

Psychopomps

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I can feel it closing in on me, hunting me down; no matter how hard I try to escape, I can't out-run it, or evade it. I can't even hide from it. I know that once one of them gets your scent, that's it. Over. It's just a matter of time. I don't know how long it will take before it harvests my soul, but it will, and I'll never see it coming. No one ever does. That's what makes the psychs so terrifying. That and what they leave behind once they've taken what they are seeking.

We'd known about psychs for years, but we'd always thought they were just ancient scare stories which had become codified into mythologies and then faded away as the world developed. Psychs, or to give them their Sunday name, psychopomps, was the term that those who studied long lost cultures gave to the spirit guides who were said to lead the souls of the dead to whatever hereafter a culture happened to believe in. For the Greeks it was Hermes who took the souls down to the banks of the river Styx and handed them over to the ferryman. For the Roman's it was Mercury; for the Vikings it was the Valkyries who led men who died in battle to the eternal feasting hall of Valhalla. So many names, yet without fail each and every culture had one. That should have been our first clue that they might actually be real. All those names, they all referred to the same thing. Or maybe that should be things.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, all those different names from so many different peoples and traditions had been consigned to the history books; few beyond the rarefied air of academia had ever heard of most of them, but we shouldn't have been so hasty. There was truth in those ancient stories, and it was so terrible that it was no wonder people had chosen to mythologize them rather than admit they were real. It seemed that the psychs needed death and destruction, they needed those souls they took, they feasted on them.

In the past, they'd wait until someone's body died, and then they'd sweep in and capture the departing soul before it could get away. They didn't guide the souls they collected to some eternal afterlife, though, they held them captive, living off their fear, their pain, their misery until the soul they'd imprisoned evaporated away to nothing. Simply gone from the collective consciousness of the world, never to

re-surface, never to be re-incarnated, never to inhabit another human body and awaken an intelligence within it.

That was before; then they changed. At first, there were just rumours: odd disappearances; tales of empty, soulless bodies, still alive but not human. Then we found out that they were real. The first clue was the empty vessels they left behind. They acted on instinct, fighting, attacking, feeding on any humans they could catch. They were brutal, savage husks that had once been human, but with their souls gone, there was no humanity left within them.

When they made their first appearance, there was talk of a virus, of zombies, of an upcoming apocalypse, but that wasn't what happened, or what was really going on. Instead, it was the psychs. Hell made real right here on earth. No one ever quite worked out what made them change, why they started taking souls from the living rather than from the dying, but there was one reason which sounded more plausible than the rest. This was the one that said that now, with so many people on the planet and so much suffering, the psychs were becoming confused. Everywhere, there was death and destruction, so many souls being released from their earthly vessels all at once. When a psych was trying to capture a soul, waiting for the exact moment of departure before they'd pounced, they'd be distracted by the possibility of another, then another. With all these souls swirling round in the æther, they found it hard to concentrate on their chosen calling.

So much human suffering, so many dying needlessly each and every day. The psychs couldn't cope, so instead they switched their attention to the living, harvesting their souls instead. It was easier and there were few distractions. All they had to do was select a victim and then take what they most dearly wanted, what they craved. Why they chose the ones they did was unknown, and unknowable, yet there was something about living souls that was different from dying ones. Their energy was different, it allowed the psychs not just to survive, but to thrive, to multiply until it seemed like they were everywhere, stealing souls and leaving behind the still-living human body to hunt those who still retained their humanity.

In many ways, the reasons the psychs had been released from their past confines was irrelevant. What mattered was that they were here, moving amongst us, unseen and unfelt until they locked onto you. Then you would feel something change deep inside. You'd feel your soul start to tremble within your body, and the closer the psych got, the more terrified your soul became. How it knew the psych was closing in, or what would happen to it once it had been harvested, was beyond me, but when I felt the change within me, I knew what it meant. From that moment on, I knew the fate which awaited me. I just didn't know when it would happen. And ever since that moment, I've been running, trying desperately to escape the inevitable.

Suddenly, I feel my soul jolt, as if it has been electrocuted. It somersaults and twists inside me; I can feel the fear which is gripping it expand and take over my body. I know the psych is close. I turn this way and that, but I can find no trace of it, no indication of which direction it's coming from. My soul starts screaming, the fearful, ungodly sound echoing through my body. Looking around, I wonder why no one else is reacting to the horrifying sound, but then I realise that only I can hear it. I am the only one who can hear my soul screaming, terrified by what is about to happen to it. Then I feel it, like an ice cold hand on my chest. No, not on my chest: in my chest; thrusting deep within me. My soul wails and then it's gone. The icy feeling disappears from within me, and with it goes something else. I look round and no longer do I see people. Instead, I see prey, and there are so many of them. I lick my lips with anticipation of what is about to happen. With my soul no longer present to keep my body in check, it does what it has always wanted to do and it attacks.

I watch, unable to resist, unable to stop it. As the blood starts flying, I feel my consciousness, all the things that made me me, start to fade, replaced by new, alien thoughts and unnatural urges. As I bite into my first victim, I feel a sense of elation run through me. Inside, the last of the old me blinks out and all that is left is my body, still living, still recognisable from the outside, but so different on the inside. For everything that was me has gone. The psych that stole my soul has seen to that. My body without my soul is not me, and neither is my soul without my body. I have been torn apart by something that I'd always thought never existed, that I'd thought were just old wives tales, but nonetheless they are real and I am no more.