

*Marcus Zwiebel**Hog Creek Review*

## Red Hands

The town of my youth was haphazardly located in the trough of a small alpine valley. The structure of this town was very basic: several gatherings of residences and a small lot with each home. My family lived in a rustic cottage near a particularly thick region of shady trees. Our mother, Mére, was a prominent and commanding woman who was able to easily secure attention from her three bustling children: Soeur, Frère, and me, Jeune. Like the other children in the town, Soeur, Frère, and I grew up with numerous rules. However, one remained of utmost importance.

Located beyond the thicketed limits of the town was a primitive structure. This structure, large and dilapidated, expanded a fair distance. It was considered taboo to make physical contact with this structure or the beckoning blooms that gracefully twisted around it. Large mauve-colored blossoms were firmly attached to a network of intricate wine-colored vines that made the structure seem even eerier. Teenagers frequently made up outlandish stories about ghouls and specters to frighten children while parents simply advised their children to avoid the structure. The town basically focused on the aversion of the structure and its ominous flora.

\*\*\*

“Jeune, look out the window!” Soeur yelled from the first floor. I leapt from my bed, vaulted down the stairs, and accidentally slammed my hip on the banister. Living a very uneventful life in our town, even an escaped animal was an exhilarating experience that rarely occurred. I was able to slide past my older siblings and receive a glimpse of the still scene outside. A hard object suddenly made contact with my head and I collapsed. I was able to stand up and make my way to a rocking chair before feeling the agonizing sensation on the back of my head. “Just messing, Jeune. I didn’t mean anything by it. Really,” Soeur

said with an attempted sympathetic voice. I rubbed the back of my head and winced. Frère, after realizing there was nothing happening outside, turned towards my older sister.

“That was foolish, we should tell Mère. You’ll be doing housework for days!” Frère then crinkled his nose and crossed his arms in an attempt to seem intimidating. Soeur’s wicked smirk quickly morphed into a half-open gasp.

“How about this... If you never tell Mère, I will promise to be kinder to you.” I lifted my head and looked at my sister,

“I feel like there’s more that you’re not telling me.” Soeur smirked again.

“If you muster up the courage to touch the haunted structure outside of town, I will treat you with the same respect I treat Mère with.”

“You don’t treat Mère with any respect,” Frère retorted. “Besides, Jeune, she’s trying to make you forget about the thing she dropped on your head.”

“So, if I touch the old thing outside of town, you’ll stop treating me so badly?” I naïvely questioned.

“Of course!” she replied. I briefly contemplated the potential consequences of such an action.

“So, if you ever treat me badly, I can tell Mère about you assaulting me?”

“I wouldn’t call it an assault,” Soeur reasoned.

“You know what, fine,” I interrupted. “The worst that can happen is not touching the object and you’d treat me the same way you do now. We either continue the relationship we have now or improve.” Soeur and I immediately shook hands. I had failed to notice the continuous motion of Frère’s shaking head.

Later that night, Soeur, Frère, and I carefully maneuvered our way through the town, avoiding the occasional lit cottage. After a brief walk through the densely wooded outskirts of the town, the three of us found ourselves at the ominous structure.

“I’d better just get this over with.” I said with a sigh.

I approached slowly. I maintained a collected exterior, but was internally terrified. Elegantly draped around the structure was a mysterious plant I had never seen before: dark vines that honed blooms the size of my adolescent forearm. The fragrance of these Siren-

like plants, which was what I believed eternity would smell like, filled the air. I was only about a meter from the structure as I began to slowly extend my arm.

I heard a fast and loud rustling and had begun to turn when someone delivered a powerful push that sent me into the thick flora. I heard a variety of shrieks and yells as I tried to free myself from the overwhelming aroma of the blooms. I managed to free one arm and immediately felt my heart rate increase. A pair of hands grasped my shoulders and freed me from the vines.

“I can’t believe her!” Frère uttered.

“Frère, it’s okay, nothing happened! And now Soeur can’t bother me ever again!” I shrieked with irrational glee. Frère powerfully grabbed my arm and began to run from the wall.

\*\*\*

We came to an abrupt halt in front of our house: a once-dark house that now exhibited a light’s eerie glow. Frère tightened his grip on my arm and entered the house. I saw Mère sitting in a rocking chair and I instinctively tried to pull my older, and much larger, brother away. Unfortunately, Frère continued to pull me closer to Mère. Mère had always appeared somewhat frightening to me, but she appeared beyond petrifying now.

Frère, the ideal brother, rationally explained what had happened to Mère. She quietly listened and then explained to her two children the purpose of the structure. As she explained, I began to scratch at an intense, bright red rash that covered my upper body. This structure served as a tool to ensure the obedience of the town’s children. If the children failed to obey their parents, the punishment was a harmless rash that occurred from contact with the plant.

\*\*\*

The following morning, Mère, Frère, and I sat at our small table discussing the events and the relief of the previous night. Suddenly, a panicked cry was heard from upstairs. This sound caused Frère and me to jump confusedly from our seats.

“My skin! My skin!” Soeur cried, even louder. Frère and I turned to look at Mère who was attempting to disguise a small smile. When she made eye contact, she presented a small bundle of dark fabric from her lap that smelled like eternity.