

# The Other Sort of Monster

By BT Smith

The hour drew near. It was ten minutes passed eleven and the cusp of midnight weighed heavy on his shoulders. The shoulders of Trevor Lalayne. As he sat, with his hands on his head, he thought only of that day. Drawing a picture from his pocket, he ran a beaten calloused finger of the black and white image of a little boy in slacks and a fine suit holding the arm of a woman in a blue dress. Both were smiling, embraced in the moment, a day at the local fair in New York. Embraced by popcorn, the local fair games, the dart game with the balloons, the strong man hammer on the beam to see if you were Hercules or a Girly Boy.

Trevor put the picture back into his coat. His mind couldn't slow down. Like a raging river with not end, no outlet just a turbine that never ends just feeds into itself with more of the same ruminating and protracted misery.

I should have been there. I could've done something. I could've saved them.

The usual thoughts. The thoughts of a guilty man. But as Trevor sat ruminating over his past, he should've been focusing on the people around him. Some would call them acquaintances, but strangers is more like it.

Flynn, the shoemaker and shoeshiner. Only 17 years old, Flynn had spent the last three years of his life, shining shoes on the corner to the five points of New York. Flynn shines the shoes of locals, of government men and even the Irish. A shy quiet boy with little conviction, his physical self is all but a reflection of his nature: He is bony, with a gaunt, submissive face and eyes that are wide and sallow with stress from an everyday life of uncertainty.

Then there is the woman, the ugly girl. The mic with a mauled face. Alicia Macree, an Irish peasant who worked as a prostitute in the five points since she was twelve years old. Somewhere around the age of fifteen, a jon-- some say a government man of the Tweed variety-- took a cutthroat razor and carved up her face real fine. The poor girl is beautiful doll. A perfect doll with rosy, baby smooth cheeks, curled eye lashes that trail down to striking green eyes, with a pair of supple lips of a Greek statuesque variety. All that perfection and a stack of scars from the tip of her scalp, just under her fluffy brown bangs, to her mouth and those supple lips only marred by the one inch by one inch patch of skin carved out on the left side of her face, revealing a naked jaw of clenched teeth and pink gums. Like an exhibit that a coroner

would create, the rectangular graft is the imperfection, the heel to a face of Achillian beauty.

There are others. The prince as the Ringmaster calls him. The poor popper, whose diapers consisted of the Sunday times, and whose milk was water and white glue. There's the mistress. The sexual object of who knew how many Robber Barons, Tweed men and any man with half a dollar. A woman of her beauty's destructiveness, lost among mirrors without a voice to speak. The Ringmaster calls her the Quiet woman.

Who is this Ringmaster?

Trevor Lalayne would say he was the devil. The manifestation of the morning star himself. But really he didn't know. He was a mask maker. Trevor owned one of these masks. As he sat ruminating about his past, he couldn't help but think of the mask. A brown sack with a small rope tied around the throat portion. When he put it on he was blind. When he put it on he could smell the hemp fabric the mask was stitched from, the woody smell that sucked deep into his nose. And as he tightened the rope around the throat of the mask-- his throat-- he couldn't breathe at all. But that was the point.

Trevor dismissed the thought from his mind. He stood up and walked to the fireplace, next to the shoemaker. The shoemaker, even after all this, all this chaos was still a timid wrench. He didn't bother a glance, he shrunk and pretended to stare at the fire. In a way, Trevor couldn't blame him.

The door to the study opened and the Ringmaster's servant-- the strange tall man, Tibolt-- walked in. He glanced across the room at each and every face, at the motley crew of souls and smiled. It was an odd smile coming from an odd face. Tibolt was bald, none of his features were particularly sharp or outstanding except for his eyes. He had the eyes that men see in their sleep, the eyes of a dead relative, who comes like a harbinger imploring change or death. His eyes implored something. Not change, no kind of message, the small stilted gray orbs offered only unease and a lifeless coldness.

"You've all come." His smile deepened and under the orange glow of the fireplace it looked predatory.

The faces turned. The shoemaker offered a timid glance then turned eyes. The ugly girl, with a blank face deceived by the gaping patch that offered a smile of its own. The popper. The mistress. And Trevor with a fierce stare of his own.

Trevor hated this man Tibolt. The man had done nothing to deserve the hate but that wasn't the point. The hate was more natural, more instinctual such as when two polar forces come too close and feel the sting of aversion like the heat from a growing fire.

Tibolt glanced at Trevor and his eyes widened. "Would you like to be the first tonight, Mr. Lalayne?" He said, his voice devoid of emotion and even with it's eloquence and fluid tonality it came off like the

whisper of a snake.

Trevor shook his head. A snake. Tibolt had venom. That was a given.

Trevor stood up, he felt the sweat from his back already heavy and sticking to his shirt. "Yes, I would like that."

"Terrific, come with me."

The tall man Tibolt lead Trevor deeper into the manor. The usual rooms, the endless oak doors and fine tapestry, draped with a thickening darkness as if in response as to what awaited. Tibolt walked with a rigid perfection, each step calculated, and weighted just the same as the last one. He was a strange man, Trevor thought to himself. A man that even though kept quiet and stood in the shadows as inconspicuously as possible still resonated with a strange, disquieting power. Trevor couldn't stop thinking about this man. And as he walked, the darkness of the eleventh hour all around and the silence of the night only marked by the faint brushing of tree branches against the many arched windows, lead him to the thought of what it would be like if he had to kill this man.

The path to the Ringmaster's door ended with a staircase. A winding rigid, iron staircase that lead up three more floors to one solid wooden door. Tibolt used a key around his neck and without any jiggling of the doorknob, turned the key, releasing the lock and opened the large wooden door to the Ringmaster's chamber. He stood by the door, aside with the same smile on his face.

"You lead."

Trevor walked passed him into the Ringmaster's chamber. No matter how many times he saw the chamber, it always struck him with a fear he could not explain. Like the aversion to Tibolt, this room, with it's Renaissance era paintings of Michelangelo, and Petrarch, paintings of Dante meeting with the ghastly figure of Virgil, of a great angel burning and beaten falling from the heaven's with wings not of feathers but like that of a bat, twisted and odd, struck Trevor with a cold fear. This room with a large fireplace, that always burned, crackled and filled the dark chamber with the light of hell. And in it all, at the crux, the heart, were the masks-- six masks displayed on six dummy heads in a row-- now under the shadow of the fireplaces light, distorted and hideous like the wearer's below.

"Mr. Lalayne." A dark frail figure said.

Trevor turned sharply, looking for the Ringmaster. He was usually seated at the center of the room near the masks, near his precious creations, but he was standing, was distant and away hidden in a corner outside of the fireplaces orange cone of light.

"Mr. Gusteau--"

Before he could finish, Tibolt, was on him. He fought, managed a flailing punch, but before he could regain his composure he was already on the floor and he was bleeding. He was bleeding bad.

Trevor screamed. Not of fear, but of pain. His arm was twisted behind, felt broken, and the large gaunt knee of the tall man was buried in his back. He tasted warm blood, it was his broken nose, and the lightning bolt from Zeus himself, must have been the clenched fist of the tall man. The tall man, with every bit of his weight pressed on Trevor, let out a quick snake like breath.

"I apologize, Mr. Lalayne." The old Ringmaster said. He walked out from his dark corner, his cane a step ahead guiding his path. "But this is necessity of intuition."

Trevor let out another painful scream, tried to move but met with a jolt of a pain and stopped. "What... Gusteau what is this?"

Tibolt removed the knife from Trevor's waist. The knife that had been so carefully tucked under his tunic in a leather sheath.

"You wished to take my life."

Tibolt threw the knife aside. He jerked Trevor's arm, and smiled when he heard another scream.

"This has to end." Trevor said

"And what do you mean?"

"Whatever you gave us...these masks..." He said his words muffled by the carpet pushed against his face. "It's all becoming... real."

"Real?"

Trevor screamed as Tibolt twisted his arm. "Yes, you bastard, you know exactly what I'm talking about!"

The Ringmaster, an old man of what age, a man with a long flowing white and gray beard, a wrinkled face like aged leather and small pair of blue eyes, laughed. He was dressed in a white tunic that hung from his skinny frame like excess skin and a pair of slacks that blended with the shade of blackness around him.

"None of it is real. What is real is that you have lost your composure Mr. Lalayne."

"Tell me I didn't...I didn't..."

"Kill the Tweed man." The old man said with a smile, and took another step toward Trevor. "What you did, is what happened. That man is as you left him."

Trevor's breath stopped. He thought of the previous night. When he had the mask on. The mask with the hemp fabric and the rope fastened around his neck. The mask that was more like the sack they put over

the head of a hangman so the hanged wouldn't curse him. The mask that turned him into the creature he knew of as only the Marauder.

"Why?"

The Ringmaster laughed. An aged gesture that sounded like sand was caught in his throat. "You may tell an endless amount of lies in your life. But a single lie to yourself, especially a lie of your own motivation, is the gravest."

Trevor twisted and was met by another violent jerk from Tibolt. He screamed. "No more riddles! No more riddles, old man!"

"You wanted to kill that man! The man who lit the fire."

"No! No! God no!" He said, but he was already thinking about the picture in his pocket. He was already thinking about rubbing his calloused fingers against the photo of his wife and son.

"You said it was all in our heads! It was all a phantasm of our own creation. You said I would be able to..."

"What? release the hate you had?" The old man said and shook his head. "For everyone else, for the shoemaker, for the princess, they were content with a fantasy. As long as the people three stories beneath had a release, they were content. You, you wanted murder from the start."

Trevor screamed again. This time it wasn't his arm.

The old man was just a few feet away from Trevor. He leaned down with a worn groan. "You wanted to kill that man. You wanted it from the start."

Trevor didn't say anything. He cried hard, the saliva, frothed at his lips. He realized though, that everything this old man was saying was right. He had wanted to kill the Tweed man. The dirty politician who had tried on multiple occasions to close down the housing building Trevor and his family called home. The man who had personally threatened Trevor's wife, then when confronted by Trevor, was told that a nothing immigrant like himself would be hung for assaulting a government man. Trevor didn't listen. He never listened.

"What do you want? What do you want!?"

The Ringmaster smiled. "I have lived far too long to {i>want{/i} anything. Wanting is but a passive wish. It's the need that dictate our lives, and truly our choices. And so I have found, that with my condition, I need assistance in order to maintain this life. I need another like Tibolt, another, someone like you. Someone to aid me against those who would seek my end."

Tibolt released Trevor's arm. Trevor shot out quickly from Tibolt's grip, and got to his feet, clutched

his arm and looked at the tall man. Tibolt's face was blank, except for that same smile. That and those cold gray eyes.

"Will you help me?"

Trevor clutched his arm, the pain faded like the echo of a siren in his ears. "With... what?" He said and caught a breath. "With what?"

The Ringmaster smiled and walked around the dark room. Each of his steps frail and offset by the cane that held him.

"You want me to wear the mask? Again?"

The Ringmaster laughed, shook his head. "No. Not at all." He coughed and cleared his throat making his way to the masks displayed near the fireplace and his usual padded chair. He reached out and grabbed the mask, the mask made from coarse brown hemp fabric and a knotted rope that dangled from the neck, and pulled it off the head of the dummy. He threw it into the fireplace, the brown fabric burned up from the edges in and curled into itself like a dead spider.

"You don't need it anymore. You, Mr. Lalayne, are something quite different. A whole other sort of monster." The old man said, the orange licks of fire glowed in his eyes.

Tibolt appeared with an ax in his hand, the tall man, disappearing and reappearing with the lithe of a wraith.

"They came for this fantasy. For a life, they could only wish of. I have given it to them." The Ringmaster stared, intent on the fire as the mask, now balled up into a black ball of char, near devoured by the fire, crackled. "Release them from the lie I have given them."

Trevor took the ax in his hand. It was an old, rusted fireman's ax, something the local volunteer department would get. But it was an ax regardless, and now, as he stood, realizing who he was without the lie of his own bias to cloud his eyes, he knew what he had to do.

He had to become the monster, he already was. The monster the Mexican American War had made him. The monster the death of his family had made him. The monster wearing that mask had made him.

Trevor walked to the heavy wooden door with the ax at his side. From behind he could hear the hums of the old man as he sat in his chair, recalling some French ballad and he could hear the rhythmic footsteps of Tibolt as he walked toward his master like a faithful dog.