

### **Spirit Board Extract [3 pages Stray Dogs]**

It is at this point my memory turns out to be unreliable and so becomes a mix of fact and fiction. If what happened next seems too fantastical to believe, then know that it at least happened, as what follows is a blur – a dream – some long-forgotten memory of a walk through a hall of mirrors. It is true that we drank home-made liquor, and it is true that we ate what was left of the canned peaches and dried bread. But it is also true that we felt a presence of what I consider to be a wicked and malevolent spirit.

After I rebuilt the fire, Frankie lit some candles and took the plastic letters from a Scrabble board and placed them around the edge of the table. Then she took two coasters and flipped em over. She wrote YES on one, and NO on the other, before placing them on opposite sides of the board. Millboy looked uneasy about the whole thing. 'Is this some more of that belly dancer stuff?' he said.

'We need help,' Frankie said. 'We can ask relatives for advice.'

'Gramps wouldn't know what to do,' Millboy said.

'Dead ones,' Frankie said. 'Not the living ones.'

'Maybe you can ask Elvis,' I said.

I knew Kathy Lee messed around with picture cards and spirit boards and that Frankie supposed it was true, so we sat cross-legged and pushed the shot glass around the table and asked it dumb questions. I must admit that I treated the whole thing like a joke, but at some point, it stopped being funny and the room grew smaller, softer; the light dimmer. Our faces twisted in the candleflame – Millboy as a blackbird: Frankie the wolf, Tiger morphed into a snake, coiled in the fireplace as the sparks danced like fireflies before turning to dust.

I lay on my side opposite Millboy who lay the other way around – our heads aligned, and we stared into each other's eyes as if they were portals into another world.

The dark circles under his eyes became his eyebrows while his eyebrows became the dark circles under his eyes. I felt detached from my body. Set free from my physical form. Like I was floating around the room observing everything at once. Frankie wanted to know about her future. The past. She put her finger back on top of the tumbler and told us to do the same.

‘Fuck this witchy poo shit,’ Millboy said. ‘I’m not doing it no more.’

It was like a compulsion, and the more we fed it the stronger it got.

The glass started moving again. Slowly then faster. We raced it around the table. It seemed to have an energy all of its own. Every time we asked a question the answer came back as a riddle. We were still moving the glass except we weren’t. I mean we weren’t moving it, something else was. At one point we lifted our fingers but the glass kept spelling out words:

Hell.

Mad.

Knife.

It spelled out the word, REQUIEM.

I asked if anyone knew what requiem meant and no one did, so I went outside and took a dictionary from the back of the car.

In the bone white of a winter’s moon, the mountains were black and the sounds of the forest spoke to me through the trees. I don’t know how long I stood outside, but when I went back the two of them were sitting with their arms around each other. I took the book and flicked back and forth until I found the page and then the word. Next to it an illustration of a hooded figure knelt at an altar. Three people stood over him. One reading a book. I traced my finger under the words and read out loud:

‘It says here, Mass for the Souls of the Dead.’

Frankie wrapped the blanket tight around her face and skipped around the room speaking in rhymes. 'The power of three,' she said. 'We are three.'

My eyeballs started trembling. My skin fizzed. It felt like something had poisoned me. The glass was still moving on its own. Millboy had the face of an old man when he spoke. I had to keep reminding myself he was just sixteen.

'There is a dark angel in this house,' he said. 'An angel of death.'

Frankie cradled Millboy in her arms as if she were comforting an infant.

'Hush-a-bye. Don't you cry.'

The glass started to tremble and then exploded into a heap of crystalized shards. Whatever had possessed us, was now gone.

Frankie took Millboy's hands and turned him around as if they were dancing to a tune only they could hear. I watched them curiously as they swayed. They had the strangeness of twins. One the mirror of the other. My blood rushed hot as I moved in-between them. The three of us danced together. We danced into the hallway, up the stairs and into the bedroom. Unable to tell one from the other and so out of our minds that I can't even remember what happened next except that it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

When I woke up, Millboy and Frankie were asleep under Mrs. Nunley's fur coat. I went to the bathroom and emptied my guts down the pan and puked up my insides. I drank some cold water from the tap but still felt nauseous. The stink of kerosene on my clothes reminding me of what had happened. When I went outside to get some fresh air, I saw Janice Morningstar stood in the daylight holding a basket of groceries.

'I thought you might want something to eat,' she said.