Hark the Herald Angel Thing

By Andy Banks

Sit down, grab a drink, and let's get started, shall we? Come on, gather in, it's cold and I don't want to shout. We start where we always start, but it's not strictly the beginning as such.

Christmas Eve, and the jaws of the solstices hang looser than they should. All manner of creatures slip between those celestial teeth at this time of year, and let's remember, it's a two way street. Things go missing all the time, and often turn up when you least expect them. That pen, your favourite socks, that screwdriver you put on the windowsill not five minutes ago. And then they all turn up, en masse, in the Washing Basket, three days later.

There is no reliable explanation for this. Religious types will wave their books, and claim it is the will of their imaginary friends, and that all of the madness you encounter is explained in their books. Wiser heads will tell you that the Universe itself is inherently unreliable. We only think we know the rules, and the explanations we have are partial, and frequently erroneous. Worse, they are often made up on the spot, two thousand years ago, by some dusty charlatan you wouldn't trust unsupervised around your kids.

Many people adhere to this viewpoint, or more accurately, believe that the rules, as they understand them, do not apply to them. One such creature even now, is striding up the hills above a damp, rotting Mill town in Lancashire. He thinks of himself as a modern-day sorcerer, though he has no grasp of the mystic arts beyond a good head for numbers.

Mr. Clive is a Solicitor of sorts. By which I mean he is a businessman who twists the law to his own ends. We could dwell briefly on the nature of Hyenas, and their behaviour would seem favourable by comparison. To mix metaphors, Mr Clive has scented blood in the water. A prime piece of real estate, on high ground - increasingly valuable in these times of unstable weather - and it's going for a song.

His assistants have done all the leg-work, tracking down the last remaining heir to a urine-stained bed in a filthy Care-home. They even dug out some dirt; a wild rumour concerning the Care-home harbouring a Nazi War Criminal. Mr Clive swept in to get the signature, with a nice wad of tenners ensuring that, yes, regardless of medical opinion, Mr Ronald Cunliffe did indeed have capacity, and could sign whatever was required. Between that, and a veiled threat about the newspapers, there was no way that Ron was going to keep his farm.

Of course, Mr Clive will take all the credit. Assistants are there to assist, and praise is passed up the line. He'd posted the papers that afternoon, digital copies already forwarded. Any counter arguments would be woefully late, he could have one of his assistants draw up a rebuttal on Boxing Day. They'd have nothing better to do, after all.

So now, he is filming the farm on his mobile phone, documenting his victory for the senior partner. Of course, he'd had to bully a couple of the locals off the road en route. Who transports a lamb on the back

of a quad bike anyway? These lanes were made for Range Rovers, not the other way around. And technically, he did own the road.

The place is essentially a ruin. Stone ribs protrude from the grass, protecting a hearth that beats no more. The walls, though broken, are stout. And the Chimney stack still stands, jutting like a defiant chin. He notes the period feature above the hearth - the votive alcove, sixteenth century, maybe older. He mentally adds another zero to the price tag.

He kicks aside some of the rubble. Fallen slate and frost-shattered stone have choked the fireplace, but it looks to be intact. He tips one of the slates aside, dislodging a slew of debris, and then recoils.

Even half-buried it still radiates malice. Though only one eye is visible, its malevolent gaze is like a physical shove. A tangle of wingtip and tentacle wrought in some greasy, greenish stone. Mr. Clive suddenly wonders what things dwelling on the ocean floor might consider art. And worse, what might they want.

He nudges the slate back until the baleful gaze is broken. Get a firm in to clear that up. No matter how rare it might be, he has no desire to touch it. He is abruptly startled by a distant shriek, and nearly drops his phone.

Some of the feral plebs in the valley below, no doubt. Indulging whatever violent idiocy that passes for entertainment for them. Regardless, the noise and the sinister carving have unsettled him, and he no longer wants to be in the house. So he steps outside, intending to walk the boundaries of the property and see just how much of the hill he owns.

Once outdoors, he begins to climb the steep uphill path beyond the farmhouse. He makes barely a hundred yards before he is surprised to see that cloud has rolled over the valley and is swallowing the hill. Then again, he rarely pays attention to anything as trivial as a weather report. In an instant, he is silently engulfed. There is no drama, the bank of cloud flows on and his world is reduced to a few damp, grey feet.

The fog distorts sound, so he isn't entirely surprised when he sees the ragged figure silently emerge from the murk. He doesn't hear any footsteps, but then again the moment she spots him she stops. They observe each other briefly. He continues to walk forward, taking in her gaunt, haggard appearance with disdain. She looks like she has been dragged through a hedge backwards. A frozen hedge. Made of barbed wire. Her once-stout, grey gingham dress hangs in rags, and her boots are in tatters. The pin in her gnarled fist suggests she had a bonnet once, but she holds it like a dagger, not a Victorian fashion accessory.

For her part, she looks at him as if she cannot believe he is real. Or as if he were some long-awaited saviour, bringing light and hope to a dark and frightening land. She reaches a filthy hand out to him, but the hat pin stays poised to strike.

"Help me," she croaks. Her voice is as ragged as her dress.

Mr. Clive veers away from her but doesn't miss a step. His lip curls in disdain.

"Get off my land," he sneers. She's probably a crack-head. "If you're not gone by the time I come back, I'm calling the Police!"

He strides off up the hill, partly to get out of reach of that hat pin, and partly to reach the top of the hill before the sun goes down.

“Please!” At first she rasps, hoarse and broken, but then she shrieks. “Help me!”

Mr. Clive takes a few jittery steps up the hill, and she follows, one frost-bitten hand outstretched to stop him. He turns, raising his phone as if it were a crucifix to ward some revenant.

“I’m filming this,” he squawks, his usual business glaze shattered. Violence was something that happened to other people. Sometimes paid for by him, admittedly, but never to him directly.

She doesn’t seem to register the threat, but eyes the device in his hand warily, and the hat pin stays ready in her chilly fist. Mr. Clive begins a most undignified scuttle up the hill; a sideways crab-like retreat to higher ground with the warding phone still held aloft.

The path snakes up into a fog-shrouded copse, not that Mr. Clive is really paying attention to the scenery. His eyes are fixed on his pursuer, who is behaving rather oddly. Rather than running after him, she seems to be hesitant, still pleading, but her tone has changed.

“Please, be careful! It’s hungry!” Her voice cracks with fear.

Mr. Clive is not looking where he is going in the thickening fog, so when he plaits his feet and trips, he is the only one surprised. He trips and rolls into what might be a stand of trees, he isn’t sure. Mud smears his waxed jacket and stains his Saville Row suit, but he still holds the phone in his grip. He hauls himself to his feet, using one of the gnarled limbs.

He hears the woman’s gasp of fear, and sees her squat, pressing her hands to her face. And then he feels, rather than hears a low warning growl. The pitch is sub sonic, but so intense that it makes his teeth ache, and shudders his gut like a week-old prawn vindaloo.

He looks over his shoulder in growing alarm. What might be a stand of trees, is clearly not. Although it definitely is now. Standing that is. Standing, and angry. He cranes his neck upwards as a cold blue light bathes his face.

Light has never seemed so loud. A silent, physical blow that strikes him with all the force of an ocean wave. He can feel the skin on his face wither, and screws his eyes shut, but it is too late. The thing he has glimpsed is burnt into his retinas forever.

It’s no bird or beast or plant that he has ever seen, but a hideous blend of all and none of them, each part in hideous cyclic motion. He instinctively knows that some fanged maw is hidden by the light, and that yards above him, great pinions spread to blot the sky, yet root-like limbs delve the earth for who knows what.

And it examines him. He feels like it has peeled the very bones of his skull from his brain and stared directly into his mind. It wrenches into every thought, sieves every memory and weighs every emotion. He feels measured, assessed against some inscrutable rubric. And he is found utterly wanting.

His mind reels, fixing on an ever-decreasing loop of thought; “It wheels and wings… it sees my thoughts…eyes, wheels, wings…”

With every spiral, his synapses decay, neurones no longer fire in sequence, the proteins refuse to form, neural pathways fray and shred, their vital fluids spill and coagulate. A myriad tiny blood vessels abrade and perforate. New paths form from the slick pooling in his skull, and he gains horrific insight into the nature of his interrogator.

He knows it has travelled vast distances for purposes he cannot grasp, and that to truly understand it will destroy him. It is here yesterday and never, and it will travel on and it might speak, but he dare not hear what it will say.

Lambs to the slaughter. Lambs for the paperwork that bleeds in the water. A lamb and it might pass over. Smear the blood on the door. And the sharks are coming. It's cold and it's hungry, and he isn't the apex predator he thinks he is.

The last desperate shreds of his personality assert themselves, and he does what his ilk always do in dire straits. He tries to throw someone else under the bus.

Despite his spasming jaw he speaks. Biting his tongue and lip both, he manages a few halting words.

"Take her, not me."

His own blood runs down his chin. Agreements. It makes agreements. He can be agreeable. He tries to make an elegant gesture to draw attention to the trembling woman squatting in the undergrowth, but his limbs only twitch and shudder.

"Take her," he slurs again. One side of his face slackens and drops. He tries to point but can't raise his arm. As he collapses sideways, the pooling in his skull washes over a different area of his brain, and sparks spasmodic life into withering axons once more.

He thinks he understands what is about to happen, as the gnarled twisting thing gathers itself. Clearly the frightened woman crouching in the undergrowth also knows.

"Please, god, not again… please, not again," she begs.

Mr. Clive smiles a jerky half grin. He thinks his plan has succeeded. Though, he can't articulate much more than a happy gurgle, as the speech centre of his brain has been rewired. He remains convinced that he is of more worth than the ragged woman, and in this, like in many other things, he is badly wrong.

For her part, she demonstrates comprehensive foreknowledge of what is to come, standing up, tucking her chin in to her chest and crossing her arms across her chest as if she were about to ride a water-slide or leave an aircraft in a desperate hurry. Neither of which she has ever seen, of course.

Mary's done this before, expelling all the air from her lungs in one desperate wheeze. When that monstrous intake of breath comes, she is ready. Mr. Clive is not. Torn into the air, and something beyond it, he can only whine and half-gurn.

It's still hungry, though, so it takes his leg, almost as an afterthought.

The Police find his car, and his left shoe, with his deep frozen foot still in it, but they can never get a fix on his phone. He is declared dead, after the appropriate amount of time has passed.

And then his firm begin to report crank calls. Most of them are short, a dozen seconds at most, comprised mainly of a wind-blasted speaker, and shrieking. All from a long-defunct mobile number. Registered to Mr. Clive. It is dismissed as a prank.

Until the senior partner starts to get the videos. Again, they are short, depicting mostly shuddering darkness and the rattle of wind in a microphone. But, a few, are extraordinary.

One consists of a violent struggle for the camera's viewpoint, ending with a woman's frost-white face shrieking "Help me!"

Another shows the gangrenous stump of a leg, dripping pus into rippling waters, that slowly encroach on a miserable grey strip of beach.

Another briefly shows a man's face, half-slack, withered, studded with ice, accompanied by a whining gurgle of distress. But then, the device is turned and the camera pans across a yawning abyss. A canyon that defies superlatives, that extends not only below, but also above, vaulted in every direction in greasy greenish stone. And everywhere, every viewpoint, is walled with ocean depths. As if the operator of the device were marooned in some deep sea bubble, anchored to the flanks of an abyssal mountain. A cold grit of monochrome sand and the empty hulls of long-dead sea creatures are his carpet. And the bubble seems to shrink imperceptibly with every whining breath.

Dark waters surround him, in which dread lights shine. Bioluminescence in inky depths, white and blue and green, shining only to find or lure prey.

The camera isn't the best, and scale is hard to judge on a phone, but something suggests to the viewer that the hideous forms that swim and reach and bite there, are perhaps a mile long. The vast obsidian orbs that pass for their eyes begin to turn toward the camera, drawn to its tiny light, and the video abruptly ends.

We get so many things wrong, so we can't really complain if other beings do too. Or perhaps they just see things differently. Mr. Clive would appear to be lodged with company well-suited to his mindset.

But, his blood is in the water. And his fellows are circling.