

“The Mounds”

By, Silas Cairn

It was during the winter of 1952 that the unraveling began. I had always kept odd company, but none more consequential than my longtime friend and frequent catalyst of adventure, Mr. Gladwell Stokes. Stoker’s fascination with the strange was more of a belief, while mine remained a mild intellectual interest. It was Stoker who pressed us to visit the obscure places we read about, so when my office phone rang on that chilly January morning, I was unsurprised to hear that familiar gruff voice on the other line.

“Mick, it’s Stokes.” A phrase he used with every call. “I think I’ve found something worth putting boots to dirt.”

“Stoker, you understand that I am in the process of preparing a very important deposition,” I said. “We can talk about this another time.”

“Just hear me out.” His voice snapped with a sudden franticism. “I won’t say too much now, but meet me at our spot. Eight tonight.”

“What is it?”

He paused and drew a slow breath. “Something that has brought a well-functioning intellectual to his knees.”

#

Flurries skittered erratically under the sickly yellow streetlight as I pulled my 1951 Buick Roadmaster into its usual spot. The Old Charter Tavern was a rough-and-tumble watering hole,

our stomping ground since we were plumbers in our early twenties. While my profession had risen in the social ranks, our favorite meeting spot remained rooted. The place had once been lively when blue-collar work dominated the area, but had since taken on a sort of vague grayness we never acknowledged.

I shivered and pulled my black wool overcoat tighter around my shoulders.

I ordered a Ballantine Ale and found my spot in the corner. Stoker, late as always, came thundering through the door after I was about halfway through. I could tell he had been running.

“Apologies. I was in the midst of reading up on the topic of tonight’s news,” he sputtered.

“Do tell,” I said measuredly.

“Remember my cousin, Bentley?”

“I do.”

“He called me over the weekend,” Stoker’s tone suddenly became hushed as he leaned forward, his thick fingers working the condensation ring on the table, smearing it wider without seeming to notice. “They found something on the new field plot he bought, something bizarre. There are dozens of mounds tucked away at the wood’s edge on the northeast side of the plot. Huge mounds. Sixteen feet across and several feet above ground. They attempted to dig into one and after digging awhile, they struck what they say can only be described as layered ash. When they dug further, they found another layer of solid limestone.”

He licked his lips as if anticipating what he was about to relay next. “That wasn’t the strangest part. When they looked closer, they noticed these slabs were fitted together like a geometric box. The faces were too smooth, but my cousin couldn’t explain what he meant by that.”

As an amateur anthropologist with an extensive knowledge of East Coast Native American history, this instantly struck me as odd. I furrowed my brow slightly.

Stoker continued. “Bentley said the whole thing felt wrong. He wouldn’t stop talking about the shape of the thing. Said the corners were sealed together with better alignment than any modern stone mason could manage. He kept saying it was ‘off.’ Knowing my cousin, the fact that he can’t understand his fear is what scares him most.”

“Sounds like a sort of cist grave, but I don’t know of a local Native American tribe that employed that sort of geometry. Did he stop there?” I asked.

“He did. He said he got the notion that he was out of his depth.”

The steady hum of the tavern chatter suddenly became oddly distant.

I exhaled slowly. “And now he wants us.”

Stoker pursed his lips and nodded.

I felt an unfamiliar tightness in my chest.

“Mick, what is it?”

“I…” I pressed my fingers against my temples. “I think I need to lie down.”

#

Bentley’s lonely farmhouse was farther from the road than I had expected. As we wound down the long driveway, I noticed the ghostly stare of the gaunt cattle. Their eyes were bleak—coal black and hollow. The house itself was a Depression-era box-frame built with utilitarian simplicity.

Bentley answered the door, and we were enveloped by the smell of urine and cheap whiskey. I nearly gasped aloud. Dark, swollen bags sagged under his glossy brown eyes. Yellow

tobacco stains steeped his normally well-trimmed gray beard. He forced a jagged smile when he saw us.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he croaked. “I’ll fetch my coat and meet you around back.”

We sloshed around the farmhouse, shouldering our tools while avoiding potholes and frozen manure. Bentley was leaning against a decrepit, chipped white fence, sipping something from a dented tin cup with shaking hands.

“It’s a bit of a hike, lads. My apologies.”

“Just lead the way,” Stoker broke in impatiently.

The air seemed oddly thick for a brisk January day. The field was a ghastly grayish white, meeting the sky without a clear boundary; its perimeter was marked only by a patch of crooked hemlocks. Bentley kept his head pointed low, never making eye contact with the forest.

His wheeze suddenly broke the silence. “Beyond those first trees. That’s where the mounds rest.”

Then I saw them. Like scattered earthen cancers, the mounds lay in wait. Bentley led us to the largest one of the bunch.

“This is the one we took a stab at. I’m going to stay off to the side and let you gentlemen work.” He scrunched his face and shuffled a few feet away from the mound, mumbling something about the stones.

We began inspecting where Bentley had initially dug. It was just as he had described to Stoker. The stone was oddly smooth, and the meeting of the slabs formed geometrically sound right angles. The rock had a strange, reddish hue; though unmistakably limestone, the color was unlike any I had seen upon any similar material. I then felt a thought snake its way into my

mind's interior. An indistinct shift—as if I was no longer alone. The notion wasn't an image, but a pressure. I began to lose my balance when Stoker's voice jolted me from my trance.

“Hand me the sledge and chisel, Mick.”

I shook my head and winced. “Here.”

Stoker reached behind his back without breaking his gaze. I imagined the cold bite of the chisel in Stoker's weathered hand.

First strike. Nothing. Second strike. Nothing. Then, it happened. The slab split along unseen ridges all at once, breaking into deliberate shapes at its points of failure. The breath of ancient acidity struck us. We stood there, stunned and processing, until Stoker looked at me. He held up a flashlight and smiled somberly.

Stoker was the first to descend. The opening was large enough that we could enter without crouching. I began choking as the flashlight cut through a cloud of primeval dust, the particles flaring white in the beam and bleaching my vision. This seemed to have no effect on Stoker, who soldiered forward, leaving me swatting and tearing at the dust as I coughed uncontrollably. I stumbled forward until my outstretched arm struck something hard. I instinctively grasped it, but there was too much dust in my tear-blurred eyes to see what it was. The object was coarse and enormous. As I continued trying to understand the form by feel, the dust began to settle.

“Stoker, over here,” I said, unable to keep the edge from my voice. “I need your light.”

When the light shone over the object, the first thing I noticed was its ivory curvature. My eyes focused upon the contour—bending upward beyond any reasonable proportion, making six points, unevenly spaced. The surface beneath was worn smooth, not by tools, but by pressure applied repeatedly, over an immeasurable span. To think of that hideous thing as a foot would

have required accepting what it was attached to—a horridly elongated limb. To accept the limb meant substantiating the body that followed.

The beam climbed, revealing an utter absence of expected dimensions—a length that transcended the limits of any known frame. The arches were too large to be human, with gnarled ridges that jutted at impossible angles. My mind raced through every possibility, rejecting them all.

Sitting atop the terminus of the massive frame, the skull lay unscathed. The scale of it rendered the word almost meaningless. I knew it was a skull; there was no terror in that knowledge, but its proportions stretched in a way that ate at the foundations of my rationality. The posterior mass extended so far beyond the frontal plate that, even accounting for its immense size, the imbalance gave the structure the aspect of a swelling tumor imposed upon the face.

“What the hell are we looking at, Mick?” Stoker’s question seeped through clenched teeth.

I opened my mouth and realized that acknowledging the thing in words would be my final mental straw. I stumbled back out of the chasm, Stoker’s question hanging like a verdict without appeal.

At first, Stoker tried to argue with me when I asked to leave the tomb, but when he saw my shaking frame, he quickly conceded. It took both men to help me back to the farmhouse. There, Bentley ushered us to a cluttered kitchen table.

“I..I’ll fetch some coffee,” he stammered.

After a few minutes of silence, he teetered back, clutching three chipped mugs of soot-black coffee.

“Have you told anyone about this?” Stoker’s question sliced the air like a machete.

Bentley flinched, rattling the mugs and spilling a few drops on the table.

“The giant?” The word curdled as soon as it left his cracked lips. He clumsily handed me a mug, setting another on the table by Stoker. “I dreamt something was down there,” he said.

“The word followed me into waking. I...I don’t know why I called it that just now.” He stared at the table and began picking at a scab on the back of his hand.

“The mounds...did you tell anyone of the mounds before contacting us, Bentley?”

Stoker’s tone seemed to be an attempt at mitigating the edge. He measured Bentley with a trace of pity.

“A... a number of weeks ago, I think. I think I was with friends...colleagues. We were drinking at Clandy’s Pub after a work week.”

“What did you tell them?” Stoker’s gaze narrowed. Leaning forward, he lowered his voice. “Bentley, I’m not asking because I’m curious. I’m asking because you don’t seem to know when you started talking.”

“I just can’t remember well. I was carried home that night, on account of the uh...” He sheepishly eyed an empty bottle of bourbon. “Merry-making.”

“Go on.”

“I may have said something about what the land surveyor found. It was on my mind a lot. Made it hard to enjoy the night.”

I felt my hand start shaking, and I tried to steady it. I gingerly lifted the mug to my lips.

Stoker’s foot began to tap. “You don’t understand what you may have set in motion. Have you noticed anything unusual?”

“Wha...What are you getting at?” Bentley’s eyes were wide.

Stoker wasn't looking for answers; he was measuring what damage had been done. His foot abruptly stopped, and he spoke slowly, as if weighing the undertone of each statement. "Figures lingering too long. Cars following just to the point of concern. A sense you're being watched."

Bentley's mug collided with the floor. Ceramic pieces skittered in all directions. I felt the heat of the coffee droplets as they pelted my ankles.

"I...no. Nothing. You must leave now."

"Bentley, listen. You can't stay here."

"OUT! NOW!" Bentley shrieked.

#

"We need to be careful," Stoker said, his eyes fixed on the road. I shifted uncomfortably in the passenger's seat.

I understood the implication of what had just transpired. My years as an attorney had taught me that restraint evaporates the moment one assumes responsibility for containing something that should not be.

"Take me home," I said suddenly.

"Home?" Stoker seemed puzzled.

"Yes, home. I still am not sure what I saw, but I know what will result once men decide they are responsible for its containment. It is not our duty to remedy this tonight. Drive."

#

Despite the cool air, my skin stuck to my sheets like damp paper that night. The murkiness of the room assumed a palpable thickness. Every faint sound caused my mind to reel. The occasional car. The soft crackling of the wood stove two rooms down. My own blood

pumping through my skull. More than once, I thought I spotted a blackness amongst the dark—a mass shifting slowly, cognizantly, only to vanish into the uniform dark as my eyes focused.

This went on for hours until I fell into a fitful sleep. I dreamt I was back in that tomb. There were torches of red fire lining that thing's resting place. My dream-state form lurched forward, urged by dozens of unseen hands. I stood at the foot of the abomination, the scream of blinding static ripping through my eardrums. Drums pounded from some otherworldly depths. As the sound crescendoed, I felt my legs buckle and I fell to my knees. I suddenly became horribly aware of what I was doing.

I was worshiping.

I awoke to the smell of my own sweat. My skin felt clammy, as if covered in a thin film of mucus. I then noticed an abject wetness and the unmistakable scent of urine. Embarrassed, I peeled myself from the bed and hobbled to the bathroom. After cleaning myself, I splashed cold water on my face, catching myself in the mirror. I was struck by the bags under my eyes. Throbbing, drooping, grim, and bearing an unpleasant resemblance to Bentley's. I tried to reconcile what had just happened, but gave up nearly as soon as I started, falling on the notion that it was just a bad dream. I reached down to turn on the cold water and wash my face when I noticed deep bruising on my forearms. To my horror, I found spots of bruising all over my arms and shoulders, wrapping around my limbs. This was more than I could justifiably account for, and I hurriedly reassured myself that I must have fallen out of bed in the night. I threw on my cleanest dirty long-sleeved shirt and made my way downstairs, resolved to resume my ordinary life.

#

In the weeks that followed, I thrust myself into my work, mistaking that comfortable familiarity with healing. Twelve-hour days. Working through lunches. I sought out cases with the most tangled fact patterns, and with every case closed, I took on three more. I lived for the short reprieve that followed each success.

But with each passing success surged a deeper compulsion to do more. This went on for weeks before I noticed my first omission. Up until this juncture, I had been ahead of schedule with all legal paperwork. I made deadlines weeks in advance. However, as I sat at my desk one afternoon, I abruptly became aware that I had not sent out a defendant letter for one of my cases, and the statute was rapidly approaching. I hurriedly drafted the appropriate document and mailed it out; no one had noticed.

But I did.

The mental slips gradually became more prevalent, most of which I only noticed in hindsight. Small things at first. I caught myself misdating documents. One letter to a police department, for instance, I had dated to the year 1949.

On another occasion, I looked up from my desk and found that nearly an hour had passed. The clock insisted on it. I tried to recall what I had been working on, but nothing came to mind. All of these instances I explained away as lapses in focus. I blamed myself for staying up too late reading and for not sleeping enough. I vowed to tighten the reins of my life.

#

One night, I was working particularly late. An important trial was on the horizon, and I had to put the final touches on my opening argument. At that point in the night, the consistent barrage of coffee I had consumed began to have an opposite effect. I flipped on the radio to enliven my spirits. The dial greeted me with static, not entirely unfamiliar. I fiddled with the

instrument, assuming that the channel was out of range. The interference persisted. I continued tinkering until I noticed what was contained in the crackle, or, rather, the aural shape of it. There, shouldered within the sea of jagged noise, was a barely-perceptible rhythm—consistent and deep. I leaned in closer, only to shake my head and blame the hour. That incident did not trouble me at that time.

It was only later that I began to notice the same static elsewhere.

In the subsequent days, it slipped into the fringe of every moment. As I drove home from work, it poured from the radio without warning. I heard it at the periphery of the television channels at home. It bled into my dreams. The purple bags under my eyes grew puffier, and my eyelids drooped further, exposing the blood-red underlining. More than once, I awoke in a cold, sticky sweat, having knelt again before that unnamed thing. With each recurrence, the sound of drums and electrical humming grew louder.

#

I was on my way to an early-morning court appearance when I became aware that the vehicle behind me had followed me through the past five turns. It was a nondescript, black Ford with darkened windows, not tailing me, but still close enough to raise concern. I reminded myself that repetition alone does not imply intent, still, the hairs on my neck stood on end until I reached the courthouse. The Ford continued straight. Twice I saw it outside my house, driving slowly.

Later that week, I sat alone at my desk eating a soggy turkey club I had packed the night before. The room suddenly contracted around me. Like the subject of an exhibit, I was seized with the notion that my privacy was extinct. The swell of radio interference swept over me. I

thought I saw a dark figure in the corner of my eye and snapped my head to the left to meet it, but as soon as I did so, it disappeared.

Again, I forced my mind to the here and now. I would not let myself linger on what I could not test. I had to take my thoughts captive. Stricter diligence was the only option.

I began to adjust my routine slightly, nothing deliberate enough to raise concern. I moved my desk so that I faced the wall, rather than the room. I found myself closing my office door, although I could not remember ever giving it any thought historically. I began avoiding windows, unsettled by the thought that they framed my person, rather than sheltered it. All of these idiosyncrasies, I had convinced myself were conducive to attaining sustainable focus. I felt that I was gaining ground in the fight for control over my life.

#

After a few weeks of this, the partner of the firm called me into his office.

Ray Overton was a strict, imposing, and unemotional man. He had jet black hair, always slicked back in impeccable order. When I entered his office, he sat at his desk, puffing away at a thick Cuban.

“Mick, take a seat. I am going to cut straight to the point.”

I hesitantly pulled back a heavy chair—red velvet cushions framed with mahogany-finished wood.

“Mick, I like you. You have been a reliable trial attorney for as long as I’ve known you. Now, it is not my job to pry into my employees’ personal lives, unless, of course, their personal lives begin affecting them here,” he made a sweeping gesture at the surrounding room. “You’ve been here, what, eight years?”

I nodded, though I was no longer looking at him.

In the darkened corner behind his desk, where the light from the window failed to reach, something stood that had not been there a moment before. It was not a figure in a conventional sense. It had no defined edges, only a sort of density, as if a portion of the room's air had accumulated into a blackened mass, refusing illumination. Ray continued to speak, but his voice was swallowed by the sound of electrical humming, now nearly deafening.

My breath grew shallow. I felt a sense of heat wrap around the base of my neck. "Mick."

Ray's voice was distant, barely noticeable. My attention was consumed.

"Mick."

Slightly louder now.

"Mick!" Ray roared.

I rubbed my eyes and tried to refocus.

"Mr. Overton," I croaked, gulping down a bit of stomach acid that had reflexively risen.

"Yes?"

As my mind raced for the right words, I felt my gaze being pulled back to the shadow.

Ray followed the path of my stare with me. Turning slightly, he raised an eyebrow, then returned his focus to me. His expression resumed its regular piercing stare, but his posture seemed tighter.

"Son, are you sleeping?"

The question struck me with surprising force. I opened my mouth to respond, but my tongue thickened. The howl of static pierced me, filling the spaces behind my eyes and snuffing out my thoughts before they reached my lips. When I spoke, the words sounded garbled, as if filtered through cotton swabs.

"I...I do...I try to. When I can, I...sir." I clenched my teeth. Trying to keep my eyes on my boss.

“I don’t think you’re listening to a word I’m saying.” Ray spoke with restrained anger. He studied me in silence for a brief second.

At that moment, the hum began to fade until it nearly melted into the background. I noticed the steady ticking of the ornate, gothic, grandfather clock in the corner. When I turned my head back to Ray, the shadow had vanished.

Ray leaned back in his chair and chewed on his cigar after plopping a hefty ashen tip in a saucer. “I’m gonna cut to the chase. Look, I’ve received several complaints about you. You are withdrawn in the office, constantly muttering things to yourself. It is making people uncomfortable to work with you. Beyond that, you’re missing deadlines. You’re overlooking material defects in written documents. And you’re sloppy in court.”

I sat there, dumbfounded. I started opening my mouth, but Ray cut me off before a word left my lips.

“I am not asking for an explanation. It is painfully clear that you need a break,” he said stiffly. “I am placing you on administrative leave. Effective now.”

I nodded blankly. The order felt mechanical.

“I am also requiring you to speak to someone,” he added. “A physician, a specialist.”

The term *specialist* echoed distastefully.

“You will not step foot back into this office until you have made considerable improvement. Come back with a psychologist’s note stating that you are fit to work, but I will turn you away if you come back any earlier than two weeks.”

“Yessir,” I said breathlessly.

Ray slid a business card across the table. “Dr. Whitcombe is an old friend. If anyone can resolve your problems, he can.”

“Alright,” I said and stuffed the paper in my pocket.

“Good. Now, go home. Get some rest. You look like hell, Mick.”

I stood and turned to leave. As I walked out, I turned one last time to where I had seen the thing.

“Go!”

#

I turned the corner and slowly made my way down the hallway. The buzzing still droned faintly in my ears.

I felt an unfamiliar reluctance at the thought of going home. When I reached my car, I left it parked at its usual spot on the block by the firm. Making my way down the sidewalk, I had no clear destination in mind. My feet retraced the same steps I used to walk so often. Before my days hardened into the schedule I now kept, I often strolled this path after hours—my “reasoning walk,” I had called it.

I passed familiar storefronts and pasty men in business coats, the smell of cigarettes burning my nostrils.

Specialist...

The term continued to reverberate uncomfortably, seemingly replacing the hum of interference. I shook my head and stepped over a pothole.

What if Ray is right? What if this isn't merely a matter of focus?

The weight of months of exhaustion seemed to bear down upon me as soon as I let the thought take precedence.

What if I am not able to handle this?

I felt Ray's paper in my pocket and decided I would make an appointment in the morning. I had to at least do my due diligence. I was surprised to feel calmer after coming to this conclusion.

#

Dr. Harold A. Whitcombe, M.D.

Psychiatry & Nervous Disorders

Consulting Rooms

The sign swung on rusty chains dangling from a spear-like pole.

Dr. Whitcombe was a pleasant man with gentle features and a smile that seemed immediately genuine.

"Afternoon," he said, rising from his desk to shake my hand. "I understand you're one of Ray's guys. He's a good man; I'm glad he sent you to me. Please, take a seat."

I glanced around the room. The walls were lined with worn books upon mahogany shelves. Van Gogh's *Starry Night* hung above an unlit, stone mantle. Dr. Whitcombe poured me a glass of water from a pitcher. He handed it to me with a reassuring grin.

"Tell me," he said. "What brings you here today, son?"

I took a long sip from the glass, noting its coolness and nothing more. I collected my thoughts. When I am about to speak, the familiar static steps in from the outskirts of my mind. My thoughts scramble like dropped china. I shake my head, trying to break the spell.

Dr. Whitcombe continues to smile, absently polishing the face of his Bulova Clipper watch with a folded handkerchief.

The room begins to shrink at a dizzying rate. I attempt to fix my eyes upon the doctor, hoping that doing so will ground me. This seems to quell the disarray, though the pressure remains.

“I...I am not entirely sure, sir. I thought that I have simply lacked focus, but now I am not so sure,” my voice sounds weak, tinny. From there, everything I kept tucked away comes bubbling forth at once. I begin to recount the past events: Stoker, Bentley, the farm.

Dr. Whitcombe gently raises a hand. “You do not need to delve into particulars. The colleague, the farm, the landowner. They tend to arrive together.”

“Together?” I didn’t understand.

Dr. Whitcombe nods. “What you’re experiencing isn’t uncommon in men under sustained stress. Particularly with men accustomed to imposing order upon complex sets of facts. The mind has a way of externalizing pressure when it exceeds its own internal capacity.”

The static begins to swell again. As if in protest.

“Are you saying what I’ve seen isn’t real? Stoker and Bentley...”

“Are functional outputs,” Dr. Whitcombe finishes my sentence for me. “Your mind had no place to go with its pressure, so it built a world to contain it.”

The room contorts. The interference surges. I cling to his words like a desperate castaway.

Dr. Whitcombe continues to polish his watch. “There is a diagnosis for this sort of thing, Mick,” the air of comfortability remains constant in his voice. “And a place we’re going to send you to get this sorted out.” He pauses, then adds gently, “You’ll find it easier once you stop dreaming of the drums.”

I stare at him for a brief second. I could not recall mentioning the sound.

My eyes suddenly roll back into the chasm of my head. At first, I see nothing, then objects begin taking shape amongst the blackness.

I am there again. Kneeling.

I feel the thing's presence looming above. Only, it is different now. Still ancient, but more palpable. The drums mimic the frantic beat of my own heart, wrapped in endless static, filling in the spaces. My blood rushes through my head like a swelling balloon. My hands shake. My sweat drips. I feel an insatiable urge to look up. I try to fight the compulsion, but my head begins to rise on its own.

The sudden touch of four merciful hands pulls me back into Dr. Whitcombe's office. I lean back, letting my weight ease into their grasp. The figures wear pressed white cotton uniforms, buttoned high at the collar, with sleeves rolled to the forearm, and neutral expressions. I hear Dr. Whitcombe's voice, slightly more hollow now.

"These are friends, Mick. They're taking you somewhere you'll be comfortable."

The men in white lead me to a gurney. I do not resist. As they wheel me away, I feel an ease wash upon my face, accepting what I didn't realize I wanted so badly—a diagnosis.