

*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.



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The following is an excerpt from

Marion Hotel

A Novel

By

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In this chapter the new arrival at the Marion Hotel, Celsus Faulkner himself, meets Reece Calkins, a man who will become key to Celsus as he battles against personal demons that are taking an entirely too corporeal form.

It was a week from the time Celsus checked into the Marion before anyone saw him again, and in that week he swore off everything that he had ever held as reason for participation with the world. His curtains stayed shut. He stopped shaving, stopped bathing, stopped changing clothes, and as he had the good fortune of occupying one of only three rooms in the Marion with a private bath, he also took the opportunity to not flush his toilet and to not air his room. Celsus was getting in touch with himself in ways that he had never done before. He was pushing the borders of decency, holed up in his rancid inner sanctum. It was self-imposed suffering that Celsus might have endured forever had it not been for Reece Calkins, who had a second sense for people who needed to be pestered out of the blues.

It was a Saturday night, and Josh and the boys were headed down to the band shell at the lake to listen to the Jimmy Dixon Orchestra play Glenn Miller. They weren't all going together: Josh was escorting his fiancé, while the rest of the Marion pirates – Cooper, MacDougal, Bennett, Vrbas, et al – were going stag. In those days a summer's evening on the shores of Lake Atwood could be pretty special. There were the big bands, jamming on the war tunes, sending their "good times ahead" message ahead across the waters and on into the little city, and

everywhere there were colored lights, strung around the band shell and over and around the cement slab that had been poured there for dancing. Hundreds of people drove in from surrounding counties to laugh, to mingle, and maybe take a midnight swim in the warm waters. Most nights the moon would reflect off the lake and bathe the countryside in a soft blue glow, the effect of which was seductive, almost magical. Even drunken brawlers from downtown tended to find themselves lost in the spell as they ventured across the highway to the water and the sound. There they would find their thoughts softened, shifted from immediate concerns to the soldiers abroad, and to the world cheering their war of decency; to the broken homes, the mothers waiting for sons that may or may not return; to the dead, the dying, the wounded and maimed; the shattered dreams lying motionless along the Carentan-Bayeux-Caen line, and to those left behind, moving vulnerably ahead through the home front, feeling unworthy of personal pain, battered also by the sound of Axis fire and the revelation of our allied response. They danced with the others, just like themselves, on the shorefront of Lake Atwood, a festive, lighted place on the dark plains.

The one person missing from the scene was Reece, who wasn't much for going out nights anymore. The others would try to get him to go, but never with much success. Reece liked it at the Marion. It had become his world.

After he'd helped Josh with his bowtie and sent him on his way, Reece took his violin and strolled on down the hallway to Room 26 where Celsus had taken residence. He propped himself up against the door and began to play a Gershwin tune:

*What'll I do when you
Are far away
And I am blue
What'll I do?*

Inside, Celsus heard the music as he lay upon his bed, staring up at the ceiling. At first he tried to ignore it, but the longer it went on the more it started to annoy him. When Reece added his singing to the refrain it made it impossible for Celsus to endure the racket, so he jumped out of bed and went to open the door.

"Good evening, Celsus," Reece said when Faulkner opened up.

"What in God's name are you doing, man? From in there I thought you were mistreating a cat."

"Just came to see if you were dead yet, Cels. Hadn't seen you for quite awhile and some of us have noticed a kind of an odor in the hall..."

Celsus reared back a bit. "I'm alive," he said, not altogether happily. "Now, if you will kindly fiddle elsewhere, preferably away from the building..."

"Wait a minute, now. Don't be such an old grump. I just came to see how you were doing," said Reece. "I hadn't really had a chance to welcome you, or say hello. Me and the other guys here, we sort of make do for each other, help out when we can, so I was gonna say we'd do the same for you. But you got to be a little more visible. I just came to see if you wouldn't like to do something. Maybe play some cards or something." Reece paused for a second. "We've met before, you know. I guess you don't remember. Probably for the best. You turned me down on a loan I tried to get to start a chicken farm a few years back."

Celsus raised his eyebrows. "I know who you are, though I don't remember the chicken thing. Turned you down, huh?"

"No hard feelings," said Reece. "Not now. I probably wouldn't have loaned me the money either."

Celsus glanced nervously at his barbarized room. "You want to come in, Mr. Reece?" "Don't mind if I do, but I ain't no Mr. Reece. Reece is my first name. I'm Mr. Calkins." Reece walked in and then stopped cold in his tracks. He looked around the room and took a sniff of the air. "You sure keep a nice place, Celsus. I always wondered how rich people live."

"Excuse the mess," said Celsus. "I haven't had any domestic help of any kind now for a week. I'm afraid I'm not too good with these things."

"I'd say some sort of adult study in home economics would do wonders for ya. Maybe you could sit in up at the high school."

Celsus looked serious as death. "I don't know any of those people up there anymore." Reece cleared off a place on the one chair in the room and sat down. The air was pungent, and

Reece wasn't shy about asking favors. "You think maybe we could open a window, Celsius. Little close in here."

While Celsius struggled to figure out how to air out the room, Reece did a quick inventory of the rubble lying around and about. There was an old pair of slippers without lining; about a dozen cigar butts in an old tarnished gold ash tray; a misplaced bowtie; some well thumbed copies of *Field & Stream*; a field of crumbled tissues; and an empty bottle of "Old Kentucky" Bourbon Whiskey.

"Celsius, lookee here. I didn't know you was a drinkin' man," Reece said, holding up the empty evidence.

Faulkner looked at Reece like he was subterranean, then quickly decided to ignore the whole thing. "Tell me, Reece. What is it you do for a living these days?" he said, remaining in his standing position over near the marginally opened window.

"Small jobs, mostly. I do a little plumbing, a little carpentry – sometimes work the hay fields and always work the harvest. Be working for Doc Henneberger this year, if we ever get the thing started. Be my fifth for him."

"And that gives you a good living, I suppose?" Celsius asked the question not to be rude, but because he had no idea what a handy man could make.

"I get by," said Reece. "What about you, Celsius. What the hell you doin' here, holed up in the Marion, when you got yourself a whole estate a stone's throw away?"

"I'm selling that house. You want to buy it?"

"Not unless I can make payments," said Reece. "Why you selling?"

"Too damned big," said Celsius. "Always been too big. I figured if I was going to spend my final years in a hotel, may as well be one with people in it."

Reece grinned. "Well that's just alright, Celsius. That's just alright."

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Celsus Faulkner had never liked that house on State Street. It was like a mausoleum, after his wife Sara died. It was like living in a huge oak crypt, being forever chained to her memory in death as he had been to her good sense and sociability in life. What joy and laughter the place had known had been hers, not his. And now that her voice was gone, so were the sounds, leaving only big, empty headroom. The silence was pronounced, and after years of listening to it by himself, Celsus had begun experiencing the symptoms of mental disorder.

It became apparent to him one night a year before he finally moved into the Marion. He was upstairs, in his drawing room above the den, when he first recognized the thing that had been gnawing at him for weeks. It had been there in the back of his mind, almost out of his conscious notice, but wearing away at him nevertheless. That night was the first he actually realized what it was. He was sitting at a small writing table wearing only underwear, working on his daily journal, when he suddenly felt a shiver rush through his entire being. The hairs at the back of his neck stood on end, and he stopped working. Slowly he turned in his chair and looked toward the entry to the little room, expecting to see someone there, but there was nothing. Celsus sat for a moment, just looking at the door. In his heart, he was expecting the worst. He was expecting to see someone – whoever it was who had been watching him, staring over his shoulder – suddenly come leaping out of the darkness toward him, grabbing him, doing God only knows what. Celsus felt that whatever transpired, it would be fatal, because he sensed death in the air, just waiting its time. He thought that he had visualized all the worst conceivable endings to his life, but this, he sensed, would be momentarily worse. This watcher from the dark recesses was a sure-hit hitter, he could somehow tell. At least the end would come soon. Previous events had all just left him changed, usually for the worse, if sometimes for the richer. But this was going to render all previous encounters inconsequential. He could feel that this was going to be the big one.

Celsus sat waiting for him, looking at the door, anticipating, knowing there was no hope. Then it had him by the throat, squeezing, its awful stench of breath laced hotly with carrion and

warm blood. From out of nowhere, without his seeing, the creature had him, for it was not, as Celsus had suspected, at all like the others. This was more than just an animal whose talon grip wrapped around his neck. This was creature beyond imagination that Celsus could not have suspected, though he thought he had seen them all. There was this one more that had launched its attack from nothingness and been on him before he was even aware.

It did not kill. Instead it bared its awful teeth and screamed the darkest scream he had ever heard. And it looked Celsus in the eye to let him know that what life he had left was not his, but on loan.

Then Celsus was just sitting there again, in his chair, watching the door, afraid of what he imagined might happen, frightened to wonder who the watcher might be.

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Sociability had never been Celsus' strong suit, and certainly isolation played a part in sending him over the edge. It was the most remarkable of his life's ironies that Celsus, the recluse, was deeply dependent upon having a close relationship in his life. His wife, Sara, had been his connection to the community in the early years. Just being "her's" had conferred a certain social acceptability upon him, for she was beloved in the community for work she had done in public welfare. A smallpox epidemic had swept through Kansas in 1928 and large parts of the population of Rawlins County were quarantined in specially created units. Sara Faulkner, who most people outside of Atwood had theretofore known only as the young wife of the young attorney, worked tirelessly in those quarantine huts, and people never forgot it. She came into her own that year, at least in the eyes of those who knew her, and for the next three after that she and Celsus were quite active on the Rawlins County social circuit. They became prominent. These were Celsus Faulkner's years of promise, when he was comfortable enough in unchallenged glory to be considered a future gubernatorial candidate. He had something of a reputation, at that time, as a populist, a man of the people. In the mid-1920s he had championed the cause of an Italian immigrant named Jack Pavorini, who had fallen in with gangsters and

been involved in a prizefight that had left another man dead. Celsus rode that case to prominence, so by 1930 he and Sara seemed to be on the brink of greatness. Then, at just the moment when their futures seemed most bright, disaster struck. For Celsus it would be the first of many devastating blows. Sara contracted spinal meningitis early in 1932, lay in bed throughout the year, and died just before Christmas.

That was when Celsus first started acting crazy, but then there was someone else who came along to prop him up and keep him going. This was a lady named Dolores Rey, who became his secretary, and who most people feel was the person responsible for keeping him in business. She carried him through his work days, keeping his affairs in order, his office open and his schedule organized. Some say she was also responsible, through her devotion to her boss, for turning Celsus into an opportunist and a vulture during the depression years. He went into the decade with every penny he had ever made, with virtually nothing in the way of investments or holdings, and when others were selling cheap Celsus was buying. Furthermore, as town attorney, he had sat upon a pretty perch, one that allowed him certain prescience when it came to buying and selling decisions – and there were a lot of those made over the next ten years. He had been well to do in 1932, but by the end of the decade he was flat wealthy. Beyond being viewed as overzealous in her admiration and devotion to Celsus, often making arrangements that padded his purse at the expense of others, Dolores Rey's reputation also suffered from gossip surrounding her and Celsus' personal relationship. There were rumors of intimate liaisons, though to most people these seemed unlikely. Celsus was completely disconnected from corporeal concerns by this time, or such was the evidence. Besides, Dolores Rey was a good fifteen years older than him and certainly beyond her seductive range. Still, stories such as these brought to final ruin Celsus' political aspirations before he ever entered his first campaign.

If Dolores hadn't owned him with her body, she certainly had control of him in other ways. When she died in 1942, Celsus' professional life went into complete arrest. Without Dolores there to tell him where to go and what to do, he was lost. There could be no replacement: at fifty-four, Celsus was already impossible to deal with. No one else would have suited him, and it is unlikely that anyone would have wanted to work for him anyway.

After that, Celsus was completely alone. The young lawyers – Clayton Davis, Matthew Merrill, Russell Forrester – had all done their time with him and struck out on their own. With this new competition, Celsus' practice went into decline, and with the absence of new clients came an absence of new faces, though there was one that appeared in that human void.

It was the one that drove Celsus Faulkner from his home.

"I've seen him, Celsus. I've seen him many times, but I still have trouble describing him. He's like a wolf, but he's more than an animal. He walks upright, like a man, but he can do anything, act anyway. He'll do anything to make your nightmare real. He senses your deepest fears and is the perfect mimic. The things that apply, the physical laws, in our world do not affect him in his. He may appear as any- thing or anyone he wishes. He may emerge out of solid objects and he may snake along the ground or fly like a bird. It's all within his range. The only thing that is consistent is that he lives on your certainty that things can never get better. He thrives on your lost dreams, and replaces them with himself. He is cruel and single-minded. And you're right – he's a sure hitter."

Celsus sat looking at Reece, absorbing his account of something he had hoped to be only the product of his own imagination.

"It's not just you, Cels. It's not me, either. It's the whole damned world. Two little people like us can't bring a thing like this into being. It takes despair and heartache on a larger scale. It takes a population full of it. It's decay that attracts him."

"How do you know all this?" said Celsus, with respect and caution.

Reece grinned. "Because I know him, Celsus. I know him intimately."

Celsus shivered. In his own mind's eye he could see it developing. Reece had lured him into close proximity, closer than anyone had gotten to Celsus in years. And it had been so magically simple, this incantation that fell over him unheard and unfelt and had him revealing his soul to this stranger. Then, in his mind, he heard the first warning cries, primitive and carnal, screaming that the horror was upon him.

Reece started to change.

Celsus felt a rush go through his body, and then he took a deep, quick breath and shook his head.

"You okay?" asked Reece. It didn't look to him that he was, sucking air like a beached whale, sitting on the edge of his mattress, belly hanging forth.

"I'm okay," said Celsus.

"Good," said Reece, "'cause he's right behind you."

Celsus' reaction was immediate. He leaped straight upward from his sitting position, spinning in mid-air like an aerial diver, then drilling back to earth like a huge corkscrew. He assumed a threatening stance – one he had probably been practicing for months, but did not yet have perfected. Fortunately, there was no enemy there.

At first, Celsus seemed relieved, then he realized that Reece was doing all he could to keep from busting a gut. "What in the hell do you think you are doing?" said Celsus with contempt. "Who do you think you are fooling with here? I'm an old man. I could have had a heart attack!"

"Oh, come on, Cels," said Reece, giggling. "You need to lighten up a bit. It's no wonder you're seeing things, what with acting so spooky all the time. Loosen up a little."

Celsus was not to be admonished, standing there in his boxer shorts, baggy undershirt and socks. "I recognized from the first that you were not a person to be trusted with personal information. I saw it from the first. What got me talking about all those other things, I don't know. I wish I hadn't..."

"Oh, Celsus. It's good that you did. Besides, with the kind of worries you're having a little chuckle might be the only thing that'll help..."
