

Reckoning

By Bob Papp

A quarter mile ahead at the rail crossing, the flashers started blinking red. Fallow fields lined the two-lane road on both sides. No other cars were in sight. Tyler considered gunning it to beat the train. Out here, most ran slow, bound for the freight yards at the edge of town. He'd make it, but hurtling over the crossing might knock something loose from his corroded car that he couldn't afford to fix. Letting off the gas, he coasted to a halt as the dual engines lumbered by, growling derision at his cowardice.

He pulled out his phone to kill time, but the single bar of service wavered, like a schoolyard bully who'd stolen his hat. *You want it? Here it is, just take it. Ha, ha! Missed again!* He shoved it back in his jacket.

Freight cars crept past—giant rusting canvases covered in spectacular graffiti. Once, when he was twelve, he and another kid snuck into the yards with cans of paint to spray their own mark on the world. As statements go, theirs wasn't very original. A round head with curly hair perched above giant boobs and, as an afterthought, a big penis. Tyler hoped, in the decade since, someone buried it under real art like this. In the dusk, watching the whimsical parade of graffiti, he could easily imagine the train returning from a long run to another world. Someplace where colors sprang to life in diverse forms, and bright hope overcame gritty despair.

A black boxcar edged into view. While the others sported broad swaths of radiant colors, this one was peppered in splatters of white and grey over blood red swirls. Its door hung ajar. The opening crawled past. From somewhere beyond the threshold, two simmering green eyes returned his stare. Then, the black boxcar was gone.

Tyler's heart skipped, then started racing. His stomach felt crammed with worms, slithering and crawling. With a moan, he wrung the steering wheel, then let go, popped off his seatbelt, and jumped from the car.

"Screw you!" he hollered after the departing boxcar, his voice high and broken. He inhaled sharply, involuntarily. Squeezing his eyes shut, he slumped against the car and moaned, "I'm so dead."

He'd actually begun thinking the thing wasn't real. That it was just a delusional childhood fantasy, like an imaginary friend. Only it never was a friend. It was the worst of everything: vicious and remorseless, consuming innocence and bartering in souls. It spoiled lives for pleasure. His own sour deal with the fiend trained him to shun interactions and dealings with people. But, by avoiding possible consequences, he'd amounted to nothing. Just a placeholder cowering in the background of life. Jamie, his childhood bully, fared so much worse. For the price of Tyler's ten-year-old soul, the monster got Jamie off his back. Permanently.

The tail of the train slithered clear of the crossing, chased by swirls of dust, and the flashers went dark with one final *Ding*. Tyler knew where it was headed: to the yards where it would park on a siding overnight. In the morning switch engines would break it apart and forklifts would unload it. The monster would be long gone by then. In the deepest hours of night, traveling through shadows, it would hunt him down to claim its due. Back when he'd made the deal with the thing, he didn't understand what selling his soul meant. How could he? He was ten. Now, after years of nightmares and imagination run wild, he had some pretty vivid guesses.

He tried to swallow but his mouth was dry.

There was only one thing to do. If he ran, it would find him. It already had. Nobody would help him; he didn't have any friends who'd believe him. The cops sure wouldn't. Even if he got arrested and locked up, it would still get to him. No. He'd prepared for this. He wouldn't just stand there like some ten-year-old peeing his pants while the thing ripped away his soul.

He backed the car onto the sloping gravel shoulder and shut it down. Fishing the flashlight from under his seat, he popped the trunk and went around back. It was jammed. Prying his fingers under the edge and yanking hurt, so he kicked it twice and pounded it with the butt of the flashlight.

"Damn it! Just...open! Please!"

One more kick, then he thought of trying the key. The lock clicked and the trunk lid creaked upward, but now the flashlight didn't work. Biting his lower lip, he steadied himself then flung the dead light into the weeds.

In the trunk, he fumbled around, pushing aside a musty blanket and a tangle of jumper cables, to reveal a dusty, hard plastic case about four feet long. He dragged this out and slammed the trunk but it bounced open. After two more slam-bounces, he just held it down and put the case on top. The smallest key on his ring opened the two mini-padlocks, revealing a pump action Remington 870 12-gauge shotgun and a box of ten shells.

Tyler bought the gun a few years back, after turning 18. He knew a guy at the oil change place who repacked shells. So, he ordered five novelty shells online, filled with genuine silver shot, then paid the guy to cannibalize those and pack ten with an even mix of steel and silver. Ten was plenty. He knew he'd be lucky to get off one. Having never handled a gun before, he'd also bought a class and ten hours at the shooting range. The whole thing cost nearly a grand, setting him months back on groceries and bills. Since then, the gun never left his trunk. He'd been thinking about selling it.

Hefting the shotgun from the case, he loaded four shells, hands shaking. The other six he jammed into his jacket. In the case, he also found the note he'd written years before. He squinted at it in the spreading darkness, then slipped it under the windshield. Locking the car, he set off down the tracks.

After about twenty minutes of stumbling on ballast and railroad ties, he slowed. The terrain surrounding the tracks had transformed from rugged fields of weeds to a forest, the last buffer at the dingy edge of urbanization. Now, trees crowded the tracks, blocking the waning glow of evening sky. He knew the area. As a boy, he'd spent long days along these tracks, waiting for trains to pass, crushing pennies on the rails, exploring the woods, playing make-believe. Hiding. It was here, he realized with a start, that he'd first encountered the monster. In a shallow, old quarry, small and lost to the woods. That was where the fiend would be now, waiting for the dead of night. He raised the shotgun and climbed the embankment.

There was a craft to walking silently through the woods. Something about exploring the ground toes first, then carefully rolling weight onto the foot. Tyler tried this. Leaves crackled, twigs broke and he grimaced. In these same woods, he'd seen feral cats favoring fallen trees and branches to mask their steps, but in the deepening darkness, he stumbled over more solid footing than he found. He lurched onward as if dogged by a light-up roadside attraction sign: *Coming Soon - Tyler!*

Then, he smelled it.

The quarry itself covered maybe an acre, about fifteen feet deep. The far end sloped down for access. Water pooled in the center. He remembered alcoves like small caves in the low walls of blasted limestone.

The quarry smelled like wet cement and muck.

The monster stank of roadkill. Dead meat. Rot and resentment and sin. Tyler winced at the oppressive familiarity of it, then pushed forward.

Near the lip of the quarry, the forest layer of leaves and twigs yielded to dirt and stone. Finally, he could stalk his nemesis in silence. He crept around the edge to the entrance of the quarry then hugged the wall as he descended.

At the foot of the slope, the air reeked of death and blood. Tyler's eyes had adjusted as well as they could to the darkness, but mostly he saw only shapes. He froze, shotgun to his shoulder, waiting for something to move.

"Tyyylerrrrrr," the thing growled.

He spun to the left. There, somewhere. In an alcove against the low cliff. His animal brain screamed to pull the trigger and run, but he fought it off. He couldn't tell for sure where the monster was. If he fired now, he'd miss, and it would know he was armed. Worse, it would taste his hope and delight in stripping that away before finally claiming his soul.

"What?" he screamed. "Here I am! You—you want my soul? Come on! I'm ready. I ain't usin' it anyway. Take it!"

A massive shadow materialized from the wall of limestone, a few yards off. Tyler twisted

and jerked the trigger. Warmth spread through his crotch and he knew he'd pissed himself.

"Goddamn it!" He pumped the shotgun, fired again, then pumped the third of his silver-laden shells into the chamber. Ears ringing, he swung the barrel left, right, up and down, searching for movement. "Where are you? Coward!"

A screech, like an army of claws raking chalkboards, filled the quarry, then a *WHUMP* shook the ground. Tyler stumbled, biting his tongue.

It spoke again in a voice that simultaneously squealed like a thousand creaking hinges and reverberated like a locomotive. "The Tyler is a little shit. It deserves what is coming to it."

He pointed and fired. The gun bucked against his shoulder, pounding in a brutal bruise. Pumping the final shell into the chamber, he backed off. To load more, he'd need time and space.

"STOP!" it commanded him.

Tyler aimed, then wavered. Could he defy a direct command from the thing that owned his soul?

"Why? You're here to take me. I—I'm here to take you out." He sounded like a cardboard action hero in a B movie. Standing there, with piss on his pants. "These are silver shots. Silver! You're screwed!"

It belched a wheezing staccato of screeches and rumbles that might have passed for laughter in the pits of hell. "Silver," it sneered. "Oh, so clever. Perhaps the Tyler has a cross too? Maybe garlic necklace? Holy water bladder? Apple a day to keep me away?"

Tyler's mouth dropped. It was mocking him. His muscles slackened and the barrel of the gun drifted downward.

Searing green eyes appeared then, level with his own, almost within reach. They rose. As they ascended, a draping void rose with them, shedding an overpowering stench of decay. The ground shook as the thing strode toward him. He sensed swift movement an instant before it batted the shotgun from his hands. The gun fired wildly as his finger ripped from the trigger, then landed with a sploosh in the unseen pool of fetid water at the center of the quarry. He stumbled back.

The eyes and the emptiness around them dropped a few feet and the ground shuddered. The monster seemed to slump against the cliff. The glowing green embers dimmed but coalesced again.

"It's...over then," Tyler said. Running would only start a game of cat and mouse, with his end all the more bloody, prolonged and agonizing. He dropped his hands and spread his arms. "Right. You'll rip out my soul now and leave my corpse here to rot. Ok, fine. I was only ten but...whatever. I know. Whatever you did to Jamie was my own fault. I begged for it. So,

go ahead. Just...make it fast, ok?"

It groaned, like thirty old men arising from overstuffed chairs, weighed down by lifetimes of sin. "The Tyler is stupid. Deserves nothing."

"I know," he repeated.

Jamie Fuller was a budding monster in his own right, shunned by other kids. When Tyler's family moved to town at the start of third grade, Jamie seized the opportunity to establish a new pecking order, with someone else at the bottom. He spent the year bullying Tyler, setting an example. In time, others bought into his dream, burying Tyler under the weight of their unjustified scorn. To escape, Tyler started hanging out alone by the tracks. Wandering the woods. In the fall of fourth grade, he found the monster in the quarry. A month later, they struck a bargain. He pleaded: *Stop Jamie Fuller from bullying me.*

The next day, Jamie was doing a book report in front of class. The monster materialized out of the black chalkboard beside him. Burning green eyes, seething layers of void like agony bound in fury. Jamie saw it, turned pale and froze. No one else did. It bent down, whispering something in Jamie's ear, then faded away. Jamie soiled himself in front of the entire class. The other kids guffawed. Thereafter Jamie Fuller became Jamie Fullinpants. He disappeared halfway through high school, though Tyler sometimes saw him scurrying around town, head bowed.

"What did you say to Jamie?" he asked the creature that owned his soul.

"No matter."

"It did to him. It destroyed his life."

"The Tyler destroyed the Jamie's life."

He bowed his head. "Right."

The creature rose, releasing a rancid sigh like the last gasp of a corpse.

Though night had engulfed the pit of the quarry, Tyler still could make out general shapes. The low limestone cliff to his left and right. Trees on the ledge above, obscuring the clear night sky. However, directly before him, he saw nothing but dark eternity. Tasted despair. Smelled horrific endings.

The monster swelled, rising above him, then wrapped its essence around him. Close, but not enough to touch. The smoldering green eyes lowered, like it meant to eat his head, but at the last moment they shifted aside. It whispered in his ear, breath like burnt meat, feces and decay, but also with a gentle whiff of hyacinth.

"Impossible to sell human soul. That is mere figure of speech. The Tyler's choice, seeking harm to the Jamie, *tainted* the Tyler's soul and established debt to me."

Something sharp scraped his cheek, cut him, and he flinched. He dared not move away. It

surrounded him completely. If he shifted at all, he might fall into the void of its body. Pressure then, drawn against the cut, like the tongue of a giant cat. It stung, like alcohol and pestilence combined.

“Mmmm. Such a waste, it is,” the monster hissed in his ear. “A soul, in this Tyler. Mmmrrrrraah. I have come to...warn the Tyler.”

Warn him? Of something worse than this? His body felt heavy. His muscles unresponsive. Oh.

“You’re toying with me. You’re just reminding me that I owe you. Warning me against hope. I keep my soul but, someday, you’re going make me ruin it.”

It chuckled, chittering screeches and growls. “Stupid Tyler. Slow and stupid.”

The thing drew closer, sealing around him in an intimate cocoon. “NO, stupid Tyler! The twilight is shifting. Other horrors rise to replace me, magnitudes more powerful and dreadful than I. I bartered the Tyler’s debt to one of those, for more nights in this world. Because I am ending and I...” Something shifted, eased almost imperceptibly. “I dislike where this path has led me and the burdens I bear.”

“Wait. You traded my debt to something worse than you? And you came to warn me? Why?”

The air turned frigid. He felt the space grow, between himself and the eternal void.

“Quiet, stupid Tyler,” it hissed.

“Why?” he asked again.

“Told the Tyler why!”

The creature withdrew its embrace entirely and rose to its full stature, blocking even the trees above. Then it turned to abandon him and ascend from the pit. The earth trembled as it passed.

“Wait!” Tyler stumbled after it. “Wait, I command you!”

It froze. The scathing green eyes pivoted, slowly, toward him.

He inhaled sharply and turned toward the pond, thinking pointlessly of the gun. When he looked back, he found the creature had not budged but its eyes burned so much brighter.

“What—” Tyler pressed his hands to his face, sighed, then let them drop. “What am I supposed to do?”

The green eyes seethed but the creature did not move. “Address your debt,” it murmured.

“With the thing that’s coming? The thing that’s worse than you? I thought you were the worst of everything!”

Its eyes dimmed then and its head seemed to bow. "Are we not all capable of change, stupid Tyler? Is there no redemption for the worst of the worse?"

"Ahh." Tyler looked down too. Somewhere, the ground between him and the creature morphed from darkness to eternal void. "I see. I have other debts, intertwined, don't I?"

He sank to his knees and dug his fingers into the dirt. It felt cold and damp but real and alive. Full of possibilities and the potential for growth.

"My will compounded your corruption," he said. "I am sorry."

"No matter," it growled. "Mutual corruption. But is the lowly Tyler capable of understanding? Of disentangling the thread that binds the debts?"

"I—" He ran dirty fingers through his hair then looked up. The creature stood hunched, watching intently. "We share an original debt."

"Yessss."

"I will repay it."

It turned away then and continued its ascent from the pit, grumbling, "And all things flow."

Tyler stood and stepped after. "If it matters," he called out, "I forgive you."

The creature was already gone, but in the rustling of the trees he imagined he heard an answer.

Back at the car, he pulled the note from the windshield, crumpled it and tossed it in back. There was no need anymore. He would find Jamie while he still had time. Hopefully, together, they could change their own paths.