

the giggling boy

BY
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CHAPTER I

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A fter the darkness fell, something began moving in the void between the living and the dead. An old man was lying in the dark and sensing something peculiar, something that created a cold chill that climbed up his spine and made him shiver. The night ahead would be long and uncertain. In his lonely home, he thought he heard a voice calling to him. He lay still and listened. He knew perfectly well he had shut his house up tight and locked all the doors. He tried to steady himself against the fear that pulled at him.

Then he heard his front door open. Francis Malachi Pratt sat up in his bed. *Who could have worked their way past my locked boundaries?* he thought. Then, aloud, "Who's there?"

He heard the front door close, and soon after he heard light footfalls creeping up the stairs, passing his bedroom door, going on down the hall. For a moment, all was quiet. Then another bedroom door creaked open. It slammed shut with a loud bang.

His ears strained.

All was quiet.

Screech. The other bedroom door opened again.

The soft footfalls crept closer and closer until they stopped just outside his bedroom door. Francis did not move.

Except for the pounding of his heart, he heard no sign of life. It was so quiet, in fact, that he swore he could hear his blood pumping through his arteries. He stared through the darkness at the locked and bolted door. It was supposed to bar anything outside his room from coming in, but he now understood that it also barred his escape.

His aged fingers clutched at the bedcovers. Yes, he thought, the bedcovers were real. They were his only firm reality there in the dark in the middle of the night. That tiny bit of reality seemed to be the only thing keeping him sane.

He wasted no time. He began praying to his god, even though he was not asking for forgiveness or even the possibility of forgiveness. His only thought was that God should *favor* him, for his pride was bigger and wider than the girth of his fear. In spite of the fact that Francis' skin was beginning to feel as cold as a dead man's skin, he felt like he was being touched by fire.

Taking a deep, brave breath, he got out of bed and picked up the lantern, though he did not light it. He moved silently past the foot of his bed, and stood still, feeling doomed for a moment. He inched along the

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floor, his mind aching with the effort of forcing his body to move forward.

The door.

The last barrier of safety.

“Who’s there?” he called out again.

With his ear pressed against the wood, he listened. Someone or *something* was pacing impatiently on the other side. Did he hear two feet or four feet pacing?

The wind began to blow against his house. Lightning flashed, illuminating his bedroom for one bright second. The haunted October wind prowled around the house, its moaning making Francis wonder if the noises he was hearing were only the sounds of a brewing storm.

He closed his eyes.

Then in his mind he began to see desolate, lightless places. He began to imagine frightening scenarios in which he was being tortured. No! He forced himself to swing back to logical thought, which told him the storm outside was the cause of whatever it was he thought he was hearing inside.

He opened his eyes.

Lightning flashed and thunder clapped again, harder, startling the old man so much he dropped his lantern. Then his world fell into darkness and silence again.

Gathering his nightshirt about him, he dashed back to his bed, jumped in, and wrapped himself

up in the covers, pulling them closer to keep himself more safe than warm. Thinking he was protected in the warmth of his bed, he let his eyes grow heavy. His heart settled itself, and sleep began to tease him. He fought back by tossing from one side of the bed to the other. Time slipped into the deeper, darker part of the night, but still Francis resisted sleep. Now he realized just how alone he was, and in his loneliness, his mind was adrift in the night. He felt a sensation so odd and fearsome that he thought he was helpless. Someone—or something—of great power was reaching into his body and trying to pull his soul out. In his lonely room he imagined the face of an angry angel pulling at his essence. She was there, breathing, inside him. He could feel her. At least he thought he could.

Francis' logical mind finally realized something did have a hold of him. He was in agony. It felt as if his chest were being chiseled open to expose his one and only true possession. His soul.

He was correct. Something wanted to gain possession of his soul. An invisible force was pulling and tugging at his essence, his soul, the only true thing we bring with us when we are born into this world, the most essential treasure a human being can own. And now some force beyond this old man's comprehension wanted his soul. A loud clap of thunder muffled his scream as the unseen force pulled and twisted, but Francis held fast to his soul with all his might.

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Suddenly the sensation of the wrenching and prying to separate his soul from his mortal being stopped for a moment. He was frozen, too frightened to move, unable to open his eyes. All the comfort he always got from his customary feelings of being in control had abandoned him. His scalp tingled. He was certain he felt spiders crawling through his hair, though when he sat up and managed to slap at his head, none fell out. After a moment, he quit pursuing the phantom spiders and sat quietly so he could listen more carefully.

He heard the soft footfalls outside his bedroom beginning to pace again.

He was dreadfully aware that he was alone.

The footfalls came through the door. Not opening the thick, heavy, oak door or turning a key in the brass lock, but just *walking through it*. Although he couldn't see who or what it was, he knew something was now in his bedroom with him.

Outside, cold rain began to fall, its pelting sounds amplified by the wicked wind throwing itself against the house.

The struggle for the old man's soul went on, bringing with it the pain of something sharp at work in his chest. The pain grew so intense that Francis lost consciousness. How long did he lie there? He never learned. He only knew that when he eventually woke, his chest didn't hurt so much. He took a quick

mental inventory of himself and discovered that his soul was still intact. He opened one eye, and in the flashes of lightning, studied his room. Except for himself, it appeared to be unoccupied. Why, then, he asked himself, did he feel unsafe? Violated? As if someone were there with him?

As he sat up again, he heard the beating from a drum that seemed to be somewhere beyond the fields around his home. The drumbeats sounded like the hooves of a great buffalo charging toward him. They grew louder and louder, as if galloping across the fields. Something invisible jumped up at his window and burst through with a force that knocked him flat. Suddenly he realized the percussion was in his chest. The imaginary, angry angel was in fact inside him. She had brought the drum from outside into his core and let it take control of the rhythm of his heart. His pulse raced through his body, its vibrations penetrating his mind until he thought he was hearing the echoes of voices from days long gone. His head throbbled with the pounding. He was hearing voices now, and as the voices became clearer, he also began to see visions arising from the faint memories racing through his head. Memories that he had purposely pushed out of his mind were coming back. Becoming brighter, louder, more vivid.

He screamed into the darkness, for now he saw that this was no angry angel that had invaded him;

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it was a spirit in the form of a bear standing in his room, a huge bear, snorting as it circled his bed. The bear lurched up and grabbed him by the ankle and dragged him down to the floor.

“Let me go! Let me go!” he begged.

But she pulled him down, down, down. He was falling somewhere beyond the limits of his mind. He fell and thought the end of his fall would never come. Down, miles from anything that resembled the world he had always known. Down into a place vivid with color, an unknown place between nothingness and reality.

The bear, a spirit being better known as the Keeper of Dreamtime, pulled Francis Malachi Pratt down into the void that existed both within him and around him, down into a space of inner knowledge where physical reality vanishes and one’s soul lives. She was a large bear, a fierce, maternal warrior that brings justice to those who injure the young children in her charge, justice to the predators that harmed them in life. Using her medicine, she pulled Francis into his own void.

He was being summoned to the Dream Lodge, a spiritual location where he could have the Great Dream of Retrospection.

As a new light suddenly flashed into the dark, Francis began to recall his life. Back in time his mind went, back to 1880, to his early days of work in the

Old West. David McKenney, Superintendent of Indian Trade and Head of the Indian Affairs Office, had just appointed him to be superintendent of the Genoa Mission School in Nebraska. This was one of the many mission schools that the young children of the indigenous nations were being brought to by force.

It was in the mission schools that believers in America's Manifest Destiny experimented with a modified slavery by imitating the military academies. Experiment and slavery were the words that caused the Great Spirit Bear to ruffle her cape and scowl. She had waited many years for this moment, and now she was enjoying it. Projecting her authority over Francis, she glared at him, and the Great Dream of Retrospection began.

In 1880, Francis Pratt had been forty years old. In that year, he had proudly accepted the position of superintendent of the Genoa Mission School. His memories of that day were sharp.

"What we need, Francis," McKenney had said to him, "is a curriculum for the savage youngster. This is something of an industrial school...if you get my meaning?"

"No, sir, I don't believe I do."

"My God, man! Now listen here." McKenney tried again. "The United States has a new president that's on board with this program. That buffoon, Lincoln, set loose our country's greatest resource."

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“What resource is that, sir?”

“The slaves!” McKenney adjusted his voice to sound calmer, even though he was obviously becoming angry with Francis’ ignorance. “Human power is what will move this country into the future,” he said. “President Garfield, a Republican, mind you, understands this, and he also understands that we can reengineer slavery with the American Indian.” He looked at Francis more closely. “Are you on board, my man?”

“Yes, sir. But...but help me to better understand this curriculum you mentioned.”

“Imagine a school, or an academy, if you will, where the little savage can be trained rather than educated. Take the young female savage. After training, she will make a good housemaid or a worker in our society’s laundries. The male savage can be trained to work in the fields of agriculture. We can train him to work on the ranch or the farm, in the mine or the factory. *That’s* how our mission schools should function. As training facilities. Francis, I need someone to make a curriculum for the post in Nebraska.”

“Under God,” Francis said, smiling at the thought of being superintendent over a population of savages, “under God, we shall meticulously remove the young savages from the despicable Indian tribes. And, sir, what authority will I have to train the young savages?”

“The utmost authority! The Christian Episcopal Church has given you limitless authority to run your

mission school in any way you see fit. As for the government, as you know from your late service in the United States Army, it fears the savage. With fear come desperate measures. We must do everything in our power to maintain a supply of savage children for our schools. The new president has authorized detachments of the army to be sent regularly to the reservations to seize the children and take them away from their parents and tribes. We are authorized to use every means necessary to carry the savage children of any reservation to another reservation, so to speak, to a school far out of the reach from their tribes.” He gave a little chuckle. “If there is one thing we can count on, it is that on the reservation, the savage man and woman will rut like deer in spring time...and we will thus have an endless supply of savage children for the schools, and in the end, an endless supply of cheap laborers. But we do this for the betterment of all mankind! We do this to educate the savage children! It’s our God-given duty!”

“Then we must do our duty,” Francis concurred. “We are obligated to do our duty.”

With a nod, McKenney continued. “It is our duty to destroy these children’s sense of themselves as Indians. In doing so, we create a lesser savage. You know you can never completely remove the savage’s... er...soul. Some part of it will always remain.”

At this point in Francis’ recollection of his meeting

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with the Superintendent, the spirit bear roared. The old man blinked away the memory. He felt hot liquid flowing down his legs.

In his lifetime, Francis had never thought twice about how he reached his goals or by what means he succeeded, but tonight vengeance was coming to call for him. Tears stung his eyes. His hands trembled as he tried to ward off the spirit bear, but his attempt was feeble. Where he should have been confused by his fear, however, his mind was somehow sharp and focused. He understood he was being forced to focus on his life, on events and acts of evil in his life when he had fooled himself into believing that he had accomplished many things for good. For God.

Francis Malachi Pratt had tamed and subdued his conscience so that he could believe he had made landmark contributions to the progress of the post-Civil War nation. He was certain that history books would memorialize him in their pages. He was convinced that everyone who studied American history would learn how he had been able to keep the country safe from the Indians, both as an officer in the U.S. Army that had conquered the Indians and as the mission school superintendent who had worked tirelessly to transform savages into dutiful servants. Slaves. He had deceived himself into believing that he had personally prevented future Indian uprisings because he had enslaved Indian children.