

Grave Error

A ghostly tale set in Walt Disney World's Haunted Mansion Attraction

by Kristi Petersen Schoonover

My dearest Penelope,

I suppose after my revelation the other night I can comprehend why you would not wish to see me, for I must come across as a fickle man. I agree that there are few people in this world more reprehensible than the groom who leaves his bride on her wedding day, but I am certain that once you read this letter, you will forgive me for such an iniquity; the tale that follows is not for the faint of heart, and I can assure you that every last word of it is true.

I met Constance shortly after my physical death. In life, I had been a teacher of Literature at a small school in the Hudson Valley; it was a position that I loved dearly, hence I chose to remain earth-bound to instruct those who had passed prematurely and, as I, had preferred to stay. However, just as it had been when I was of the flesh, the position afforded me little compensation other than invitations to dinner parties at the homes of my wealthier students.

Constance was in town on a visit to a friend, and happened to attend the same affair as I. She had drunk so many glasses of wine that she suddenly rose and exclaimed, "My cup is full, and now my cup is run!" The reflection of the hearth in her eyes bewitched me, and I, having some familiarity with that particular poem and full of no less wine than she, responded boldly, "I believe you are alluding to Chidiok Tichborne's elegy, referred to as either 'Tichborne's Elegy' or 'My Prime of Youth is But a Frost of Cares,' and the line of which you speak is actually, "My glass is full, and now my glass is run."

The room hushed, and Constance beheld me at first not with wickedness or embarrassment, but with something akin to recognition. In hopes of stimulating her

memory, I added most quietly, "He wrote it on the night he was to be executed for crimes against Queen Elizabeth."

Then she burst into laughter and exclaimed, "Of course! Why, how could I have forgotten? I adore that elegy so much that I have a gravestone in my family plot that reads that very thing, 'my glass is run.'"

And hence we struck up a most scintillating conversation, and there was something so beguiling in her manner and in her laugh that, despite my impecunious position which would not allow me to give her a proper home, I was compelled to court her.

Although I was of little means, she adored my sense of humor, intellect, and other qualities, and insisted upon marrying me. Her home, she said, was so expansive that there was "always room for one more," and I would have no want of anything, so I agreed.

Our wedding was to be a fortnight's affair and take place at her—indeed, expansive, and imposing—six-gabled mansion on the banks of a river that was the most extraordinary color of peridot. I arrived by carriage and was greeted at the door by her butler, Master Gracey, whom Constance had hired for his astonishing ability to age from youth to bare skeleton in such smooth and rapid succession that it was rather like watching a trick of the light. Of all of the talents I have seen bestowed upon some of us, his was by far the most extraordinary; he rivaled only a woman I had met once who could transpose her countenance onto any object around her. I did not wish to embarrass myself, but my curiosity was piqued. "Good sir," I said, "You display such fine form, but I would like to know, do you ever catch a chill?"

As he responded his young face vanished before my eyes to reveal his pearly skull. "Never," he said. "Constance established my chambers in the oval portrait over the mantel, so that I would always be quite warm. Come."

The mansion's foyer was well-appointed, which I had expected, but such care had been taken with smaller details; in particular, I was quite taken aback by the meticulous arrangement of the cobwebs upon the enormous chandelier. In many other

homes, the cobwebs are left to conquer their surroundings, spreading like an untamed fungus; here, it appeared that Constance either compensated her maids to arrange each gossamer strand or did it herself with her fine, long fingers, and just the very thought of having the privilege of living in such a well-cared-for manor stirred my soul.

A great oak door slid open and I was escorted into an octagonal room graced with exquisite gargoyles, which nodded at me in silent, but most cordial, greeting. Master Gracey reached over to a lever on the wall, and the oak door behind us whispered closed; it was then that I realized how truly fortunate I was, for the walls began to stretch. Such features are only in the most lively of homes, and quite expensive to maintain. I was then made breathless by the paintings on the walls, in particular one of Constance, who smiled most charmingly and held aloft a parasol the color of rubies; as the portrait stretched, she was balanced on a tightrope above the gaping mouth of a vicious-looking alligator. It then occurred to me that she had never told me how she had become one of us, and that quite possibly I was seeing those last few moments of her prior existence.

So enrapt was I with this fantasy that I did not, at first, notice that something was touching me...and then I felt hot breath on my neck. I startled, and when I looked, what I saw was most horrifying: shadows, milling about, murmuring words I could not quite comprehend, and in one excruciating moment, something shoved me.

I am certain that I shrieked, and when I looked hither again, the room had returned to normal; I could not utter a word at first, and when at last I found my voice, it was timid.

"Gracey," I said. "I...I..."

He raised one eyebrow as his skull became skin. "Yes?"

"I thought I...I felt something most peculiar."

A smile spread across his countenance as it once again became skull. "You are simply tired after your journey, sir." Then he turned his changing face upward and announced, "We have a new guest."

I wondered with whom he might be speaking until a clap of thunder and blaze of lightning called my attention to the ceiling, where I saw a man swinging from a noose.

“Hello!” I exclaimed with much cheer, for I was not certain who the man might be, even though I was aware there would be no response to me directly; those of us who stay in fixed positions often do not speak.

Master Gracey seemed to fathom my behavior, for he said, “that is Constance’s father.” Then the door opened and he stepped aside most politely to usher me into an exquisite hall with the most delicately faded and distressed wallpaper; there was also the most pleasant smell that pervaded the room, moist and mossy, or like fine, old books that have absorbed the ideal quantity of dust.

He led me down a corridor lined with portraits, and I was struck by the wonderfully talented company Constance kept! It appeared that Master Gracey was not the only one here with the transformative talent; a voluptuous dark-eyed beauty changed into a bloodthirsty cat creature; a knight and horse became skeletal; a fair maiden bore her teeth as snakes curled about her head. I was equally enthralled with the jovial busts that were sorting books in the library, who greeted me most amicably as we passed: “Welcome sir!”, “This velvet chair has been set here just for you!” “Tea is waiting!” I marveled at how welcome Constance was making me feel, for she knew I loved books and had mentioned this summer that she had been pondering the idea of installing a library specifically for my use. And as though Constance’s hospitality had no end, a shadow player sat before a decaying piano in a conservatory, engaging in a most out-of-tune dirge. Dead flowers were set in the most elegant manner about his instrument, and cool breezes whistled through the well-placed holes in the windows. Glowing footsteps cavorted on the staircase, and the wallpaper on the second floor blinked in surprise as a nearby clock struck thirteen. There was an uproarious clattering and banging in the hall in front of me, and I could see that some of the doors were indeed possessed; I hoped I would not be placed in one of those rooms, for I do, as you know, adore my quiet for thinking. But Master Gracey bore to the right before then, and we passed a suit of armor which nodded his approval as we entered a long room

that stretched for an eternity. A velvet carpet the color of garnets was nearly threadbare, and before us floated a candelabra, its candles crying wax on the floor. He opened one of the many doors to reveal the room beyond: I wanted to see immediately what my quarters held in store, but did not wish to be rude.

Master Gracey said, "This is our endless hallway; it is rather quiet, so we trust these accommodations will be suitable? Prudence here will see to your needs; she only wanders this area of the house."

I nodded in the direction of the floating candelabra; she was an invisible, and I concealed my dismay at this, for I knew it would be impossible to know her whereabouts if I had need of her. But Master Gracey seemed to sense my apprehension, for he said, "Do not worry; she only goes as far as the top of the stairs, but she never puts down her candelabra. Constance will be along shortly."

At last, I was alone to behold my apartment. The dust was gloriously thick, dulling a duvet the color of sapphires, a settee the color of amethysts, and drapes in shades of opal. A wash basin stood in the corner, dead vines crawled through a missing pane in the French doors, books littered the floor, and a broken doll blinked at me from her perch on the wardrobe; in contrast, the eyes in the wallpaper were closed, and I could hear a light snoring.

While all was aesthetically pleasing, it was lit by only a single candle, and as I needed more light so I could freshen myself properly, I searched around the room for others, but in vain. I stepped out into the hallway in search of Prudence, but her candelabra were further down the hall, and I did not wish to shout.

It was then I beheld the most ghastly sight: at the end of the hall, a great humped obsidian beast lumbered past! Corporeal pale stripes crawled and writhed on its underbelly, and my ears were assaulted by the most vile and chilling sounds; suddenly the hall was filled with noise, giggling and squealing, an unearthly chittering that I had never heard on this earth and was more than certain came from Hell, for the sound of it stopped my breath and plunged me into a bath of needles.

I slammed the door and braced myself against it in a louder fashion than I would have liked had I my notions about me; I startled the sleeping wallpaper, and thousands of eyes fluttered open. I was most glad to have the company, and began to calm myself when a knock at the door caused me to jump.

“Silly!” burred Constance as she entered the room, “do you not want to see me?”

I threw my arms about her as I admired her; her gown was the color of diamonds, and her wig was the most utopian shade of aquamarine. “N-no.” I have always had a clear, fine voice, and phrased my sentences with eloquence; yet I had been in her home for what amounted to less than an hour, and twice I had lost my ability to speak clearly. “H-have you ever...h-have you e-ever.”

She was gazing at me with a concerned and quizzical expression. “Darling, what is it?”

“I thought I saw something at the end of the hall.”

“What? What did you see?”

“Something...something terrible, something that does not belong here.” I could not even speculate on identifying what I had just seen, but in many books I had studied sketches of appalling creatures—scale-covered bull-like animals that feed on poisonous plants, lambs that were attached via umbilical cords to plants, rabid half-dog, half-cats that hid beneath trees and snarled in the dark. While the humps of the things that I had seen looking back at me were certainly reminiscent of those I had studied long ago, the nature of their movements was whole and seamless, as though there were many beasts joined at the hip or quite possibly it was one brute creation with many humps, like the equally lurid serpent that was rumored to live in deep lakes.

She blinked, and it was her robust laugh, the laugh that I loved then and still love to this day, that warmed me so I was no longer so cold. “You are weary from your journey,” she said, and she stroked my arm in a manner that made me even warmer. “You should take some time to rest; the welcome ball does not begin until later.” She reached up and touched my face, and the feel of the pads of her fingertips on my cheek

was soothing as warmed milk. "You will meet my friends, and it is also going to be a deathday party of sorts for my grandmother. We shall see you at seven."

She left my presence, and the wallpaper had fallen back into sleep. I rested on the bed but could not bring myself to blow out the candle, nor could I sleep; each time I tried to think of pleasantries, there was the threatening specter of this apperception: I was going to have to walk right through the place where I had seen the Obsidian Beast in order to go to the ballroom.

Being sleep was out of the question, I rose earlier than necessary and prepared for the party, all the while trying to convince myself that perhaps what Master Gracey and Constance had said was truth; I was overwhelmed, and some libations would make me drowsy enough to rest. Tomorrow, and from then forward, I would likely see nothing else to unnerve me.

I did, however, take my candle, and when I emerged from the room, I nodded toward Prudence's invisible presence and said, "Would it be too much trouble for you to stock my chamber with more candles?"

The candelabra bobbed up and down most enthusiastically, and then I inhaled deeply and made my way to the end of the hall. The knight once again greeted me, and I felt comfort; even the clamor of the banging and breathing doors was most cheerful. Then I came upon a most festive funeral parlor, festooned with all manner of wilting flora and a most convivial raven. So entranced was I, I forgot my apprehension and stopped to visit—only to grasp that something was dreadfully amiss.

The skeletal man inside the coffin was desperately engaged in escape.

"Let me outta here! Please! Le-let me outta here!" He struggled with the coffin's lid, and the pair of candles equidistantly placed atop the coffin were inclined to tip over.

"What has terrified you so?" I asked as I tried to insert my fingers beneath the lid to wrest him free, but then as I went about my work, I heard that disturbing sound, that chattering like so many bedeviled rats; I did not have to wait for his answer, for I knew, that he had seen the Obsidian Beast too, and I was forthwith inspired to run.

I ran past the rattling, breathing doors, and it was then that I fathomed that the beings who had been assigned these rooms were not rejoicing in these activities; they were petrified, living in a constant state of panic.

At last I reached the balcony over the ballroom, and although it had barely struck seven it seemed as though the revelry had been progressing for some time. It was the most colorful cavalcade of individuals: a portly woman in a dress the color of rose quartz, who must have been Constance's aforementioned grandmother, was blowing out candles on a cake; a steady stream of guests in all their finery poured in through the door and up the stairwell; a pair of duelers playfully shot at each other. Some appeared to have already imbibed too much, for there was a couple seated atop a chandelier, swaying back and forth as they quaffed from enormous goblets. Others, who seemed much older, were enjoying more sedentary activities; an old woman sat knitting in a rocker before the emerald fire that blazed in the hearth; an aging king chortled with laughter as he sat at the head of the long table. Much rotting food was everywhere, and the tantalizing odor made me hungry; my appetite whetted further when I recalled Constance's affluence, and that she had surely set her table with food that had been rotting for quite some time to bring out its most piquant and robust flavors—food in such condition very expensive, but worth every penny as it was most pleasing to the palate. As I fantasized about my forthcoming victuals, I beheld the plates on the table—and then something disturbing caught my eye.

One place setting in its arrangement formed an odd sort of symbol; a single circle in the center, and two smaller circles just above it.

I do not know why something in my brain resonated that this was extraordinary, but my insides twisted and knotted in anxiety.

"Come," Constance ascended the stairs and reached for my hand, "let me introduce you to Millie; she is my closest companion."

We strode to the dance floor, where several other couples were dancing, and approached a couple whose female element wore a gown and wig in hues of carnelian and sunlit topaz. When she saw Constance, she broke away from her male counterpart.

“At last,” she said, reaching out her hand for me to kiss. “I have heard so much about you.”

Gradually my dismay was ebbing, and I tried to be most charming as I answered, “All of it disagreeable, I’m sure.”

Millie threw back her head and laughed; she was more stunning than when I had first seen her. Indeed, if I ever would have been tempted to betray Constance, it would have been with Millie; she radiated serenity that allowed me to forget my harrowing experiences.

“May I have this dance?” she batted her eyes at my beloved in a fetching manner.

Constance nodded. “I do believe Uncle Harry is drunk again,” she said, cocking her head toward the long table; I could see legs thrust out from underneath the tablecloth. “He does this at every affair; perhaps I had better try to wake him.” Then she rushed away, and Millie took my arms and swept me onto the floor. I have always been deft at the waltz, but Millie was forceful in leading me—most unconventional, and yet refreshing, so I let her carry me and sweep me about as smiling skulls poured from the organ and drifted about.

As we glided about, I was indentured to appreciate these glorious surroundings; Millie said sweet things in my ear, to be truthful, compliments that were probably inappropriate for a single woman to be uttering to a betrothed man, but exciting all the same. I studied every fine strand of hair on her head, and how fastidiously it was arranged, and then I looked up at the balcony overhead.

The Obsidian Beast! The streaks on its belly were sprouting and squirming and coming alive like grubs, and they jostled and moved and pointed, why, they were pointing at me! And some ungodly childlike voice rendered, “see that one! See that one!”

I screamed and pushed Millie away from me, and the whole of the room, the organ, the dancers, the grandmother blowing out her candles, seemed to freeze. A strange, deep voice shook the room, saying something about “playful spooks”, and the

Beast, the Beast on the balcony was leering at us, drooling its superiority and dominion over all of us, and I heard a baby, crying as though it had been starved for days.

Constance towered over me and pulled me to my feet. "What is the matter with you?"

The annoyance in her voice unsettled me, for I had never heard her speak with such sharpness; in fact, I had never seen her even mildly irritated.

I tried to make my mouth form words, and for the third time that day I had difficulty speaking.

She put a finger to my lips. "We shall visit my Aunt Leota," she said, taking my hand. "Come, you have not met her yet. She tends to keep to herself and does not come to the parties, but she is wise and knows all."

I followed her up the staircase and, despite how exquisitely it had been broken in places, did not seem to marvel at the details anymore. This house, this lovely place where I was supposed to spend eternity with my bride, had taken on an ominous air.

Her Aunt Leota was an ethereal being the color of turquoise who floated about in a crystal ball before a hail of instruments, a drum, a harp, a horn; tarot cards were strewn about a small table under a gilt cloth.

"Whom do you bring me this fine happy day?" she intoned.

"He is the one of whom I've spoken often," Constance answered. "The one I am marrying tomorrow."

"Trust him do not, for he'll soon go away."

Constance was not shaken by her aunt's disapproval; I, on the other hand, had an eerie inkling that she was correct in her assessment.

"Tisk, tisk! Oh, do show him your true self, Aunt Leota!"

Leota eyed me and nodded and began to chant something in just short of dactylic tetrameter, each line rhyming with the one previous, each one imploring the great beyond to spill forth its most heinous and mischievous beings.

"She has such an amazing poetic skill, does she not?" Constance asked. "I thought you would love her, being the great reader that you are."

But I was too taken aback by the words she was saying to appreciate Leota's adroit use of language, much less agree with what Constance had just said; for the words she spoke, they had a nefarious purpose. The Obsidian Beast—she was summoning it here! "This is the house of the devil!" I shouted, and, scarcely aware of where I was going, I burst out of the room and began to run; my only thought was of self-preservation, that I needed to leave this house. But, alas, I could find no door that lead me to freedom, and when my race through the labyrinthine halls came to an end, I found myself in the attic, amid broken frames, shelves of rare china and soup tureens, and comfortable, dust-clothed furniture. In an instant the wonder of my surroundings overtook me so that it was as though I was no longer afraid; but then, I saw in the corner our wedding cake, several portraits of my beloved Constance, and, on the opposite side, her wedding gown, lovingly hugging a dress form; at the sight of what should have brought me much anticipation, I was gripped once again by the dread of what lay ahead: eternity in a house of demons.

"Now, is that cake simply lovely? And that dress?"

Constance had followed me, and I could feel the whispers of her on my back, her hands still physically gentle, but in their circular motions disquieting; it was like a hundred chilling baby fingers. I was then possessed of great angst, and I turned on her. "This house is haunted!" I shouted. "Haunted, Constance, and I cannot deign to overlook it any longer!"

Her face turned pale. "You are mad with drink. There is nothing in this house which does not belong here!"

But I simply could not contain my fear, my frustration, my rage that no one—not even my beloved Constance—could conceive of, much less sympathize with, my plight. I seized her arms and gripped her as tightly as I could, shaking her in the hopes that she could see my desperation. "Do you not understand what I am telling you? Something evil is here! And I cannot, by the grace of God, stay here, or even allow you to remain!"

Constance gasped, and then in a wild misinterpretation of my expression, she screamed and snaked out of my arms and hoisted an ax from the corner, her motion so

reckless she knocked over the dress form with her gown, a birdcage, and several pieces of china.

"I will!" she waved the ax. "I will, I will...I do!" She advanced toward me with a hex in her eyes, ignorant that with each swing of the ax she was destroying the heirlooms around her; I clamored to escape, and, upon, looking over my shoulder, saw that my only way out was through the attic window. I was gripped in the pain of a tumultuous conflict: that this was either the end of Constance and I and a promising future, or it was going to be the end of myself; to clarify, if I should jump, I would never see Constance again, but if I should jump, I would also be free of these demonic presences waiting to swallow my soul, presences that I knew would never leave me in peace. Self-preservation triumphed, and I crashed through the window to the ground below.

I awoke to the sound of a delightful, raucous jig about me. Everywhere were more party-goers, and I supposed these were the masses that had either been too inebriated to stay in the ballroom, or that, simply, there had not been enough space in the ballroom to accommodate them. And then, just as I was beginning to believe that perhaps I had made a grave error in leaping from the window, there was a rabbit, freckled face with a gaping mouth and the presence of a baying, whining, quaking dog, and a most agonizing light in my eyes. "Be gone!" the thing shouted, and I scrambled to arise although my legs seemed to have been fashioned from rubber; when I peered back at the thing, it was gone, and I was loathe to stay one more second in this haunted place. I ignored the gala riot about me, a cacophonous band, a richly dressed couple enjoying tea, an opera singer and a knight with a sword between his legs; none of them were going to assist me. But then I spotted a most solemn soul in one of the crypts; he appeared to be the blessed Reaper himself—yes, the great Reaper really does exist, for I stood in his presence, I tell you—and, as is characteristic of such heavenly comfort, he was not singing nor celebrating, he was merely hovering, and so I approached him.

"Do you not see?" I demanded. "Do you not see there are evil beings consuming your home? Show me the way out!"

And the Reaper pointed, only when he did...the fingers on his left hand made the shape of that same symbol I had seen on the banquet table, and so awestruck was I, taking that as a revelation, a great message from the One Who Created Us, that I did not even, at first, notice the enormity of the gateway to which he had directed me.

The Obsidian Beast was humping through it.

The opera singer took another breath and continued her lively aria.

I was a man with not a single alternative; I had to rush into that chasmal blackness, Beast or no, and so I closed my eyes and thrust my way forward. I was besieged upon by an arctic sting, but simultaneously my skin boiled, and around me were the sounds of that terrible chattering and that laughter, and again the childlike voices, "look at that one! Look at that one!" I could not help opening my eyes for one glimpse, and before me I saw three friendly gentlemen, pointing me forward, and so on I went. Almost before I was aware, the Obsidian Beast was gone and I was in the stolid silence of an augustly defiled crypt, its only resident a child-sized figure in a wedding gown beckoning me to hurry back; her voice was so consolatory I thought I almost could return, make recompense for my error, go forth in a luxurious life with Constance.

But I knew that everything had been ruined, for I would no longer be innocent; I would always be standing precariously on the edge of cataclysm. I could not, as I stood there, even bring myself to return for the things I had left in my apartment; that night, I lost everything I owned, which for a poverty-stricken individual is akin to an Armageddon.

Many weeks later, when I had recovered from a prolonged state of shock, I remembered one small irony I had seen in my mad dash of escape. As I rushed into the crypt, I had caught a glimpse of one particularly large gravestone; on it was an hourglass, and it read "RIP My glass is run". I contemplated this, and still now it fills me with melancholy—but not enough, as you can imagine, to return.

Millie searched tirelessly for my address and now writes to me often, and she assures me that Constance is doing well, spending infinite hours up in her attic, looking as ravishing as she would have in her gown, dancing to the tune of "Here Comes the

Bride" and sustaining herself on our rotting wedding cake. I take joy in the fact that her heart beats so loud and strong and clear that it drowns out the revelry which carries on nightly in the graveyard below. She and her friends and family are most happy living in their Haunted Mansion, but I could not, could never, live in such a frightful place where black shadows assail me in the foyer and a strange, lengthy, Obsidian Beast drifts down the end of my hall all night long; I could not live in a place where a brutish laughter and fleshly screams disrupt my routine spy my empyrean existence. Surely you would not thrust yourself into such precarious circumstances; surely you could not expect that I would be any different?

On more current matters, my dearest Penelope, I have chosen a lovely abandoned resort inside which the two of us can live our lives together, one that is so dark and moldy and overgrown with weeds that we shall not have to worry about such gross anatomies ever wanting to take up residence.

I hope this explanation and offer of a future has been more than satisfactory, and I would be euphoric should you do me the honor of paying a call.

Ever yours,
Reginald