

RIPPLES FROM A DARKLING POOL
WILLIAM ANTHONY SHEA

BAD DOG PUBLISHING

RIPPLES FROM A DARKLING POOL
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All characters and events in this book are fictional and any resemblance to actual places, events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

For Michael,
Who has followed more of my tales,
From beginning to end,
And who has remained always,
My friend...

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TERROR

I cannot see you in the light,
But know you're lurking there,
Though dark conceals thee from my sight,
To feed again my fear,
And yet you cannot hide from me,
I hear your whispering sigh,
A spiteful rasp,
A hateful moan,
A wretched, pitiful cry,
Shadows close,
I feel your wrath,
And sense your inevitable embrace,
Though nothing touches me as yet,
I strain to see your face,
But I draw back,
And hold my breath,
In fear of vale and fen,
Knowing that I'll breach this night,
To the *Darkling Pool* again,
And should I glimpse the awful truth,
What I see will bare my mind,
To the terror living deep within,
That will make this world unwind...

PART ONE:
JASON GREEVES INVESTIGATES:
CRY OF THE DAMNED

Prologue

Twist of Darkness

The world was no longer a place that rested comfortably in the light. When the sun went down, the perception of apprehension increased but the terrors of the night were never in truth confined to aspects of darkness alone. They reached into the daylight hours and harried a mortal world that had once denied the growing undercurrent of evil. The shadows lingered and grew in daring. The wicked did not fear the day. Evil no longer stayed confined. It had become invasive, and it had become hungry. The swell of darkness matched the wash of the waves against a shoreline of broken, twisted and smoothed stones that choked a precarious border to a raised landscape of indifference. Patches of darkened seaweed filled every possibility of a sure foothold that would permit passage by one brave or foolish enough to venture across this nightmare backdrop set between the worrying sea and the weakening land. It was tangled about the stone, woven into places that ensured no easy resolution in any attempt to remove an incursion that was becoming more and more certain with the passage of time. Yet, this place had not always been known for such a sinister undertone, and the transition from a welcoming beach to a boundary of malevolent foreboding was recent when measured against the longevity of human existence or the endurance of that which defied the erosion of time. Something moved with the water and tainted the shoreline. It kept an aspect of fluidity that emulated the rolling waves, but forced them in an unnatural direction that warned of some macabre intent. There was resistance, but it failed to keep the underlying corruption in check. The rocks and stones were infected too, traced with patches of black that resisted the wash of more natural currents. Waves pushed forth, eagerly touching the sandy shores to drive away the grime - fervent, but futile. The inky blackness that crept from the sea amidst the waves would not

relent. Any perception of a natural corruption seemed wholly out of character with the malign intent of this deliberate taint. It had begun its purchase on the shoreline, and it would not be halted or sated in such a necessary ambition. The darkness wanted more, and not even the rise of the ocean could stop it from taking sustenance from mortal creatures who dared to visit this place. They would come and the darkness would feed and grow, and consume... and endure. It had touched a living world in the past and desired a return that would see it step onto the troubled beach to again harry the dreams of those foolish enough to consign the coming of the darkness to myth. *Time*. It needed time to recover from a dissolution that had seen the essence of what it had been reduced to a near-liquefied mass, that while slowly returning to cohesion, still had a long way to go before it could traverse to the land unchallenged. The passing of an age had not imbued the entity with patience. Quite the opposite occurred as it fervently struggled to escape, tasting with eagerness the reality of its impending release. The sea behaved consciously to inhibit its return, though in truth it was the incantations used to unravel that kept the coalescence at bay. Sheer will had permitted the darkness to endure beyond all aspirations to see it undone. Now it needed to feed, and its appetite seemed insatiable as the hunger burned achingly, more in the memory than in any physical manifestation of a form that still lacked such considerations. The sea could no longer fully contain the darkness and as the creature stretched awkwardly from the depths in search of victims – fate, cruel and conceding, offered up a morsel to begin with as an appetiser for what would prove to be a fleetingly satisfying nurturing to rally its return.

Even now a drunken man walked awkwardly with his rum-filled prize, oblivious to the certain and fatal misfortune that awaited him. His melancholy whispers of discontent carried out over the water, and though he was not loud in his dismay, the words of self-blame were most certainly heard.

They were fuelled by the proximity of the darkness, augmented to despair and encouraged to seeking an abode of solitude. They were also merely an unfortunate reflection of a deeper sorrow, the true cause of which had not in truth been detected. The drunk presented a more obvious target.

‘I... I could do that,’ said the man sorrowfully. ‘I could walk into the water... and let it... take me.’

The man chuckled softly, the false mirth diminished by a more prominent sob. The truth of his lament seeped through a thin façade that was unnecessary given where he now stood – alone and dejected on a rocky shore, a lost and vagrant soul who did not invite as much as a sliver of sympathy. Any modicum of pride had long since been consumed by regret and fear, the latter for living in a crueller world, one that looked upon him with nothing but pity. He could not reason a way to return to usefulness. He did not know how.

‘Never... never was a good... swimmer. Worked the sea all me... life, but never could swim good,’ he sniffed miserably as he raised his arm to trace the sleeve of his tattered and worn coat across his nose, the result of a horrid habit thankfully lost in an uncertain light.

The dark reacted, drawn irrevocably to the aching despondency that permeated the air, bathing the rock and seaweed choked beach in an element of gloom that seemed fitting. The sorrow manifesting from this source was bewilderingly strong but there was also a sliver of something else. The man grew suddenly quiet, supped from his bottle and staggered a few feet, his gait unsettled by the uneven ground as much as by the effects of the alcohol coursing through his veins. His footing slipped but he managed to remain upright. He sniffed and snorted, cursed, sobbed a moment longer and then fixed his drink-fuelled gaze in no particular direction to offer a feeble reproach. He was a man to be pitied, but there was no one here to care. He was pathetic but the need of the darkness was greater than the revulsion it felt for this abhorrent fool. His anguish was

immensely alluring. The man had wandered lonely into loneliness, his wavering shame overruling sensibility. Still, his despondency seemed to reverberate deeper, almost as if it provided a reflection of a greater hurt that did not fit the nature of this man. While it was true that he was depressed beyond even that which the bottle augmented, the emanations of despair seemed provoked by a deeper pain than one man's tragedy alone. The underlying taint was weak but familiar.

The sea tried desperately to pull the inky blackness back into its depths but it was already too late. The power that had kept the creature at bay was waning in a world that no longer remembered what true evil looked like under the dull façade of disinterested denial. The living had followed new paths to enlightenment that consigned such things to the frightful imaginings of a primal mind, one that no longer had any place in a modern world.

The tendrils of pitch reached out, slithering through the sand and rising concealed amidst the gaps in the rocks and stones, slinking over the darkened seaweed and a myriad of discarded shells with deathly stealth and deafening silence as it poised to strike. The man took a hearty swallow from his bottle. The rank odour tainting his breath momentarily ruffled even his own senses. He looked to see where the smell emanated from and cast a glance about the shoreline. He just as quickly confined his realisation to a simple conclusion that it most likely came from him. His soiled clothing betrayed him as much as any olfactory distress from his body. He was aged beyond his years, harassed by a hard life, diminished by crippling, back breaking hours of labour that would have broken another man. In truth, he had fallen too far and was just as lost and could not remember when his gradual decline had begun in moments of denial and apathy. He took solace in the bottle, but it was a bitter mistress. Soon he would have nothing left with which to barter and no one would accept his petition as a labourer aboard any vessel, or along the shore, should he have been inclined to accept that

he could not return to a life on the sea. If he could not find work it would only serve to denigrate him further. His failure and his regret enticed the darkness. In turn, the dark drove the emotions of his abject despondency to the surface so as to make him more pliable to a solution that would only end with his fatal resignation. *Surrender*. His bitterness at his plight tantalised. The rum did little to alleviate his utter despair. It too worked against reason and any hope of redemption.

'There but for the grace of God go I.'

The thought crept unbidden into his alcohol fuelled mind. It was an expression he had heard far too often in his life. It was too late for him to grasp onto any sliver of divine hope. There would be no intervention, by faith long repudiated, or any mortal rescue. He was a vagrant soul, lost amidst a sea of his own lament. Anguish swelled about him, provoking other feelings that contradicted his memories but served to damn him further. It was almost as if he was not alone in his despair, but reflected a deeper hurt, soaking up the aching loss of another soul. No matter, it was too late for him now.

When the darkness struck, he did not resist. He screamed only because fear overwhelmed his heart and it was a natural inclination in the realisation that death had come, but it proved far more terrible than the man had realised. The pain ignited along every nerve as his blood reacted to an enticement to quit the body that was terrible and beyond imagining.

The manifestation of darkness played to his thoughts, a throwback to an age when the world had cause to know real terror, but did not have the wherewithal to realise how truly alarmed they should have been by the unnatural penchants of evil. The man dropped his bottle and lost sight of it as the dregs poured out into the sand, though he could hear it seeping away, until the cruel, mocking *'drip, drip'* faded to silence in tune to the last beat of his heart as the darkness took him completely. It was not the gentle death he had thought would greet him in the cold of the night. It was

venom and spite, rising to bitterness incarnate. It was callous and cruel and without a sliver of remorse. There was no redemption here on the corrupted rocky shores as a living soul was consumed to feed a darkness that had again found purchase on a world no longer prepared for its coming.

A second man watched, safe in his disregard for the victim of the darkness, because he believed he had been veiled by a greater remoteness and the masking emanation of a closer lament. He offered a similar despondent alcohol-fuelled haze that permitted him to deny the horror. It presented less upset to his indifference. His despair was deeper than self-loathing. The darkness seemed to be drawn to the victim of a more immediate harm even though this second man was the truer source of despondency. It drew the darkness forth. His awful lament cost the victim dearly. He regarded the darkness unfolding before his eyes, as it moved with a tangible appetite, to be something ordinary – a familiar malevolence that did not stir him to action or any disposition of an emotional outcry for the victim he so callously observed and left to his fate. His raw emotions were drawn away into the night as if something tangible had sucked the despair from him. A single tendril of darkness was limply coiled about his leg, touching the exposed flesh. It drew something from him but there was no pain. When the darkness began to feed, interest waned in both the wayward tendril, and this watcher, as the other man was consumed. The second man did not care and the slivering wisp withdrew to revel in the feeding. The watcher did not want to believe. He had known much of the darkness creeping on the periphery of the shadows in a world that could no longer afford to refute the truth, but he withdrew in duplicitous denial, consumed by his own failures. Any thought that he had caused the other man's obliteration never even touched the surface of a deeply troubled mind, though the unheeded screams within attested otherwise. The watcher felt... hungry. The darkness devouring its prey seemed oblivious to his presence now as

the tendrils of inky blackness penetrated and fed, with a primal eagerness, on a victim that would not have otherwise stirred its appetite. The second man retreated to a place that lent nothing to his ambitions to negate what he had seen, or to dull his vain attempt to consign what had happened on the precarious shoreline to another of the nightmares that haunted his dreams. They overwhelmed a dire need for sleep. His mind ached for the release of a rest long deprived. He did not know the man. There was no emotional connection. He no longer wanted to remember who he had been, let alone a figment stranger consumed by terrors that deigned to follow him into the night. The memory would weave into flashes of madness that taxed his already troubled mind. He could not stop the nightmares and he too had been a victim. He drank deep from a bottle containing a dark liquid that he drew out from inside his coat and wandered inland away from the sea. Tears wet his face but he was oblivious to the trigger that stirred such inner turmoil. The rain had begun to fall, droplets of recrimination that quickly became a torrent of condemnation.

The victim of the darkness would soon be joined by a myriad of others, screaming in utter anguish in his head – cries that fell on the deaf ears of a man who had already been broken beyond redemption...

ALSO FROM BAD DOG PUBLISHING

By William Anthony Shea

TALES FROM A DARKLING POOL
RETURN TO A DARKLING POOL
A DARKLING POOL AGAIN
BEYOND A DARKLING POOL
RIPPLES FROM A DARKLING POOL

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BOOK ONE: CAULDRON OF TROUBLE
BOOK TWO: FOR THE LAND THAT FELL
BOOK THREE: THE HOUSE OF SILMARIN

NIGHTMARE
VAMPIRE
FALLEN
REMNANT – NYR*

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KNIGHTSHADE THE ROLE PLAYING GAME
THE INITIATE'S TOME
THE GRANDMASTER'S TOME
THE LOREMASTER'S TOME – NYR*
THE QUESTMASTER'S TOME – NYR*

FUMBLING VOLUME ONE
FUMBLING VOLUME TWO
FUMBLING VOLUME THREE – NYR*

*NYR = Not Yet Released.

By L Shea

IMMORAL DAWN

DE CORK BOIs

DEAD TO ME (The many deaths of Michaleen) – NYR*

DE CORK BOIs TOO – NYR*

*NYR = Not Yet Released.

The *Darkling Pool* is never done as *Ripples* reach out from the darker influences of the mind of *William Anthony Shea* to once again open other doors to stories of intrigue and menace.

In this fifth instalment, the tales delve deeper into moments of true horror, with macabre undertones that cross new and familiar thresholds to shadowy worlds that can never be denied in the light of a day that offers little relief in knowing what is about to unfold, or what dwells on the periphery of lucidity.

Embrace the swells that touch your consciousness with no distinction for sleeping or waking – but only if you can face a night of gloom that knows no end...