



Maplecroft: The Borden Dispatches

By Cherie Priest

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But it is not far enough from the affliction that possessed my parents. Their characters, their very *souls*, were consumed from within by something that left malevolent entities in their place. It originates from the ocean's depths, plaguing the populace with tides of nightmares and madness.

This evil cannot hide from me. No matter what guise it assumes, I will be waiting for it. With an axe.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Maplecroft*

“Cherie Priest is supremely gifted and *Maplecroft* is a remarkable novel, simultaneously beautiful and grotesque. It is at once a dark historical fantasy with roots buried deep in real-life horror and a supernatural thriller mixing Victorian drama and Lovecraftian myth. You won't be able to put it down.”—Christopher Golden, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Snowblind*

Praise for Cherie Priest and her novels

“Priest can write scenes that are jump-out-of-your-skin scary.”—Cory Doctorow, Author of *Homeland*

“Give Cherie Priest fifteen minutes of your time; trust me—you won't look back.”—Bookslut

“Priest kills as a stylist.”—Charles de Lint, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*

“Cherie Priest kicks ass!”—Maggie Shayne, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Sleep with the Lights On*

About the Author

Cherie Priest is the author of more than a dozen novels, including the award-winning Clockwork Century series (*Boneshaker*, *Dreadnaught*, *Clementine*) and the Cheshire Red books (*Bloodshot*, *Hellbent*). *Maplecroft* is the first book of The Borden Dispatches.

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Praise for *Maplecroft*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THESE ARE THE THINGS AN EARTHQUAKE BRINGS

Lizzie Andrew Borden

MARCH 17, 1894

No one else is allowed in the cellar.

Emma has a second key, in case I am injured or trapped down there; but Emma also has instructions about how and when to use that key. When she knocks upon the cellar door, I must always reply, “Emma dear, I'm nearly finished.” Even if I'm not working on anything at all. Even if I'm simply down there, writing in my

journals. If I say anything else when she knocks, or if I do not respond—my elder sister knows what to do: She must summon Doctor Seabury, and then prevent him from descending into the cellar unarmed.

I wish there were someone closer she could send for, but no one else would come.

The good doctor, though . . . he could be persuaded to attend us, I believe. And he's a large man, sturdy, and in good health for a fellow of his age. Quite a commanding presence, very much the old soldier, which is no surprise. During the War Between the States, he served as a field surgeon—I know that much. He must've been quite young, but the military training has served him well through the years, even in such a provincial setting as Fall River.

Yes, I think all things being equal, he's the last and best chance either Emma or I would have, were either of us to meet with some accident. And between the two of us, I suppose it must be admitted—to myself, if no one else—that accidents are more likely to befall me than her.

Ah, well. I'd take up safer hobbies if I could.

I locked the cellar door behind myself, and proceeded down the narrow wood-slat stairs into the darkness of that half-finished pit, once intended for vegetables, roots, or wines. I've paid a pretty penny to refurbish the place so that the floor is stable and the walls are stacked with stone. During wet weather, those stones weep buckets and the floor creaks something awful, but by and large it's secure enough.

Secure and quiet. Dreadfully so, as I've learned on occasion. I could scream my head off down there and Emma could be reading peacefully by the fireplace. She'd never hear a thing.

Obviously this concerns me, but what can I do? My precautions are for the safety and well-being of us both.

Of us *all*.

I lit the gas fixtures as I went. All three came on with a turn of their switches, and by the time I reached the final stair I cast a huge, long shadow—as if I were a giant in my own laboratory.

My laboratory. That feels like the wrong word, but what else can I call it? This is the place where I've gathered my specimens, collected my tools, recorded my findings, and meticulously documented all experiments and tests. So the word must apply.

I cannot claim to have made any real progress, except I now know a thousand ways in which I have failed to save anyone, anywhere. From anything.

It would be easier, I think, if I knew there was some finite number of possibilities—an absolute threshold of events I could try in order to produce successful, repeatable results. If I knew there were only a million hypothetical trials, I would cheerfully, painstakingly navigate them all from first to last. Such a task might take the rest of my life, but it'd be a comfort to know I was forcing some definite evolution to a crisis.

But I don't know any such thing. And more likely, the possibilities measure in the billions—or are altogether endless. I shudder to consider it, but I'd be a fool if I didn't.

So I go on wishing. I wish for the prospect of a definite finale, and I wish I were not alone.

That would make things easier, too—if there were someone else to share the burden, apart from poor Emma. And though she appeared invulnerably strong when I was a child (due in part to the ten-year difference in age between us), in our middling years her health has failed her in a treacherous fashion. Often she's

confined to a bed or a seat, and she coughs with such frequency that I only notice it anymore if she's stopped. Consumption, everyone supposes. Consumption, and possibly the shock of what befell our father and Mrs. Borden.

That's the rest of what everyone supposes, and that's probably true, in its way. It's true that Emma has never been herself since those last weeks when she fled the house, insisting that something was wrong and that she felt a hideous suffocation, and she needed to find some other air to breathe.

That's how she put it. Finding other air to breathe.

At the time we assumed she only wanted a change of scenery from the fighting, the bickering, and the sudden appearance of William—and all the difficulties he inspired.

True, true. All of it true, but incomplete.

We were both contaminated by something, by whatever took the other Bordens. It worked its way inside us, too—whether by breath, or through the skin, or through something we consumed, still I cannot say. All I can do is pray that we caught it in time, and that we have removed ourselves beyond its influence . . .

Alas.

I almost wrote, “before any permanent damage was done.” But then I thought of Emma and her fragile lungs, and her bloodied handkerchiefs. And I thought also of my poisoned dreams and the awful visions that sometimes distract me even while waking. I often believe in retrospect that they're telling me something crucial . . . but doesn't every dreamer insist that every dream is meaningful at the time? However, in the retelling, the dreams (and my visions) are trite at best, disturbing at worst.

I will not burden Emma with them, for she is burdened enough with her own body's complaints. And I don't have anyone else to tell, not really. Not except for Nance, and I fear to the point of fretful, bowel-clenching sickness that I might chase her away even without the secrets that darken the space between us. Little though I see her lately, since her most recent job for that director, Peter Rasmussen . . . still I value beyond my life the time I spend with her beside me.

Nance has accused me, once or twice in teasing, of being a sentimental old fool. She's right, absolutely.

She's also young—very young. So young it's all the more inappropriate, how we carry on between ourselves. Carelessly, it's been said. Wantonly, it's been accused. Nance wouldn't argue with either one; she would laugh instead, and add her own descriptors with even less propriety. But women her age, barely out of their teens and with the whole world before them, they haven't yet had time to lose the things they love. Every affair is a fairy tale or a tragedy, and either one is fine so long as the story is good. Every love is all or nothing, and even their “nothings” are poetry. They don't yet know how the years fade and stretch the highs and the lows, wearing them thin, making them vulnerable. They haven't yet known much of death.

I don't think I'm talking about Nance anymore.

It doesn't matter. She won't come again for weeks, maybe months. And I won't hold that against her.

I can't. I'm the one who asked her to stay away.

• • •

Upon reaching the cellar's floor I turned on the two largest gaslights, and the bleak, cluttered space was

flooded with a quivering white light that joined the illumination from the stairs. I blinked against it. I set one hand on the nearest table and leaned there while my eyes adjusted, and when they did, I took a very deep breath and considered the week's samples.

My laboratory is a large open room, undivided except by two rows of three tables each. Several of the tables are occupied by jars of assorted sizes, ranging from tubes as small as my thumb to bigger containers that could easily hold a loaf of bread. Floating within them in an alcohol solution are things I've collected over the last two years. Some are recognizable as varieties of ordinary ocean flora and fauna, and some are not. I've gathered plants, fish, sea jellies, crustaceans, and cephalopods by the score, and I've cataloged them all by their deformities. Some are laden with so many aberrations that it's impossible to tell what the original species might have been; some have minor exterior problems, though these malformations often mask more obvious internal ones.

For example, one of my larger jars holds a brown octopus (*octopus vulgaris*) with two distinct heads and three extra tentacles. Upon a cursory dissection of it, I discovered that it also had twice the usual complement of hearts—which is to say six of them. Two of these hearts were pitifully underdeveloped, but distinct and bafflingly present.

I've also found fish with too many sets of gills, grotesquely oversized fins, or no eyes whatsoever. I've retrieved lobsters with three claws, with one claw, with no tail, or no legs. The story is much the same for simpler creatures, though the abnormalities are sometimes harder to spot.

My conclusions, such as they are, sound like utter madness. But I believe they are borne out by the books that are stacked on the other desks, where I've had to establish the library. We couldn't put shelves along the wall or else the damp would ruin them, so two of the farthest tables are stacked with shorter bookcases. Each of these cases is piled with volumes too arcane and peculiar to display upstairs, despite the fact that we virtually never see visitors.

Upon reflection, I'm not entirely sure who I'm hiding them from. Not Emma. She's the one who ordered most of them, and regardless, she's read them already.

Nance? No, I don't think so. Nance is difficult to scandalize, and she's aware of my interests—though not aware of their extent, or their origins. If pressed, I'd have to say that I'm hiding the books from Nance's friends, who sometimes accompany her when she visits.

Or maybe I only do it out of optimism, from the eternal hope that someday we'll have friends of our own again.

It's ridiculous, I know. My infamy taints my sister, who declares her intent to stay by my side even as we both know she's too fragile for any other recourse. And it's furthermore ridiculous because our respective activities require a certain solitude. I must be left alone to pursue my experiments, and Emma could never continue her correspondences with eminent scientists and biologists if anyone knew that "E. A. Jackson" was a woman. Thank heavens none of her correspondents has ever dropped by for a spot of tea. I honestly don't know what she'd tell them.

It's a blessing, really, that no one will have anything to do with us.

• • •

I picked up the nearest lantern and lit it. It's a special one, affixed with mirrors and foils, to direct the light wherever I wish to project it—and I wanted to brighten the back right table, beside the two oversized sinks

and an assortment of hoses, hooks, tongs, knives, and scalpels. There, in one of my larger jars, a peculiar mass had sunk to the bottom, where it sizzled enough to muster a light froth that foamed throughout the container. It'd been sizzling that way for two days, while an acid solution nibbled away at the calcite. Within that mass, I have always sensed there was something important.

When I first discovered it, the object was approximately the size of a small melon, and it lacked any geometric shape to speak of. If I were to assign it any general description, I'd say that it looked like a very large hand grabbed a fistful of the ocean bottom and squeezed until the sediment became stone. It was roughly column-like, with bits of finny fluting. Primarily it was white, or the swirled browns and bleached hues of ocean detritus.

I found it on one of my evening walks on the beach, after dark with a lantern. And at the risk of sounding hysterical, I believe that I *felt* it. I believe that it called me, and I heard it.

So I retrieved it, setting my lantern on the sand and hefting the rock into my hands, holding it there. Though it was in no way shaped like a shell, I held it up to my ear and listened—for what, I cannot say.

But this draw, this *lure*. I've felt it before and I don't yet understand the full implications of what it means, but I know I should've taken more care with the sample. I should've wrapped it in my apron and carried it that way, without touching it bare-handed, but I didn't. I cradled it in one naked arm and held my light aloft with the other, all the way back home.

There, I returned to my senses and dumped it into the jar full of acid to let science sort it out.

• • •

I forcibly tugged my attention away from the bubbling, hypnotic jar and turned instead to a box I keep buried beneath the floor.

With a quick pop of a pry bar at just the right spot, a row of boards slipped out of place. My floor is not as seamless and immutable as it appears; it is riddled with compartments such as this one.

Some people keep cupboards in a wall. I keep them in the ground.

Beneath this lid, which I'd disguised as flooring, a box squatted—smelling of wet soil and worms, and moss, and lichen, and whatever else blackens the earth below my home. I could have pried it out and brought it up to the floor, but I chose not to. For some reason, I felt that the box was safest right there, underneath everything. Underneath my house, my basement, my floor.

I would bury it deeper if I could, but I need to keep it within reach, this little repository of evil. Soon, I might need to add to its contents—depending on what lies at the heart of that strange mass which dissolves by atoms on the back right table.

I'm not sure what made me reach into the hole and touch the iron-bound top of that box.

Yes, again, I'm mired in uncertainties and suspicions, but I have taken all the precautions I can. More than likely, at least half of them don't work. But when I don't know what works and what does *not* work, all I can do is throw it all in together, and trust that some measure of success will result, even if that success is diluted by imprecision.

So there is a box that is lined with lead and sealed with iron bands, and inscribed with unsettling symbols, and buried in the earth, beneath the rowan-wood boards that make up the floor of my basement.

I reached down into the hole and fumbled with the latches until it was unfastened all around, and then I lifted the lid for no good reason whatsoever. I'd like to say that the motion was dreamlike on my behalf, that I scarcely recall doing it; but this isn't quite true, because I remember watching my arm extend, and my fingers manipulate the fasteners, and then lift the lid. I recall every bit of this, and in my recollection, I was fully in control of myself.

Except that I *can't* have been.

Because now, with some distance from that box and that basement, I know full well that it was a dangerous, absurd thing to do—and that not all the gold in the world, nor all the threats or complaints, could ever persuade me to open it right now, with nothing to add to its treasure.

And I jot this down, all of it, in case—upon eventual review—some pattern is revealed. These journal entries are already helping, for now I can see, going back over last month's notes, that there's a proximal effect to the lure of the box. The farther I remove myself from its contents, the less they affect me.

If I had any sense, I'd relocate to the desert or the mountains, and be done with this whole business once and for all.

• • •

I gazed into the box, upon six bits of stone or glass, all varying in their respective radiance and greenness. They go from the sickly yellowish shade of a toad's belly to a rich seaweed that could nearly be described as emerald. The smallest is the size of a child's fingernail. The largest is as big as a plum. All of them are beautiful. Very beautiful. So beautiful it's all but impossible to take one's eyes away, even though they look like nothing more alarming than bits of sea glass, glittering weakly at the bottom of a reinforced box.

Of course, they are more than that. I know it good and well, just like I know better than to kneel over the box and listen to the odd hum they make. But it's a lovely hum, you see? It's a calming, drawing thing. When I hear it, as I stare at those scattered pieces of precious jetsam, it's as if I can hear my mother beside my cradle, and feel the rocking of her gentle hand as she sings me off to a nap.

No, not the recently late Mrs. Borden—but my *true* mother, Sarah, who died when I was very small. I have no real remembrance of her, but sometimes I think I recall a perfume, or a very distant voice. The rustle of a skirt, perhaps. A step upon the stairs. Emma says she was a pretty woman, and that she often hummed to herself while she worked around the house.

I envy my sister's solid memories.

My father married Abigail when I was two, and Abigail raised me, albeit reluctantly and without any warmth. She'd wanted to be a society wife, not the live-in caretaker for two girls who were not her own.

She did not let us forget it often, or for long.

(I was instructed to call her "Mother" when I was tiny. This was insisted upon to great penalty if I failed, though Emma was old enough that she was never commanded to do the same. I finally began to refer to her as "Mrs. Borden" when I realized that I was an adult, and that no one could make me do otherwise. I did not owe that cold, interloping daughter of a pushcart peddler the respect of the more personal term.)

• • •

I'd left the box open longer than I should have.

I knew this even before Emma came knocking, but it's strange—I couldn't seem to care. I was fully aware that I was tempting fate or something worse, and I was all too certain that the buzzing, warm green noise could be heard by more ears than just my own. But the stones were beautiful, and they were near. They calmed me, nearly to the point of a stupor.

Emma had called twice from upstairs, and she'd been pounding upon the cellar door for half a minute before I was able to rouse myself enough to say in a choked, weird voice, "Emma dear, I'm nearly finished."

I thought I heard her sob. She cried, "Lizzie, you must come, quickly. Something . . . something is trying to come inside. Lizzie, something is *here*."

I slammed the box lid back down and dropped the board atop it, cursing myself for my inattention and reflexively seeking the weapon I keep leaned against the bottom of the staircase.

There it was, yes.

I grabbed my axe.

A DOCTOR, A LAWYER, A MERCHANT, A CHIEF

Owen Seabury, M.D.

MARCH 15, 1894

The first thing I ever learned of my patients is that they lie, incessantly and to their own detriment. They mislead me regarding their injuries; they feign symptoms; they deny delicate but pressing problems out of modesty or embarrassment, or fear of repercussions.

In short, they are utterly untrustable. But they are also readable, to an experienced man like myself—and I can learn much from the things they leave unsaid.

But this was not always the case.

So let me recount the Borden deaths. I may as well. I do not see the benefit of avoiding and ignoring the truth. To the contrary, I'd much rather address the case outright, and shine a light upon it—regardless of what sins of mine may be revealed.

These are the facts.

Sometime late in June of 1892 the Borden family began to experience a prolonged, peculiar set of ailments. I was a close witness to their distress, for I was not merely their doctor but also a nearby neighbor. They lived directly across the street from me and my now-late wife, so I had ample opportunity to observe them over the weeks leading up to the murders on August 4 of that same year.

The first complaints came from Abigail Borden, second wife of Andrew Jackson Borden and stepmother to Andrew's grown children, Emma and her younger sister, Lizzie, both of whom lived on the premises. Mrs. Borden came to sit in my parlor, having visited for an informal consultation.

I didn't know her well, but I liked what I knew of her. She was younger than her husband by enough years to remark it, and agreeable in that comfortable way women sometimes achieve when they marry into money

and can expect to be cared for.

But on that summer occasion she was out of sorts, restless and pale. As she spoke, she fidgeted constantly with a pendant that hung around her neck from a long silver chain. I remember it so vividly because of the way the light caught it, and though I did not see the item clearly, I could not help but notice how its glassy stone gleamed a rich, ocean green shade that cast bright reflections on the walls.

“Doctor Seabury, it’s a digestive problem. It’s a horrible feeling, at once cold and bubbling. I’m so nauseous, and so light-headed, at times, that I must sit and cover my eyes until the sensation passes.”

“I see. And is anyone else in the family displaying symptoms like these?”

After a brief hesitation she said, “Andrew is, a bit.”

“What are his complaints? Are they precisely like yours, or is there some variation to his discomfort?”

“I couldn’t say.” She shook her head. “He hasn’t spoken about it. I’ve only . . . noticed. As his wife, who shares the same household. You understand.”

“Of course,” I replied. “And what of your stepdaughters?”

Her face darkened and for a moment she quit worrying the pendant. “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t spoken to either of them lately.”

“Ah. Has there been any significant change in the family diet?”

She shook her head again and said, “No, I don’t believe so.”

I did not press her any further. I already knew what bothered her bowels, though I couldn’t bring it up without prompting denials and offense. So rather than invite confrontation, I said, “Perhaps it’s something seasonal, then. Dyspepsia can arise from almost anything—and rather than leap to alarming conclusions, I honestly think this can be handled with simple, common treatments.”

I offered her some harmless prescriptions, chiefly carbonate of ammonia pills and white bismuth. It wouldn’t hurt, and it might even help.

I did not doubt that she was suffering from indigestion. I only doubted my personal ability to address the root cause thereof.

• • •

It was no great secret that the Bordens had difficulties. Andrew’s spinster daughters never developed any affection for Abigail; and with the lot of them living under one roof, tensions could—and often did—overflow into arguments . . . the kind of arguments which nearby neighbors might hear, and pretend they hadn’t.

Not long before Abigail Borden sought me out for this first of many complaints, things at home had escalated in an unexpected and unfortunate fashion.

As I said, Andrew was older than his wife. He’d lived a full lifetime before ever meeting her. Whether or not she loved him I cannot speculate; but she was content with him, and by all appearances their union was a “good match,” as they say, even though he was widely regarded as a tight-fisted curmudgeon. Regardless,

she was at ease with the decisions that had brought her to Andrew, an aged but still vital man—who had a fortune and a family, if few friends.

That said, I do not think she knew about his son. I'm not sure anyone did, until he appeared.

When William strolled into town claiming Andrew as his father, efforts were made to keep his existence quiet. I believe he stayed at the Borden home for a few days, though surely a hotel would have been a better choice. At any rate, I saw him coming and going repeatedly over a weekend once, and the timing was *deeply* suspicious: The elder patriarch was in the process of revising his will—a tense time in any moneyed family. But to a family so fractured already, and burdened with middle-aged daughters unlikely to marry? What added pressure would come with a shiftless bastard in search of an inheritance?

Little wonder Mrs. Borden was experiencing gastrointestinal distress. She'd hardly be human if she didn't.

That's why I gave her the harmless medicines to soothe her. And that's why I looked no closer, not at that time. The situation was so clear to me! So obvious!

Yet the matters were so personal, I doubted she would speak of them; and I didn't think she'd tolerate my talking about them with any frankness. After all, this was a woman unwilling to converse aloud about her husband's flatulence. Dragging his past indiscretions into the conversation could only make things worse.

Or that's what I told myself when I sent her away, bottles in hand, her pendant clinking against one of them as she walked.

The next week she came to see me again, twice in quick succession. Still she complained of the troublesome stomach, though the pains were worse, she said. I suspected the beginnings of a peptic ulcer, but I didn't go so far as to suggest it. The treatments were similar anyway, with the added admonition to rest, avoid stressful engagements, and alter her diet.

Abigail was already resting more than might have been considered strictly healthful, and she was scarcely eating as it stood. I was afraid that any attempt to more closely restrict her intake would lead to emaciation.

There wasn't much I could do about her stressful engagements. They all lived in her house, or insisted they had a right to.

Before long, Andrew sought me out as well. His complaints were similar, though never quite as advanced as his wife's—for Abigail's digestive issues continued and she grew paler before my eyes. Had the circumstances surrounding her decline been any different, I might have noticed sooner that I'd made some egregious mistake in the diagnosis.

But in my slim defense, William's interference had crossed a threshold from nuisance to criminal mischief. The authorities were called on two separate occasions; and on one of these, to my serious concern, both Andrew and Abigail accused the wayward young man of trying to poison them.

Back then, I considered the accusation, turning it over in my mind. Given even what little I knew of William's character, I couldn't dismiss the possibility outright; and the Bordens *did* appear collectively weakened—even Emma and Lizzie were unusually wan. They too admitted feeling as if they'd eaten something tainted, though neither went so far as to accuse their half brother of any misdeed.

I offered my assistance, providing more bismuth, diluted nitrous acid, canella bark powders, and even charcoal in case they suspected poison in the future.

• • •

Over the summer, the situation deteriorated.

I was busy—I was distracted by other patients, and by the gossip of William’s presence and behavior lingering over the place like a fog. The murky context of the Borden home life obscured the truth from me. It was not my place to cut through the word of mouth. I was a friend to them, yes, absolutely. Or I tried to be. But I was not family, and whatever was happening across the street was a family matter.

By the end of July the shouting had stopped. I know, because the weather was overly warm, even given the season. All of us left our windows open, but I barely heard a sound from my neighbors, though my wife said she’d heard strange noises—the kind that made her worry for their health. She had seen their shapes at the window, moving slowly past the wind-stirred curtains.

I told her she shouldn’t watch or listen for such things, that it wasn’t polite. She pointed out that it was difficult not to watch or listen, given that the house was scarcely twenty yards away from our own, and if they wished to keep their problems private, they could close the windows or leave the city for their negotiations.

Then she said that in fact, Emma Borden had done just that. She’d packed up her things and called a carriage, and that was the last anyone had seen of her. (Somehow, this had escaped my notice, too.)

For that matter, William had left town as well a week previously—not entirely of his own accord. Andrew’s influence had persuaded the authorities to become more aggressively involved, and the young man had vanished without returning.

Assuming this was the case, only Andrew, Abigail, and the younger daughter were left in the house. No wonder things had quieted. I hoped this meant the end, and that their lives could return to normal.

Surely if left in peace, the remaining Bordens would sort out their differences and their health would be restored.

• • •

I’ll never forget the night of August 3. I wish I could—but I’ve played it over in my head a thousand times, and it’s burned there like a book of photographs, flipped together to make a moving scene.

It was late, but my wife and I were still up. We were turning down the wicks and extinguishing the gas lamps, settling in for the night when we heard a loud thump downstairs against our front door, followed by a gruesome wail that sounded part human, part drowning animal.

My wife was alarmed, but I told her not to panic and I lit another lantern to carry downstairs. “Stay here!” I commanded over my shoulder. It wasn’t necessary. She’d already thrown herself into the water closet and locked the door.

Down the stairs I rushed, stumbling over my slippers and wincing with every pound upon the door. They weren’t the ordinary knockings of a late-night visitor, or the frantic beating of a desperate patient—a noise I knew quite well, after a career of delivering babies and attending the dying.

Instead it was a low, dull thud repeated without rhythm, and the cry came with it again. I wanted to shut my ears against the bellowing yowl, but I forced myself down the corridor. And there, shadowed in the colored glass of the small-framed window, I saw a shape flinging itself heavily, repeatedly, against the front door.

I froze, reconsidering my decision to answer. Whatever struggled on the other side couldn't be human, could it? But then I heard one word and my resolve quickened.

"Help."

A woman's voice. Garbled, even in that single syllable. But recognizable.

"Help us," she tried again, and I rushed toward the door.

I flung it open and held up my lantern. There she was, Abigail Borden—for all that I scarcely recognized her. How long had it been since I'd seen her? This change could not have dropped upon her overnight. What kind of failure was I as a physician and neighbor that this ghastly transformation had eluded me?

Her skin looked like that of a waterlogged corpse, doughy and far too white. She seemed swollen, and her hair was wild around her shoulders, falling down her back in seaweed tangles.

I croaked at her, "Mrs. Borden!" though there was no good reason I shouldn't have used her first name. I'd known her as "Abigail" for years, but this did not seem like her, for all that I knew it must be. I wanted to impose some distance between myself and this woman. Something was wrong. Any fool could see it. Even me.

I stammered again, "Mrs. Borden—what on earth is the matter?"

Her eyes met mine and they were rheumy and too large for their sockets, with surprise or stress or horror. She said, "It's poison, I think." Every word was thick in her mouth, and I wondered if she hadn't been drinking. I struggled to convince myself of any new cause—alcohol? laudanum? Dependency could change a person terribly; this much I knew. I clung to this explanation of what stood swaying before me.

"Poison?"

She was unstable on her feet. I should've reached for her, taken her arm and steadied her.

In my career I've had my hands upon more revolting bodies than a layman is likely to encounter in a lifetime of trying. I've squeezed boils, soaked my hands in blood and pus, slipped in entrails, swaddled slippery stillborns, and pulled excrement from unwilling bowels by hand.

But I did not want to touch that woman. I couldn't stand the thought of it.

• • •

All my oaths were failed in that night.

• • •

I opened my mouth to tell her something. Anything. A consolation, a suggestion. I have no idea what might've spewed forth if I'd had the opportunity to speak, but I was interrupted by a voice from across the road.

A low voice, another woman. Steady and authoritative. Firm and reassuring.

It was the younger Borden daughter, Lizzie. She stood on the front porch watching her stepmother shudder and beg before me. With just enough subtle volume to carry the short distance between us, she commanded,

“Mrs. Borden, come back inside.”

Abigail’s eyes widened yet further, until a seam of white showed all around her night-blackened pupils. Slowly she swiveled her head to look back at her house, at her stepdaughter.

The moon and the corner gaslight showed Lizzie in shades of gray, tinted yellow. She was motionless. She might have been an apparition, or a daguerreotype. I could not say that her face was blank, for that would be untrue; I should say instead that she did not appear conflicted. Even given the distance and darkness between us, I could see that she had come to some resolution.

(Though it’s easy for me to speak that way in retrospect, and it’s possible I did not perceive any of this. I may only be coloring the past with my knowledge of what was to come.)

I said, “Mrs. Borden?” and she pivoted to regard me once more, unblinking.

For a very short flash—only an instant—her features shifted, as if her old self had seized control in order to speak.

She told me then, in that narrow window between fright and madness, “We’re done for, you know. Whatever happens now, we won’t be saved.”

Then she backed away, nearly tripping over the top porch stair but catching herself at the last moment. She retreated without unlocking her gaze from my face until she reached the street, at which point she trudged back up to her own home and let Lizzie usher her inside.

As Lizzie closed the door, she too met my eyes. I saw only her certainty, and the moon’s cold reflection. And then nothing at all, as they both disappeared inside.

Confused and unaccountably afraid, I lingered, with the wind gusting into my own house, flapping the curtains and rattling the leaves on the young rubber plant that shivered in the hallway.

My wife called out, “Dearest?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t know how.

I shut the door and locked it, then in a fit of lunatic whimsy, I pushed the potted plant in front of the door. It slid against it with the dragging, grating scrape of unfinished ceramics. And it did nothing to make me feel less afraid.

• • •

The next morning, Abigail and Andrew Jackson Borden were found hacked to death. It’s a well-known story by now.

Lizzie was the closest thing to a witness, and she said almost nothing. She’d found them, yes. Her father downstairs on the couch, reclined as if he’d been napping and caught unawares. Her stepmother upstairs in the spare bedroom, sprawled facedown on the floor.

Before the house swarmed with police and investigators, reporters and curiosity seekers, I was summoned by the maid, who arrived in a firestorm of tears, wails, and blubbered protestations. She was an Irish girl; Maggie was her name—or that’s all I ever heard them call her. She tugged on my arm when I opened the door, and she drew me across the street, telling me everything between gasps and gulps.

And I went, with all the dread of the previous evening foremost in my mind, weighing down my feet as I plodded the few scant yards over to my neighbors' bloody abode.

The day was bright and hot. The sun bleached out all the colors, and some of the details, almost as badly as the night had just a few hours previously. And there was Lizzie, standing on the front porch waiting for me. Her mouth was fixed in a grim line, and her eyes squinted against the brilliant light of morning.

Just above her feet I saw dark stains spreading in a violent red against the light brown shade of her dress. She would later say, before a judge and jury, that her hem had become bloody when she stood beside the corpses, attempting to examine or rouse them.

(And at that same trial, I would testify on her behalf. I would recall the brown dress, and I would swear that the blood on her clothes was consistent with a concerned, frightened woman who'd approached the Bordens with intent to assist them.)

As I approached she said, "Doctor Seabury, my father and Mrs. Borden are dead. Something has killed them."

• • •

Much difficulty followed.

I was called upon to testify, as were many others. I would speak again and again of her dress and the blood, and my neighbors bashed open with the thick, heavy blade.

Lizzie comported herself admirably. She remained ladylike and reasonable, and she answered the prosecutor's questions so long as he asked them—always presenting a picture of calm cooperation, and only becoming slightly scrambled under the barrage of confusing questions. He worked hard to trip her, to compel her to incriminate herself.

She stuck to her story, and neither the witnesses nor the lawyers were able to rattle her into guilty confessions.

It was just as well. No one really wanted to believe she'd done it.

Was she physically capable of committing the murders?

No doubt. She was only thirty-two, and sturdily built. Her father was in his seventies. Her stepmother, although younger, was taken from behind, presumably by surprise.

But there was no one to satisfactorily accuse Lizzie. Maggie refused to condemn her, and none of the other witnesses could convince the jury that she had a motive for such horrendous acts. The small things added up to only more small things. The daily, petty gripes of a mixed household and Lizzie's cold behavior toward her stepmother . . . they seemed to fall within the parameters of reasonableness, if not pleasantness.

Nothing emerged to make Lizzie appear to the court like a monster gone mad, and so she was not convicted. She collected her inheritance, after the much-discussed "will" failed to materialize; and shortly thereafter, she and her sister, Emma, relocated together to the other side of town.

They purchased a large, beautiful home and they named it Maplecroft.

Phillip Zollicoffer, Professor of Biology, Miskatonic University

ONE YEAR PREVIOUS

APRIL 15, 1893

It arrived yesterday, though I did not have the opportunity to open and examine it until this afternoon. The package came wrapped in brown paper and twine, directed to myself with a return address of Fall River, Massachusetts.

Immediately I knew it had originated in the office of my distant colleague, Dr. E. A. Jackson—a knowledgeable fellow biologist, though now retired (or so I believed).

We began our correspondence in 1890, after I published a paper on a new strain of nuisance seaweed that was clogging beaches and boat-screws up and down the eastern seaboard. (I argued that it was a previously unknown subspecies of a common aquatic varietal and was experiencing an outrageous bloom.)

Dr. Jackson sent me a letter telling me how much he appreciated my diagnosis of the situation, and how he was additionally impressed by the thoroughness of my research. I was flattered, as any man might be, and I responded with my thanks. He wrote again with a question regarding a particular crustacean he'd found at the ocean's edge—a creature I later deemed to be a grotesque lobster, dwarfed and otherwise congenitally deformed—and since then, the conversation has scarcely ceased. From time to time, we even send each other samples and articles.

This package was one such sample, I assumed; and when the time finally presented itself, I closed my door and sat at my desk, reaching for a small pair of scissors to snip the string.

Within the brown paper I found a box. Within this box I found a large mason jar sealed with a screw-on lid, which had been furthermore made airtight with a blue wax seal. The glass was large enough to hold a significant sample, something bigger than my own hand. But in the dim light of my stuffy, book-lined office, I could not at first tell what was hidden inside.

I rested the jar atop two of my research volumes, and went in search of a second lamp. Shortly I found one, though it was low on oil, and I brought it over to my seat in order to illuminate my workspace.

Lifting the jar up to the light, I noted first that it was quite heavy. The contents sloshed very slightly, indicating a high water percentage, and through the thick container gleamed a dull ivory color. The sample was too dark to be called off-white, and too light to be called brown—with seams of a sickly blue (or perhaps green) swirling through the whole.

As to its shape, I'd be hard-pressed to say. Crammed as it was inside the container, it had no shape at all except that which it borrowed from the jar. But it was lumpy and gelatinous, that much I could see. Could it be some odd representative of Cnidaria?

I turned it over in my hand.

Yes, possibly. Some sea-jelly, though nothing I'd seen before.

At the bottom of the box a folded letter lurked. I set the vial aside and retrieved the heavy-stock paper, and flapping it open, I read:

Dear Dr. Zollicoffer,

I trust this missive finds you well. I'm including with this message a strange . . . substance? Creature? Glob of fauna? Honestly, I'm at a loss. I found it along the Atlantic coast not a mile from my home, as I was on the shore with my sister—who was assisting me.

(My physician, Doctor Seabury, suggests that I should do my best to remain active despite my encroaching infirmity. He thinks that the ocean air will do me well, and I believe he's right. I always feel invigorated after these strolls. As to my sister's presence in the tale—she is ten years my junior, and in far better health than I. Thus I enlist her aid for these excursions.)

I must forewarn you, this item has an odious scent which will become apparent the moment you release the seal. The texture also is abhorrent, and I recommend that you handle it only with the sturdiest of gloves—preferably gloves you can afford to discard. I ruined a very fine pair manipulating this awful thing, and I wouldn't wish that upon you.

At any rate, because it is such a curiosity, I thought I might pass it along. I have not preserved it in any solution, only taking care to seal out the air. I hope it hasn't spoiled further during transit, though given how awful it smelled when fresh, I'm not entirely certain how one would know the difference.

To my own casual inspection, it strikes me as possibly some peculiar form of Anthomedusae—or a corrupted polyp-stage example of the same? I understand these medusas sometimes grow in colonies, so perhaps I've only passed along some decomposing cluster of ordinary sea-jellies. If this is the case, I do apologize.

But I could not help but feel that this is something different, and stranger. I hope that if nothing else, you find it an interesting puzzle.

(My sister says I'm mad, and that you will no doubt cease all correspondence with me immediately upon receiving this. I believe she's just unhappy about the odor that lingers in the kitchen.)

E.A.J.

I examined the jar, holding it carefully between my hands. With only the lamplight to judge it by, few details presented themselves.

By my right elbow I kept an oversized magnifying glass in a jointed frame. I seized it and drew it forward, adjusting its screws to aim the lens at the jar's contents. Here and there, bubbles bobbed back and forth as I turned it about. They moved with a weird, low *squish* that would have disinclined me to unscrew the top had I been any other kind of scientist.

But I located a letter opener—sharp but not dangerous, and perfect for cutting through the seal—and I set upon the container with great gusto, determined to liberate the contents despite Dr. Jackson's warnings.

In another five minutes I had a desk covered with pale, curled scrapings of wax, and the lid was ready to be twisted. I braced myself, rising up out of my chair for added leverage. With a bend of my elbow I threw my strength against the jar and the lid shifted a quarter of an inch, breaking the seal that preserved the contents within.

My colleague had not exaggerated the reek.

I was genuinely astonished. The scent oozed and drifted from the jar, crawling up into my eyes. They watered. My nose stung. I could feel the stench in the back of my throat.

But I'd come this far and I was determined to proceed, though at this point it occurred to me that I had no

gloves handy and was proceeding with naked fingers.

Alas. Nothing to be done about it now.

I struggled onward, pivoting the lid with my wrist and yanking it away with a flourish that sent foul-smelling slime streaking across my desk and one of my bookshelves, but no matter! The moment was upon me!

Before I could stare too closely, I flailed for the handkerchief in my jacket pocket and thrust it up to my face, for all the good it did. I held the jar at arm's distance and peered through the glass, doing my best to detect the contents without bringing my nose too close to the source.

As a good biologist, I ought to catalog even that, I suppose—outrageously unpleasant though it proved.

The sample smelled like pickled death. It stank of rot and fire, as of something imperfectly fermented. The fumes were thick in my nostrils, and I bit my tongue fiercely to keep myself from sneezing. Almost as if the contents emitted some noxious, dizzying gas, my vision became light and my concentration waned.

Shaking my head, I tried to clear it, even as I felt my grip on the jar sliding—very slightly—as it slipped through my fingers, down to the top of my desk.

I came to my senses in time to prevent a crash; I squeezed my hand like a vise and set the item down. Before I could talk myself into some other course of action, I peered into the jar, at the oozing thing within—with the added advantage of the magnifier and the nearby lamp.

Immediately beneath my desk table top, there's a drawer. I reached inside it and retrieved a set of long steel pincers with the hand which wasn't holding the handkerchief to my nose, and I used these pincers to prod at the thing within the jar.

It sloshed, and when I made a general attempt to pierce it (in order to judge its consistency) I found the task more difficult than expected. The thing was fleshy and dense, approximately the same as a sea-jelly—a diagnosis which now seemed likely, if imprecise. I needed to see it spread out; I needed to prod at its appendages, if it had any, and take proper measurements.

I then did what I should've done in the first place: I relocated to the chemical sink against the far wall. (It'd been installed three years previously, after some disagreements between myself and two other faculty members regarding usage of the facilities down the corridor. I fancied that this new one was "mine," and I could do with it as I liked . . . even if what I liked stank up the place and stained everything I touched.)

After a bit of hunting, I tracked down the drain plug and affixed it, then in one fell swoop I upturned the jar and dumped its contents into the enamel basin. It dropped and slid in a slippery roll, rollicking to a halt and sprawling out into a truer approximation of its original shape.

I retrieved my lamp and dragged it over to the sink.

The sink became a veritable theater—brilliantly lit, and with me the sole audience member, gazing upon the single player plopped upon the stage.

How to describe such a thing? Let me attempt it.

I've already recorded the texture, dense and fleshy. Its color was akin to old bones, except for the aforementioned greenish blue streaks and blotches. The creature—for it was definitely a creature, and no plant—demonstrated radial symmetry, perhaps pentamerism. Difficult to say. One portion of the thing

looked as if it'd been torn, perhaps grabbed by a predator or snagged upon a rock. Overall, it lacked the traditional cuplike shape of Scyphozoa and more closely resembled something from a "stalked" class of sea-jellies.

The thing is a true puzzle, and I am overjoyed to have made its acquaintance!

But a more formal analysis will have to be postponed until later. I have a classroom full of students awaiting at the other end of campus, and if I'm more than a few minutes late, the whole lot of them will accuse me of abandonment and walk out.

Lizzie Andrew Borden

MARCH 17, 1894

Emma was frantic, and can't be blamed for it. I hadn't responded in my usual timely fashion, having been mellowed or stunned or mesmerized by the stones, and she could hear something outside, sniffing around, nosing closer.

When I reached the top of the stairs I unlocked and flung open the cellar door. My sister fell against me, but there was no time to catch her properly or comfort her—not while I held the axe, and not while something struggled to breach our stronghold. Her eyes were wild as I lifted her with my free arm. She toppled against my breasts and rapped her cheek against my shoulder. Her strength had been all but spent to bring me 'round, and now she was wasted, exhausted, unable to even stand. A smudge of half-wiped blood streaked from the corner of her mouth, down her jawline, and into her hair.

Had I done this? Had I brought the uncanny intruder to Maplecroft with my reverie, my stupid fascination with the contents of that iron-capped box?

I suspected already that the bizarre sea glass and the strange fiends operated in some unholy conjunction, and I wished to know more about their connection, to better judge how closely they were aligned. But not then. Not at the expense of my sister's life or sanity.

"Emma, wait here," I said, and I let her lean on me as she slid to the floor, into a seated position. "I'll take care of this. I'll take care of everything."

"The *creature* . . . it's around back. I saw it, at the kitchen window. Its *hands* . . ."

"Shush, don't talk now. Stay here."

She seized my sleeve as I rose away from her. "Don't leave me alone, with nothing to defend myself!" She did not ask, "What if you fail? What then will I do?" But the questions were implied, and though I did not intend to fail her, I understood her terror.

I squeezed her hand and saw that her knuckles were bruised, flushed, and welling blood. I dropped her battered fingers and hastened around the corner to the parlor, to our father's old cabinet, which had once been stocked with his favorite spirits and crystal decanters. Now it was also stocked with a pair of pistols, likewise once his own.

I seized them both, knowing that both were loaded.

I ran back to the cellar door, shut it, and dropped the guns into Emma's lap. They looked so heavy in her hands when she lifted them and checked to see that they were ready. She knew how to shoot because I'd taught her, and I had to trust that she'd defend herself ably should the worst occur.

But I warned her, "Don't be an eager shot, dear—I'm not going outside yet. Stay quiet."

She nodded with understanding. She knew the routine. Silence and darkness.

Taking my axe along for the tour, I went from room to room on our first floor and extinguished the gas lamps until nothing but the streetlamps cast illumination into our space. It was feeble light, fractured and prismatic, sent through the leaded-glass trestle and the street-facing windows, but it was enough for me to orient myself, and to feel as if I now had the space to listen.

I closed my eyes and opened them again, letting the darkness adjust my vision. I stood in the center of the large front room, strange lines and shadows marking me like a nightmare's checkerboard. I could see the patterns on my dress, slashing dark lines and light grooves across my skirts and down my arms. The tattoos of brightness shifted when I shifted, raising the axe and feeling its heft settle across my shoulder as I waited, squinting at the night outside and wondering where the would-be intruder had gone off to.

Where was it?

Emma said the kitchen; she'd seen it at the window. It wouldn't be there still. It would've tried to follow her, circling, tracking her through sound or scent or whatever it is these things use to perceive the world.

Mostly they seem to be blind, or to see very poorly. But they *feel* . . . they pat the walls, they lunge at the boards, they trip and scuttle and scramble up our stairs when they stumble across them. They press their weird, webbed hands against the windows and leave prints on the glass in the shape of starfish.

I held as motionless as possible, hearing only the creak of my breath against my clothing, the bones of my undergarments giving and resisting, the cinch of my tied belt stretching, the small stitches in small seams straining to contain me. And then I heard it, against the south wall. It must've been standing in the long, narrow rose garden, as if a thing like that cared a whit about catching thorns or treading on blossoms.

It wheezed and hissed, feeling its way along the exterior. The timbre of its flailing slaps changed when it reached the small side porch, and when it smacked the steps, and then the foundation stones as it relentlessly sought an entrance. It moved widdershins like the devil himself, and it made no sound apart from the exploratory jabs with its hands and the susurrous whistles of its breath coming and going.

Having pinpointed the brute thusly, I steeled myself and crept to the front door. Silently, or nearly so, I slipped outside and shut the door behind me with only the faintest of clicks. I took my key and fastened the lock as well, sealing Emma within to the best of my ability.

(I shuddered to consider it, but there was always the possibility of more than one interloper. Only once have I seen them work in pairs, but once is enough. It introduces the possibility of a second time, and for that, I invest in very good bolts.)

I stepped carefully through the covered porch area, keeping my steps as light as I could manage. My boots had low heels, but even low heels can tap and warn—so I tiptoed to the secondary door and unlatched it. It was a flimsy portal, intended more for show than for protection. I let myself out and shut it anyway, and it slipped into the frame with a muffled scuffing that felt terribly loud in the nighttime quietude.

I crept down the half dozen short steps to the ground, where the grass was more forgiving than the sanded slats of the porch. I moved through it swiftly, the rustle of the tiny green leaves whispering no more loudly than the sway of my underskirts around my legs as I trotted to the left, to the corner, where I paused and readied myself.

I heard the slithering, damp coughs of the creature very close by. Its exhalations gusted with the smattering strikes of its hands as it sought entry.

If I did not stop this thing, it would find a way inside.

Eventually it would break a window and sense the space within, and come crawling through—just like its uncanny brethren had done when we lived across town. When my father and Mrs. Borden were alive. (Though they were not themselves anymore. Not by then.)

I raised the axe, holding it aloft over my shoulder but slightly to the side—ready to swing in a deadly arc, at the approximate head level of a person-shaped thing. I adjusted the trajectory, opting to aim lower. My trespasser might be smaller than I. Better to risk a strike too low than to swing too high and miss.

On an internal count of three, I stepped swiftly around the corner and charged forward, headlong, bringing the axe wide and throwing all my strength behind it.

The creature turned its face to me.

I cannot say that it looked at me. I cannot say that those film-covered eyes could see anything, though I detected the dark orbs of pupils twitching left to right beneath some silvery membrane.

Its skin did not glow. It would be more accurate to say that it gleamed dully in whatever shreds of cast-off light reached us from the streetlamps at the distant corner. But the dull gleam was very, very white without appearing clean—the wet-looking pallor of boiled eggs, or navy beans left too long in a pot.

The thing's stretched-tight skin was translucent enough to show the inner workings of organs wrestling for space, jostling together in that narrow torso cavity that scarcely looked large enough to hold a rolled-up newspaper.

I'm saying this wrong. I'm making it sound fragile, or ill.

It was not. They never are.

Their muscles are thin as laundry lines, strong as steel. Their teeth, when they brandish them, are jabbing spikes as fine and terrible as needles.

The swing of my axe caught this creature in those teeth. They shattered like glass.

• • •

I'd been right to aim low. The visitor was a full head shorter than I. Almost childlike, if you wished to compare something so malicious and inhuman to the size of something innocent and mortal.

I'd pushed the axe with enough momentum, enough weight, enough of my own not-inconsiderable strength, that it came very close to decapitating the brute in one blow. Broken teeth glittered as they flew through the air; they stuck onto the gore-covered axe-head when I retracted it and went to swing again.

But the creature wriggled and fell, ducking away from my second blow—which slammed into the house instead. Windows above me rattled, not breaking but shuddering. The axe stuck in the siding. I wrenched at it, and retrieved it.

My adversary lurched to its feet once more, and the top of its head flipped open and backward, clinging to the whole of its shape by nothing but gristle and tendons, but this did not stop it. Whether or not it could think, or feel, or see, or bite . . . minus all the obvious faculties to do so . . . I have no idea.

But it could *attack*.

It rushed toward me, but I was ready. I'd seen this trick before, how they could function like the worst vermin, the most disgusting bugs that could eat and fornicate and lay eggs . . . though their brains have been smashed to bits.

This one came at me the same way, its fingers fanning to show the connective webbing between them, and to brandish the curved claws they all boasted. Its head swung down between its shoulder blades, dangling there and spewing the green and brown bile that serves for their fluids.

It ducked and I slashed with the heavy blade—and the creature leaned in for me. It tumbled forward and snared my skirt, which ripped as I pulled away and then, because there was no room for me to rear back for another swipe, I shifted the axe in my grip and brought it up again—from underneath, and to my left. I leaned backward, shifting my center like a pendulum and whipping the weapon forward.

I caught the damnable thing below the throat. The axe shattered its sternum, and hacked up through its neck. Its lower jaw flew away, scattering more sparkling teeth in the garden roses, and in the grass.

It staggered.

I finished it. I kicked out my boot and caught it in the chest, shoving it back to the ground, where it writhed, clutching all its injured parts and gushing those terrible, foul-smelling fluids. I stood over it, and I bashed it again and again with the axe, until the pulp of its chest caved inward and the throbbing organs ceased their gruesome pumping.

When at last it was still, I dropped the axe-head to the ground and leaned on the handle, catching my breath as I gazed down upon my handiwork and listened to the sound of my heart pounding in my ears.

Thank God, I heard nothing else.

No curious neighbors, no late-night passersby wondering what went on at Maplecroft, where the notorious spinsters hid themselves like fugitives, and rarely showed their faces.

But this did not mean I had any time to waste.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Marcos Gorman:

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Michael Aldrich:

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