

Upon the Pale Isle of Gloam

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This story contains **mature content** and touches on topics some may be sensitive to. See the full **content warning** at the back of the book to learn more about it.

Gray

The boat lay in **silence** upon the water. The black glass-like surface was stock-still and ominous, like a mirror in the dark, and reflected neither star nor moon nor sky. Not a sound could be heard in the night's infinite gloom, and it seemed as though existence itself had relinquished its ascendancy leaving all but one ramshackle watercraft damned to drift in relentless suspension.

The woman opened her eyes to disquieting nothingness and wondered if she had drowned. She lay there in the boat, slipping in and out of consciousness, and when she was awake, she tried to remember things that did not permit her to, and while asleep, she dreamt of things she wished she had not. Soft voices whispered across the void. At first, they spoke comfort to her, but their words transmuted

balefully to cachinnation in which horrific cruelty seethed. She dared not reply.



When the woman woke for the last time, many hours had passed. The sky above was a brooding gray. She sat upright and found that the vessel had wedged itself into the thick, wet sand of a shallow shoreline. Damp, frigid air clung to her cold, weary body. In despondency, she shivered and wept. Her tears were those of a girl who was broken and alone and deeply afraid.

The beach was littered with debris, both natural and man-made. There were boats and broken things and makeshift tents and lean-to's where others once made camp. The woman stood inside the watercraft and shifted her weight back and forth to balance herself. She lifted one leg over the side and then the other. Her wet shoes sank into the strand beneath them, which pulled and sucked at them with each step, and she trudged onward until the water could no longer reach her. Quivering, she surveyed the shoreline and scouted a small encampment where a

fire pit had been artlessly cobbled together long before.

The woman remembered little of herself or her past, but her instincts remained unscathed. She gathered driftwood and cloth from the salvage and detritus and chanced upon a plastic lighter stripped of its label yet undepleted of its contents. When the woman gathered enough wood for a fire, she brought the materials to the pit and bundled twigs and leaves inside strips of torn cloth for kindling. She placed the driest logs over the kindling and set the damp ones along the edge to parch. She nursed the flames until they grew large enough that she no longer needed to tend them.

As the fire burned, so burned myriad questions. The woman was tired and hungry. She sat and stared into the dancing flames, and a single word surfaced from the farthest recess of her mind. *Rue*, she thought. *My name is Rue.*

As the day grew darker, Rue wandered the beach. She discovered an unopened can of yams in brown-sugar gravy and a sharp sliver of steel with which to open it. Burlap sacks, tattered and empty, were strewn about, and she collected those too. When Rue returned to the fire, she scraped out a space in the

ground beneath a lean-to and filled it with the burlap and settled atop it with the canned yams. With three fingers, she spooned them to her mouth. Someone once told her that hunger was the best sauce, and though she could not remember who spoke these words, she could not agree more.

The blue-black veil of night draped itself over the shoreline. Rue rested beside the fire and fell asleep. She awoke in the darkness to a torturous wail piercing the brisk air. It came from the woods beyond the beach. Rue slid her arms across the ground, pushing waves of sand onto the fire to smother it. She feared what its glow might attract, for she knew not if this world was the same as that which she had once dwelled. She slept little that night.

The following morning, the sky was no less minacious and ashen than the evening prior, and thunder rolled overhead with an unwavering steadiness. Rue studied the shoreline with scrupulous sweeps of her eyes in hopes of finding a path toward civilization. She thought any way was better than traversing the forest but was overcome with dread when she saw no other way but through. Worse, the boat had been swept back into the sea while she slept.

Rue could not repel the crushing trepidation that filled her heart and mind much in the way that lungs draw air, so she decided she would stay at her camp until there was no other choice but to enter the forest that lay ahead. She made sweeping passes along the beach and rummaged through whatever she could find scattered throughout the dispersed piles of mangled watercraft. Shattered crates lay tangled in species of seaweed known only to faraway oceans. In her rummaging, she came upon a can of peaches in heavy syrup and several bars of granola. There was a large bag of peanuts and two batteries for a gadget that wasn't there.

When Rue returned to her camp, she ate the peaches and drank the syrup from the can and sucked the salt from the peanuts as she savored each one. Her hunger was satiated somewhat, but her thirst was unquenched. Looking at the sky and feeling a drop in temperature, she thought it might rain. She set out the empty cans from the food she had eaten and oscillated them into the coarse sand, hoping they would collect water.

In the evening, Rue still had no memory of her past or how she came to arrive at such a strange and foreboding place. She nestled into her improvised

hollow beneath the lean-to and faded into sleep. A short time later, she opened her eyes and saw she was not alone. The paralyzing weight of terror flooded her veins, and she lay there, silent and unmoving.

Two figures loomed, silhouetted against the inky black of night. Their dull and lifeless eyes glowed white and were all but human. In whispering tones, they spoke to each other, and one said that Rue was quite beautiful and wished to lay with her; the other said it longed to pull the bones from her flesh while she agonied.

A distant crack of lightning ignited the horizon, and the beach was bathed in the luminous pale light. During the flash, the figures vanished, and when the light had gone, the figures remained. An unnatural weariness enveloped Rue. She could no longer keep awake. Despite her defiance, her eyes drew shut.



Rue fell into a fathomless sleep, drifting through dream after dream until dreams became nightmares. In one such nightmare, she found herself gazing upon the mouth of a cave, deeply nestled within a lush, narrow valley. A mother bear lazed there with her offspring.

The cubs played, giving little thought to the dangers of the surrounding world, for the sow was all the world they knew, and by some inherent instinct, they trusted that she would lay down her life to protect them. Rue observed them with a childlike curiosity. She admired the mother.

There came a rustling from a nearby patch of brush. A male bear reared up and let out an admonishing roar that echoed throughout the valley. Sensing its malice, the cubs cried out for their mother, but the sow did not move. She watched without so much as a twitch of a muscle or a sound of protest as the male lunged forward. It tore apart the screaming cubs. While blood and fur and flesh were flung in every direction, the sow stood silent, and Rue thought that a mother who would not protect her children was no mother at all.



It was the delicate pecking of raindrops upon Rue's face that woke her, and she jolted to her feet. She expected to see again the vile beings that appeared in the night, but they had gone. Rue checked her body with grave consternation. Deep scratches were etched into her calves and forearms. Dark bruises

pressed upon her brown skin. She sobbed, knowing now that her fear of the isle was vindicated.

Rue worried she might be revisited and wished not to relive the encounter. On the beach was a broken section of metal hull that once belonged to a fishing boat. It was embedded within a low-lying dune. Its shell was enclosed but for one open side. Upon vetting the site, Rue thought she could fortify it, so she moved her camp inside and used planks of wood, incongruous and misshapen, to close the opening, save for a narrow passage she could crawl through. She sharpened the end of a long, blunt stick so that she could defend the entrance from invaders.

There was an uncluttered area of shoreline, and Rue thought it might make for an effective place to construct a signal. She had not seen nor heard any passing of aircraft but thought that should one fly overhead, a sign might garner the attention of its crew. With this in mind, Rue gathered the largest stones she could carry and began forging a distress signal along the clearing. While lifting a rock, barely set in the sand, a snake emerged from beneath it, and the wrath ophidian lashed out at her with its mouth agape and its fangs protruding from its jaws. Rue leaped backward to avoid the strike, and when it landed atop

the sand, she drove the heel of her shoe down on its head. She did not lift her foot until the body stopped writhing. Rue draped the dead snake over her shoulder and finished forming the sign. When she was done, she returned to her camp to rest.

The next day was no less dull in appearance than the last, and Rue longed for even the slightest glimpse of sunlight. Once more, she bimbled throughout the graveyard of metal and wood until something she previously missed caught her eye. Beneath a pile of broken containers and dried weeds lay hidden a journal, unusual in appearance and composed of a sundry of papers. It had crinkled pages held together by small knots of fishing line which ran through crude holes punched along one side. A makeshift cover had been crafted from a cut piece of burlap, the same on which she had slept. The material was water-stained, and the faint smell of old tobacco clung to it. Of its many handmade pages, few contained any writing at all.

Rue found a small cache of other perishables tucked away with the journal. Some were of use, while others had succumbed to rot. She gathered the items and journal together in her arms and carried them and sat in the safety and quietude of her shrouded

encampment. She read from the weather-worn pages of the improvised notebook.

Stranger's Journal

Entry 1.

This place is damned. I don't know how or why I'm here. I've been over it again and again in my mind, but I can't remember what happened. Only that I washed up after the ship sank. Things here make little sense. The sun never shines, and the days seem shorter than they should be. It looks as though this island is in a constant state of dusk, except at night when there's little light. Only, there's never a red dusk. Just a dark shade of gray. Gray and gray and depressing fucking gray. Am I dead? Is this what Hell is? Purgatory, perhaps? Nothing makes sense. Sometimes, I see things that look like ghosts, and I clutch the ring I wear around my neck. I don't know why. I think I was married once.

Entry 2.

I've been able to scavenge and make the most of what's on the beach. I think I can hold out here for a long while. I'm certainly not going into those woods. No way, no how. I swear it's cursed! I hear terrible things at night, and I have no weapons I can rely on. No, I'll wait here until a patrol finally comes along. Surely they'll come along, won't they?

Entry 3.

I should have known this place was evil. Those crows aren't just bad omens—they're the tools of devils! They're always watching. Always waiting. Always taunting me as they perch around my camp. They're sitting on top of this old lifeboat as I lay beneath it, writing these very words. They caw at me over and over and over again. But I won't listen to them. No sir.

Entry 4.

Those little beaked bastards! Stupid flying rats! The sand fleas had me itching this morning, so I bathed in the ocean. I folded my clothing, placed the pile on the beach, and set the wedding ring inside my shirt pocket. When I returned from the water, a crow landed on my things. It reached into my shirt pocket and pulled the ring up in its beak. Right in front of me! I ran as fast as I could, but it was too late—the little devil flew into the forest. I promise I'll get it back. I won't let this place keep the one connection I have to who I am.



After reading the journal, Rue packed it amongst the meager stock of provisions she had scavenged. She dozed as she rested by the fire. When she awoke, she saw through tired, blurry eyes that something was amiss. She blinked them clear again and looked around her campsite. Rue leaped to her feet in wild panic and stood trembling and aghast. The beach was devoid of its contents, and not even the fire was left to keep her warm; all that remained were the things in her jacket pockets.

Rue shambled along the shoreline in disbelief. She did not understand how a beach so cluttered with wreckage could suddenly become so void of it, but she knew that without fire or shelter or clean water, she would not last. The rain would only worsen, and whatever danger lurked in the forest was a risk she had no choice but to accept.

Content Warning

This book describes scenes of intense violence and includes references to abuse and sexual assault. Strong language is used throughout. There are mentions of animal cruelty, suicide, alcoholism, and the use of drugs and alcohol. It also contains dark subject content and religious themes. Please read with care.

If you or someone you know is struggling or in a crisis, help is available at www.samhsa.gov. You can also call or text 988 to reach the suicide and crisis hotline.