

“Crookbarrow”

By Glenn James
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I cannot remember a time in my life when I did not know of Crookbarrow Hill. Despite all attempts to block it out I could even see it in my sleep, and it will be before my dying eyes when I finally close them forever. I don't think it will be long now, and I can see the shadows lengthening beneath its lonely tree.

It was once a fascinating mystery, a strange, pudding-basin shaped mound we would see from the windows of our coaches as we passed, heading off on holiday, with a single tree on top. My mother was convinced it was an ancient burial mound, and swore that it was man-made, and I was sure even then that she was right.

I shake now to think that I know for certain that she was right, and I can almost see the funny side of the thought that archaeologists are said to finally talking about cutting into the hillside.

It won't happen. Something unexpected and wild will stop it, because there is something sleeping under that hill, deep down inside, way down under the questing roots of that old chestnut tree, which fidgets' in its evil slumber, and does not want to be disturbed.

Although I was raised in a completely different county, miles and miles away from that hill, it often came into my thoughts during my youth, like someone with a familiar face who you see on the way to work, but never seem to get the chance to speak to. If ever I had cause to pass that hill on the way to the West Country I always craned around in my seat to get a good look at it, and delighted in telling my friends about my dreams and thoughts about it. They always smiled, and indulged in a little happy speculation to while away the journey, and no doubt forgot all about it inside ten minutes.

But I never did.

It lingered tantalisingly in my memory, and as I was always drawn to the West, I promised myself that one day I would walk up that hill and admire the view of the distant mountains, which must have been quite magnificent. It was, but I have no desire to see them again.

My steps there were well set out and planned for me by fate, and I believe that even if I had taken one of half a dozen different directions in life, at those critical junctions which become obvious with age, fate would have seized the wheel and taken me back there slowly by another route. As it was, with a certain subtle insight, she chose to seize my pen...

It came quietly enough; at a time when I found that I had hit one of those cross roads in life. Everything seemed stagnant and stuck in second gear. No matter what I did I just couldn't seem to move forward, in my career or my personal life, and after a year of iniquitous temping jobs, I had decided that enough was enough, and it was time to do something drastic.

It was a big leap to take, but I told myself that if ever I was going to finish my book then I had got to get down to it right now, and so I made my preparations. I sold my house, and with a decent amount in the bank I made preparations to move. And that's why, one dreamy summer's afternoon, with the crickets singing in the long grass, I set out with an estate agent to view a short list of houses in a distant, dreamy county I had loved as a child.

She took me to the first on the list, admitting that this seemed the most likely from my description of what I was looking for, and when I got out of her car in the long garden, with its dry-stone ivy cloaked wall and small overhanging trees, I had a deep and sudden attack of love at first sight. The house was only a two up two down on the end of a short row, but I was head over heels in love.

My thoughts must have been an open book. "I thought you'd like it!" she said cheerfully. "And of course, if you fancy a bit of a walk, there's always the hill. The sunsets are meant to be stunning."

Following the arrow of her finger, it was then that I looked over my shoulder and there, peering curiously over the tops of the trees, was the furrowed dome of the top of Crookbarrow Hill.

How could I argue with something like that? I must have stared at it in amazement for thirty seconds, and then I took the house on the spot.

Never was a writer so spoilt. I got more work under my belt in the first six months at that house than I had managed, (and not for want of trying), for the previous six years. I actually had to slow down, and of an evening I would stroll up the hill to have a relaxed smoke, and marvel at the sun kissed majesty of the landscape. It was truly a joyous time in my life, and I didn't pay much notice to the disturbing dreams for quite some time after I moved in. They always seemed to focus on the hill itself, and the surrounding fields, leaving a memory only of grey after dawn light and a sense of something terrible having occurred, but that was all that remained when I opened my eyes and let in the day. Nothing more focussed than a certain foreboding.

They were a small price to pay, and always evaporated a short time after I had woken up. I have to say that in those days I thought of it as MY hill, although I shake at the blasphemy of such a conceit now, and I know that when the sleeper awakes again I will answer for entertaining presumptuous ideas.

In those days I trooped up there with many a jealous visiting friend, but I never used to notice the deep disquiet and nervousness which overcame them when we were on top of the hill. No-one ever stayed for more than one night at my little terraced end cottage, and all of them seemed to shrug off a tired look in the morning with an excuse about bad dreams. They never went into detail, and although my own were uncommonly bad, neither they nor I could remember them. Not then, anyway.

Despite this attitude and odd feeling I spent many a happy hour up there in the summer months, leaning against the tree and working on my book. All sorts of dark and foreboding legends hovered over the place like May-flies, but it suited my own dark work. I laughed if anyone said rather me than them, and felt vaguely puzzled if local people hastily changed the subject when I spoke of legends surrounding the Hill.

Only one more thing would have made it perfect, someone to share it with. But that seemed very unlikely, in my isolated, unspoken melancholy.

But yet, who would have thought it? She came to me one summer's afternoon, her dark hair shining in the sunlight, and brushing wisps of straw away which had caught on her cool cotton dress. I was completely absorbed in my work, as usual, as I sat under the tree and actually even wearing headphones. I had that strange intuition that I was being watched, and when I looked up she was laughing.

She stood there grinning at me, as I looked up, and the sunlight kissed her golden skin on her neck and shoulders, as she shaded her eyes to look at me. Instant and total attraction hit me like a wall, and god knows what I said as I took off my headphones in complete astonishment, but whatever it was she doubled up laughing. We talked for a little while, I completely embarrassed by the fact that I was wildly attracted by a little curl of hair falling against her neck, and somehow I became aware that I had dumbly muddled through accepting an invitation to meet her by the gate below that evening, for a summer nights walk. Then, with a grinning bite of her lip more sensual than Venus dressed as catwoman, she wandered off through the long grass. Trying to play it cool I got my head down to my book for a couple of seconds, but when I looked up to go after her, she had melted away into the hot afternoon.

This kind of thing never has happened to me. If we're honest, it doesn't happen to many people at all, unless you're Orlando Bloom, and I sat there staring after her, astonished by my sheer dumb luck.

I had broken up badly with my last girlfriend, very badly. We had been together a long time, and the break came as a bad shock, to me at least. It was drawn out, incremental, and devastating, and although it was a few years back the cracks were still deep and painful. Moving here had been a new start. This was absolutely unlooked for, unsolicited, and quite unexpected.

Was I still raw? That's an *understatement*. I was completely *brittle*, but now, this wonderful, unexpected turn of events made me dizzy with joy. I couldn't stop thinking about her all day, and naturally any pretence of work went right out of the window. I changed my mind over what to wear a dozen times, and had two showers before going out. I realize now that something about the situation made me feel really uneasy, but I couldn't get the sight of her out of my head. She wanted to meet me just as it was getting dark, and my pounding heart that glorious afternoon played havoc with my imagination.

After an afternoon and early evening of elastic time, alternating between dragging agonizingly and flashing forward by the hour, I set out, (slightly later than intended.) I walked dizzily down the little track, half convinced I was being wound up.

But then I saw her, standing by the gate in that hedge, which led through the field and up the hillside. Her hair was still down, and her brown waves were moving gently in the sweet summer breeze. I almost ran over the road to her.

Breathlessly, I introduced myself properly, intoxicated by her beauty, and her simple off the shoulder white dress. But when I asked her name, she raised her fingers with an elfish grin to my lips, and followed them with a kiss. Then she took me by the hands, and led me playfully towards the gate. My heart was hammering, and I followed...

I wish I had not.

A large junction off the motorway lies near that field, and with the best will in the world it's impossible to leave behind the sound of the traffic, thundering to and from the West Country.

And yet, once we went through the gate, the echo of it disappeared completely.

I was so surprised that I stopped for a moment, and looked behind me. The gigantic concrete street lights which march along the roadsides towards Bristol had also vanished, too, and the night was suddenly genuinely dark. Somewhere I heard the sounds of a fox calling to its mate and that's when I realized that all I could hear was the sounds of nature around me.

I began to feel breathless and panicky, as there were no lights visible from the nearby cottages, not a sound of the hurtling juggernauts I had so often wished a thousand miles away from this idyllic place, and the air was so sweet and fresh that I could feel it flaring up the asthma in my city born lungs. I wondered vaguely if there had been a huge power cut, and the traffic had been stopped. I could hear the wind in the hedgerows, and the only light was the lazy galleon of the moon over the field, across which a low warm mist was creeping.

It was impossibly beautiful, forbiddingly beautiful and sinister, and I wondered if my glorying senses were causing some kind of emotional overload. I was wrong on every count, but as my blood sang through my veins I had other things on my mind... I thought then that this would be a truly special night, a bewitching night, that I'd remember for the rest of my life. I'm sorry to say I was right.

Irresistible in the moonlight, she beckoned me on, and who was I to resist? I still didn't know her name, but I would have followed her into the crater of a volcano, if she had given me that *smile* as she headed for the tides of lava. Her body moved with the unceasing promise of mortal sin, and her smoky grey eyes caught the moonlight with more than a mischievous gleam as she coaxed me up those ancient sandy rabbit-runs which form the paths to the hill.

I had a deep-seated feeling that something was wrong with every step I took, but I couldn't tear myself away. There was a light up at the top of the hill now, some way off from the tree, and I couldn't make out what was going on up there. Odd sounds began dancing down on the breeze, strange yells and shrieks of delight, and a music I have never heard before. It must have been played on some kind of horn, but the tune was edgy, primitive, something unkind and unfettered. It had an orgiastic quality which was forbidding, and called back to my dreams in ways I would rather not recall, even now. When I chanced to look up at the summit, the mist had spread out across the top of the hill, flickering oddly with what must have been camp fires up there, but it was all oddly out of focus.

Around us in the fog of the meadow, as we progressed towards the hill, there came little human sounds. Stifled little cries and shiftings, down in the long grass. Every now and then I saw that two heads would appear, engulfed in passionate kissing as they emerged from the undergrowth or limbs, entwined in passion, which briefly sought the air. So we were not the *only* lovers out on this wonderful night, and I wondered vaguely if some kind of neo-hippy caravan was passing through the county, but my siren lead me on, with her tousled hair and light step, through that lovers meadow to the foot of the hill.

I was mesmerized, and I looked up to where the fires were burning distantly and brightly through the shifting mist. She took my hand with a wicked grin, and led me on up. Just for a moment I wondered where the fence and the stile had gone, (and come to that the nearby 15th century moated farmhouse), but I followed her silently, my throat choked with passion.

The music was louder now, as we crested the brow of the hill, and I could make out what had been so oddly hidden. A low stone circle lay near my tree, simple standing monoliths' in a wide ring about the height of a man. I stopped in wonder and looked at this, pondering for a moment if someone were making a film. There was no sign of any of this normally, not even the tip of a single solitary stone showing through the earth. But here they stood, jagged and weather worn as if they had been here countless years.

Fires burned around the edges of the circle, and around these fires, figures writhed and gyrated, curling and uncurling with a savage untempered passion. Most of them were naked and making love wildly, and here and there I saw the musicians I had heard below, beating out the tempo for their desires. I stopped in sheer shock, I'd never seen anything so wildly unrestrained and sexual, and for a moment I didn't know what to do or say. Beside me my lover laughed delightedly, kissed me searchingly on the lips, and pulled me on to join them.

But I stopped.

The mists were clearing, and as I looked around in the light of the pale harvest moon, I realized that the landscape below us had changed. No houses remained in sight, and for the most part forest stretched in every direction. There was no sight of the distant cathedral, or for that matter the city surrounding it, not a car, a cow, a pylon or a streetlight. I know that view intimately, and I felt life draining out of me, as I filled with a cold and heart stopping panic.

Everything was gone, *everything*, and a completely different world lay below. In the place where cars turned on and off the motorway for Worcester, there lay a kind of huge brutal looking wooden fort, filled with smoking round houses. In the moonlight I could see an old woman dressed in rags slaughtering a pig, and its shrieks rose up to me over the treetops.

I turned to my lover, shaking and scared almost out of my wits, and over her shoulder in the far distance, I could see that the ancient hill forts of Malvern were alive now, with beacon fires burning and massive wooden walls. I only realized I was shaking my head with denial when she took my face in her hands with gentle force, and smiling, touched my lips with her fingers, as if to say it was okay. She tried to beckon me on again, but I had frozen where I stood. Something was happening in the circle.

I wasn't the only one who sensed that something wasn't right. All around us sweating and thrusting couples had paused in their rut, and stood together, looking at the centre of the circle.

There was little to see at first, and we stood like that for several seconds before someone cried out and pointed.

A small area seemed to be falling in, as though the soil were falling away, like the sand making an increasing crater in an egg timer, as it drains from the top half to the bottom. It wouldn't have mattered if this has remained on such a small scale, but it spread out with incredible speed, until the soil suddenly was falling in all around the whole circumference of the area within the stone monoliths, and a tight dark hole could be seen at the centre of the deepening crater. Everyone was muttering uncertainly, straining to see, and a few of the distant couples were moving closer, craning over the edges with flaming torches to try and see what was down there.

I lost interest the instant that I noticed that my lover had disappeared. Somehow we had got separated as everyone flocked to the edges of the circle, and I was looking around for her with mounting concern, when somebody cried out.

I looked round sharply, and just as I did, I saw something *emerge* from that dark hole, and float up into the light. It looked like a bundle of rags covered in cobwebs, and a couple of those closest to the edge drew near to have a look. But as they did, it extended two long spindly arms, and raised its head to look at them. I caught a fast glimpse of a mummified, withered face, and there was a blinding flash of fire. The closest woman screamed, and fell to the earth in a cloak of black smoke, and then, that was all I knew. Because then we were *running*.

No-one stayed to see it happen again. As one we all turned and fled. People literally climbed over each other to escape. Fleeing for our lives, scratching, screaming, punching and scrambling, falling over those who'd stumbled, and I myself fought madly to get out. Behind us there were terrible screams and cries as that grey fire flared out again and again, and people fell around me in plumes of greasy black smoke. We soon saw that if the fire touched you when it took a victim, then it took you as well, and when someone was hit everyone around them fought to get out of the way. It fed indiscriminately, flying in random directions, and we scattered wildly before it, wheat fleeing the blade. The press of naked people, the smell of sweat and rut, and the mad frightened faces pressed up against you....

I don't remember much about coming down. I all but ran off the edge of the hill, amongst the flashes of fire and the terrible sobbing cries. We died as we ran, I didn't stop to watch. I fell through brambles and nettles, half falling and half rolling down the steep sides of the hill; I hit against small trees, and scratched myself viciously. Then I remember falling face down against a big flat stone, and when I did, I said goodbye to the world.....

I must have a champion bruise. Half my face is swollen, and it's agony to touch. It's impossible to say how long I must have been unconscious, I wasn't wearing a watch, but it must have been some time, because I came back to myself the night had passed and I woke to a grey after-dawn light, under brooding slate coloured skies.

There was no sign of my lover, and the world was still in its Pagan state. No signs of safe modernity made themselves visible over the treetops, and the land felt uncommonly still, as if holding its breath. I could understand that, there was a greasy, sickly smell everywhere, like overcooked meat, and a black smoke hung close to the ground in the damp early air of the meadow and hillside. As I pulled myself painfully to sit up, there was a sharp movement beside me, and I realized that my lover was watching me from a small bush, with her knees tucked up under her, and eyes like a frightened bird.

I choked back a cry as I flung myself towards her, dragging her from her hiding place to fold her in my arms... but she nearly knocked me over backwards, as she fought me viciously.

I couldn't believe it for a second... I put it down to shock, and I fought to hold her still, squeezing her arms against my chest bodily, and putting my hand over her mouth. Only then did she stop and look into my eyes, and I felt her body slacken in my arms.

I said nothing, but I nodded down towards the gate, and she nodded her understanding.

I reached out to take her hand, and we started to pick our way through the meadow carefully, and gently, down towards the gate through the little scattered bushes. Every now and then there was a cry which dropped us to the ground, and we saw some distant figure break cover and run for the gate. They never covered half the distance, and always fell to the ground enveloped in grey fire.

We cannot have been the only ones bought here like this, as the others always made for the hedge, and the gap where the gate to sanity and the modern world lay hidden. And that's how they died, running for the gate. We passed some gruesome smoking ruins, ash coated relics of humanity with bones visible through the charred flesh, and more than one wore a watch, or had 21st century tattoos or modern jewellery. My lover said nothing.

There was little cover, but somehow we managed to get more than three quarters of the way down to the gate, probably at the expense of some infernal deaths, as we crept the long way below the grass line along the hedge. But our luck couldn't hold out forever, and then, we saw her at last.

Down a sandy rabbit run she came, walking the path with free familiarity as though she did it every day. She was little more than skin and bone, rangy and wasted, with a wild trailing mane of gossamer white hair hanging down her back like spiders webs. But there was an energy and strength in every muscle, a terrible power about her as she moved, scanning the fields for any living thing. As we watched she caught sight of a fox, and flicked her deadly eye in its direction. It exploded into flame at once with a terrible cry, and fell to its death in the grass.

I couldn't even breath, watching her between the stalks of waving grass, and I pulled my lover close to my side, sheltering her as best I could..... But as I tried to do so, she wriggled free....

In full sight of that primeval thing, not 30 feet away, she jumped to her feet, and began calling that Hag, calling with a voice almost uncontrollable with laughter.....

I lay on my back like an overturned crab staring at her. Had she gone mad!! I kicked her legs from under her, and wrestled her bodily down.... But she bit me viciously, wriggled free, and shouted all the louder.

I saw that cobwebbed head flick in our direction, saw the Hag stop and stare, and the flash of the fire in her eyes. Then she changed direction, and headed right for us...

I couldn't move, I couldn't run, and my lover had gone quite mad. It was too late to do anything, and that Hag was nearly with us.

There was a terrible majesty in her every move as the Hag came to stand over me. The rags were worn with hauteur and a regal sweep. I saw a face entirely covered in deep furrowed wrinkles, the skin puckered and as ridged as the sides of the hill itself with age. Two terrible fierce orange infernos blazed in the sockets in place of her eyes, too bright to look at, and I averted my gaze, partly from pain and entirely from fear. There was a godlike blaze about her, the air shimmered with heat, and the air reeked of fresh sulphur.

Despite everything, I couldn't leave my lover unprotected, and all I could think was that she was unhinged by fear. I tried to get up to protect her, and that's when the worst blow fell.

As I tried to get up to shelter her, our eyes met for a second, and then, when I saw the gloating look on her face, I finally understood. When she turned her hand to point at me for her ancient mistress it was only a distant and confirming echo of that look on her face.

She had bought me here *deliberately*. She bought us *all* here, as a sacrifice for this terrible wasted god, and now, I was the last one left, the last beast to go onto the alter. That thought alone was enough to welcome the grey fire, for I knew it wouldn't scourge me long, and I lay down with my arms over my head and buried my face in the earth I would shortly join. And as I did, I heard a sound which might just have been a laugh.

I looked through my arms, and as I did I saw that thing turn her gaze to my love. I saw the deep seated cruelty as a smile moved across her face, and the rotted remains of her teeth, as her eyes suddenly blazed.

The girl was dead before she hit the floor, falling slowly in a shroud of blue-black smoke, her thick brown waves of hair floating around her as she hit the grass. There was still a puzzled smile on her face. I didn't have time to move a muscle.

I don't know if she could speak my language, I don't know if she could even understand me as we would understand it, but I screamed myself hoarse at that thing, every foul word I could dredge up, and a tide of rage. That faint smile remained on her lips, and she turned to look at me, cocking her head to stare at my leg.

The pain nearly threw me backwards into the hedge. Brief, and short and agonizing, doubling me up in shock. Then my whole lower body just went numb, and I fell back against the ground.

This appeared to satisfy her. There was that brief, dry laugh again, and she nodded at me, before the earth fell away beneath her in that egg timer fashion and she floated back down into the bowls of the earth, taking her inferno with her.....

There is little left to tell.....

The soil filled in again behind her, and I have lain here all day.

I am in no pain, but my leg is little more than charcoal now, and I can feel it spreading. No-one has heard my cries for help, or if they have, then no-one has certainly come to help me. They must be too frightened of the Goddess.

It doesn't matter, really, I'm pretty sure I'm dying anyway.

As the sun reappeared through the miserable grey clouds and rode up the sky, and the morning really began, I saw the concrete street lights reappear, and the thundering sound of traffic returned as though someone had turned off the mute control. It came as some little comfort, but as night gets closer again, I know that I will be back again in that horribly distant past. She will return tonight, that Witch Queen with eyes of deadly fire, and I cannot move. If I haven't died by then, that will be the end of me. I am resigned to it.

I haven't tried to move all day, and my heart wasn't really in crying for help. My Lover lies where she fell, and her corpse might almost be asleep. The blast has oddly beautified her, whilst miraculously not touching her beautiful hair. I have no inclination to leave her, and she lies quite near.

I don't understand how she contacted that wild thing under the hill, or even if she came from the same century as myself. What I do know, unshakably, is that I loved her totally when I looked up from my work and saw her in the sunlight, and I hope that maybe, when the Hags scourging fires have finally closed my eyes for the last time, she will be able to tell me why she did it.