

*A NOTE ON THE  
ATWOOD TRILOGY*

I graduated from high school in the small farming community of Atwood, Kansas, situated in Rawlins County in the northwestern part of the state. It is, in many respects, the ancestral home of my mother's family.

The text that you are about to read is excerpted from a long work that began to be developed in the late 1960s and in many respects it is still just a working draft. It is a work of fiction that is seasoned with the impressions of my youth. Some of the places described in this work are *real*, to some extent, though I have morphed them to suit my mythology, which I think is what this work is. Maybe it is my *Lord of the Rings*.

Some of the names of the characters may be names familiar to people of the Atwood, Kansas area, but there are no real persons depicted in this work. Any similarity between characters in this story and real life people, living or dead, is purely coincidental and completely unintended.

All of the characters depicted in this series are amalgams of any number of people I have known. No story contained herein is the story of any actual person I have ever known. Any sense that this is anything other than a work of fiction is purely the inference of the reader.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rick A. Allen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "A".

July 18, 2006

The following is an excerpt from

## City by the Lake

A Novel

By

Rick Alan Rice

In this chapter Bernie Horinek, a local contractor, has a strange encounter with a creature in Lenora Pears' woods.

(Autumn, 1965)

Bernie Horinek was lost in the feel of his saddle leather when the first cries of alarm barely pierced the early spring air and gently teased his ear. He looked at his little boy, who had been watching in silence as his daddy worked the soap into the fine grain of his riding tack. Bernie paused. "Did you hear that?" he asked the boy.

The little toe-headed kid had drifted into a fog of his own, watching the treatment. He just stared blankly at his father, no response at all.

Bernie peered out the open door of his garage, and thought how quiet the night was. There was no traffic moving along U.S. 36, which passed within one hundred feet of his house. To the north, the lake road, too, was without sound. He noticed the moisture in the air, casting a swirling aura around the streetlamps, and that the moths that danced in their lights were decreasing in number as the cool weather came. He could hear the occasional pinging of their wings against the glass of the blue lights, and the electrical hum of the feeding current. An almost unnoticeable breeze tickled the leaves in the trees across the dirt road running passed his front door. He thought the sound they made was brittle. They'd all be gone, soon. Autumn was upon them.

"What did you hear, Daddy?" asked the little boy, just catching up to the question. He sat on the garage steps, leading up to the back door.

Bernie straightened up out of his squatting position and gingerly walked to the open garage door and looked out into the night. His breath materialized in a crystalline fog, and the dampness in the air raised goose bumps on his forearms and neck. He cocked his head and concentrated, standing perfectly still.

Strangely, he didn't hear his son say, "What's wrong, Dad?" The sound he was listening for was in the distance – in the darkness, perhaps in the trees across the road. He waited for a moment, and then instinctively started walking toward that dark grove of twisted branches, not consciously aware of what he was doing.

His little boy, dressed for bed in long pajamas, watched curiously as his father started making his way out of the light of the garage, and into the darkness. A shiver came over him as he realized that something – he didn't know what but something – was happening. "Daddy!" he called out, then began following his father, confused and frightened, not knowing what was going on.

Bernie didn't hear the boy. He simply kept walking, his complete attention focused on the trees before him, drawing him like a magnet. He was expecting something, though he wasn't exactly sure of what.

"Daddy!" the little boy called out, following along uncertainly.

There was alarm growing in Bernie's mind – the sense that something was wrong in that tangled mass of branches and un-pruned limbs. It was this thorny fortress that protected old Lenora Pear from the outside world. Here she lived in eerie solitude, among a bramble of twisted vines and knotted limbs. "What is happening," Bernie asked himself. "What is happening to Lenora?"

Suddenly, just as Bernie reached the edge of the trees, a high-pitched scream cut like a knife through the cold air, filling his heart with the adrenaline of terror.

Across the road the little Horinek boy stopped cold in his tracks. His eyes were wide, his

mouth open.

Instinct had Bernie completely in its grip now, and he went crashing into the forest after the sound of the screams, snapping branches as he roared forth, the brambles tearing at his clothes and flesh. Leaves crunched beneath his heavy boots as he fought through the overgrown brush, his heart pounding, blood coursing through his veins, throbbing at his temples.

When he broke through to the clearing around Lenora's dilapidated little house, he stopped. Realization swept over him, the fact that he had come charging off on a rescue mission without knowing what he might have to face. Now he was there, and he could feel the evil all around him. He knew that it was somewhere near, and the thought that he did not know its exact nature piqued his imagination with fear and dread. He had rushed to action at an undefined noble impulse. At the edge of the dark clearing, he stood frozen.

The front door of Lenora's shack-like home was standing wide open, and the only light in the forest was that issuing forth from inside the house. Newspapers covering the windows glowed Halloween-like and orange, and terror was mounting, surreal and mean. Slowly, Bernie moved around the perimeter of the clearing, approaching the open door. There was no sound now, other than that of leaves and twigs snapping beneath his own weight. He knew, however, that there was something in there, behind that doorway with that strange witch-like old woman. And it was waiting in silence. Bernie could sense a presence, and in his heart he knew that whatever it was, it could feel him, too.

Slowly, he edged his way nearer and nearer the door, walking around it while walking toward it, moving to a position that might allow him to peer inside while still maintaining a margin of safety. He didn't want to be surprised. His heart was beating wildly, and he feared the unknown, knowing as he did that he was walking along its outer perimeters and at any time might be swept within. The voice of caution – his own voice – was screaming out to him from the furthest reaches of his mind, making him doubt his own courage. His sternum ached from the mallet pounding in his chest, and he could hardly fill his lungs with air. He could only hear his own strained breathing as he stopped ten feet to the front of the open door. He stood there, rigid with fright, not moving a muscle.

For what seemed an eternal moment, all sound was gone, and in that damnable instant Bernie knew the encounter was upon him.

A form flashed in the light of the door, and suddenly it was there, barreling full force into him, like a demon unleashed from the light of the underworld. The impact forced the air out of his body and sent him sprawling backwards in the fallen leaves. The beast, too, was knocked to the ground by the collision, but before Bernie could recover himself, the creature sprung to its feet, and by the moonlight Bernie caught a glimpse of an evil, yellow eye. The demon hunkered low to the ground, and seemed to sway before him for a moment, as if uncertain whether to attack or flee. Suddenly a snarl issued forth from the creature's mouth, a vicious warning to the man, lying prostrate on the ground before it, and by the light of the moon Bernie could see its terrible incisors. The beast lunged at him once, and then drew back. Raising its head toward the stars, it let out a blood chilling cry, an unearthly shriek filled with madness and insanity. It snarled once more at Bernie, and then bound away into the trees and out of sight, disappearing into the night.

Bernie lay in the fallen leaves, stunned by what he had seen. His thoughts were spinning, dizzying forces swimming through his head, set off by his brief but terrifying encounter, unexpected beyond his wildest imaginings. He had rushed head-long into a battle to protect a strange little woman he knew only as a reclusive neighbor, and had done so without thought for what he might discover. Exactly what he had discovered was as yet unclear. He had only the knowledge that, whatever it had been, it had deposited him in a heap on the ground, and then had bolted away into the night...like an enraged animal, filled not with the impassioned violence of anger, but with a tortured anguish that seemed to be tearing lesions into its brain. What Bernie saw had been evil itself, its very face and form.

His energy drained, Bernie struggled to his feet, then thought of Lenora, who had apparently been trapped with that hideous demon. He moved short of breath to her open door. The feeling around him was different, now. There was no fear, the beast was gone.

Bernie found the old woman lying still on the dirt floor of her home. "A dirt floor," he mumbled to himself, as if at the moment it was important. In his state, an almost pathetic sense

of distance had come over him. He had never seen the inside of the bizarre hermitage before, and now he was actually there. Almost half-consciously, he surveyed the room. A pot-belly stove, part of its flue patched with sheet metal, glowed red-hot in one corner, and sitting on its stove surface, an ancient black tea pot bubbled like a cauldron. Pictures lined one wall, some with frames, others stuck into the wood with nails and tacks, hung randomly. They over-lapped each other, as if Lenora had used every possible available wall space to get them up and on display. Now they were old and yellowed, frayed around the edges, looking almost like museum pieces. The subjects, like their curator, were remnants of the past, and Bernie felt another sensation sweeping over him, telling him that they were all gone now, living only in the memory of this timid little woman.

Bernie bent down next to Lenora, lying motionless on the floor, but breathing regularly. Already bruises were becoming visible around her neck, the attacker having left the imprint of its hands on her flesh. Blood trickled from her nose, and there were gashes on her arms, apparently inflicted as she struggled to free herself from the creature's grasp.

Bernie carefully picked Lenora up and cradled her in his arms. She couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds.

She moaned a bit as Bernie lifted her. "Just relax," he told her, not sure that she could actually hear. "I'm going to get you some help." Then he carried her out of her house and on into the trees.

On the road, his little boy was still waiting for his father, who had so mysteriously charged off into the brush. When he saw him come back out, his eyes widened. "Wow!" he enthused. "That's the witch, Dad!"

"Go tell your Mom to call an ambulance," he told the boy. "I'll bring her on into the house."

"But dad!" The little boy began to protest.

"Hurry up now!" snapped Bernie.

The kid ran back toward his home, convinced that his father had flipped out, now that he

was carrying the weirdest person in town into their house. His eyes got even wider when his father brought the old woman inside and laid her on his bed. The little Horinek boy was already frightened by the dark. Now was he going to have to share his room with a witch?

"Did you call the hospital?" Bernie asked his wife.

"They are on their way," she said. "What happened?"

Bernie was kneeling on the bed, thinking there must be something he could do for the old woman. Lenora was unconscious, but still breathing evenly.

"I don't know," Bernie started to say. "There was something in the woods..." Then he looked at the young boy and stopped. The kid was obviously scared, and Bernie didn't want to frighten him further.

"Look, Bobby, everything is okay. Now, why don't you just go on to bed," said Bernie. "But, Dad!" the boy shrieked.

Bernie still wasn't straight enough in his thinking to realize that he had laid Lenora down upon the boy's bed. It was simply the first he had come upon when he carried her in through the garage. Now he realized the kid's horror at the thought that it was bed time.

"Well, go crawl in with your brother," said Bernie. "And don't wake him up!"

The kid wasn't gone thirty seconds before his little brother showed up at the door, along with their little sister.

"Bobby says there's a witch in his room!" cried the little boy.

At that moment there came a knock on the garage door, and a voice called out – "Bernie, are you in there?" It was Sheriff Beims.

"I'll get the kids to bed, you can talk to Pete," said Mrs. Horinek, dragging the kids off down the hall. Bernie could hear her trying to explain that the old woman in Bobby's bedroom was not a witch.

Along with Pete Beims were Doc Henneberger and two locals who were on-call for emergency situations at the hospital.

Henneberger pushed his way into the bedroom and moved to Lenora's side. "How long has she been unconscious?" he asked Bernie, as he pulled back her eye-lids to check her pupils. "Don't know for sure," said Bernie. "I found her that way, maybe ten minutes ago."

"Did she seem to be breathing alright?" asked Henneberger?

"I think so, Doc," said Bernie.

"Well, I don't want to take any chances with her, so let's get her on up to the hospital where we can keep an eye on her," Henneberger said.

The attendants lifted Lenora onto a portable stretcher and loaded her into the back of their wagon, then drove the half-mile to the hospital, where the emergency staff was already on alert. Doc Henneberger got into his own car and followed along behind, leaving only Pete Beims to talk with Bernie Horinek about the incident.

"What happened here?" asked the old Sheriff.

Bernie could smell the traces of whiskey on the old man's breath, and could see the red veins bulging in his eyes. Pete had been called out late at night and was known to throw back a few before going to bed. Bernie sensed that he had caught him after the night-caps had already begun.

Bernie and Pete had walked outside when the ambulance crew loaded Lenora Pear, and Horinek was just about to tell his story when Marshall Kane squealed his tires around the corner coming off the highway and skidded to a stop in front of the Horinek home.

"Why don't you hold on a minute," instructed Pete to Bernie. "Bill will want to hear this."

"God damned radio!" Marshall Kane said as he flung the door open on his squad car. He got out and slammed the door hard enough to rattle the glass. "Hell, I'm lucky to know anything goin' on around here. Damned radio doesn't work and I never even heard a call. If I hadn't run in to the ambulance going up the hill and followed it to the hospital, I wouldn't be here now!" Kane was spitting mad, mostly because he hated having old man Beims beat him to the scene.

"Settle down, Bill," said Beims. "Bernie was just about to explain what went on here tonight, so

you're just in time."

"Oh, yeh?" said Kane. "Well what did go on here tonight? Henry told me they had old Lenora Pear in the truck, but didn't say much more."

"Why don't you just go ahead and tell us what you saw, Bernie," said Beims.

Bernie looked at Kane and Beims. "I'll tell you what I saw," he said, "but I don't think you're gonna believe me."

"Hell, I've wondered what the inside of this place looked like since I was a kid," Bill Kane said as he picked up an old tin cup off Lenora's stove and examined it.

Sheriff Beims grimaced. "Did it ever occur to you that we may want to check for fingerprints on some of this stuff?"

Kane put the cup back down like a scolded child. "I doubt that he had a cup of coffee while he was here," he countered, somewhat weakly.

Beims ignored him, concentrating instead on Bernie's story. "Okay, Bernie, can you show me where she was lying when you found her?"

"Yeh," said Bernie, gesturing through his explanation. "She was lying this way, with her head here..."

"Just draw us an outline in the dirt," Kane chimed in. "Here, use this," he said, handing Horinek his night stick.

Bernie traced out Lenora's form on the dirt floor of her home, just as he had found her. "That's fine," said Beims.

"Now, what we are going to want to do is put a police barricade around this whole area." The instructions were really meant for Marshall Kane. "We may as well include this whole stand of trees, north and south from the lake road to the highway, and east and west from Bernie's street to the back of John Chvatel's liquor store."

Barricade instructions given, Beims turned his attention back to Bernie. "Okay," he said, "now let's go back outside and work through this whole thing again."

"Okay," said Bernie, standing in the clearing outside Lenora Pear's door. "After I heard the sounds..."

"Wait, now," interrupted Marshall Kane. "What kind of sounds?"

Bernie had to think back into a moment that had seemed surreal in its time, and only vague now. "Let me see..." he tried to think. "They were like screams. No...first they were like shrieks...or a kind of a yelping sound. That's what I heard first. Then I walked over across the road, nearer the trees, and then I heard a scream! That's how it was. Then I guess I started running into the grove of trees."

"You don't remember?" asked Kane.

"Not very well," said Bernie. "It all happened..."

"So fast?" asked Kane.

"No, not really fast," said Bernie, struggling for some reference.

"It was just weird, is more like it. It just happened so fast."

Sheriff Beims was trying to help Bernie through the confusion. "Okay, so you ran through the trees until you came...to this spot?" he asked, walking to the approximate area where Bernie was attacked.

"Yeh, about there," said Bernie.

Beims had gathered some big rocks from around the perimeter of the house and was marking the fight scene with them. He placed one where Bernie agreed he had been attacked, and made a notation in a little notebook. "Okay," said Beims, "describe what happened then." Bernie shook his head as if trying to clear his mind. He drew in a deep breath and the exhaled. "I was standing here," he said, motioning with his hands and speaking in earnest. He wanted to get this right. Somewhere, out there in the night, he knew was that thing that had attacked him and Lenora Pear. He didn't want anyone else to have to face it – not on its own terms. If this testimony could help prevent that, then he wanted to do as best he could. "I couldn't hear any noise from outside, but I knew it was in there."

"Explain" said Bill Kane.

Bernie just shook his head, as if trying to shake off distraction. "I was standing here, and there was no sound. I was waiting...and there was light streaming out of the doorway. I can remember that – that there was this light. And then there was a figure of something in the door. I could only see its outline."

"Let me stop you there for a moment," said Sheriff Beims. "Can you recall just that image, Bernie? Can you describe what you saw in the doorway?"

"It was just an outline," said Bernie.

"How tall?" asked Beims.

Bernie shook his head as if he didn't know.

"God, I don't know. Five, six feet."

Beims walked over and stood in the doorway so that all Bernie could see of him was his outline, just as he had seen the outline of the creature just before it attacked him. "Now, Bernie, look at me and describe what you saw. Was it shorter? Taller? Heavier or thinner? Just try to remember."

Bernie looked at the outline of the Sheriff, backlit as he was in the doorway. His mind's eye, however, was seeing the events of an hour earlier. "I can see it now," Bernie began. "It was standing not quite as tall as you, but it was hunched over at the waist and its knees were bent a little." The image of the creature was flashing through his mind. "And it was more wiry, thinner than you by quite a bit. Long arms hanging down by its knees." A shiver ran through Bernie's body. "It seemed to sway back and forth a little as it stood there."

"You keep saying it! What is this bullshit?" Marshall Kane butted in.

"Shut up, Bill!" snapped Sheriff Beims. "Go on, Bernie, you're doing great. What else can you remember?"

Bernie squinted as he looked at the Sheriff, standing in the doorway. "He had hair that stood straight up on the top of his head." Bernie paused.

"What else, Bernie?" asked Beims.

Bernie shook his head and felt that cold shiver of fear again. "Then he charged me," he said.

"Okay, now just stay there, Bernie. I'm going to move toward you from the door, and you just try to remember anything that might be useful."

The Sheriff started at Bernie, and the movement took Horinek back in time once again. "He's coming after you, Bernie. Now, what do you see?" said Beims, walking toward Horinek. In that instant of reflection, Bernie clearly saw the creature that he had seen earlier in the evening and sweat broke through around his brow and temple. When Beims walked into him, so the two collided, Bernie fell to the ground and let out an agonizing cry of terror that shocked both Beims and Kane.

Bernie Horinek was crying. "Stay away! Stay away!"

Beims dropped to his side and grabbed his arm. "It's all right, Bernie! It's all right, just calm down."

Bernie pulled himself back together as quickly as he had come unglued. It was a show of manly dignity, for truth be known, he was summoning all his strength to fight off the terror. He looked up at the two lawmen, Kane and Beims. "It had long teeth and it had yellow eyes. I swear it did," said Bernie, his voice breaking as he spoke. "And it leered at me, and it growled like an animal." Bernie closed his eyes and he began to shake.

Pete Beims looked at Horinek, then up at Marshall Kane. "I think we better take him up to the hospital," said Beims.

"No!" snapped Horinek. "I'm alright. Really, I am."

Beims and Kane walked Bernie back to his house to make sure that he was stable. He looked like he had been through hell; in fact, he looked worse than had Lenora Pear. "Get a good night's rest," said Pete Beims, before leaving the Horinek home. "We'll need to talk more tomorrow."

Bernie's wife was waiting for him at the door. "My God, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, fine," he said. "Did you get the kids to bed?"

"I don't think they're asleep yet," she told him.

"I'll look in on them," said Bernie. "Why don't you go ahead and turn in."

The two younger Horinek children shared one bedroom, but tonight the three of them were all in one room together. Little Bobby was having doubts about his own room.

"Is the witch gone?" he asked his father.

Bernie, now well composed, knowing that he would have to calm his children, told him, "That was Lenora Pear, the lady who lives across the street. There aren't any such things as witches."

"Is she in my room?" the boy asked again.

"No, she's been taken to the hospital," said Bernie. "Now, you just get some sleep, okay?" Bernie looked over at the other two children, snuggled together in the other twin bed. "That goes for all of you now."

Bernie had just turned off the light and was closing the bedroom door when little Bobby asked, "Daddy, why did that boy do that to her?"

Bernie stopped. "What boy?" he asked.

"That boy that ran out of the woods when you went in there," said Bobby.

"The boy?" asked Bernie. "You saw a boy come out of the woods?"

"I think it was a boy," said Bobby. "He sure was weird."

Bernie just stared blankly at his little son for a moment, until the boy asked, "Daddy, are you okay?"

"Yeh, I'm fine," said Bernie. "You guys go to sleep now, you hear?"

As Bernie walked around the house, shutting off lights, he paused for a moment at the living room window to stare into the night and across the road into the grove of trees around Lenora Pear's house. He thought about the events of the evening that had started so peacefully,

starting with him conditioning his riding saddle. He could still smell the soap on his hands. He thought of Lenora Pear, now in the hospital, and he thought of that horrible thing he had encountered in the dark. Down the hall, he could hear the even breathing of his family members, now having drifted into restful sleep. He thought about Bobby and the boy in the woods. Most of all, he thought about himself. The question kept coming back to him.

"Are you okay, daddy?"

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