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The Disappearance of the HMS Umbra

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Abstract

A sailor aboard the HMS Umbra has a strange run-in with an ominous fog that won't lift. As the days drag by, the weather is the least of his problems.

Keywords

Suspense, Lovecraft, Umbra, Fiction

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Comments

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The Disappearance of the *HMS Umbra*

There is a reason that I have candles lit at all hours of the day. There is a reason why I fear the dark, and even why my hand is shaking as I write this story down. I have seen what lurks beyond- the abominations that dwell just on the edge of our understanding, tickling the hair on the back of our neck when we are alone, and living on the edge of our panicked vision. They know I have gone too far and they are coming for me soon. I must keep them at bay long enough for me to write what horrors await any who stumble upon the things I have.

My story begins simply enough. The year was 18--, and I was a sailor on the *HMS Umbra*. We were out in the South Pacific on a normal expedition, mapping the islands and making sure that the seas were free from villains that were all too well known for interrupting trade in the region. It was smooth sailing, until about a year into the excursion.

I cannot know where the fog came from, for until that moment it was a cloudless day. A wall of it seemed to stretch in each direction for miles. As we entered it, I could feel the cold mist wash over me. The first day it was a novelty, a break from the unrelenting rage of the tropic sun. The second day it was an inconvenience, because it became difficult to perform daily chores and belay orders. By the third day it was maddening. It was the thick heavy fog that seeped into my very soul- making each breath laborious. I felt myself gasping for air, as chilled droplets clung to my clothes making

everything heavy with dampness. Everyone doubled over with this weight as we slunk further and further away from the light.

The crew couldn't even discern the faces of their comrades, and after a week of that infernal fog, they could hardly remember what another face looked like. We stopped singing while we rigged. Then we stopped talking altogether. With heads bowed low we stumbled clumsily through our routine- one day melting into the next with no sun or stars piercing the veil of whatever damnation we had wandered into. Soon, I found myself going through the motions alone. No one assisted me when I hauled the sail, or swabbed the deck. No one pulled me up when I slipped on the wood soaked with the icy touch of the mist. No one answered when I screamed, and looking back, I wonder if my voice was even loud enough to cut through that evil cloud. Kneeling on that deck, I was able to have one thought in my muddled mind that cut through my despair. I needed to get off the ship, nay, that prison. For that is what it became. I tried desperately to feel my way to any able-minded sailor, only to find that they were as cold and unresponsive as death itself. Their addled wits and glassy eyes showed no spark of recognition. My throat was hoarse from yelling and pleading for them to move, to make a noise, to do anything. It was in vain.

I could stay no longer. Taking what little food stores we had left, I lowered the yawl boat and got on. As I cut the lines with my small knife, I could feel the fog trying to pull me, stretching its cold fingertips down my back. I shivered, and watched as the giant hull of that ship faded almost instantaneously. Were there tears in my eyes? Or was that the mist clinging to my face like another layer of skin?

From the yawl boat, the still sea stretched out like the black fields of Asphodel. I was in a land of death, or so it seemed.

I cowered in my yawl boat for an eternity. The maddeningly still waters did not stir under me, making it feel tantalizingly like land. I was tempted to jump out (for if you remember, I had spent a year at sea among the sway of the waves and creaking of timber) if only to make sure that in these black depths it was possible to make ripples. Somehow though, I knew that if I touched that inky liquid, I would not survive the experience.

The absence of light, of movement, of sound, was horrid. It was as if I were buried alive in a silver tomb with chilled, heavy air not fit for the living. The only way I knew I was not dead was by the pain. The pangs of hunger and sorrow gnawed at me like the rat (my sole companion) gnawed away at my food stores. I tried to chase it once, but it was a vile creature, and bit my thumb. The dull throb of pain, the warm trickle of blood that to me appeared as a slightly less gray streak in a landscape of nothing, kept my senses keen even as the mist sapped my strength.

I drifted in and out of sleep. Nothing marked my days, mind you, so I have no way of fathoming how long I had spent in that sinister weather. Oh, God. I spent eons in that endless night.

This limbo between life and death continued until I hit, quite suddenly, a solid object. It was a soft thunk, but compared to all that time in the absence of motion it could have been an earthquake of titanic magnitudes. I shot upright and immediately scrambled out on shaking legs. The fog was slightly less dense, and I could see the outline of a rocky beach for some distance. It took me a moment to discern what was eerie. It may have been a beach, but there was no crescendo of the waves. No sea birds squawking in

alarm at seeing a foreign threat, such as myself. The water met the shore in a tight lip. No side ebbed or flowed into each other. And as I began to haul my stores onto the strange rocks, I realized that there were no tides, either. My feet felt over the rough rocks as my traveling companion sniffed the air. I watched, expecting the rat to hop onto the land and savor the solid ground as I did. Instead, to my befuddlement, it made a savage hiss and backed up into the corner of the boat. Every piece of its matted fur was sticking out, and it almost seemed to whimper. I rubbed the now scabbing bite on my hand and laughed. The sound of my laugh bounced off the foreign isle- its presence seemingly unwelcome. In my amusement, I did not notice. If that dumb animal wanted to die in a boat instead of surviving, then why stop it? I turned and dragged my small wooden crates of hard tack and rum deeper into this strange country.

Emerging from the fog appeared a giant forest of unfamiliar trees. It consumed me, and I looked back in time to see the small grey dot that was my yawl boat sink into the mist. A heavier darkness surrounded me on all sides, but I did not care. After all that time gazing at the opaque smoke, dark foliage was preferable. I could make out the shapes of leaves and trunks and vines. Feeling my way along, I noticed that the flora was covered in the same cold moisture as everything else. As I pressed on, I came upon a clearing. Ringed with plants on all sides, the ground continued on until it hit a great stone monolith in the middle. It seemed almost sacred, and rose up beyond the line of my strained eyes. How far it continued up into that blasted fog, I do not know. Breathing heavily, I realized that I had not exercised in a long time. Had I gone one mile? Two? Five? Suddenly feeling the weight of my predicament, I dropped my stores and slumped against the stone.

I awoke some hours (or days) later, chilled to the bone. My skin was as cold as the stone beneath my head. I touched the rock, almost on instinct. As I slid against its surface, I could feel that it was not smooth. There were carvings in it that felt intentional. Later, after managing to light some damp branches into a measly fire, I examined the stone more closely. The ghastly writing was in a language foreign to the eyes of mortals. It was a system of symbols that the small minds of men cannot conceive of. After this ordeal, I once tried to remember these horrid scratches, but in the feverish state I was in, my mind could not retain the otherworldly symbols. The monolith seemed to call me to it, and as the fire glimmered over its mystic secrets, a bit of the omnipresent fog seemed to disappear around my small bubble. Momentarily my morale lifted. But it was not to last.

The trees broke a silence that seemed eternal. With an ancient groan, they twisted and shuddered as if they were alive and aware of my intrusion. My heart raced as I looked around- straining in the dark to see what might appear. I tightened my grip on the knife as I waited. Every fiber of my being was tightened as my senses were attuned to the slightest shift of those wicked leaves. That is when I saw them.

They could have come from the very pits of hell or the deepest abyss of space- a world beyond the need for eyes or mouths or flesh. The vapor parted for them, and beneath that shiny haze lay pure darkness. The shadows circled me, and I was overcome with horror. The back of my neck tingled as I strained my lungs to scream. Perhaps I did scream. Or, maybe that guttural animalistic screech came from those... *things*. The fog swirled in on me and my only thought was pure terror.

Without hesitating, I threw a crate of tack on the fire. The small glow grew until it was large enough to cut through the encroaching cloud. The shadows- four or five at least- stayed on the edge of the clearing. They circled me constantly like hungry wolves, and although the fire was steadily growing directly beside me, I could feel their cold hatred pierce me stronger with every minute. This lasted for some time, this standoff between light and dark. I shook with dread and continued to feed the fire the rest of my food stores. The thought of saving some for myself did not even cross my mind, because thinking that far ahead would be impossible. My life depended on each splinter of wood. On each chalky white biscuit that made its way into the mouth of the flames. My stomach was empty and my lips were cracked. How long since my last drink of water? My last meal? However long ago it was, I dared not take a bite of food. Starvation would be a blessing compared to whatever fate awaited those swallowed by the mist.

I do not know how long this continued, only that at some point I must have drifted off. Starting awake, I realized that the fire had dwindled low, and the creatures were closer than ever. I fed it with my next crate, and although my body was exhausted from anxiety, I did not sleep. Jabbing my back into the pointed lines of the stone awoke me when the fog began to work its infernal magic. This cycle continued, and I became more and more aware of the dwindling supplies (only a box of tack and the last of my whiskey) that lay before me on the frozen ground. My breath came out in small puffs as I slowly realized that the horrible creatures would come for me soon. They would finish what they started... no survivors could gaze upon them and tell the story. I was such a fool!

As the fire began to smolder after consuming the last crate of tack, I shuddered. The creatures could sense my despair, and tried to press against the light. As they were

drawn in, my mind fell apart. In a desperate attempt to keep those ungodly monsters away from me, I dropped my whiskey on the dying light, and ran. In a few moments, the case exploded in a roar of light and sound- and I stumbled through the foliage. The dark creatures drew back with a blood-chilling screech and the fog momentarily vaporized.

Whipped by the vines reaching out for me, I darted through the gloom. It seemed God permeated this foul place, because I had no idea which direction to go. Somehow, I ran, my lungs screaming and my head swimming. I hadn't had food since I knew not when. I continued as the fog slowly reappeared. A fresh jolt of fear ripped through me and I splashed along even faster than before.

The shadows reappeared, just on the edge of my vision. They were on the hunt- and I was the prey. Realizing this, I could not even absorb the fact that the putrid, brown floor soon turned to rocks. The fog loomed ever closer as I could feel my strength give out. I was certain that the last sound I would ever hear was the devilish shriek of those shadows.

People told me that I must have hit my head. Fishermen found me in my Yawl Boat and nursed my broken body back to health. I had nightmarish dreams and they said that I was prone to having mad fits that were only soothed when they lit a candle to ward off the darkness. I healed slowly, and even began to suspect that my story was a dream, until I saw it. On my hand was that damned rat bite- now a scar. On my back, the cuts from that infernal stone. Badges reminding me every day that what had happened was real. They never found the *HMS Umbra*, and when I told them the coordinates of the weird waters we were sailing, I was laughed out of the Navigator's office. The place where I lost my sanity did not exist. How fitting.

Eventually I stopped asking questions, mostly because I wanted to avoid the mad house. I pulled away, shrinking from conversation and laughter. Although I fear the dark, I am not yet ready to rejoin the light. I know they are coming. I know they are in the shadows, waiting for me to slip. Waiting for my candles to die. What was that? I heard my front door slowly creaking open. And I know why. I am ready now. They know I have gone too far and they are coming for me now. I should have stayed on the Umbra- oh God! If only I could have just disappeared. I would not be punished for my defiance now. They know my last candle has just flickered out.

Inspired by the work of HP Lovecraft, read by candlelight on stormy nights