

Matthew Allred
858 N 700 E #12
Logan, UT 84321
801-512-7813
mallred87@gmail.com

about 2,100 words

AFTERNOON OF THE CLAW

(for Ramsey)

by

Matthew Allred

The impulse is strong, unquestionable.

Get to Reeder's as quickly as possible and buy the book.

I have not been sleeping well. I am disturbed by the potency of the impression. I shift uncomfortably in my cubical wanting nothing but to file the last of my reports. I want to be free for my evening with Caddie. Again words—not heard, more certain than words heard—commandeer me, derailing every other thought.

Get to Reeder's as quickly as possible and buy the book.

The urging is for *The Night of the Claw* by Jay Ramsay. I noticed it the other day when perusing the horror/occult section at the used bookstore downtown after Caddie left my apartment. After my recent discovery that Jay Ramsay is the pseudonym of horror novelist Ramsey Campbell, I decided that when it was convenient I would go to the store and pick it up (more for the novelty of owning the collector's piece than for the hopes that it would be worth any considerable amount of money). I think of how Caddie did not always approve of the books I like to read: tales of killers, demons, and bloody horrors. Maybe she's right, though; I've been having terrible nightmares. The last three nights I've woken up after Caddie's funeral. It seems like hours before I can fully shake the dream away from me. The details are so vivid.

Leaving now would require an explanation to my supervisor and, more importantly, to Caddie, who must be impressed with my dedication to work, if nothing else. The impulse, however, is too strong. I would not call myself a religious man exactly, but I am not closed to the idea that there are forces beyond our understanding. Perhaps something is trying to help me. Perhaps there is a reason to go to the bookstore sooner rather than later.

I walk to the supervisor's office, which is really nothing but another cubicle with higher walls and a ceiling. I say, "Jeff, something came up and I need to go. I'm sorry."

He barely looks away from his screen, on which he is most likely engaged in some kind of virtual farming, and says, "What about those reports, Stephan?"

"First thing tomorrow." I say, hearing myself as if I were on film. I head back down the cramped, cloth-walled hallway before he can say anything more. At my cubicle I gather my pens and planner into my workbag. I dropped something in the bag this morning, but just now I can't recall what it was. No time to look, for the compulsion is stronger, lending itself unwarranted urgency. Even in my own mind I cannot justify why I should allow myself to be taken captive by this idea, but the reason seems unimportant. Perhaps it will be easier to not mention this little diversion to Caddie when I tell her about my day. It is not like me to leave something like this out, but I cannot think of what I would tell say.

It is harder to talk to her now than it once was. She does not always respond to me. She likes to sit upright on the corner of my bed, feet planted on the floor firmly as I am under the covers, listening to me talk, but saying nothing.

The cars between me and the bookstore seem infuriating obstacles. I knead and grip the wheel nervously until my wrists are sore. The traffic lights and rain only add to my haste and resentment. The rain reminds me of the funeral dream where they put Caddie in the ground. I claw at the grave while my father and brother try to pull me away from the fresh, cool mound of dirt. I slap my face to dispel the vision, adding to the sensation that I'm in a movie. By the time I reach the large, unorganized shop, I am not in the mood for other distractions. I go directly down the spiral staircase leading to the basement where the horror, romance, and crime novels have

been banished. In a far corner I notice a bored-looking girl in white ear buds sort a stack of paperbacks. She doesn't speak to me. She does not as much as turn my way.

Dead City. Fiends. The Taint. Semi-realistic paintings (most of them uncanny and awkward) peer out from the books. Distressed women, dilapidated houses, hands in repose with bloody pools. At first I can't find the object of my interest; my memory has painted the cover bright-red, and my eyes pass over it's muted black several times. For a moment, the impulse to buy it passes, and I feel both childish and irresponsible for having left work early. I think perhaps I should buy another book. Not a horror novel, but maybe one of the inspirational novels Caddie has suggested so many times before. Instead, I finally find the book and grab *Night of the Claw* from its display. I flip almost instinctively to the copyright page. I want to see if the book makes any mention of Ramsey Campbell. If it does, then it was reprinted once he revealed he was the author, making the copy I hold in my hands effectively worthless. I am disappointed but not at all surprised to see it is not a first printing, but it is old enough that Campbell's name does not appear.

I feel greedy and strange. The price—sketched in pencil above the tempting phrase “out-of-print” on the title page—asks four dollars, and certainly the book is not worth much more than that. My eyes return to the cover, musing again how excellent books so often have melodramatic titles. The words are severely raised in round-style relief, each one still a reflective, shiny silver despite the age of the book. I try to return it to the shelf—I have more books than I can keep up with already, and I simply want to forget this decent into indulgent self-deception—but something stops me; like a hand. I hold my breath, imagining cold skin tightening around my wrist. I can almost feel it. I back away from the cluttered wall of horror.

It is, after all, just four dollars.

Upstairs I half-expect the cashier with the G.I. Joe haircut to accuse me of trying to rip them off, but he merely looks at the book to check the price as I hand him the creased five-dollar bill. He says nothing to me during the transaction, not even to ask if I would like a bag. I glance outside and see that not only has the rain has stopped, but the sun is shining. No rain; no need to argue about getting a plastic bag.

I head out the back door, past the metal cart of Reader's Digest condensed novels, past the opposing rack of Grisham, and out to the parking lot. The sun gleams intensely off the silver lettering of the title, momentarily blinding me.

When I look up afterimages of the words dance meanly in front of my eyes, obscuring everything. *Claw. Night of the Claw. Night of.* I can nearly read the title with my eyes closed, the flash had been so bright. In the parking lot I pass people I may or may not know. The sunspots in my eyes have erased much of their faces, leaving an eye floating here, two or three teeth hanging over there. I wave at everyone mildly, just in case.

I am in the car trying to blink the ghost-letters away, but they remain fixed in their place, stubborn as an ache. Speaking of which, my head has begun to bother me. Slowly, the pain has crept up on me and now is as much a part of my life as the afterimages. I think of Caddie on my bed, silent. I know if she would just turn and look at me she would smile. She always smiles when she sees me. The awful, unthinkable dream in which she has died is playing out again in my mind. My father pulls me away from the grave saying, "She is gone Stephan. She is gone." But he's wrong. I tell her my fears and dreams every night, even if she says nothing in return.

The sun attempts to pre-heat my car to 400 degrees, so I turn the ignition. The air-conditioning blasts my hands and even my knees through thin khaki material. I am reminded of the cold hand I imagined in the basement of the bookstore. I move the fan dial to its lowest setting.

People pass, but I can't see them clearly. The white spots perform not only a dance, but a march around my vision. Looking down at my lap, the headache is more pronounced now, it begs me to sleep, here, now. The book is in the passenger seat, but didn't I put it in the backseat where with my little work-bag? I can't be certain.

I think I love Caddie. I might very well ask her to marry me if I didn't fear her silence. Why, if she does not want to talk to me, does she come so dutifully to my room each night? Her exposed shoulders always look so pale, as if all the pink has run out of her skin. My cell is buzzing on the dashboard like an angry wasp. I see my parent's number light up in the little window and silence it. They call too much. It's not as if I have anything new to tell them since yesterday. The air-conditioning is blasting me again, I reach up to return the fan to the #1 position, but when had I turned it back up? I guess my job is okay, every night I have a couple of stories to tell Caddie about what happened there. A woman presses her face up against my window, smearing it with little traces of snot, spit, and the grease from her nose. I cannot see her well; I can't see anything well. Reaching over to the seat, I try to grab the little paperback. Maybe I should read it, but where is it? I twist painfully to get to the backseat where the book rests serenely on my work-bag. My headache has defined itself as splitting, so acutely that I could map out its path on a plaster cast of a human head. I could sleep. Why am I between the two front seats? A child's little fingers slap up against the back window, but the child must be

too short for me to see its head. The hand smears chocolate across the bottom half of the window. It's getting colder in the car now. I might be seeing my breath. I have the book in my grip in front of me, and I am opening it. The words swim before my eyes. The afterimages have grown too great; they are big white puddles of paint. The little claw I dropped into my work-bag that morning spills out, shining dimly in the too-bright sun. I cannot make out the story of the book, but it's just as well, for soon I will meet with Caddie. Light shines in through all the windows, but a shadow is cast by a man standing outside the car looking in. Gooseflesh breaks out over my arms from the cold—who turned the air up again?

The claw has cut me, for I hadn't noticed that it was tucked in the pages of the book. Oops. The blood, which feels like it will freeze upon contact with the air, instead drips down my forearms and off my elbows into the light-gray fabric where the backseat passengers can put their feet. The driver's side door opens with a sucking sound. Hands grip my leg, high up on the back of my thigh, near my buttocks. I kick them away. I feel the alien fingers might tear into my tender flesh. "Buddy. Buddy, you okay?" More hands are on me, but I can't see because my breath is too thick, billowing out of my mouth as smoke. The white spots spread and spread. The headache threatens to tear my brain into unequal halves. "Hey, can somebody get an ambulance?" The little claw falls from my hands. But when did it get there? "Oh...oh no, he's bleeding pretty bad!" Am I meeting Caddie tonight? We haven't talked in a while. Perhaps we need a nice, long talk. Certainly, I would feel better.

The bloody book slips out of the car, as something drags me out. Sunspots grow to fill everything. "How long's he been in there?" "Geez, this stuff's everywhere!" "Gross!" I see the

claw—the little silver razorblade—glint in the sunshine, shiny with my blood. The headache overtakes me and I see nothing else.

I would like to have a long talk with Caddie.

It would be nice if she were to respond.