

Lemon Hill

A Short Story



By
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In the summer, Marcus and I would ride our bikes over to Lemon Hill almost every day. Sometimes we'd pass through it as a short cut to the creeks behind Sedgely Drive where we liked to catch crayfish. Other times it was our destination. There was always a baseball game or a cookout or frightened tourists who had accidentally turned right instead of left at Waterworks Drive.

If you're a history buff, you may know that the mansion at Lemon Hill was once the home of Robert Morris, signer of the Declaration of Independence. Although I grew up just a few blocks away, I never knew that fact until late into my twenties. That's one of the unique things about growing up in Philadelphia: you're always a stone's throw from history.

Back then, the only things Marcus and I knew about that old mansion on the hill were the ghost stories. They went like this: In the eighteenth century a man named Henry Pratt purchased the estate from Morris and planted a vast grove of Lemon Trees around the mansion. It is said that you can still smell the scent of lemons even though Pratt's trees have been gone for more than two hundred years. The older kids in the neighborhood said that if the moonlight were right, you could glimpse Pratt's ghost walking about or sitting at an easel, painting.

I was just a kid and I didn't know what to make of these tales. For the most part I didn't think about them, though I was careful to avoid Lemon Hill at night.

Then, when I was twelve, something happened that seared them into my mind forever.

Marcus and I had been down on Kelly Drive all day, selling bottled water.

Whenever Action News predicted the temperature would eclipse ninety degrees, Marcus' dad would load a cooler filled with cheap bottled water onto the back of his bike and make him go down to the Drive and sell the bottles for two bucks each. The rule was that Marcus couldn't come home

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until he had sold at least half the bottles. Most of the time I would help Marcus sell the water, even though his dad never gave me a cut of the profits. I was never thrilled about wasting a precious summer day hawking warm water in the blazing sun, but Marcus was my best friend and it seemed like the right thing to do.

It wasn't always a bad gig. Once the college kids from the boathouses bought the whole cooler, freeing us for the rest of the day. Another time an old woman felt bad for us and give us five dollars for one bottle. We used the bonus to buy Italian water ice from the Rita's stand over on Girard Avenue.

But on this particular day, sales were slow. Earlier, to our utter chagrin, we had arrived at the Drive to discover that a cart vendor had taken our usual spot. To make matters worse, he was selling his water for just one dollar. After discussing it, Marcus and I decided to setup shop a little further north. It was a disaster. The cart vendor stole most of the rollerbladers who typically made up the bulk of our customers and the ones who did stop at our cooler were now outraged by our prices.

Marcus was worried. He said his dad would punch him in the chest if he came home without any money. So we stayed down on the Drive much later than we ever had. It was dark by the time the police came by and made us pack up. By then we had ventured all the way up to Brewery Hill Drive trying to find customers.

The only way back home was to take Sedgely Drive past Lemon Hill.

Marcus wasn't very talkative and we pedaled half the trip in silence. With a nearly full cooler strapped to the back of his bike, he moved much slower and I had to make a conscious effort not to leave him behind.

When we got to the top of Lemon Hill Drive, I heard a great commotion behind me. I turned to see that the cooler had fallen off the back of Marcus' bike, spilling plastic bottles everywhere. Marcus, afraid that his father would think that damaged merchandise was the reason the water hadn't sold, was frantically chasing down bottles.

I went back to help. "What happened, man?"

"I don't know," he said, caressing an armload of bottles like a newborn baby. "I was riding and all of a sudden it felt like somebody knocked the cooler off my bike with a baseball bat."

“What? You sure you didn’t hit one of these North Philly potholes in the dark? You know you’re good for that.”

He wasn’t amused. “Do you see a pothole?”

I looked around, but I couldn’t find one. But it was so dark I couldn’t see much of anything.

“Man, why are you just standing there?” Marcus asked me. “Help me. You know if I don’t bring back all of these bottles you won’t see me the rest of the summer.”

I saw a bottle that had rolled over near the mansion and I went to retrieve it. When I did, I noticed something.

After a minute or so, Marcus came over to crack the whip again. “Les, what are you doing over here? How long does it take to pick up one bottle?” No sooner had he spoken than he noticed the smell too.

Fresh lemons.

“You smell that?” I asked him.

“Yeah. It smells like...”

Just then a light came on in the second floor of the mansion, startling both of us. Marcus dropped three of the bottles crowding his arms. The bottles thwacked against the asphalt, giving rise to rustling in the dark bank of trees off to our right. I turned toward the trees and that’s when I saw it: a painter’s easel.

We should have run away then, but we didn’t. Marcus couldn’t leave without his bottles and I couldn’t leave without my friend. Yet it was not loyalty that made me stay. I was drawn to the easel. Something came over me that compelled every ounce of my being to go over to it.

When I started walking towards it, Marcus yelled at my back, “Les, where are you going? Les? Les!” I heard him calling my name, but his voice was somehow muted, as if he were far away. I could think only of reaching the easel.

A few seconds later, I held a remarkable canvas portrait in my hand. The unfinished painting partially depicted someone sitting on a magnificent throne. The artist had painted from the bottom up and the portrait abruptly stopped at his subject’s knees. The one who sat on the throne had feet unlike any I had ever seen. They were shiny like polished brass and perfect in every way. I know it sounds strange to discuss feet in this manner, but they were beautiful, mesmerizing even.

I turned back and said, “Marcus, come see this.”

But Marcus was gone.

At first I thought my friend had fled in fear. But then I noticed his bike still splayed on the asphalt. The cooler lay open near it and all the bottles Marcus had collected were scattered about the ground, some of them still rolling.

The bravery that had led me to the easel departed from me as quickly as it had come. “Marcus?” I whispered tepidly into the dark. When no reply came, I thought, *This is not good.*

Just then a strong gust of wind with an overpowering lemon scent swirled around me, jarring the canvas from my hands and spinning me down to the ground. I yelled as I spun. When the gust had passed and the summer air was still again, I found myself staring directly up at the old mansion. I saw Marcus standing in the second floor window of the only lit room. It was definitely my friend, but his face looked different in a way I can’t quite describe. I called out his name, but he did not answer. He just withdrew from the window.

I noticed that the mansion’s front door was standing wide open. But I had no intention of setting even one toe inside that house. I sprinted over to my bike and pedaled home as fast as I could.

I spent the next twenty-five years of my life deconstructing the events of that night, trying to determine what had really happened. In a sense it was the defining moment of my life, setting me on the path to becoming what I am today: a professor of anthropology, specializing in the occult.

Given my impressive publication record, I should be tenured by now. I am not because I spend far more time conducting field research than I do in the classroom. In fact, I haven’t taught a class in six semesters now. But in that time I have observed no less than five exorcisms, twelve séances and a force that I am convinced was a third stage poltergeist. It is a commentary that I know more ghost hunters than anthropologists. The only reason the University hasn’t fired me is because of the popularity of my books. Two of the paranormal events I chronicled in my first book were optioned by Hollywood. I donated the whole seven-figure option fee to the

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University because a Tapirapé shaman I met in South America once told me that possession of more wealth than one needs gives rise to curses which accumulate and greet you upon death.

I've never told anyone this before now, but the passion with which I prosecute my research is driven by my desire to find Marcus. He disappeared from the world that night we smelled lemons. I was the last person to see him. The Police interrogated me for weeks about his disappearance, but my story never changed and a body was never recovered. When I told them about the cruelty of Marcus' father, the detectives simply classified Marcus as a runaway. In time they eventually reclassified him as a missing person. The case was closed unsolved. As the years passed no one seemed to care but me.

And I cared for a reason. If there is one thing that I've learned in all my research into the otherworldly, it is this: human souls never disappear. I cannot tell you if they go to the Astral Plane, or to Purgatory or to Allah's Paradise. But they go somewhere. It is one of the rare universal beliefs in the various occult systems I have studied. The reason I cannot let the case go is because I believe Marcus is still on this side, waiting to be found, or freed, as the case may be. I have consulted every manner of medium to search for his soul on The Other Side, but none have succeeded. What's more, deep down inside of my *Ka*, I can feel that he is still here, waiting for me to save him.

Though none of my mediums ever contacted Marcus, several of them encountered someone else who gave me my only lead in the case. For years I followed that lead with ruthless abandon until I reached its natural conclusion. That conclusion is what has brought me back to Lemon Hill after all these years.

Everything looked smaller. I had intentionally stayed away from Lemon Hill after Marcus went missing. The first few years I stayed away because it hurt too much, but later I avoided it for pragmatic reasons. I learned early on that many paranormal entities are easily disturbed and it's best not to seek them out until you're sure what you're dealing with. And I was finally sure.

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The neighborhoods abutting East Fairmount Park had deteriorated dramatically in the decades I had been gone. I drove by to find Lemon Hill in a state of deep disrepair, with dirt-patched fields replacing what I vividly remembered as lush and well-maintained grassy knolls. Many of the elegant statues were corroded by acid rain. The old mansion itself was decorated in repugnant graffiti. Some of the neighbors who still remembered me said the dilapidation was largely due to City budget cuts. I just shook my head. In my research I had discovered that places have spirits too. And the spirit of Lemon Hill was most definitely ailing.

I waited until nightfall to approach the house. That wasn't strictly required, but I didn't want to take any chances. Both of the nearby street lamps were broken and the only light came from the full moon. I used a crowbar to pry off the warped clapboard masking a window under the mansion's south portico. The nails made a terrible wailing sound as they were separated from the wood, like souls condemned in Hades. I climbed over the windowsill into the main parlor. It was completely dark, but I could taste the dust in the air. I flicked on my heavy-duty flashlight and saw rats the size of cats scurry away. The interior looked as bad as I had expected. Some of the rafters were exposed, furniture was strewn about and cobwebs were everywhere. Like an Egyptian tomb, the room I was standing in had clearly been vandalized many times.

I got right down to business. I pulled out my hand computer and turned it on. The luminance from the screen cast my face in a soft blue light. I pulled up a file containing the text of a scroll I had purchased from an elderly mystic in Bucharest who had never seen a black man in person before, especially not one who spoke passable Dacian. The actual scroll would've been better, but it was so rare I was afraid to remove it from my safe deposit box. I read the text aloud seven times in the original language. Then I waited.

About ten minutes later, a breeze blew into the room and I smelled lemons. I knew that was the ghost of Henry Pratt preparing to strike, but I didn't retreat. I wasn't there for the ghost. I was there for Marcus.

The ghost knocked me around pretty good. I cut my thigh on a shard of glass and fractured my right arm during one nasty fall, but I didn't flee. Every time the ghost knocked me down, I got back up and read the text seven times.

Eventually Henry Pratt's master answered back in modern English. "It means nothing that you speak an old tongue." The disembodied voice came from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

I looked down at the floor. Demons can be angered by the smallest perceived slight, so one must behave carefully. I once witnessed an exorcised demon possess a catholic priest, who then summarily slammed his own forehead into a rusted nail.

"Akashiel," I said, addressing him by name. "I am here for my friend, whom I left behind in your service."

The demon laughed arrogantly. "You did not leave him. I took him, just as I may take you now, monkey."

The other thing about demons is that they habitually lie, so you can never really be sure whether to believe what they say. It was quite possible that Akashiel could've taken me at any moment, but I had reason to believe he was simply making idle threats.

"I want to propose a trade," I said.

As soon as I said that, I felt my body flying backwards through the air. I slammed into a wall and was knocked unconscious. When I came to, I found myself in the same room, but everything was different. The mansion had been restored to its original state, down to the tiniest details. All the furniture was bright and new. A fire burned in the fireplace and I saw endless tracts of lemon trees outside the window.

Henry Pratt's body sat cross-legged on a couch across from me. Of course I knew it was not really Henry Pratt, or even his ghost. "What could a monkey possibly have to trade me?" Akashiel asked bemusedly through Pratt's mouth.

"Freedom," I said with a straight face.

"How can a slave offer a master freedom? You better do better than that Lester, or you will find out if there really is life after death."

I uttered the first few lines of the only words that can scare a demon.

"Shut up!" Akashiel shouted at me irately, rising to his feet.

I closed my eyes and waited. Either Akashiel would kill me in the next few moments or we would bargain. I honestly did not know which outcome would occur.

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“I will give you the boy,” he said finally. “But it will not grant you the absolution you seek. I told your silly mediums that many times.”

Indeed he had. Whenever I had sent mediums forth to search for Marcus’ soul on The Other Side, all they had ever found was Akashiel, taunting them. I had engaged mediums from around the world and it was highly unusual for a demon that did not possess you to travel so far so consistently. It eventually occurred to me that Akashiel wanted something from me.

On the logic that it is wise to know one’s enemies, I began to research him. I learned that an angel named Akashiel had been one of Lucifer’s fallen stars. Before he rebelled against the Most High, Akashiel had been a Cherubim of the Second Choir, one of the highest ranking angels in Heaven. Later I found evidence that Robert Morris, the original owner of Lemon Hill, had been known to consult “a dark spirit” on his business and political decisions. But in the end it was the fate of Henry Pratt that convinced me what I was dealing with. Pratt had been a successful merchant when he purchased Lemon Hill from Morris. Soon after taking up residence in the mansion, he began to exhibit strange behavior. He lost interest in his mercantile business and spent the rest of his life planting lemon trees and trying to become a great painter. He eventually went completely mad. When I joined these facts with my own experience at Lemon Hill, I deducted that Akashiel must now be a principality, a demon assigned to a particular place. It was a demotion of the highest order. Not only had he been permanently exiled from the glorious presence of God, he was now bound to this decrepit park like an ordinary ghost. In many ways, Lemon Hill was Akashiel’s hell.

The only way for a principality to leave his assigned area is to be expelled by an archangel. And this is precisely what I was offering Akashiel. The words I had uttered were the beginnings of an ancient prayer alleged to summon the most ferocious of the warrior archangels in God’s Army. But this was risky business, for warrior angels have been known to kill anyone they find who does not love God with all their heart.

“What I seek is my burden, not yours,” I said to the demon. “Release Marcus so we may end our dealings.”

“When Michael’s angels come, they will kill you,” he warned. “Surely you know that. They hate monkeys as much as I do.”

“They will not harm a servant of the Most High,” I said shakily.

Akashiel laughed at me again. “Then you better start running now.”

“You do not know what is in my heart,” I said.

“You have studied the many ways of darkness so long now that *you* do not know what is in your heart. You believe in everything. But the Most High is jealous, as you will soon contemplate for the rest of eternity.”

“Release Marcus or kill me,” I said.

“You realize I could kill you before you summon anyone.”

“But you won’t,” I said. “You want me to finish it. You long to be free of this place.”

Pratt’s body sighed. “As you wish, monkey.” He raised his right hand in a gesture that I presumed would release my friend’s imprisoned soul.

“Wait,” I said suddenly. Before I could get out another word, a lamp crashed against my head and my chair flew out from under me, dropping me painfully to the floor.

“You seem to be under the mistaken impression that you can give me commands,” Akashiel said.

Between grimaces of agony, I said, “I want you to release Pratt too.”

One of the other things I had figured out about my experience at Lemon Hill was the meaning of the canvas I had been drawn to that night. Pratt’s ghost had been painting a reproduction of the throne room of Heaven when Marcus and I showed up and interrupted him. Since no living human is capable of observing the awesome glory of God, the completed portrait would’ve been an instant death sentence for anyone who happened upon it. I suspect Akashiel made Pratt paint it against his will, which is likely what drove him mad.

Now Pratt’s body walked over and spat in my face. “This is not a negotiation.”

But it was. “Release both of them or kill me,” I said.

Pratt’s body turned away from me and went over to stoke the fire. “The night I took Marcus, I actually possessed you first. I was the force driving you to the easel. I was planning to kill you for interrupting my servant’s work. But when I looked into your heart, I saw that it was blacker than a thousand nights.”

“Lies!” I hissed.

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Akashiel went on as if I had said nothing. “So I came out of you and let your own nature take over.” I covered my ears, but Akashiel used some kind of telepathy to speak inside my head. “You always hated Marcus. You hated him for having a faster bicycle. You hated him for having two parents when you only had one. You hated him for dragging you down to Kelly Drive to sell water, even though you knew the money was for his father’s stupid little church. But more than anything you hated him because he loved The Most High and you never did. I watched you murder him like the talking animal that you are, like all of you are.” Pratt’s body came over and kicked me in the teeth. “Lemon Hill did not push you towards the darkness. It was always in you.”

I ran from the mansion screaming. I headed straight to the hidden plot near the old the storm drain where I had buried Marcus’ body the night I killed him. I dug and I dug until I found the bones.

THE END

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