

<http://www.rhiannonrs.com>
rhi.rose@gmail.com

An Unquiet Slumber

By Rhiannon Rasmussen

Originally published in *Arcane: Thirty Weird and Unsettling Stories*

Greyson set the pliers down and leaned heavily against the table to stand. Every move brought a stiff jolt of pain into his ossified joints. He had to cut and squeeze to extract blood from his desiccating body, to get even a fingertip's worth of that rust. Not good, no good at all. Only the dead don't bleed. He had lived longer than most, true, as stones do, but he had no desire to flicker out after a mayfly's lifespan. Short and worthless, like the rest of humanity.

He ran his fingers along his chin while he examined the day's work on the doll. Stubble scratched under his dull nails. He needed to wash up and shave. No good to walk around unshaven and disgusting. He might have *company*, after all.

Greyson hadn't been in the washroom long before something out of the corner of his eye startled him. When he glanced back at the door, it was empty, just the dim hallway stretching out to the study. He turned back to the mirror. A silhouette stood behind him where there had been the wall's reflection; a woman, her wet hair clinging to her face. Her features were obscured by shadow, but something about the tilt of her head and the lay of her hair was wrong. There was less substance than she should have possessed, and faint glistening. She was angry with him.

He put the razor down, leaned forward, and breathed on the glass. The ghost reached past his reflection.

You slept through our anniversary, she wrote, letter by painstaking letter. They faded as he watched. The whole room chilled. Ghosts, or at least Abigail, had scent. Not as a person did, not the distasteful pungency of the byproducts of living, but as a room long abandoned to the desert, a remembrance of her self. She was too old to have the fragrance of turned earth or the deep draught of the river Thames. He never had pegged her exact date of death, but it was long before he had been born. No, Abigail was the faint breath of old ink, the fragile grain of aging paper as it crumbled under touch. His dearest wife.

"Well, I believe we'll have another next year," Greyson said. "And it will be five times as grand. I doubt it matters if we miss one of one hundred ten." In the cold room, his breath frosted the glass easily.

You slept for three days. Abigail retraced her earlier words. He had indeed slept. And dreamed. She'd been there. She'd danced with him.

Greyson picked the razor back up. She had all right to be mad at him. Certainly, were their positions reversed, he would be livid with her.

"The dreams weren't enough?" The memories faded like the words she traced on the mirror. Ghosts lived in dreams, insubstantial as they both were. "They were so lovely that I lost track of time. I wouldn't mind wandering in those gardens forever with you, for... how did it go? 'The moon never beams without bringing me dreams...'" Abigail didn't respond. "With due respect, I need to finish shaving now, my dear."

When she did not so much as stir, he went back to shaving.

The chill sharpened, made his bones ache. The cold distracted him, or his hand slipped, or something shoved him; either way, the razor sliced through his skin, and deep. He swore and threw it into the sink. It clattered shut. "Abigail!"

Her fingers pinched the wound on his cheek, drawing out his drying, silty blood. She smeared it across the mirror. The blood was too thick for her to get far.

Greyson clapped his hand over the cut. It stung. He met his own gaze in the mirror. He looked haggard and weary and half-shaven. His spectacles hid the worst of the shadows under his eyes. "It's not our wedding anniversary, is it? No, only the anniversary of when we met. Did I deserve that? All right? Darling? I *know* it's important to you. What are we all but creatures of habit? I'll make it up to you. What would you like me to say? 'I love you yet; you are in my soul.'" The line was a bit bastardized, perhaps, but he would recite the scene in full if she asked him to. They had both read her favorite book so many times, so often aloud. "If I could touch you, if you could come to me, then you would know."

The silhouette lifted her head and smiled. Her visage was less ghastly than he had feared; she still had both her eyes. He touched her reflection's cheek and she vanished, left him with his hand pressed to smooth, empty glass.

She was hungry again. She grew hungrier as she grew older. The hunger of a ghost that no longer had the volition to temper desire, the narrow-mindedness of a soul stripped to the emotions of her death throes. Not that it mattered. They were both desperate.

Cruel irony to think that he might be the one trapped in a dying routine, a living fossil, slower to adapt than a ghost. How long until he couldn't clear the dust collecting on the shelves of his own home? How long until the dust would settle on his own self? Living forever had turned out to be the falsely optimistic term for dying forever. It was bearable, as long as he had her.

Greyson finished shaving, splashed his face with stale water from the basin, and threw the razor into the bin next to it. Blades wore down fast, or perhaps it was just how cheaply they were manufactured now.

"I'm going back downstairs," he said, all cheer, to the air. "To finish your gift, my dear. A few days late, but with you by my side, who would count the time?" No answer, save for the light brush of a breeze on the back of his neck. He touched the locket he wore. It was cool, but not cold. A memento, so Abigail could accompany him always. Her wedding ring was strung on the chain, and inside, instead of a portrait, nestled a folded page from her beloved book. Her focus and sole grounding tie to the living world, to his dismay; if only he were the tie, she wouldn't speak so fondly of Heathcliff.

He closed the bathroom door and then reopened it as a door to the basement, his workshop, and stepped through. Upper floor to lower floor. Alchemy had myriad uses; in this case, a forged trinket wound in copper and embedded under his skin allowed a reroute from one room to another. Door to door, he could go anywhere he pleased. Around the world, even. But everything he cared about was in this manor.

Most of the doors in the house now opened to walls and mirrors and beds of nails and other such distractions. No one besides himself and spirits could navigate the maze.

The manor smelled of decay, the stifling must of a catacomb. Greyson flicked the light switch on and off until the lamp decided to cooperate and crackle into illumination. He took off his glasses and blinked until his vision adjusted, then replaced them and closed the door. A table and work tools took up this half of the room, his study. A large life-sized doll lay across the table, fabric stretched across its wooden frame. Abigail's body. An object to return the solidity he'd never known her to have.

He stepped over the smeared remains of two white chalk circles across the stone floor. The books stored here were shelved well away from the ground so that moisture wouldn't warp their pages.

Books held no interest for him today, save for one. *Wuthering Heights* lay across the body Abigail would inhabit; the last remnant of her past life and the artifact that would be her future. Greyson leaned forward, kissed the book along the spine, inhaled the sharp scent of the leather cover, soft as human skin, and murmured Abigail's name. She was there, the shadow of a breath on his cheek, a cool touch slipping under the

collar of his shirt. Not in body, never in body, but in spirit. She never strayed far from his side. Even if he couldn't see her, she was there. She would brush her fingers down his neck, a chill too cold and sudden to be a breeze in this windowless house.

Greyson picked *Wuthering Heights* off of the doll's chest and set it to the side. Pages fell out, the companions to those ripped out of their bindings, burned and scattered into the body, to tie it to Abigail. He stacked them back on the desk.

Glass eyes stared up at the ceiling's beams, clouded grey jewels in her porcelain face. He'd heard of puppets built of flesh, handstitched golems to do their master's bidding, but the thought made him queasy. No doubt Abigail would have objections as well. No disgusting secondhand materials would comprise her earthly vessel. Except the hair; human hair, of course. There was no other substitute.

He ran his hand through the hair, soft and dark and curled, and laid his head on her chest, imagined back to when they had first met, when he could still see her and, after a fashion, touch her. A gift he'd squandered on immortality. Love for life; her love, to extend his life. Steps that, once danced, could never be undone.

No heartbeat, no breath stirred the doll's frame, nor would it ever. He nestled his hand in the crook of its jaw and murmured sweet platitudes to its still lips: all the night-tide, he'd lay down by the side of his darling, his darling, his life and his bride. The doll couldn't answer, of course. It was almost finished. Almost. All it lacked was the ghost to give it function and some way to give it a smoother semblance of life,

more than the jerky, violent movements that she could manage with it now.

Greyson closed his eyes, and then said, quite aloud, "With all the smoke and mirrors I contrive to talk to you, my dear, it makes you wonder if I've simply gone mad, doesn't it? All this to touch you."

A twinge, and then a deeper pain in his neck, the locket's chain digging into his collar. "I'm joking, darling," Greyson said, his hand on the locket to keep it from trying to burrow its way deeper into his flesh. "Just words said in jest."

Before her presence faded he got up and began work on the doll again, tweaking the fine jeweler's wire that twined through her limbs, gold and copper to hold the energy that would animate her, silk and steel to hold the physical frame together. Magic and copper stitched together the seams, giving it movement, which was all very pretty and for naught if the wires snapped when it moved.

When he was satisfied with the doll's state, Greyson slid his arms under the doll's body and lifted it up, propped it against his chest and arranged its arms as if it were his partner in a waltz. He let the doll's head loll against his shoulder, cold porcelain lips resting on his collar. The skirts rustled against his legs as he walked it gently to the middle of the room, over the necromancer's array sketched onto the stone floor, and began to dance with it. He didn't need music to keep time; this was only practice for when they could truly dance.

The doll would be finished soon, and they could go out and satiate Abigail's hunger together, both of them, physically embodied. They would go out and feel; she would leave the house, really leave it, not just

as a shade trailing the folded words in his locket. Travel wherever she pleased. Anywhere.

Even without him.

He swung the doll around, skirts twirling out. They were both reflected in the mirrors that lined the study's walls, the reflections spiraling out on to eternity. If Abigail watched, she left no shadow. Was she just waiting for him to finish, so that she could travel in physical form without his aid?

She could abandon him; she could walk away and never look back. Abigail was capricious. Given a chance, she would run after some imagined Heathcliff and forget to return, leave him to rot in his own house. He stopped mid-stride and held the limp thing out in his arms. The head tipped brokenly to one side, pale face wearing the sheen of fine porcelain, sightlessly gazing over his shoulder, through the walls and away to the far horizon where Heathcliff awaited her.

The doll was the most abhorrent thing he had ever touched. Greyson threw it away from him. It collapsed and clattered across the floor, limbs crooked in ways that no living body would ever move. Three years of his life on this lifeless device that would steal Abigail away from him. He scrambled for a hammer or a saw or any other implement on the table. She would never be able to walk away from him. He would never let her leave.

The saw would do. He cracked the legs, splinted the wood in rough strokes. It did not yield easily under his hands; he cut gouges, threw the saw aside, bent the legs with the hammer and stomped on the wounds until the hardwood snapped and the cloth ripped.

Shavings covered the floor, two severed stumps stuck out from under the carefully layered petticoats. He stood and brushed his coat up, glanced around the room with sudden dread. Idiot, idiot! He'd worked so hard and ruined it. He took up the hammer again and smashed the mirrors, too, so that Abigail couldn't see him. If they didn't break when he swung at them he pried them off the wall and tossed them facings-down onto the floor. Every creak made him nervous; the house settling, or Abigail? A mouse in the wall, or his wife come to ask what was wrong? She wouldn't understand. Couldn't understand.

The locket burned. The room creaked. A misty form, a woman's shadow, wavered in the heart of the room. Her visage stared out from every mirror shard. Greyson dropped the saw.

"It was an accident," he said, stepping backwards. Wood crunched under his feet. "The legs were too frail. I'll just have to remake them. It won't take long, my dear."

"And the mirrors?" she hissed. He could hear her, see her lips move in her reflections, all the little shattered pieces, fragments of Abigail. Anger congealed her form. If only there were more amicable conditions. "You claim you love me," Her voice echoed, a thin whisper that filled the room like old spiderwebs. "Heathcliff would never betray his love so." Her reflection reached down and picked up the saw.

"As I recall, he could, and he did," Greyson said, and then regretted every word.

In the mirror, Abigail struck him across the face with the saw.

In the mirror, Greyson readjusted his glasses, ignoring the warm rivulet that crawled down his cheek. "Alas, Heathcliff is fictional."

"Fictional!" A rising wail accompanied the word. "I love you, I love you, and this is how you repay me?"

"Swear you'll never leave me," Greyson said. "Because you care so deeply. Isn't that right?"

"Why won't you join me in death? I asked you even before you proposed to me, when you were just a student of the occult and I a lost shade in that depository. You could have joined me then and none of this would have happened. How can you claim to love me?" She grew closer with every word, skeletal, rotting. His beautiful wife. Anger made her vile, and his revulsion made him guilty. She was right; he should be able to love her no matter her petty faults, no matter the situation. And he could, if she would pay attention to him instead of that damned novel. "You teach me now how cruel you've been - cruel and false. Why did you despise me? Why did you betray your own heart?"

"Stop quoting that infernal book at me!" Greyson yelled back, throwing out his hands. "And you - how can you claim to love me? All you ever profess is your obsession with Heathcliff, with never a thought for me. Me, your husband! I've done everything for you. I carry pieces of your bloody book around next to my heart, for God's sake! But soon enough you'll have naught but a statue to love! Is that steadfast enough?!"

"You broke my body," she said, sadly, so sadly, but at least they were her own words. "You gave it to me, then you take it all away. I wish I could hold you until we both were dead." The fragmented remains of her skeleton reached out, grabbed him around the throat, before melting away completely.

And then came the sudden pain, crippling needles and the razor edges of knives. Every clock in the house rang out, a clamor that drowned Greyson's cry even to his own ears.

Greyson tore the locket off and threw it across the room as far as his shaking hands could manage. Abigail shrieked, and her presence left him. Chasing the locket. Maybe there was a God after all and this was Greyson's last reprieve. He sat gasping until the pain subsided some, then staggered across the room, ripped the door open, and stepped through it without looking at his destination. Didn't matter, as long as it was as far away as possible. It wasn't abandonment, or if it was, she had made the first move away.

He slammed the door behind him and then sank to his knees. He was facing the ocean at night, some unwitting person's unlocked beach house at his back. It was too cloudy and dark for stars. Abigail was trying to kill him. Abigail was honestly trying to murder him. After all the sacrifices he had made for her, ungrateful bitch, after all those decades they'd lived together.

Greyson forced himself up and picked his way slowly, unsteadily across the idiot's property and down to the sound of crashing waves. High tide, low tide, who cared? It wasn't as if he were capable of drowning.

When the sand got damp and his boots sunk into the ground, he stopped and lay down, and stared up at the moon's silhouette shifting through the clouds. She should understand that he couldn't just let her leave. What if she decided not to come back?

What if she refused to take him back?

He lay there in the mud until dawn, ruining his suit in the salt water, contemplating how many pretty seashells would purchase Abigail's renewed affection, when some fool spotted his body and approached. He didn't look up when he heard a voice.

"Hey, are you all right?" Yankee accent; a young man.

"Well," Greyson said. "Waiting for the end of the world."

The man leaned over, then stepped back. "I'll get help," the man said, puzzlement all over his face, before rushing back into the house.

Like Hell he'd wait around. Once the man was back inside, Greyson rolled to his feet, dripping wet, and walked to the house. He opened the door to another locale where he could sulk in peace.

It would have been much simpler had he died. They would be together in Heaven or in Hell, or to wander the earth forever as shades until Armageddon came. He wanted to see the end, the War to truly end all wars, but to be without Abigail was another sort of end, a worse one, an empty gouge in his chest that left him listless. He wandered for weeks, aimlessly, ticking off the days in his mind. From city to city; no matter how many people crowded the streets, he was alone.

Of course she would forgive him. She had to. Who else loved her, who else did she love? Anyone she may have had a chance to was long dust by now; just her and him and her damnable beloved book, rotting in the house with her. He would have to be presentable, though. He cleaned himself up in his radial apartment in Paris, washed and shaved and changed his suit.

He opened a door in Paris and stepped back though to his study. All but one of the doors in the house yawned open, exposing their nails,

their empty portals into adjacent rooms. Useless to him. An opened door could not be opened again until closed, and so could not take him back outside. A trap, most likely. Nothing left to do but fall for her again. He shut the door carefully behind himself and then called out, cheerfully, "Abigail, I'm home!"

Nothing. He sighed and stepped into the room, towards the locket, which still lay untouched on the floor where he had thrown it a week ago. Beside it lay what remained of the doll, hand stretched out as if it were reaching for the locket. The air in the study stilled.

Abigail was here, waiting, watching him. Forgiving him, he hoped. "I missed you," Greyson said. The doll stirred.

What little light there was winked out. The air thickened; the room became stuffy, muggy, difficult to breathe. It stank like mildew and sludge dredged up from the bottom of the Thames. Abigail appeared before him, eyes glittering like bone exposed deep in their sockets, soaked, so solid that silt and water dripped from her hair and clothes and pooled on the floor around her reflections.

"How dare you step foot in this house again," she said. "You promised me, you promised, and you broke the promise and its legs and then abandoned me. I hate you."

"It was an accident."

"Why even pretend I didn't see you?! I see everything you do!"

"Then you'll see how I've been heartbroken and wandering the Earth looking for trinkets to appease you with. I was afraid that you would leave me."

"Yet you arrive empty-handed," Abigail spat. She was hardly transparent. Solid as flesh. Her voice carried well in the thick air.

"I thought you might forgive me simply because you also missed me."

She fixed him with a hollow glare, reached for him with thin fingers. He would not back away this time. Greyson strode forward; the doll dragged itself upright to meet him, and he knelt, kissed her, twined his hands into her hair. It was just the doll's body, but wasn't this what he had built it for? In the reflections fragmented across the floor it was Abigail herself who embraced him, who returned the kiss, deeper, hungrily. She dug her fingers into his back. Her hair and her brine-soaked dress dampened his suit.

For a moment he thought that in her lust she might have forgiven him, until the pressure blossomed into pain. Greyson tried to pull away. She dug deeper. Stabbed in the back by his own desperation, perhaps by a sliver from one of the mirrors. Pathetic. Struggling deepened the wound.

She pressed his head to her shoulder and murmured something like the strain of a lullaby, the same words that he had whispered to the doll.

"Abigail, please forgive me," he said, lying limp in her embrace.

"I'll forgive you," she promised. Her cold hand stroked his cheek. "I'll forgive you very soon."

"If you mean that you'll forgive me when I die, I'll take this chance to remind you that I can't, not even for you. I would in a heartbeat, I swear, if I could, but I was young and foolish once, you know."

"Are you scared? You talk so much when you're scared."

"Of course not. I know you wouldn't *hurt* me."

"I wouldn't," she agreed, and in what would have been the same breath for anyone living, said "Offer me your heart."

"You have my heart, darling. You always have."

"No. Your heart." Her fingers trailed down to rest over his chest.

"Really?" How could she say that after all he'd done for her? "Really, I need that to circulate blood through my decrepit body. Do you know how long it will take me to heal? Months—" She made some small movement that sent pain down his side and he gasped. "If you're just going to leave me bleeding on the floor, Abigail, please, I'll bring you someone else's heart. Please, Abigail."

"I don't want anyone else's heart." She unbuttoned his vest, slid her cold fingers against his skin. "I realized, when you were gone. What's been missing, what I want. Only you."

"Heathcliff," he said. "I'll bring you Heathcliff's heart."

"He doesn't exist, darling. You keep telling me that. But it doesn't matter, because you love me more than Heathcliff ever loved his dear Catherine, don't you? There's no use for the book or the doll, any of that. I want your love to fill me. Don't you want that, too?" She was pleading, the hunger turned to desperation turned on him. Inevitably. He couldn't leave her to suffer, never let her cry alone without respite. What was one more little sacrifice, to ensure that she wouldn't leave him?

"Of course I do," Greyson said. What was the use of struggling? It was true. He closed his eyes, pressed his face against Abigail's damp collar. "And if I give you this, will you never leave me?"

"I will never leave you. I keep all my promises."

Of course she had to make one last dig at him. He smiled crookedly. "Ah. I'll even make the first cut for you."

"Oh, my love, you don't need to." Abigail lifted his chin slightly and kissed him. She held him still, drawing out the caress even as she cut him open, even as she dug into his chest. It hurt. He gripped her tighter, but it wasn't as painful as he had feared. His flesh was clay; no doubt the nerves had hardened and died. Blood and sediment pooled on the floor over his shoes, mixing with her river water. No matter. The suit was already long past ruin.

Greyson clutched her in his tight embrace until she held his barely-beating heart in her hands. She knelt down with him, laid him on the floor, and lifted his heart to her lips and took a tentative bite.

He hoped it was the sweetest meat she ever tasted.



Greyson woke lying on the ground like Abigail's broken doll. Abigail sat over his body. He had to squint to focus on her. Her figure seemed odd; she was dressed loosely in his clothes, his glasses tucked neatly into the waistcoat breast-pocket. She fitted together small brass springs and gears and pipes. Though she was by his side, he could only conjure up the vague memories of affection. *Take my heart, and all my love for you, darling.* Dried blood made his skin sticky. The room smelled like wet earth and rot.

"I suppose I didn't need it after all," he said, through his parched throat. "Maybe you'll have more use for it." He laughed until it turned to coughing, a hollow grating noise, the dying strikes of a wound-down

clock, and lifted a hand to probe at the wound in his chest. All the warmth had drained out of him, down into a distant well that he could not draw from.

"Hush, darling, Greyson," Abigail said, and traced his lips with her fingertips. She was as warm as life and love, save for the cool band of the wedding ring. The locket's bare chain dangled from her neck. "Lie still. I'm building you a new heart, to tick away the seconds until the world ends. I burnt the book, dear. Only your love sustains us." She sprinkled damp ash among the workings. Though he tried, Greyson could not find the heart to care.

