair rail, near the bottom, he broke the concrete and the jug was underneath. He didn’t see it, but it was there, and as he worked—”

“The stopper was popped free,” Gary said.

“Yes, but it has been confined for some time, and it no longer had its master, so it has been learning on its own how to be free, how to use its own will. That’s why it has only been a sensation, a sound, a glance, up until now. After I saw it had the ability to grow flesh on a bone, hair on skin, I felt it had come back to itself, so to speak. And with one of its many images trapped in a mirror, it will be angry; a jinn does like to show any part of its true self in a reflection.”

“Being back to itself is not good, is it?” Nora said.

“No, it’s not,” I said. “There is little in the supernormal universe nastier than a jinn on the loose.”

I looked outside.

“We should have evidence of that shortly, so I suggest you do not get outside the circle. Not a finger. Not a nose. Not a toe.”

“Can it break through?” Nora asked.

“We will soon find out,” I said, and removed a couple of thick incense candles from my bag, and lit them. The incense was supposed to contain powerful properties to combat evil. I hoped they in fact did. I had never before had the opportunity to use them.

It was then that we heard the footsteps on the stairs.

I could feel Nora close to me, shivering, or maybe it was me shivering, or the both of us. Behind and to my left, I could hear Gary. He was breathing like a horse about to make the grade.

Outside the door, we heard the jinn stop. We saw its shadow move along the floor, and slide under like an oil spill. The shadow quivered in the candle light. The jinn paused. Then the door started to buckle, and there was a sound like a wind blowing through a canyon, followed by a brisk scratching noise. From the vigor of the scratching, it was obvious that it had gained tremendous strength in just the few days we had been there. The room filled with a stench, like carrion, and it turned warm in the room, but my guess was, outside the circle, it was even warmer. I saw the paint on the walls beading.

Then the door sagged in the middle, creaked at the hinges, and blew across the room. It smacked into the field around our protective circle, bounced to the side, and skidded across the floor, hitting the runner at the base of the tall window glass. The circle, if it held, would keep out anything that was brought about by supernormal means. I tried to let that reassure me.

“You two,” I said, “get behind me.”

They didn't hesitate.

It came into the room in a whirl of shadows, and the whirl made dust rise up and twist about, and the dust hit the field around our circle as if we were behind glass. The jinn leaped right at us, so fast it made me jump. It hit the force field, bounced back, whirled in a tight spin of darkness, and came again.

This time the field wobbled and the chalk circle dented slightly. I reached into my bag and brought out the blessed chalk, and reached out to tighten the circle, and I felt it touch me.

I don't know how to describe it. It was a horrid touch. I know that sounds very... Lovecraftian, or Poe-like. What is a horrid touch? What does that actually mean? But I have no other words to describe it. I can only say it was like black electricity leaping through my bones, topping out at my skull to the degree that I thought the summit of my head might blow off.

And it had only been a touch. My finger was smoking and blistered from the burn.

Around and around it went, making the circle I had drawn. Out of the whirl, long fingers, spiked with nails like daggers, touched the field, and the field ripped. I pulled a paper from my bag and started to quote the spells the juju man had given me; they were written across the page in chicken blood and were easy to read even by candle light. My reading them made the jinn howl all the louder. I don't know if it was in anger or pain, or both.

It bounced again and again against the chalk wall, causing the chalk to dust slightly, and move. The circle was not holding. I had not only foolishly put myself in this bad position, but I had put my friends in the same position as well.

I kept reciting the juju spell, but it didn't seem to be working. I finally realized that I was showing fear, that my recital of it didn't have the African tone for the words; they sounded exactly like what they were—words read off paper and pronounced poorly.

I admit all this reluctantly, for I've faced many horrors, but this one was strong well beyond my expectations. I had never seen the chalk line start to break so easily. I closed my eyes, started to quote the words again, this time, not by rote, but with feeling.

When I opened my eyes, my heart sank. It hadn't mattered. The field was starting to fade, and the long fingers of the thing took hold of the tip of my shoe, and it was jerked off my foot and snapped into the spinning vortex. The room became dark. The light of the candles flickered, a sure sign that the jinn was breaking through. The air stank and it grew warm, like a campfire had been built all around us.

As it was tearing its way in, I attempted to draw the line with the chalk again, but each time I reached, it reached too, and finally it caught me by the tip of my finger. I tried to pull it back, but it had me in a snug grip, and in a moment I felt a burning, tearing pain that nearly made me faint. It pulled the tip of my finger off like it was snapping loose a damp piece of taffy. Blood dotted the floor with hot red splashes.

The chalk was buckling. The rip was widening. The field was about to break completely.

On instinct, for a weapon, I grabbed up one of the Coke bottles by the neck, just as this thing, this shape-shifting thing, plunged through the barrier. I swatted at it with the bottle, and in a rush, it turned thin and smoky, and was sucked directly into the bottle; all of him.

I quickly put the open bottle top against the floor, gently, and told Nora to roll up the paper with the juju spell on it, and she did. I took it, and with one quick move, lifted the bottle and jammed the paper inside. Then I grabbed up the candle, and ignoring what the hot wax was doing to my fingers, I packed the mouth of the bottle with it. The wax had another effect; it sealed off my finger wound.

The jinn roiled around inside the bottle like a lava lamp, but it didn't come out.

Nora said, "What happened?"

"I have to admit to an accident," I said. "It wouldn't have occurred to me. But remember the quote I told you that was anonymous, about the jinn? *And when the mouth of the container is presented, and a request is made—*"

"Then to its prison it must return," Nora said, finishing off the line.

"I misunderstood. I thought it had to be the container it was placed in originally. But it's clear now. Once it was subject to a spell, if a container was put before it, it had to enter it. It didn't have to return to its original confinement, it just had to imprison itself. When I picked it up and brought it down, it was merely responding to its initial commands, given to it those long years ago."

"So, our jinn wasn't so bad after all," Nora said.

"Bad enough," Gary said.

I remembered I had considered scolding them for bringing a lunch and Cokes into a power circle. I decided not to mention that.

Not much more to tell. We put the bottle in a metal ice chest and covered the bottle in four or five inches of dry concrete, and put water in it, and let it dry for a couple of days on the landing of our hotel room. Day after it was solid dry, we rented a boat and motored out into the Gulf where it was deep, and dropped the closed chest full of concrete and the trapped jinn, into the depths of the water.

She leaned back, and said, "Well, that's it."

We all sat silent for a while. The smokers had forgotten to call time and go smoke. They had listened without interruption from start to finish.

Finally, I said, "It's a good story, but how are we to know it's nothing more than a story?"

"Oh," she said, holding her glass while Kevin refilled it, and then went over to turn on the lights, "you don't. Remember? I said it didn't matter to me... But..."

She reached inside her coat pocket and brought out something small and round.

"This is the mirror in which the jinn's image was trapped, and considering I thought you might ask something like that, just for grins, I brought it with me."

"It's easy to fake things," I said, but then my mouth fell open.

She held the mirror toward us, and all I can tell you is what Dana said before. There's no way to truly describe the image that had been trapped inside that broken mirror. It sent chills down my back, and in fact, the whole room for a moment seemed as if it were made of ice. None of us questioned its validity.

Another thing. As Dana held the mirror out, I noted that the tip of her index finger on her right hand was missing; where the tip should have been there was a glistening wink of bone.

She smiled, put the mirror away, then without another word, downed her drink, rose from her chair, and departed, leaving us speechless.

