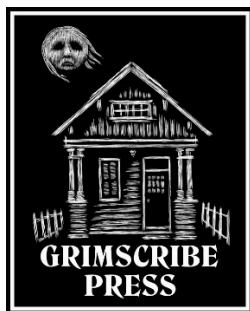


# ANTISOCIETIES

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New Orleans, Louisiana

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# Intentionally Left Blank



WE LIVED IN a little house on the hilltop, just below the peak. Nobody lived up on the actual ridge line. There was a narrow, snaky side street that went up and around one curve, and we all were hidden up at the end of it, a cluster of maybe a dozen small houses. Everybody knew each other, because we formed a kind of pocket community up there. With no through traffic, people would be out in the street all the time. We were a sociable bunch up there. If I put my mind to it, I imagine I could probably remember the family name of each home.

That year, my mother tried to kill herself and had to go into the hospital for a while. My father had to go back to base at the same time and couldn't get an exemption, so Aunt Gabrielle offered to take me in for the time being. She lived in a white stucco house on the hilltop, nestled in a heavy spiderweb of cables. I remember there were cables strung up all over, so that it looked as though the houses were all leashed to each other. People were in and out of that house all the time, because she was in a wheelchair and never left the hill. This guy named Claudio she called her "boyfriend" did all the shopping; he was a musician who lived somewhere in the valley, but he came by pretty often and took good care of her. She had two refrigerators, a big lie-down deep freezer, and a garage full of food in cans and boxes, enough to feed an army, so I wasn't any burden. It meant stale cereal and microwaved stew, dusty two-liter bottles of soda and angel food

cake you had to thaw out in the microwave at two in the morning with a pillow over the oven so the beeping wouldn't wake her up, that's all. She wouldn't have complained if I had woken her up.

I was between schools, but it was summer anyway. The main problem was that I had no way of getting around, and there was no one my age in the little cluster of houses. Most of the people there were either young or old, with almost nobody in the middle. I think the youngest adult there was maybe in their forties, and he was a flat-top, sort of strait-laced, frumpy math teacher guy who dedicated his life to his lawn. So, I was kind of stuck there, with not much to do, and that's how things turned out the way they turned out. I wanted to turn inward and get monastic with video games or guitar practice, something like that, but I suck at guitar and Aunt Gabrielle had exactly one "computer device" in the house and that was hers. There was a doily on top of it. I just had my phone.

Plus, the neighbors were always coming by. The house was small, although the guest room was sort of angled out from the rest of the house, protruding a bit over the edge of the hill, so I could sit in there without hearing absolutely every word they were saying. Sometimes a visitor would break away to go to the bathroom, and the conversation would swerve in my direction, then cut off abruptly. Toilet flush. Pause. Hopefully the sound of the tap running. Then the talk would resume and dwindle back toward the kitchen. From my room, I could see into the back yard of Dr. Wilson, who was a retired dentist, living next door. He had a garden and a sheltering structure for an old-time sports car roadster I never saw completely. Dr. Wilson came by every day to say hello to Aunt Gabrielle and recommend dentistry and the military to me.

"You'd be amazed at how tightly it tends to run in families," he'd say. He was a soft-spoken man in his sixties (I think) with iron-grey hair, a deep tan. Sort of a golfer type. He'd been in the navy. I would



see him sometimes jogging up that steep hill. He kept himself in shape. Once he loaned me a book about the Civil War—he was hugely interested in the Civil War. I started avoiding him after that. I didn't want to tell that I hadn't read it and didn't care; I guess I was afraid of hurting his feelings.

This isn't local color or whatever; it matters. You have to understand that Dr. Wilson was totally ordinary. Just bear with me, and you'll get why that matters in a moment.

Like I said, I could see into his yard from my room. We were a little higher than his house, so I could see down into it. So, I would see him back there, doing chores from time to time. He went back to his garage a lot, and now we're getting into it. Every now and then I'd hear him talking, and once I glanced outside and he was coming out of the garage, talking, not on a phone, but to someone else who was still inside the garage. There was no doubt about it; he was clearly telling someone something that had only just occurred to him as he was leaving. He used to do that with my Aunt Gabrielle, so that you couldn't be sure when he was getting ready to go or getting ready to launch into another long bit about photography, the Civil War, football. He was doing that with someone in his garage, though, even though he lived alone. I mean, no one told me he lived alone, but no one ever mentioned anyone else living there with him. I think he was saying something about remembering to do this or that, like he was giving someone advice about a task. It's one of those memories you forget until something makes you remember, and you come back to it and see it in a new light.

What made me remember that was seeing him working on the car with someone else, maybe a week later. There were tarps up, hanging from a frame that suspended them over the car, so I couldn't see much of the other person, only that it was someone big, but once they came around to the nearer side and I saw their shadow through the tarp,

and they had some kind of wiggly things sticking out of their head. I couldn't figure it out. It was weird. So, I remembered it. And I wondered if that was the person in the garage.

I actually saw who it was without realizing it. It was around the same time. I was out getting the mail, and I saw Dr. Wilson cross his kitchen window, and someone else was there too, just moving out of sight as I looked up. At the time, I didn't think about it. Dr. Wilson was as sociable as my Aunt Gabrielle, and neighbors visited him all the time, too, so I assumed it was some neighbor. But, looking back, I recognize the shapeless purple sweater that person was wearing; because, that day with the car, I saw part of the other person, an arm in a raggedy purple sweater sleeve, reaching around the front of the car while the person was crouching beside Dr. Wilson. Does that make sense? I mean, the person was wearing that same sweater, not just one that was the same color. It was beat up the same way, and even dirty, too, like something you'd see somebody homeless wearing. I wondered if maybe Dr. Wilson let somebody homeless stay with him or help him out with chores, like work-for-food? But then I remembered the weird springy head thing from the other day and didn't know what to think. Some big raggedy guy was living with Dr. Wilson, doing chores for him, and they had wiggly things sticking out of their head at least one time, and nobody ever mentioned him.

I got the good look at them that you're waiting to hear about a few days after that. I looked out my window and saw a big person in sort of rust-colored pants and boots and sagging purple sweater working in Dr. Wilson's garden. They had on floppy, colorless gardening gloves, and I guess they were weeding, in no hurry, kneeling on the ground, and they had on a rubber Halloween mask over their head. When they turned around to get the hand-rake thing, I saw the face and thought at first it was a green gorilla mask, or then a zombie, with the mouth hanging open, not in a snarl, but just open, like mindless.

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Then I saw the snake heads wiggling in the shaggy fake hair, and it was a Medusa mask. The mouth was open, but there was backing inside it so you couldn't see the mouth inside. The eyes were filled in with staring Medusa eyes, sort of sloppily painted there with paint like two splashes of bird shit. There were slits under the eyes, so I guess you see out through those. And right away, I remembered the weird shapes around the silhouette of the head the other day. You see? It means they were wearing the mask then, when they were working on the car with Dr. Wilson. I didn't see the head that day through the kitchen window, but I sort of think that I saw the back of the mask, the scruffy, fake hair sticking out in all directions, just for a flash there. So, it's like they were in the same cheap, Halloween-store Medusa mask all the time.

Gee, what's under the mask, are they too gross under the mask and so they wear the mask, but why wear a cheap, shitty drugstore mask and not just like some kind of medical mask they make for people with facial deformities?

Dr. Wilson came out into the yard a moment later and started talking to them. You in the Medusa mask knelt on the ground listening and you nodded when Dr. Wilson was done. Then you went back to weeding. Aunt Gabrielle was talking with Mrs. Figiel from across the street when I came in and asked her what the deal was with the Medusa masked person next door, and she said she hadn't noticed anybody.

"Oh, you mean Dr. Wilson's friend?" Mrs. Figiel said.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know who it is."

"Sort of big?" she said. "Works around the house, in the garden? And on that car he has, too, I think, right?"

"Do they always wear a mask? A Medusa mask?"

"You know, I think they do. I think they do usually have that mask on, yeah."

“Oh!” my Aunt said. “I know who you mean! They’ve been living with Mr. Wilson since before I moved here.”

“And they always have that mask on?”

“I guess so,” she said.

They couldn’t tell me anything about them. They hadn’t ever spoken with them, although, as my Aunt pointed out, they wouldn’t likely know they had or hadn’t, because they didn’t know what their face looked like. But neither thought they had. If they changed out of their work clothes and went passing on the street, someone might well have waved hello, exchanged the usual pleasantries about the weather. My aunt’s lack of concern didn’t rub off on me; I pulled my shades down and stopped looking out the window of my room. I didn’t want to see that rubber face with bird shit eyes again. When I heard Dr. Wilson talking next door, I turned up my headphones or stopped reading and stuck my head under my pillow, but it was like I could feel them out there, in that stifling mask with only the narrow eye slits, no opening in the mouth, breathing in the rank rubber smell, the headachy stink of the paint and the glue and stale breath. I caught another glimpse of them one night, coming around Dr. Wilson’s house from the back yard, hauling out the trash can to the curb. A big guy, who carried himself with the impatient, heavy step I associated with maintenance men and construction workers. The livid green of the mask was flushed blue with the twilight. I turned my head away and went inside quickly, but I worried that they’d seen me do it and realized I hadn’t wanted to look at them and might resent it. They’d never made any sound that I’d heard, not any vocal sound. I don’t know why I did it. I acted without thinking. I turned back. They’d finished with the trash and were striding back toward the rear of Dr. Wilson’s house.

“Hey,” I called. I kept repeating it, but they didn’t turn around. They just vanished around the corner.

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Later that night, with my lights out, I spied out on Dr. Wilson's yard, hiding myself with the blind down. The lawn was black, the overhanging trees were black, the garage, like Dr. Wilson's house, was all rough, rustic-style dark planking with white trim. There was one window in the garage on this side, and it was dark, but suddenly I knew they were in there, wearing their Medusa mask. There was something darker in the window, with two pale spots on it. It could have been the mask, sitting on a shelf, or it could have been them, sitting perfectly still. There was no sound but the overlapped pulses of crickets at first. Then I heard a coyote yipping into the sky somewhere up on the ridge. He kept yipping out into the night. I waited to hear if any others joined in. None did. So, that was me, peering around the shade into Dr. Wilson's indigo yard, seeing Medusa mask sitting motionless at the window of the darkened garage, hearing that coyote's unanswered, shrill cries waver up in the neutral wash of cricket static.

I saw them nearly every day after that, always doing something around Dr. Wilson's place, in plain view. Everyone was used to Medusa mask but me. My Aunt Gabrielle recruited me to help her prepare what she called a "wing ding" so I tidied up and dusted her figurines and went to get supplies at the store with Mrs. Figiel and her son Dominic who only wanted to talk about metal. I saw the people stocking shelves at the store and stomping back to the inventory to get more, and people clearing brush along the side of the road in the blazing heat and orange vests and helmets, and guys in oily coveralls slapping their hands together and smoking out in front of the auto body shop, and I saw the Halloween store, somehow still open in the middle of summer. The "wing ding" happened, and all sorts of neighbors came to eat my Aunt's chicken wings from paper plates. Dr. Wilson showed up to say hi and apologize.

“My son threw his back out doing some yard work the other day, and I wanted to go check in on him. I’m sure it’s nothing serious, but he’s all alone out there while Lily’s back east. She’s a tax adjuster.”

He looked at me.

“Fascinating job. I could tell you about it some time.”

“Sure,” I said.

He left. All the hobnobbing was getting me down, so I went back to my room. Shades down. I peeked around them. Medusa mask was bent over the car, with a toolbox open next to them. I began to wonder if I was strange for caring. Nobody else paid any mind. Why did this bother me so much?

Why doesn’t it bother them? That’s the question, I told myself. How is this normal? Again, I wanted to call out, and again something in me really wouldn’t. I was starting to be frightened of what I might do, that I had this impulse to call out riding around in me.

I slipped out the back door and made my way to the street through the bit of scrub that divided my Aunt’s property from the Overbrooks’ next door. I walked up around the bend, maneuvered around the yellow gate that marked the end of the street and the beginning of the ridge trail, and spent a while up there by myself in the dust and brush. I wondered when they would notice I wasn’t around.

The feeling started when I turned back. My heart felt like it was packed in hot mud. Hot mud that started to go cold right away and stayed cold. I was down like I had never been before, not further down. I mean, I’d been hurt much worse. I’d been more deeply sad than this, but this was just different. Like I knew something was coming, and I was going to be a part of it. I was going to be all about it, and it was going to be all about me. And it was going to involve Medusa mask. Something had to happen, and all I was waiting on was the chance that the something would come from someone else, not from

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me, like I'd get summoned away or there'd be a fire or Dr. Wilson would move to another neighborhood and take his buddy with him.

None of those things happened. What happened was I had to run some cans of beans or something up to Mrs. Mendez' house for my Aunt, and coming back I saw them again, clearing some brush by the corner of Dr. Wilson's house, and before I knew what I was doing or why, I called out.

"Hey!"

No response.

"Hey! Hey, monster mask!"

I couldn't believe I'd said that, but what else could I call them?

They stopped and turned to me, arms at their sides. Those bird shit eyes weren't looking at me, they were focused on two different, random points, but I knew that there were eyes behind those little slits, and they were on me, walking up to him. Big, massive, solid. Fat over muscle. Totally silent. Not even some breath whistling through the neck hole of the mask, nothing. Didn't move an inch as I came over. Still holding a cut branch in one hand. The air was thick with the smell of fresh-cut brush, sort of resinous, very strong, a little like turpentine.

I came up a few feet away and opened my mouth, but what exactly was I going to ask? I mean, now was the time for me to ask something, but it's like for the first time I realized that asking something would mean actually picking individual words and putting them together to form a clear question. I couldn't just ball up all my confusion and creeps and toss it to Medusa mask to work out for me. What's up with the mask, what's with the mask, why do you always—do you always?—they do—why always you mask wear, why the mask? I couldn't manage to come up with a possible question. It was like asking why someone was in a wheelchair, first thing, right up front. You

don't walk up to someone and first thing ask them what the fuck is the matter with them, although you could. I could.

I opened my mouth, and what ended up coming out was:

“What's your name?”

What did I say? *What's your name?*

Without moving, Medusa mask said two words.

“Dog Scream.”

The voice that came out from inside the mask was all wrong. It was tinny and flat, like it was coming through a police radio, but it wasn't muffled by the mask. There was nothing about that voice that had been affected by the mask. The voice from inside the mask was not mechanical, but it was flat and tinny—sharp, not muffled but sharp—so that I heard the words crisply, without any possibility of being wrong. And that quick answer in that weird voice yanked my heart up into my mouth. I couldn't think of anything to say. I think I just stared. After a moment, they turned and shoved the branch down into a plastic garbage can, then bent over to tear up more rattling, dry stuff.

I left them there, like that. Ignoring me. I found my way back to my room—luckily my Aunt wasn't around, she was napping or something—and sat down on my bed. My hands were shaking. Maybe he had one of those voice box things you get when you... after throat surgery or...

Does throat surgery make you change your name? To “Dog Scream”?

I sat watching my shaking hands. After a while they started to move on their own. They started packing my crap up. Putting things into a backpack in no order and without reason, but then again, they were just my hands, right? They couldn't think. I had to leave before my Aunt woke up or I would have to talk to her, and then she would know I'd gone crazy right, and she'd worry and be frightened—well



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she's going to have to worry and be frightened anyway, isn't she? She didn't worry about what's next door. She'll worry about me, though. I have nowhere to go but away so that's where I'm going, and if I can figure out a way back I'll take it, but right now there's two words spoken in a voice that isn't human anymore going through my mind over and over, and each time they repeat it's like a buzzer shaking my whole body, and it's coming from next door, so it's time to go.

I couldn't go back into the street. The sound of brush being rammed into a garbage can told me that. So, I went up the trail again. There's a concrete fire cut further along the ridge that links the trail to the street up by the landfill.

I walked for a long time, down out of the hills. Eventually, I came to the highway, the little three- and four-unit apartment buildings, the liquor store, the candy store. I shoplifted a bottle of water there. Kept walking. Over the hill, past the community college, the gas stations, the row of grandma stores with silk flowers and potpourri. The generic fancy Italian place. Two words behind me, echoing in the hills, getting further away, but still there, smoldering. Just keep going. Two feet, one after another. I don't know anybody.

A rubber mask. There in the window, a row of them. The Halloween store. I go inside. It smells like paint, rubber, plastic, glue in here. A paper top hat covered in gold glitter, a plastic scythe, red devil horns, bags of vampire fangs, a fake rat. I look for a Medusa mask. There it is. Just the same. There's three of them, all on a steel hook. All off the same mold. I don't want to touch them. I don't want to have anything to do with them. I want to run out of here. I want to throw myself in front of a moving car. But not really. My hand reaches out and takes down a monkey mask. It's a monkey, not a chimp. It's not Curious George either. It's a plain, general, no-name monkey, with a serious expression. I put it on. I don't feel better. I feel different. I leave with it on. Maybe nobody noticed. I don't care. I'm walking down the

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street, which I see framed through the slits under the staring, innocent eyes of the mask. I see the slanting gold of the sunbeams. I see the flowers bob in the breeze, planters full of them. People float past me like drowned bodies. The daytime has flooded the street. It sweeps everything before it, the waters of daytime pushing me along, pushing everyone, watering us with time, pressing on the gleaming glass windows, the glittering gems in the vitrines of the jewelry stores, the sparkling white tiles of an ice cream place, the hoods and windshields of the cars.

I don't know anybody. I never will.