Bedeviled
by Cliff Burns

_Oppression._

That was the word.

This sense of something hanging over him, not a razor-edged sword, more like a heavy, dark curtain, poised to descend. The feeling never completely went away. It lingered, waiting. With the patience of a hungry cat. And there was no doubt in Andrew’s mind that the source of his malaise, his _condition_, was external. It wasn’t just his imagination, his mind playing tricks on him. The evidence indicated otherwise. _The whole building felt wrong._ Like he didn’t belong there any more. Every time he left his apartment, he was navigating alien terrain.

He didn’t blame the recent influx of new tenants, though the corridors and stairwells were ripe with sour, exotic aromas and constantly echoed with excited, chattering voices. There were families, kids, people coming and going day and night. Whenever he encountered anyone, Andrew always had difficulty meeting their eyes. He got the impression his neighbors thought him queer and talked about him behind his back.

Part of the problem was that he had no friends, no one he could relate to. Someone who would understand what he was experiencing. The only person who came to mind was Paul Dupree, his caseworker. It was a long shot but he decided he had to at least _try_. At their next appointment, Andrew alluded to the sad and tragic turns life can take, with no advance warning. Almost _ahem!_ like we’re victims of larger forces. For instance:

The story dominating the news that morning concerned the owner of a local car dealership who, during a weekend barbeque, killed his entire family before turning his weapon on himself. Friends, employees and neighbors expressed shock. No one saw it coming. They seemed to get along wonderfully, the kids honor roll students, his wife well-known for her volunteer and philanthropic work. A model family.

Paul hadn’t heard the story and didn’t seem particularly impressed. There was a thick stack of folders on his desk and some kind of Trojan virus playing hell with the hard drive of his computer. He wasn’t in the most receptive mood.
“I’m sure they’ll find out the guy owed money or his wife was cheating on him. *Something* set him off.”

Andrew persisted. “But what if it didn’t? What if there isn’t any logical reason why this guy walked out of his house and fucking *slaughtered* his loved ones? That’s even scarier, don’t you think?”

“Not sure I get you, Andrew. What happened was a tragedy, no doubt about it, but I don’t think there’s any big mystery behind it.” He paused. “Unless you know something I don’t...”

But Andrew figured he’d pushed his luck far enough. “I just think it’s odd. Sometimes things happen that, y’know, defy understanding. And I’m noticing them more and more lately.”

“People don’t need a reason to behave badly, Andrew. The toughest crimes to solve are those that have no motive whatsoever. Just random acts.” He leaned back, stared at a point above Andrew’s head. “Shit happens.”

Deep thoughts, coming from Paul.

Well, after all, his background was social work, not philosophy. At least he wasn’t a shrink. Andrew had dealt with his fair share of those and didn’t care for them as a breed. He’d take their pills and listen to their bullshit, but would *never* buy into the voodoo science they preached. Reducing people to symptoms and categories, tossing out diagnoses based on a few minutes of interaction and observation. This one normal, this one not. The psych ward for you, the executive boardroom for you...

*Pill pushers. Witch doctors.*

After that, it was back to routine, Paul asking the standard questions, Andrew giving his standard replies. Part of the game they played, the roles they automatically assumed. Social services paid the rent, picked up the tab for basic groceries and his monthly bus pass. That was the extent of their largesse. And no one seemed to know how much longer the situation would continue. Years, maybe. Or it was just as conceivable he could get cut off next week.

Andrew had no family to speak of, no one to see to his care. Which made him a ward of the state; a “leech”, the old man would’ve said. *Takin’ hand-outs while your back is still fit*
and your heart strong. Shame on ye! His Irish brogue thickening when he was drunk or in full chastisement mode.

But the old man had to cope with his own dark spells, depressive interludes that often left him virtually catatonic. He used booze to sedate himself against the worst attacks and ended up pretty much drinking himself to death. Andrew dreaded a similar fate. Alone, in some basement room. No one finding you for days. Anything was better than that.

The pills deadened, the pills flattened, but, alas, they didn't cure. They shaved the rough edges off; that was about it. Except the pills weren't helping much lately, doing little to combat that bad feeling, an intimation or premonition of approaching calamity. Something out of his control. A bullet already in flight.

Today I saw:
-a black cat in a window--its cool, unnerving regard.
-someone cursed me from a passing vehicle/stupid, undirected fury
-a pool of blood in the street, bright red, going black and scabby around the edges
-a lunatic in ragged, filthy coveralls. Roaring: “It’s the end of the world, you fuckers!”
My daily horoscope: “Beware of wolves masquerading as sheep. Know where to put your trust.”

Entering his apartment block after the unrewarding tête-à-tête with Paul, the first person Andrew encountered was the building’s resident manager-caretaker, Sammy Haha.

Sammy must have been up late again because he looked like hell. His dark, straight hair greasy and unkempt, circles under his eyes.

“Two a.m. gig at the casino,” Sammy confirmed, without any prompting. “Mostly a buncha fuckin’ Shriners. Are those the fuckahs with the hats? The beanies?” Sammy scowled. “I heard one of them call me a Jap. Like ‘the little Jap’s pretty funny, huh?’ Fuckin’ racist crackah motherfuckah.” Sammy took great pains to emphasize his Korean heritage, the historical and cultural traits that distinguished his mother country from its larger, more powerful Asian neighbors. But his pride in his ethnicity didn’t prevent him from legally changing his original name, “Myeong”, to his present moniker, which he thought more fitting for a naturalized citizen and comic genius.
He frequently tried out new material on tenants and, Andrew suspected, gave preferential treatment to those who showed the most enthusiasm for his act. If you laughed, you got that drip under your sink fixed, pronto. If not...

Andrew always made sure to smile, even if he found a joke too heavy-handed or the punch line telegraphed well in advance of its actual delivery. Sammy’s “humor” centered around how hard-working Koreans are and, conversely, how lazy and selfish North Americans stack up in comparison. Sometimes his audiences were receptive but apparently the Shriners had been less than enthralled.

“I told them the one about my Korean mother, how tough she is, like Chairman Mao in drag...fuckahs just sat there.”

Andrew sympathized, waiting for his moment. “Yeah, that’s, uh, typical, isn’t it? Listen, Sammy, d’you happen to know what this is?” He took the little object from his pocket. He tried to be careful but it must have snagged on the lining. One of the small arms was askew, hanging by a sliver of wood. Sammy took it from him, gave it a cursory inspection.

“Some kid make it,” he shrugged. “Maybe that Pilar on the third floor.”

“I found it outside my door,” Andrew explained. “There was another by the washing machine when I went down to do my laundry.” Sammy’s reaction was underwhelming; mild curiosity, if that. “Kind of a weird, don’t you think? That stuff wrapped it, holding the sticks together? That’s not thread, it’s human hair. See?”

Sammy saw. But Sammy was tired and too focused on his show biz career. Useless. He would have to pursue his investigations on his own.

As a matter of fact, he had confronted Pilar as she was going outside with a friend and she denied responsibility. She asked if she could play with the figures but Andrew refused. He knew they were important clues, key to what was going on.

Cream of celery soup, a few crackers and two slices of cheese for lunch. He didn’t have much of an appetite these days. The stress and anxiety affecting his mood, playing havoc with his guts. He was having trouble sleeping too. Waking frequently during the night, perplexed and tormented by crazy dreams...
Andrew picked up the fetish—for he was certain that’s what it was—subjecting it to another close examination. So simple in design and execution. Four small sticks or twigs, positioned and secured with human hair. Dark brown, almost black. Wiry. Brittle. He’d unwound one strand and found it to be fairly long. So...likely from a woman. Was that telling? Persuasive or suggestive? He wasn’t sure.

He needed facts, further information. And since no one else seemed inclined to lend assistance, it was up to him to take the initiative.

Andrew checked again, making sure he had his pass. Totally obsessive about it. But he kept imagining getting on the bus, reaching into his pocket and finding nothing there. The stares of passengers, the contempt of the driver. So...best to make sure.

The trip downtown went without a hitch and he disembarked within a block of the main library. He chose that one, rather than any of the branches, because he figured there would be more information there, especially on such a specialized subject.

He hadn’t been in the new building and as soon as he walked inside knew he was in trouble. Once you passed by the checkout area, it opened up, spreading out in all directions. The middle section was hollow, revealing two more floors stacked above them. He got that bug-under-a-microscope feeling. He hated that. Like he was insignificantly small, the world swelling and expanding to monstrous proportions around him.

Andrew was sweating like a pig and, worse, his insides were bilious, churning. He needed to find a bathroom, quickly. There was an old guy, a commissaire, parked at a little table. He closed his search-a-word book, gazing at Andrew with a quizzical smile...

He barely had time to lock the stall and peel down his jeans. The cramps hit hard and he moaned involuntarily as his bowels cut loose, fouling the air around him. Other patrons came in to use the facilities, including a father with his young son. No one stayed long. Andrew was mortified.

The library, its size and scale, was too much for him. All the people, activity. When he emerged from the washroom, he felt disoriented. His clothes plastered to his body and he probably had terrible b.o. too. Christ, what a mess.
There was no way he’d be able to navigate his way around on his own. He could spend the entire day here and never come across what he was looking for. The free computers were all occupied but there was no one in line at the information desk.

He blotted his forehead with a tissue, took the bull by the horns and approached the counter.

The woman smiled at him and Andrew tried his best to relax. Give off peaceful, calming vibes. “Um, hi. I’m, ah, looking for books on black magic or--or maybe witchcraft. They should be close together, right? In terms of proximity? I mean, that would make sense, wouldn’t it?” Rushing ahead without waiting for an answer. “See, I have this, uh, situation and I need to find out more about spells and stuff. Like I said, uh, witchcraft, black magic, voodoo, whatever you have. D’you know if there’s anything like that or...”

She shook her head. A pleasant-faced woman with short, silvery hair. “I’m afraid that’s not my area of expertise. However, I think I can direct you—”

“Okay, that’s fine. That’d be great. Because this place, wow, it's so big. Like a hangar. A person could get lost for days.” She was tapping something into her computer, search terms, probably. “It’s really great, you helping me like this. I need to find out what’s going on and, y’know, I figured this would be where to look. Because we need to know if these things are superstition or the real deal. You know what I mean? So we can protect ourselves. People might be up to no good and, y’know, you have to be careful.”

He was babbling. He needed to stop. She didn’t seem to be paying much attention anyway. That was a relief. She took a slip of paper, wrote down some numbers. “Try your luck there. If you can’t find what you’re looking for, our resource person will be back soon, you can ask her.”

Andrew stared down at the numbers she’d given him. Mumbled his thanks and moved off. He drifted about the main floor awhile, looking for the right section but it was hopeless. He couldn’t get his bearings. Circling past the desk for the third time, he saw the woman talking to someone else, helping them with an inquiry. He got the feeling she was deliberately avoiding looking his way. He paused, his eyes skipping from the escalators to the front doors. Stuck the slip in his pocket and walked out.
Then things got sketchy and imprecise. He had no clear recollection of what he did next, only an impression of making an aimless circuit through the downtown core, barely cognizant of trivialities like traffic and other pedestrians. He must have slipped into some kind of fugue state, one that lasted until he found himself sitting on a bus bench near the library. At least a couple of hours had passed.

The ride home seemed to jar and rattle every bone in his body and he felt nauseous when he finally stumbled off. He walked with his head down, his vision confined to an area a few feet in front of him. The sun seemed unnaturally bright and a headache was throbbing just behind his eyes.

There were symbols scratched in chalk on the sidewalk in front of his building. Not words, not letters. Symbols.

Indecipherable, obscure, meaningless to all save the one who’d inscribed them. They hadn’t been there when he left. Andrew swayed, the world tilting, gravity shifting. He wrenched open the door, made a beeline for the stairs. Outside his apartment, dropping his keys, retrieving them, fumbling with the lock, panting by that point, desperate to get inside...

It was bad, bad as it had ever been. The pills weren’t working. No effect, even at twice the regular dosage. Cast them out, flush them down the toilet. Rid thyself of their toxic poisons.

He couldn’t concentrate on a book or the week-old newspaper he had lying around. His TV only got two channels (cheap bastards even begrudged him cable). Half the time only one worked. The bunny ears were fucked and he was never sure he had them wired up right.

Andrew paced, endless miles down a road to nowhere. Up all that night, the next day too. Didn’t go out. Didn’t even bother turning on the lights. The phone only rang once. Likely a wrong number. If anyone had come to the door, he wouldn’t have answered.

His mind awhirl. Going over everything, looking for patterns or clues. The fetishes and symbols. Signs and portents. You just had to know where to look for them.

And that night, confirmation.
The late show was a golden oldie called “The Curse of the Demon”. Black and white, made in the 40’s or 50’s. Dana Andrews was the only actor Andrew recognized. At first it seemed cheesy and he almost switched it off...until he realized what was going on and that, in fact, the movie had particular relevance to his ordeal. He started paying closer attention. The plot focused on the struggle between Dana Andrews’ (Andrews/Andrew?) character and a modern day black magician who dispatched his enemies by slipping them enchanted runes, ancient spells that summoned a murderous, blood-thirsty demon.

Just like that, everything fell into place. Andrew could have wept with relief and gratitude.

Of course! It was so simple. And it almost exactly paralleled his own situation. He was snared in a web, the plaything of supernatural forces. That oppression...it was part of being bewitched or spellbound or whatever you called it. Nothing else came close to explaining what had been happening.

And now that he knew what was going on, there were steps he could take, countermeasures and such. He settled onto the couch and finally, after nearly forty-eight hours, closed his eyes and slept.

Not surprisingly, his dreams were fantastic, harrowing: things clutching at him, hissing shapes in the close dark. He didn’t want to look at their faces. They had removed their flesh masks and were hideous to behold. They pursued him, threw themselves at his feet like penitents, beseeching him to look at them, their horrible, twisted countenances...

-Today Corey yelled to me and when he came running up, I saw he was wearing a t-shirt with a strange logo--asked about its meaning but he seemed vague/evasive. Crashing headache descends almost as soon as he leaves--coincidence?

-colored strings and ribbons wrapped and tied around trees for no apparent reason. Interviewed city worker but gained no satisfaction. Called city hall, consigned to voice mail hell. (Follow up later!!!)

-jet contrails, smoky patterns in the sky (air borne inscriptions/incantations)

-more rune-like symbols out front, copied some of them (last ones erased)

Scanning the roster. Each entry innocuous, in and of itself. But viewed collectively, worrisome.
The black coil notebook never left his sight. It helped clarify his thoughts but it was also a liability. He fretted about it falling into the wrong hands. What they would do to him if they suspected how much he knew.

*Essential questions:*

- who is behind this? who can I trust?
- what are the limits of their influence? what are my options?
- what can I do to protect myself?!!

He didn’t take any chances, used an outside phone to make the call. Terry Cullimore. Why hadn’t he thought of him sooner?

Cully made group tolerable. Chronically misbehaving. The scourge of the “facilitators”, fearlessly lampooning their New Age, feel good claptrap. A fat, feral Oliver Hardy. Bitter as a mouthful of lemons.

“I’m not here because I need healing, dearie,” he informed Jeanine, the female half of the dynamic duo leading the Wednesday night sessions. “I’m here because I’m too fucking stupid to live and too much of a coward to die.” Most of the others got bent out of shape by Cully’s antics but Andrew found him refreshing. After one particularly godawful evening--Jeanine and Phil weren’t happy unless they reduced at least one participant to tears--Andrew made a point of approaching him and striking up a conversation.

“What can I say?” Cully shrugged. “This is complete horseshit but it’s the price you pay for being a fuckup, so why bitch and moan?”

Andrew couldn’t have put it better. They went out for coffee a few times but it never quite clicked. Cully (he answered to nothing else) was a walking encyclopedia, one of those people who kill at *Trivial Pursuit*. He’d keep tossing things out, doing set routines you could tell he’d performed a million times. In two minutes he could explain the theory of relativity so even a moron could understand it. But before you had a chance to say anything, he’d be off again. If there had recently been an earthquake somewhere, he’d tell you all about plate tectonics and if the waitress mistimed her approach, include her in the lecture as well. A consummate showoff and social retard. Fun to hang around with for a while, but wearing out his welcome all too soon.
The group sessions ended in the fall and Andrew still hadn’t heard when or if they were starting up again. He hadn’t seen Cully in months.

The payphone was at a service station several blocks from his apartment. They arranged to meet at the Westgate Mall food court.

“Sounds like you’re on a cell or calling from outside,” Cully, never missing a trick.

“I’ll explain later...”

Cully’s appearance caught him by surprise.

“Don’t say anything,” he warned, swinging up to the table, at least fifteen minutes late and huffing like a chimney. He was on crutches because the circulation in his legs had gone to hell. “Fucking diabetes,” he snarled, once he’d struggled into a plastic chair that barely accommodated his bulk. He had to be at least thirty pounds heavier. At least.

“Doctors say they might have to whack off my feet. Both of them.” He regarded Andrew morosely, all the bitterness squeezed out, sadness and self-pity filling the void. “I’m a fucking mess, Andrew. Rotting away piece by piece.”

Andrew commiserated, offering to buy him lunch to help raise his spirits. Went to one of the nearby kiosks, placed an order for his ailing companion. Extra large everything. Some things never changed.

The food seemed to rally Cully, restore some of his old spark. He started ragging on Jeanine and Phil, who (in his view) weren’t qualified to coach a girls’ volleyball team, let alone dole out what passed for therapy these days. “Imagine putting those two twits in charge of a bunch of emotional cripples. Talk about the stupid leading the blind. Remember the trust exercises? I thought I was gonna puke.” He had devoured a triple burger and large fries and pounded back a pint of cola on top of that. If his diabetes didn’t kill him, his heart would.

“Yeah, pretty pathetic. Listen, Cully, I wonder if I can pick your brain about something.” Cully nodded, sucking at the dregs of his drink, the racket drawing the attention of nearby tables. Social skills not his strong suit. Finally he was done.

“Sure, Andrew. Shoot...”
Andrew had thought long and hard about what his approach should be. There was no reason to suspect Cully was implicated and yet one couldn’t be too careful. Some people are unwitting pawns of larger forces.

He decided to call it a “working theory”. Completely hypothetical. Make it an intellectual proposition. Appeal to Cully’s vanity.

Question: could certain powers, possibly of a supernatural nature, be called upon to affect the course of human lives? If so, was it conceivable that some people, adepts or witches or whatever you chose to call them, might use these powers to exert their will over others?

Cully was cautious, but receptive. “There could be something to that, sure. Religion comes from our fear of the unknown, combined with our curiosity, our desire to understand the forces that made us. Science, magic, superstition… maybe it’s all entwined. I’ve read stuff on quantum dynamics that’s closer to mysticism than science. No shit. In a quantum universe, literally anything is possible. So if a butterfly flapping its wings in Illinois can cause a cyclone in China...hey, who knows?”

Andrew wasn’t sure he followed Cully’s reasoning but it sounded good. “I want to show you something.” He unwrapped the tissue paper, revealing his prizes. “I found these in my building. That one right outside my door.”

Cully didn’t touch them at first. He stared at the little figures for some time, then nudged them with the tip of his finger. “They look like they were made by a kid.”

“There’s more.” Pulling out his notebook, pointing to the symbols he’d copied from the front walk. “Do these look like anything to you? Maybe a language or--or a message there, do you think?”

Cully studied them, his expression thoughtful. Reached for his drink, shook it. His eyes were tired; ill health and pain had aged him. Even his skin looked sick, dry and scaly. “This is really strange shit. Kinda creepy.” He picked up the broken fetish. “Is that human hair?”

"I feel so bad sometimes. Like there’s something lying in wait for me, just around the corner. It never goes away. I'm wondering if this maybe isn't part of the explanation.”

Cully went back to the notebook. “There’s a crescent shape and some of these others seem familiar. And this one…an ankh, maybe?”
“What's that?”
“Egyptian. One of their sacred symbols. Like a cross.”
“So it definitely means something,” Andrew pressed. “There’s an intelligence or a--a will at work.”

Cully sat back, weighing his response. “I guess you could put it that way. Can I have this page?” he asked, then went ahead and tore it out anyway. Now he had the only copy. Andrew’s unease returned. Cully? Could he be part of it too?

He waited two days. Three days. Back to the service station, but Cully wasn't answering his phone.

-Cully/disappeared.
-advertisement for local church—Sunday sermon: “The supernatural at large in the world”
-today a bird smacked my window, hard enough to crack the glass
-mood very black: OPPRESSION

It was Paul who broke the news. Tuesday morning, 9:30, the two of them crammed into his office, smelling each other’s breath. “You were acquainted with Terry Cullimore, right? From group?”
Past tense.
Post mortem.
Terry’s gone.

“What happened?” His throat drying up. Because he already knew. The symbols.
Cully must have deciphered something. A death rune. Intended for Andrew, rerouted to an innocent party. Poor bastard.

“Well...ah, there's no easy way of...it was suicide, I'm sorry to say.”
Andrew felt something inside him come unmoored. “Suicide…”

Paul seemed uncomfortable. Not emotionally equipped to provide solace or comfort. Hardly the cuddly type. “Yes, I’m afraid so. Very sad, obviously. I spoke with Terry--well, not very long ago, as a matter of fact. He had some hard decisions to make and was facing surgery, possibly life in a wheel chair.”

“He told us he was too scared to kill himself. That it wasn’t an option.”

“It seems he didn’t take his own words to heart.”
Or he wasn’t acting of his own free will.

For his part, Paul was already putting Cully behind him. A lost cause. Another client who didn’t make the cut. Casualty of war. Only Terry Cullimore’s name would never show up on a wall or monument, remembered and commemorated for all time. His battle had been a private one, his death squalid and lonely, lacking the necessary esprit de corps. “Sorry to be the one to tell you…”

Later that night, hunched over his notebook:

1) *Terry Cullimore was killed by mistake.*
2) *I am responsible for his death.*
3) *Now almost certain Paul is part of it too.*

Inez Delgado asked him if he’d seen Pilar. She described her daughter, held her hand waist high to demonstrate her diminutive size. Andrew said he hadn’t, started to walk away, then doubled back. “Inez?” She turned toward him, her face expectant. “Do you and Pilar ever do crafts?”

“Crafts?” Head tilted in puzzlement.

“Yeah. Make little things. Toys and, uh, decorations.”

“Mebbe. I don’t know whachu mean. Like sewing?”

“Just wondering. She seems like, y’know, such a creative kid.”

Andrew watched her, alert for any hint of deception. But she played it cool. Blameless? Or demonstrating the skill and duplicity of an accomplished liar? He wondered...

The fetish dolls were gone.

He was certain he’d left them on the kitchen counter. And then he knew what must have happened.

The fire alarm.

It had gone off again that morning and everyone in the building who happened to be home went out to see if it was the real thing this time or just kids again. Including Andrew. Leaving his door wide open, his attention distracted for a critical two or three
minute interval. Long enough for one of their minions to slip in and steal his most valuable evidence. It was a devastating setback and Andrew stood in his living room, fists clenched, trembling with fury and self-retribution...until something else occurred to him.

They knew.

Maybe Cully talked before he died or Inez had guessed the real purpose of his cross-examination. It was possible he’d given something away to Paul. The various scenarios made his head spin.

He was a marked man. He had no doubt whatsoever that his enemies would use whatever means necessary to avoid exposure to the rest of the world. Their web of control had to be preserved at all costs.

There seemed to be no recourse but to hide out. Crawl into a deep, dark hole and pull it in after him. The good news was thanks to his lifestyle no one was liable to take much notice of his absence. No job, no girlfriend; social services paid the bills and a phone call postponed his next appointment with Paul.

“Sorry, I think I’m coming down with something. It’s really knocked me on my ass.” Paul pretended to care, told him to pop in when he was feeling better. It bought him some time but sooner or later he was going to have to go out for food and essentials. Unless he wanted to be reduced to wiping his ass with sheets torn from his handy notebook.

-dreams too terrible to record. Bleeding eyes/huge faces leering from the sky
-2:32 a.m. Loud outburst in the street (man howling like a wolf/laughter)
-Doris Day in the late movie (when times were purer/before the shadow fell)
-4:45 Furtive sounds in hallway/someone creeping past
-open the Bible at random--Acts 3:14-16 (!!!!)
-possibility of securing weapon (gun?)

It went on for pages and pages.

Andrew managed to stretch it out to eleven days. Eleven days shuttered up inside three small rooms. Watching TV ’til he was bored senseless, spending the rest of the time
checking the windows, peering down at the street from several different vantage points. Pacing endlessly. Sleeping only intermittently. And then not at all.

Supplies ran low. He ate cereal with cold water instead of milk. Went without bread and eggs (the first things devoured); used dish soap for shampoo...but was finally forced to concede defeat when he scraped the last thin streak of margarine off the side of its plastic tub.

Venturing out cautiously. Cracking open the door, peering into the hallway. The coast was clear. It was going to be all right. He’d sneak out, grab a few things from Lang’s convenience store, just enough to tide him over, then scampers back here, free as a bird.

Except Pilar Delgado was at the bottom of the front steps, on her hands and knees, scratching away with a dry, white finger of chalk. Andrew watched her from the doorway, his mood darkening to a murderous hue. Hating the little bitch for being a part of it. Inez had undoubtedly initiated her, served as her mentor. His thoughts chaotic, indecipherable as he pushed through the door and started down the steps. He knew something was about to happen but it was like he was separated from himself, a mere witness to what was transpiring.

Pilar was seven or eight. A bright, cheerful child. Not bashful, looking up at him with frank interest. “Hi! Wanna play with me?”

Andrew stared at her, then his eyes ranged along the numbered squares stretching up the sidewalk. No arcane symbols or runes. *Hopscotch! She’s playing hopscotch!* Suddenly the sun came out, street sounds and birdsong flooded back in and he smiled, patting her head. “Not today, sweetie. Maybe some other time.”

*Pilar isn’t one of them.* Turning so he could wave to her again--

Lowering his arm when he spotted the 8 1/2 X 11 sheet taped to the bus shelter, looking crisp and fresh compared to the other announcements and posters plastered around it.

Lost dog. A Shih Tzu answering to the name “Angel”. Reward offered.

Shih Tzu...An-drew. (They were getting sloppy, far too obvious.)

Andrew, the lost angel?

Was it a warning? Or a jeering taunt?
That wasn’t all. He was certain he was being followed, under surveillance. The little hairs on the back of his neck prickling. Passing a billboard with most of the lettering worn off, leaving: “...fear...security”. The panhandler he was sure he’d seen somewhere else. A blue van with no windows. And then a passing car, trailing music from its open windows:

“...wooo-hoo, witchy woman...she got the moon in her eye...”

This was wrong. All signs pointed toward imminent danger. He should turn around, run back home. But the store was right there, he could see it, so he kept going, against his better judgment. Inside, it wasn’t as bad, he didn’t feel so exposed. Until he noticed the camera, bolted to the wall, panning slowly over the narrow aisles, alert for suspicious behavior. *No matter where you are, someone is always watching...*

He found most of the items on the list, decided to dispense with the rest. Syrup? He’d make do with honey.

One guy ahead of him in line: middle-aged, suit and tie, fancy briefcase. Flirting with the cashier even though she was young enough to be his daughter. Wanting to know what time she got off work. There was a camera behind the cash register too. With a stern warning to shoplifters underneath.

Andrew browsed the rack of tabloids, one headline catching his eye: “Coven Exposed in Cincinnati”. Next to that, a rag with a cover story celebrating the latest serial killer, “The Priest”, who left his victims’ heads in churches. Stuck on pulpits, arranged so they were facing parishioners.

He felt sick, repulsed by the growing power of evil, the terrible, corrupting influence it had on human affairs. The rest of the world unaware of what was going on right under their noses. Unaware or indifferent, it amounted to the same thing.

Andrew unloaded the items from his plastic basket and the girl, who was dumpy but quite pretty, started ringing everything in. She had black fingernails. That bothered him. And she wore too much makeup for someone her age.

He decided he needed to say something, make conversation. Eleven days alone will do that to you. “So...what do you think about all this witchcraft and demon stuff they’re always going on about. This crap...” Indicating the tabloids. “Crazy, huh?”

She raised her shoulders. “I think it’s cool.”

He stared at her. “But...”
“Evil’s cool, man. Who wants to be good all the time?” He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. The businessman had left the store. They were alone and terrible things were afoot. “John Lennon is right, God is just a concept. But the Devil, he’s the real deal.” Beckoning him closer. “You wanna see something?” She took a quick look around. Slid off the stool and leaned over the counter, sweeping the hair from the nape of her neck.

There was a tattoo, just below the hairline.

An eye. Flawlessly rendered. Looking right back at him.

“That’s my third eye. It sees all.”

She straightened, nonchalant. But this time they had seriously miscalculated. The challenge or, more precisely, the threat was too brazen to ignore and he felt compelled to act. Let them know they couldn’t toy with him any more.

The steak knife was in his waistband, Andrew had secreted it there just before leaving his apartment. It was in his waistband and then it was in his hand and then it was leaping at her, the thin, sharp blade biting and slashing and tearing and gouging...and the whole time there was this grim satisfaction that finally he was striking back. On some of the footage caught by overhead cameras, he seemed to be smiling. Bowdlerized versions played over and over again on the news and proved to be popular fare in cyberspace as well, downloaded and viewed by the morbid and curious millions of times.

It was an open and shut case. Andrew’s lawyers advised him to cop to insanity, so he fired them. He informed the presiding judge he would conduct his own defense. In an impromptu press scrum convened on the courthouse steps, the girl’s family accused him of grandstanding, exploiting her senseless death.

He sympathized with their position but a full-blown trial granted him a public forum to expose what he insisted was a dangerous and insidious plot. In the meantime, Andrew told the court, his life was in grave danger, his enemies anxious to silence him before he could disclose their closely guarded secrets. He demanded special provisions for his safety, causing an embarrassing spectacle in the courtroom when that request was summarily denied.