

The Calling

There is a stone up on the brow of the hill. It can be seen quite clearly from the town below. The outline of a granite slab, a pale grey rectangle of uneven dimensions and dubious history. It has been there long before folklore etched it into the local memory - but it is not of this landscape.

I had been here once before, many years ago, on holiday with my parents, but I have no particular memory of the place and I can think of no actual reason for a return visit. In fact, I'm not sure why I drove sixty miles out of my way to be here. It was little more than an urge to take a different route to begin with, and it wasn't until I saw the signs that I realised where I was headed. But here I am, and the stone is the only thing in the area worth seeing.

From the car park there is a well-worn track that takes it's time to find the least arduous route to the top of the hill. I pass a wooden hut that would normally be selling bookmarks and tea towels with images of the stone printed on them, or a booklet about its history and mythology. I might have bought one, but the hut is closed and I'd probably never read it anyway. I'm sure it's full of the same old nonsense. Sacrificial virgins, UFO's, faery abductions and how the stone got there in the first place - which would it be this time, giants or magic? Something told me that it was brute strength, but that wouldn't sell guide books, would it.

I paused before beginning my ascent and tried to think back to my last visit, but it was as though I'd blanked it out. At the same time, I felt as though there was something I needed to remember or something I used to know about this place, I simply couldn't recall what it was.

Another nauseating headache had started. I'd been having them almost everyday for months and the doctors just fobbed me off with stronger pills. I reached into my jacket pocket to find some tablets but pulled out a blurry old photograph instead. At first I didn't recognise it, then I remembered, it was the photo I had taken of the stone about thirty years ago. For some reason, when the photos came back from the developers the whole film had been damaged and all the pictures were blurred. I asked at the shop and they said that something had interfered with the negative, but they couldn't say what it might have been. I thought I'd thrown them all out a long time ago, goodness knows how this one ended up in my pocket. I put it back, took some tablets and carried on.

Shortly before the top of the hill the stone is obscured from view as the path turns round a slight bluff. I paused for breath, the tablets hadn't worked and my head was pounding, I felt unsteady and lowered myself onto the grass verge. I held my head as my mind flashed back to long buried memories that I'd rather not recall, and dreams that had plagued my nights for years. The pain intensified before subsiding. I rubbed my eyes and looked up blinking at the clouds. There was a stillness, a silence that unnerved me, I felt as though I wasn't simply by myself, I was completely alone, cut off from the natural world. I convinced myself that it was just an effect of my headache and would wear off.

After a pause, I carried on up the last leg of the path and reached the summit. The stone is situated on the edge of a small plateau and would actually make a great place to theatrically slaughter a virgin or two, if that was your sort of thing. Most people come for the view.

I stood directly in front of the stone and realised that I had been putting off this visit for years. The weathering of centuries and the intricate patterns of the yellow and green lichen almost turned the

stone into a work of art, but this could not disguise the fact that it was more than a decorative object. Although I hadn't been aware of it, the stone had been calling to me through my dreams all my life. I suddenly felt as old as the stone. Older, connected to it in a way that I could barely understand. Had I been here before? Not just thirty years ago, it felt more like three hundred, three thousand or more, it was hard to tell.

Almost magnetically I place my hands on the stone and immediately forgot how I'd arrived here, I forgot about my previous visit and all the years in between. I forgot where I grew up and who I was. It didn't matter. There was a blissful pause, as though my feet had left the ground and I was at one with the air. I wasn't, but it seemed that way.

I soon came back to earth. A deep pulse of energy surged through my hands and filled my mind with darkness. The pulses intensified and with each wave my sense of despair spiralled out of control.

Every pain suffered, every atrocity inflicted by one person on another, every knife wound or gunshot, every evil word spoken with hate, every pain of torture, or flesh cut by exploding shells. I felt every single agony of the horrors that humans had done to each other for millennia. I felt them all. Tears ran down my cheeks and I sobbed.

This stone, this sentinel of the ages, absorbing our humanity for generation on generation, could only find it lacking.

It was then I realised that Hell was not an abstract notion, or a place to be banished to. Hell is on Earth. Hell is within us all.

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