

Monday 27th May

Miss Yu,

I hear that you've had the dubitable pleasure of receiving a letter from my niece, Lisa. As you know, she and her husband are staying with me at White Gate for a week or two while they visit friends back here in Blighty.

I must admit I was a little surprised by her views on John's death when she informed me about the letter she was writing you. Even for Lisa they're on another planet. She's told you, I understand, that my brother did not kill himself - at least, not in the usual sense of those words - but rather that he was killed by some dark force in his study that either drove him mad to the point of suicide or somehow animated his Colt and shot him itself.

Lisa, I'd like to remind you, is thirty-one years old. That's twenty-one years too old for this kind nonsense. Of course, the death of a parent can make anyone think and act oddly, and you'll have to believe me when I say that I plan to approach this subject with a little more sympathy and sensitivity than I'm usually given credit for. Even so, bullshit is bullshit, and I honestly believe I'll be doing the woman a kindness if I can dislodge this particular piece of bunkum from her brain. You won't be surprised if I suggest that I have a better understanding of the events surrounding my brother's suicide. After all, even if we dismiss personal beliefs, there remains the simple fact that I was there - here, that is, at White Gate - on the night in question, whereas Lisa was (thankfully, I think) some five and a half thousand miles away in California.

First, let's get this business of a supernatural force out the way. Lisa has identified as its source a mask known as the 'Hungry Corpse' that John and I collected in New Caledonia some twenty-five years ago. I'm not too surprised by this part of her theory - she's always been frightened by that mask, ever since John first showed it to her when she was a little girl back in the sixties. Reading her father's rather gothic retelling of the mask's acquisition, as I caught her doing the other day, will only have cemented in her impressionable mind the notion that this mask is some fountainhead of pungent tropical diabolism.

What can I say to this? I won't insult your intelligence by reminding you that magic isn't real. Stooping to such intellectual inanities would be beneath both of us. Instead, perhaps the best thing I can say is that the Hungry Corpse has remained in John's old study ever since his death, and at no other time in the intervening two decades has anything untoward happened at White Gate. That's a pretty poor showing for a malevolent being of supposedly unchecked powers, especially since this house is positively packed with lethal weapons, as you noted in your piece - take your pick from swords, knives, darts, ice picks and what have you. Hell, even a well-aimed throw of the Bigfoot cast would do the job nicely. And yet nothing.

Then we move on to Lisa's psychological arguments against John's death being a suicide. Once again I must contradict my niece. John may have been a rambunctious father, but you have to remember the old boy's situation in '73. His wife had just left him, taking Lisa - their only child - half way around the world with her. That just left me and John in White Gate, and I was obviously a poor substitution for his wife and daughter. Lisa seems to think, in that romantic way of hers, that John and Evelyn were going to reconcile, and maybe that she and her mother would move back to White Gate. I'm afraid that was never going to be the case. John was always a stubborn man, and once he made a decision he stuck to it, even if it caused him pain. I haven't told Lisa for fear of upsetting her, but the simple fact of the matter is that John had no plans to get back together with Evelyn. Now, when you're in a grand mood White Gate is a fine house to sit and think and cook and write. But it's a hell of a lonely place for a chap to rattle around in when he's in a less agreeable state of mind, I can tell you. On a dark day you don't need the help of any cursed mask to fill its rooms with ghosts and demons.

I'm rambling. My apologies. You mustn't think I faxed you purely to ensnare you in some tedious family dispute - there is, you'll be relieved to know, a point to this missive. Everything so far has been subjective, so let's start being objective: rather than endlessly debate the curse of the Hungry Corpse, I propose to exorcise it, once and for all.

I'm setting up an experiment of sorts to prove that the curse does not exist and that the mask is nothing more than breadfruit wood and hair. It will take place right here at White Gate this weekend. As part of this experiment I'll be inviting a few people together with relevant knowledge of the mask, and I trust you'll be there as a witness. Feel free to turn up any time this Saturday, 1st June, and be prepared to spend the night here. Bedding and breakfast provided, etc. etc. Together we can banish the demons from White Gate and finally let my brother rest in peace.

I look forward to seeing you there.

Yours,

Andrew Paris

P.S. It's a Kentrosaurus tooth, not a Stegosaurus, but I'll let that slide.