



HIDDEN FOLK

STRANGE STORIES

C.M. MULLER

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CHTHONIC MATTER | St. Paul, Minnesota

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VRANGR



BEFORE THE INHERITANCE, Arthur Speth had neither heard of Vrangr, North Dakota, nor of the great-aunt who authored the will. For reasons inexplicable, this mysterious relative had bequeathed both her house and a generous parcel of land. Included in the will was a handwritten note detailing how one might locate this peculiar-sounding locale; this would prove beneficial, for upon consulting the internet, Speth uncovered no mention of the place. Even the dusty old atlas he found stuffed in his closet proved discouraging. If the town did exist, cartographers had thought best not to include it.

There was no description of the house, but that it resided on nearly eight-hundred acres of land led Speth to envision a sizable and well-furnished abode. Details concerning Aunt Torgren were also absent, the wraithlike executor who delivered the news claiming to know nothing about her. Upon relaying the essential information, the rain-soaked figure had slithered back to whatever shadowy realm he called home, leaving Speth to wonder if the meeting had ever taken place. Were it not for the will—written in nearly illegible script, but legitimate-looking all the same—he would have figured it all to have been no more than a dream.

Since childhood Speth had been fascinated with history, particularly as it related to his own family, and had long assumed he had a handle on its major and minor figures, which made this supposed great-aunt such an enigma. He could not help but wonder if she had been excised from the family record. And what of Vrangr itself, what significance did it hold? For all Speth knew, it was the place where his ancestors had first settled after crossing the Atlantic, the place of origin as it were. But why had it never been mentioned in all these years? Desperate for answers, Speth consulted the family albums he had inherited upon his mother's passing and began systematically removing photos containing individuals he could not properly identify. Most of the images were thoroughly documented on back (in a variety of generational scripts, including his mother's), but none matched the name he sought.

Speth had not consulted the albums in years, but doing so made him remember how obsessed he had once been with the past. As a teen he had longed for a kind of alchemical absorption into these old black and white photos. Even now, nearing middle age, he still distrusted modernity—but he had accommodated himself to it, securing employment at the local library, where the past commingled with the present. His apartment was littered with books of a mostly historical nature, and during his free time he did little else but read and watch old movies. He would be the first to admit that his life had become directionless since his mother's death the previous year.

The mystery and lure of Vrangr lingered for the remainder of the day, but in the end Speth continued to have reservations about the will's authenticity. This, coupled with the idea of driving such a great distance (nine hours, by his calculation), made the entire proposition seem little more than a fool's errand. Then again, maybe things would become clearer in the days to come.

Before turning in for the night, Speth channel surfed until he arrived upon a delightful period-piece that in the end overwhelmed him with nostalgic joy.

HE SLEPT SOUNDLY that night, experiencing a dream wherein he glimpsed himself, or at least a past version of himself. While the countenance of this past-Speth was uncannily

similar, his manner of dress bespoke of a much earlier century. The man even sported infinity-shaped spectacles similar to those worn by the modern-day Speth. This individual sat in a rocking chair on the porch of a lavish farmhouse. Reposing at his side was a stately woman encumbered in a frilly white dress. She read from a palm-sized leather book as her pipe-smoking companion gazed directly at Speth as though waiting for him to speak. While the man indicated no sign of recognition, it was nevertheless an eerie feeling being stared at like that. In the front yard, a passel of wild but oddly silent children chased one another across the huge expanse. Speth longed to inch closer, in the hope of touring the interior of the house (or chatting with its owners), but he was locked to this one distant perspective for the remainder of the dream.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING he awoke with an impulse to flee. It was quarter to noon (this surprised Speth, for normally he was an early riser), so he frantically collected a few items and stuffed them into a small duffle bag. He phoned the library to inform the director he had taken ill and would therefore not be able to make his one o'clock shift. His voice was groggy, which only helped matters, and he managed to conclude the call in under twenty seconds.

While spontaneity had never been his strong suit, Speth embraced it now like a newfound book of wonders, and in less than half an hour he was driving by rote through the

streets of the city. Once he reached the interstate, he continued on a westerly route until he passed the dividing-line into North Dakota, wherein the landscape gradually leveled off to a vast and nearly featureless expanse. Speth's only companion, due to the unreliability of his radio antenna, was an 80s cassette tape, the only one in his collection that had not been mangled by the player. While he had high hopes of making the journey in a single day, he decided not to push his luck. His arrival would coincide with nightfall, and he had little interest in experiencing Vrangr (and his inheritance) in the dark. Therefore, with less than two-hundred miles remaining, Speth began searching for a motel. The one he eventually decided on was cheap and rundown, but it afforded him the rest and relaxation he required, even if the mattress was uncomfortable and the exterior vending machine expelled one flat soda after another. None of these inconveniences mattered in light of what awaited him.

The remainder of his evening was spent watching an old film on the room's television, an outdated set that presented the fictional world not in its intended black and white but a grainy viridescent that pained his eyes and spirit. He left the set on, for the sound worked perfectly, and merely shifted his focus to the papered wall above, attempting to visualize his inheritance and to resurrect the details of his dream.

HE AWOKE TO the disorientation invariably encountered

while sleeping in new environs, but this time the sensation never fully cleared. Surveying the unknown room, he was struck by its meticulousness and antiquity. There were framed portraits of various individuals on the walls, and he examined each before venturing to the far window. From the opposite side looking in, he felt certain he resembled the images he had glimpsed; however, none of the children running about in the yard took notice. He turned from the window to again peruse the portraits, discovering to his delight that they had changed—each now featured Speth standing proudly before his inheritance.

THE DREAM HAD no small effect, for upon awakening the following morning Speth gathered his things and returned to the interstate as though he had never left. The way he saw it, his waking life was mere interlude to the dream; the long road ahead, a stepping stone to seeing its promise fulfilled. He cruised the interstate well above the posted speed limit, feeling alive for the first time since his mother's passing. He needn't worry about being ticketed, for he had yet to encounter a state trooper or any other traveler for that matter. It felt strange being the sole motorist, but he accepted it all without question.

At a little past noon, Speth glimpsed the first signpost for Vrangr. It was composed of wood that might have been erected a full century ago. Even the letters appeared chiseled. Veering

off the interstate, Speth pulled to the side of the road where he could again study his great-aunt's directions. He rolled the window down and felt the purity of the country air fill his lungs. Relieved to be so close to his destination, he continued ahead, and in less than three miles arrived at a familiar cross-roads—familiar because Aunt Torgren had written “thresher” near two intersecting lines on the map, and sure enough there sat the rusted-out implement in the corner of an empty field. Speth turned left, and within a quarter of a mile entered a tightly meshed corridor of corn. After venturing along several more adjoining roads, he began to feel as though he had become trapped in a maize labyrinth, of the sort that fascinated him as a child. It was a disorienting feeling, but only in the sense of being unable to successfully retrace his route to the interstate. If he read the map correctly, Vrangr should only be a few miles distant, though he had yet to glimpse any telltale signs of a town; no church steeple rising above a copse of trees, no water tower, no opposing traffic or wandering souls. Nothing but corn and the dust kicked up by his vehicle, and a growing sense that he had been duped, that the entire enterprise was little more than a hoax.

Upon entering the supposedly final stretch of road, Speth came to an idling halt, wondering if he had followed the directions incorrectly. He contemplated retracing his route, and in doing so shifted his attention to the map on the passenger seat. It, however, was gone. Only a thin layering of

dust remained, the outline suggesting a single sheet of paper. Speth had a hard time believing in its disintegration but for the evidence. Without the map, finding his way back would prove challenging. Then again, maybe Vrangr was closer than he imagined. Perhaps all he need do was continue up this final road. Feeling faint, Speth stepped outside to stretch and get some fresh air. He glanced across the way, shielding his eyes from the sun.

When his vision adjusted to the glare, he glimpsed the structure. At first he thought it a mirage, but the longer he stared the more distinct it became, until at last it materialized into a beautiful farmhouse. He closed his eyes, merely to confirm his mind wasn't playing tricks on him. Upon opening them, he discovered the truth of the matter. Contrary to his dream, the structure was as equally decayed as the Vrangr sign on the interstate.

Speth broke free of his paralysis and approached the overgrown drive leading to the porch. Considering the overall disrepair of the house, the windows remained intact and the front door appeared solid and functional. There was even a rocking chair on the porch, but Speth saw this as another detail mocking his dream. With each approaching step he longed for everything to vanish, longed to find himself in nothing more than an endless field of corn. Then again, he had not traveled all this way to come up empty-handed. Perhaps the interior would prove more bountiful. Speth stepped

onto the porch and, placing a hand on the rocker, recalled the children of his dream. He turned to examine the weedy expanse, displeased to discover nothing but his sun-battered vehicle.

Proceeding into the house, Speth tensed as the structure groaned under his shifting weight. For all he knew the mere opening of the door had started a chain reaction that would end with him being buried. Regardless, he continued forward, wandering from room to room on the first floor, encountering nothing but dust and the usual detritus of a long-abandoned dwelling. The only thing of substance was the fireplace, which still contained three charred logs and an ample layering of ash. As Speth ascended to the second floor, the creaking structure again put him on edge. By the time he reached the landing, he felt lightheaded and wanted nothing more to do with this so-called “inheritance.” Nevertheless, he made a thorough search of each room. Entering the last, he felt dismayed though unsurprised by its emptiness. He walked slowly to the window overlooking the front of the house and gazed out. The infinite plain of Vrangr extended before him, but his focus was drawn to the lone country road and the man who stood next to his vehicle, the man even now shading his eyes from the sun.

Panic swept through Speth and his only thought was to wonder if the man noticed him in the window. Just as he was about to raise a pale hand in greeting, the man turned and

slipped into his vehicle and rapidly drove away.

The figure in the window could do little more than watch the rising dust until it dissipated into thin air.

THE DUST CHILD



OLIVER HAD HIS first glimpse of the dust child two weeks after his mother started receiving treatments. Per his usual after-school routine, he peeked into the dim interior of her room, startled to discover a presence looming at her side. As the thing shifted its gaze toward his prying eyes, specks of dust began drifting from its ill-defined skull. Pushing the door wide, Oliver watched its slender body distort under the sudden influx of air and begin to rapidly dissipate. By the time he reached the bed to clasp his mother's hand, it was gone.

Most days after checking in on his mother—who at this

stage was still capable of taking care of herself, even though she rarely ventured from bed—Oliver would retreat to his room to read until his father returned from work. But on this particular occasion he remained at her side, figuring that doing so would prevent the dust child's return. In a way, it had brought him closer to her, encouraged a kindness and closeness that, since her physical change, he had avoided more often than not. The treatments had taken so much from her, and it pained him to witness her daily metamorphosis. Her hair had started falling out, and on most mornings he awoke to the sound of her crying in the bathroom as she showered.

But now Oliver found solace in her restful countenance. She had always been there for him, always made him feel loved, and he wanted nothing more than for things to return to the way they had been. As he began to cry, he tightened his grip on her hand, stroking its bony surface with his thumb. He glanced to the spot near the window where the dust child had been, mesmerized by the ever-shifting particles, curious and yet petrified to know their origin.

He must have been staring longer than he thought, for when he turned his attention back to his mother, he was startled to discover she had awoken and was studying his own features as though for the first time, as though he and the newborn he had once been were one and the same. She was smiling and he could not help but mimic the expression, believing she had miraculously overcome her sickness and was beginning to heal.

FROM THAT DAY onward, Oliver dusted his mother's room without fail every day after school.

And even though he knew it was impossible to remove each speck of dust, he did his best, often repeating the process two or three times to make certain the majority had been removed. It hadn't even occurred to him, until a few days in, that the floor, and in particular the space beneath the bed, hadn't been cleaned in months. The thought of all that dust collected in the carpet's fibers unnerved him as he walked its surface, and when he peeked beneath the bed and saw the dirt-like accumulation there, he felt sick to his stomach.

By week's end, however, Oliver began to realize the hopelessness of his efforts. As thorough as he had been, the dust seemed bound and determined to outwit his due diligence. He'd swipe one surface and move on to the next, only to look back and find that the dust had reaccumulated, giving the impression of month-long neglect. As he stared in disbelief, he could sense the dust child watching him from the shadows of the room, silently snickering and waiting for the appropriate moment to reappear, to force him into a corner and blow dust in his face.

"Ollie, what's going on in here?"

He turned to find his father standing in the doorway, his work tie loosened into an inverted noose. This had not been the first instance Oliver had lost track of time. Normally, reading was the culprit, but now it was the dust (or the task of

its removal) that swept time away. Without a word, he walked past his father to the end of the hall, far enough from the room so as not to disturb his resting mother. His father was quick to follow, asking if everything was okay.

“Just thought I’d do a little cleaning for Mom is all.”

His father smiled, ruffling his hair. “That’s very thoughtful of you, Ollie. We’re going to make it through this, I promise.”

Part of Oliver wanted to tell about his experience with the dust child, but another part knew that his father would likely insinuate that he had been reading too many imaginative books as of late. In the hall, away from the room, Oliver nearly convinced himself that this was the case.

UPON WAKING THE following morning, Oliver sensed something amiss. His dreams had been filled not only with dust but a smothering sensation as well. Still clad in his pajamas, he strode to his mother’s room, pausing to listen to the heavy snores emanating from the living area. Lately, his father had been spending a lot of time on the couch, watching TV after work, falling asleep there late at night.

Oliver opened the door a comfortable two inches, enough to peek inside. The dust child was waiting for him.

“Get away,” he said, his voice full of whispered fury. “Leave her alone.” But the thing stood its ground, continuing to study his mother. The movement of its head was methodical, like a surgeon contemplating a specific task. “I’m coming in to clean,

so you better leave now.”

Striding to the dresser, Oliver located the rag he had set there yesterday. As he started to dust, he bravely inched closer to the intruder. “I’m not afraid of you, you know. Not one bit.” He was not staring at the dust child when he said this, but at the barely discernible reflection of himself in the dresser’s unlit surface. “You’re nothing but dust, anyway.”

With these words, Oliver found the courage to turn.

But the dust child was gone.

LATER THAT MORNING, not long after breakfast, Oliver started vacuuming the room. He used each nozzle, collecting as much dust as he could from the sides of furniture, baseboards, and beneath the bed. His meticulousness surprised and delighted his mother, who had awoken and propped herself up to watch the proceedings with a prideful smile, motioning for him to turn off the vacuum.

“You’re going to too much trouble, dear. I don’t mind a bit of dust.”

Seeing his mother sitting up heartened Oliver, for part of his rationale for cleaning—aside from starving out the dust child—had to do with speeding up her recovery. He figured the cleaner and more organized he kept her room, the sooner she might be made whole again.

But all this work was for naught, for later that afternoon, not long after his father had left for the grocery store, the dust

child reappeared. With its return came a renewed boldness. It wanted to be seen, wanted to share its secrets. And even though its featureless face was incapable of forming a sinister grin, Oliver sensed it was taunting him, worse than any bully at school.

Bracing for the worst, he strode to the opposite side of the bed, his gaze fixed on the manifestation, asking what it wanted, why it had chosen his mother. The thing turned dispassionately in his direction, as though it could see. But making eye contact or attempting to communicate had never been its objective. It wanted an audience, wanted Oliver to come in close and observe.

And he did, staring in horrified disbelief as the dust child moved its fingerless right arm in a precise and fluid motion toward his mother's chin; watched as the stub of this simple appendage reformulated into a tube, an impossibly configured siphon that eased its way into the anemic mouth, pulsing as regular as his own heart; watched as the thing's body grew more dense with the essence of his mother.

That the dust child was feeding, Oliver had no doubt.

And it was consuming its host faster than any cancer could.

NEARLY EVERY AFTERNOON, after arriving home from school, Oliver would find the dust child waiting for him. Only when it became aware of his presence, would it insert the siphon into his mother's mouth. Her arms would invariably stiffen at

her sides, fingers raking the bedspread as though doing so might prevent her from floating away. It seemed to be her final act, and Oliver could not tear himself from the desperate movement of those hands, knowing that when they stilled she would be gone.

He had never been quick to anger, but on one particular occasion he could not stop the rage that ignited within him. He rushed headlong into the room, uttering obscenities he would never dare express in front of his mother—but in this instance not caring, certain she would understand—until he came to a huffing halt a few inches from the dust child. He hoped this close proximity would scare the thing off, but its focus remained unwavering.

Shifting his attention to his mother, Oliver was startled to discover that her eyes were open and her expression was serene. She was staring at the dust child as though it were Oliver himself, her expression brimming with emotion. Nearly everything about her reminded him of the way she had been before the treatments.

“Mom, it’s me,” he said, hoping to break the spell. “It’s Ollie. I’m right here.”

Her expression abruptly collapsed under a racking cough, each outburst sending a plume of dust into the air. The siphon shifted in a surprisingly fluid way, and as her cough subsided she lifted a weak hand to caress the dusty feed arm, rubbing its surface gently with her thumb. The gesture enraged Oliver,

and in a burst of renewed anger he screamed and leapt at the dust child, pummeling it like the tyrants did to him at school. His entire body was encased in dust, and he began choking so violently he fell to his knees. He felt dizzy and on the verge of passing out, but he did his best to shake it off.

His mother was calling for him now, her voice distant and frail.

Oliver pulled himself up, standing directly where the dust child had been. His cough lingered, though he controlled it as best he could. While he was proud of what he had accomplished, he wondered if he had truly put an end to any of it. Brushing the thick residue from his face, he parted his hair in an attempt to make himself look more presentable.

In an instant, his mother's expression changed from joy to disbelief. Oliver could tell by the look in her eyes, and her quivering upper lip, that she was seeing something else standing there, not him. "You're not my Ollie," she said, uttering the words three more times before Oliver bolted from the room. His tears made a mess of all the dust still clinging to his face, and as it began to gather in his eyes he couldn't stop blinking. He leapt into bed, deep beneath the covers, shivering and muttering until his father returned.

THE NEXT MORNING, he stayed in his room longer than usual. When his father checked on him, Oliver made a convincing plea as to how horrible he felt, and in the end was allowed to

stay home from school. It was partially true, because he still had a lingering sore throat from the dust he had inhaled. And while he felt certain he could have made it through the school day, he remained fearful that if he left the house something bad would happen.

Only after his father had left for work did Oliver enter the room, hopeful that his mother would not turn on him as she had during the previous visit. Thankfully, she was overjoyed to see him. Not only that, but she appeared to have regained more energy. She motioned for him to come closer.

“Your father said you’re not feeling well.”

“Getting a cold, I think.” He had brought along a few paperbacks, and after setting these on the nightstand he climbed into bed and lay beside her.

“How are you *really* feeling, sweetie?”

Oliver tried to push his emotions aside and offer up a stock response, but instead broke down and began to cry, telling her that he didn’t know what he was going to do when she was gone, that he didn’t think he could live a moment without her.

“I’m not going anywhere, Ollie,” she said, inching herself more erect. “Trust me on that, okay? I’m going to beat this thing, and you’re going to help.”

For a moment Oliver thought she was referring to the dust child, that she had known of its existence all along, but he soon came to the realization that she was talking about the cancer and nothing more, about the thing neither of them

could see and he hardly understood.

“There’s something I need to tell you, Mom,” Oliver said, wanting but unable to describe what he had witnessed yesterday. When she encouraged him to continue, he faltered, knowing she would never believe him. Instead, he asked if he could read to her. She nodded and he picked up one of the paperbacks and began fanning through its pages. He started the first chapter, savoring the odor of its newly printed ink. Such a ritual always cheered him up.

“Honey,” his mother interrupted after the first page had been read, “why did you tell your father you were sick today, when you aren’t?”

Oliver flushed. His mother had always been able to see beneath his skin, so to speak, to understand how he was feeling. And even now, in her debilitated state, she knew the truth and was calling him on it.

“You wanted to keep me safe, didn’t you?” Her smile was so full of life. “Well, I’ll keep your secret for today, I promise, but I don’t want you missing out on school. So tomorrow you’ll be ‘better,’ okay?”

Oliver nodded reluctantly, thinking about all the things that were wrong with that idea and dreading the moment he would have to leave her behind. She would be all alone if the dust child returned (as he suspected it would), and this time it would likely complete its task. As hard as it was to imagine, his mother’s days were numbered.

“What’s wrong, Ollie?” Her expression had shifted to concern.

Oliver couldn’t stop his hands from shaking as he held the book. He set it aside and tucked into his knees in an attempt to smother his emotions. A few seconds later he felt his mother’s palm on his back, rubbing gently between his shoulders, whispering, “Everything’ll be okay, it really will...”

BUT IT WASN’T okay. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

Oliver did what his mother wanted, venturing to school the following day in a daze, slogging through the minutes as though each bore an hour’s weight, his thoughts continually on his mother’s well-being, knowing that leaving her alone was equivalent to his having passed a death sentence. Numerous horrible scenarios filled his mind, and more than once his teachers asked if he was okay, if he needed to visit the nurse.

He had bowed to his mother’s wishes, and now he hated himself for it. Why hadn’t he explained the real reason for wanting to remain at home? Would that have been so difficult? And who could say she wouldn’t have believed him. Then again, maybe she wanted to be alone with the dust child. The idea infuriated him, particularly when he recalled the adoring expression she had shared with the thing.

At the final bell, Oliver leapt to his feet, feeling as though it was more than the end of another school day. Something had happened at home. He had felt anxious all day and by the time he stepped through the front door he was drained. Sti-

fling his emotions, he peered into his mother's room.

The dust child was nowhere in sight. In the area where it normally stood, dust drifted lazily through the muted light. Oliver walked around the bed, running a hand along the dusty dresser and spreading the residue across his forehead. Near the window he searched the floor, expecting to discover the dust child collapsed in a pile of refuse waiting to be swept away. But there was nothing. He didn't even sense the thing's presence, whereas in the past it had seemed to haunt the darkest parts of the room.

Oliver turned his attention to his mother. She looked so peaceful lying there with her head angled tranquilly upon the pillow. Had her eyes been open she would have stared directly at him. But they were closed—closed and unmoving. He stooped over, listening for her breath but knowing the last of it had likely expired as the school bell had begun to toll.

The bedspread was covered by a thick layer of dust, an impossible accumulation. As Oliver placed his palms on the surface, particles began to stick to his flesh as though magnetized, as though they were (and always had been) a part of him. He swiped at the surface of the spread as if it were a dust-coated mirror wherein memories and reflections waited to be revealed.

In time Oliver began coating himself with dust, cupping it into each palm and painting his face, clothes, and hair, not stopping until every portion of his body was shimmering.

Satisfied with his work, he shifted his attention to his mother, waiting for her to open her eyes, to see what he had become. When she did not, he knew exactly what he needed to do. Leaning close, he inserted two dusty fingers into her mouth. And waited.

He wasn't sure how long he had been standing there before a disturbance shattered his focus and forced him to gaze slowly, dispassionately, toward the door. A figure was silhouetted there, calling to him in a familiar voice, a voice that rose in desperation and would not cease repeating his name, over and over again.

But he ignored it and returned to his mother, continuing to tend to her until he could no longer, until something grasped his shoulders and yanked him back—and he began to drift, like so much dust, away from her, so very far away.