

episode three:

THE HEIROPHANT

the story so far: Appearances are rarely what they seem. Take Milo Hunter, for example. At first glance you'd take him to be a bookish introvert. You'd be right. Milo would be quite happy to lead a life of quiet study, avoiding the world at large. Unfortunately for him, his grandfather won't allow that. Milo has been trained by his grandfather for as yet unknown missions, and forced to attend a fourth-rate state college in the middle of nowhere without explanation. Worse yet, his grandfather has ordered him to make friends at his new school. For years Milo has been secretly trained by his grandfather, but to what end? Evidently his training has included sword fighting, marksmanship, lock-picking, stealth, and tapping into his psychic potential!

Milo's first year in college so far is shaping up to be far from ordinary. The first "mission" that his grandfather sent him on turned disastrous when Milo found the "damsel in distress" that he intended to rescue dead before he arrived at the scene! On investigating her death, Milo discovered that he was familiar with the dead girl, one Sadie Hawkins who he had Psych 100 class with. Sadie had an unusual pastime. She would meticulously recreate herself to match the fashions of the past, not just in clothing, but in body as well. Sadie also was very much in love with her boyfriend Brandon, who she was on her way to meet the night she was killed. Milo broke into Sadie's room to find her life-long friend and room mate Genni sleeping there. While there, Milo feels compelled to steal Sadie's secret sketchbook, though he doesn't know why. Afraid that Genni will awaken to find him there, he cuts his search for clues short and returns to his dorm room. There he realizes that he has tainted the crime scene with his own blood and footprints, left his fingerprints on Sadie's corpse, and has Sadie's stolen journal with him in his dorm room.

I sat where I always do in Psych 100, my first class of the day. Her seat stayed empty. I'd been praying that it'd all been a dream, that she'd walk in and take her usual seat, and I'd resume staring longingly at her while ignoring the professor. But her seat stayed empty, the people who sat beside her not yet knowing that she'd never be there to take her place. My knuckles throbbed where I'd bitten them. The bandage had already soaked through. I felt so tired I could have slept for a week. Grampa said it was vitally important that I act as if nothing had happened, though, so here I was.

The professor droned on. It was all just background noise to me. The only thing I heard him say was, "Some people like to sum up the differences like this: Neurotics build castles in the clouds, and psychotics live in them."

I wondered when I slipped from being a neurotic boy outsider to a psychotic one. Visits from an imaginary grandfather, sneaking around in the dark, communicating with corpses, breaking into girl's rooms and watching them while they slept, stealing evidence...good God, what was I doing? *I wanted this*, I told myself. *I agreed to this. It's all part of the deal.* But I wondered... had I made a deal with the Devil?

I was the only one who cried at my grandfather's funeral. My deadbeat father couldn't even be bothered to show up to his own father's funeral. That is what they told me at the time. Now I wonder if anybody even bothered to let him know his father had died. From what I know of him I'm surprised he didn't show up for the reading of the will just to see if he'd gotten anything. Mom and sis made a

great show of being upset, but only to get sympathy. They hated Grampa, even though he'd always been nice to them. When my father ran off Grampa'd always been there for us. He paid for my sister's and my braces, and paid for the three years of college my sister attended. She dropped out after 3 years because by then she'd gotten the Mrs. degree she'd been trying for, complete with a baby girl and a boring husband who had a "future." My father never paid us any child support, but I know Grampa more than compensated for that with monthly payments to my mother.

Still, they hated him. Maybe it was because they reminded him of father. I was really too young when he split to remember him, but my sister was a teenager at the time, and she refused to even speak his name. Even if they didn't show it, I knew they were happy Grampa was dead. I was only in fourth grade at the time, but I could see it. They were happy. They were excited. All they could think about were the riches they stood to inherit from his estate.

I was devastated. I'd never known anyone who died before. I loved my Grampa. In my father's absence, Grampa had done the best he could. Summers I spent weeks at his camp, swimming, playing chess, listening to his stories. Looking back on it I realized that the only reason my mother ever allowed this was because of the money. She *hated* the man but loved his money. As long as I was around, though, she didn't have to pretend to be nice to him.

Even though he was in his eighties, Grampa still spent much of his time traveling the world. I always got letters from him from exotic locations, with pictures and tales of the things he'd seen, the people he'd met. Grampa got his taste for travel as a combat photographer during the first World War. When that war ended, he liked to tell people, he took a wrong turn. Instead of leaving France and crossing the Atlantic he'd headed the opposite direction, wound up touring Europe before heading to Russia. Not able to understand a word of Russian, so he told us, he couldn't read the signs, and found himself in China for a couple years, then India, and all the countries in between. Then back across the Pacific to see the country "with eyes opened." Through it all he took thousands of pictures. His photographs appeared regularly in National Geographic, Life and Look magazines.

He met my grandmother during the second World War. He'd returned to Europe as a combat photographer again. She'd been a resistance fighter in Vichy France. He found in her a kindred spirit. After the war they traveled the world, pausing just long enough in the United States to give birth to my father. I never met her. She died sometime in the fifties. Grampa never would talk about it. He never remarried.

I remember summer nights at his camp when it was too hot to sleep. We'd sit out on the screened-in porch and he'd pull out a box of photos and tell me stories. Some would give me nightmares, like the stories of the horrors of trench warfare during WW I. Others would have me in hysterics. Later, in history class, I'd see the people Grampa told stories about and realize that they were famous people. Like Robert Oppenheimer, or, as Grampa called him, "Bobbie Op," or, "Good Ol' B.O." Or "that scrawny little shit," Gandhi. Although I was very young then, I knew how special it was. Grampa was the only person who talked to me like a grownup. He used words that I knew you weren't supposed to say around kids. I was careful never to repeat those words around other adults because then they might think that Grampa was a "bad influence" and not let me be around him anymore. When he talked about horrible things, like the effects of mustard gas on soldiers, he didn't spare any details. It seemed more important to him to tell things as they really happened than to say what was "proper."

When the telegram came from Morocco telling us he died, my world fell apart. A courier arrived from Marrakech a few days later, bearing with him a shoe box-sized container carrying his ashes. It seemed impossible that such a little box could contain all that was left of my grandfather, my friend,

the only person in the world who truly loved me. The man who carried my grandfather's remains had a timelessness about him. His face seemed very old, but there were only a few flecks of gray in his hair. He didn't speak any English. My mother tried to tip him \$10, but he closed her hand on the money and shook his head. It was obvious to me what my mother was oblivious to. This man had traveled halfway around the world to deliver the ashes out of respect and love for my grandfather.

I didn't understand what happened next. The man noticed me, and our eyes met. There was a feeling of connection there, of understanding. He smiled at me and nodded. I smiled back. Then he winked, as if he were letting me in on some secret. "Adieu, Milo," he whispered. Then he nodded at my mother, turned and walked away.

My mother glared at me but said nothing. I just smirked, not because I knew how the man had known my name, or why he winked at me, but just to piss her off by letting her think I did.

The funeral was sparsely attended. My mom, my sister and her family, some other people I'd never seen before. The priest said a few words, the container was lowered into the ground. My sister cried theatrically. I hated her for it, but was grateful in a way. It turned the attention away from my real tears. I couldn't believe it. Such a great man who had done such wonderful things, and it all came down to this. It seemed like he deserved a whole lot more.

If my mother had hated my grandfather when he was alive, she hated him even more after the reading of the will. I don't know how much he left her. I know it was a lot of money, and some property, but it wasn't the millions she was expecting. I remember her screaming at the lawyers, telling them they'd overlooked something. I don't know if she knew something, or if she was just greedy. Grampa never really seemed all that rich to me. The bulk of what was in the will came to me and my sister in the form of trusts that we only received at certain points in our lives. The first came when we graduated from college. My sister was furious with this condition. She'd never intended to return to college, and now Grampa was forcing her from beyond the grave.

I was only peripherally aware of all this controversy. Grandfather's death left me in a state of shock and depression. To the outside world it looked like I was in bed with a bad case of the flu. My mother and sister raged at the lawyers while I lay in bed with the shades pulled. Then they pulled me out of bed to ride with them to my Grampa's house to go through his estate.

My grandfather's house really didn't hold any memories for me. We always spent time at his camp. He referred to the house as "his closet." He spent so little time there that it was really just a place to put his stuff. An old couple named the Freidlanders had lived there for many years. Sometimes they'd visit the camp when I was out there. Grampa had found them when they were a young couple, homeless and jobless, living out of a broken down station wagon with their two children. He took them in and gave them a place to live. In return, they looked after his house. The arrangement worked well, apparently. They lived there for decades, even after they'd gotten back on their feet and could afford their own place, even after their kids had grown and moved out.

Mother, of course, hated them. She called them lazy freeloaders, and worse. When we arrived at the house it was obvious the amount of care they'd put into the place. The lawns were mowed, the hedges were trimmed. There was not a flake of peeling paint to be seen anywhere. They certainly earned their keep. It was obvious that they were in the process of moving out. Their children were there helping them to load their things into a moving truck. Still, my mother ordered them out, saying that it was her house now, and that they'd have to leave. They just glared at her, and said nothing. How mother must have hated them then! Grandfather's will had left them with enough money to buy a house of their own, money that my mother though should rightfully be hers. Mother stormed into the house, my sister trailing behind her. I stayed outside. As young as I was then, I knew how wrong she

was for saying that. They were more family to my grandfather than she'd ever been.

"I'm sorry about that," I said to the Freidlanders.

Mrs. Friedlander passed a box up to her son, who was standing inside the moving truck putting things in place. "I'm glad you are," she said, turning to me. "It means you won't grow up to be just like her." Then she smiled, pushing her glasses up her nose with her thumb. "Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed. "Can this be Milo? Roy, come see! It's Milo! Look how much he's grown!" The man in the truck turned and smiled at me. We'd met a couple times before, and he'd never said a word. He had a nice smile, though. "Ben!" she hollered, "Come see! It's Milo and he's grown a foot since last summer!"

The old man shuffled out from the back of the house, "A foot huh?" he said. "That must make it hard to buy shoes!" He laughed at his own joke, while his son groaned and rolled his eyes. "Why, it is Milo. It is so good to see you! You have grown, haven't you? You're the spitting image of your father!" Mrs. Friedlander gave him a glare that would have melted ice.

"It's okay, Mrs. F.," I said. "You can talk about my father around me. I don't really remember him, so I don't mind. Now if Mother was here..."

"Come down from there Roy," Mrs. F. said. "Time for a break. We've been at this for hours now. Milo, come have some lemonade with us." She led the way to the back of the house. The back half of the house was just for the Friedlander's. They had a separate entrance and their own kitchen, living room, bathroom and everything. Most of the rooms had been cleared out, and their daughter Beverly was scrubbing down the floors. Mrs. F. called her to join us. She gave the obligatory "My how you've grown!" that everyone has to say when they haven't seen a kid for a long time. Somehow it didn't annoy me when the Friedlanders said it. Bev gave me a big hug and said, "Oh Milo, we're all so sorry about your loss." I almost started to cry right there. It was the first time anyone had even acknowledged that I had lost something.

"I'm sorry too," I said. "Sorry for you, I mean. You were as much family to him as I was."

"Well, not quite," Bev said, "But thank you for saying that."

"I'm glad you got here before we left, Milo," Mrs. F. said, handing me a glass of lemonade. "I was afraid we were going to leave without getting the chance to say goodbye."

Ben sat down in one of the kitchen chairs, and patted the seat next to him for me to come sit down. "June's right, Milo," he said. "When someone you love dies you think about all the things that you should have said and didn't. The things we wanted to say to your grandfather, well, we'll say them to you. It isn't quite the same, but it's all we have. I wish we could have said goodbye. I wish we could have thanked him for all he's done for us.

"Your grandfather never would have told you this, Milo. We owe him our lives. We wouldn't have made it if it weren't for him. We were wanted fugitives. It doesn't really matter what we did. Really bad things. We wanted to stay together, but we knew that it was only a matter of days before the cops caught up to us. Then we'd go to jail for life, or get gunned down on the spot. We'd decided we were going to leave the kids on the steps of an orphanage, and then high-tail it for the Canadian border. Get as far away from the kids as possible so they'd never connect them to us.

"You want to know how we met your grandfather? It was down the barrel of a loaded gun I had pointed at his forehead. I was robbing him for gas money.

"He moved so fast I didn't even see him do it. One second I am aiming the gun at him, and he's smiling at me. And then he's got my gun, and it is pointed at my chest. I didn't even see him move! But my fingers stung from him pulling the gun so fast.

"To the day I die I won't forget what he said to me then. 'Everybody makes mistakes,' he told me. 'Sometimes people fix their mistakes. Other times people die trying to live with those mistakes,'

and then he handed me back my gun. 'You choose the path you want to take. I'll tell you one thing, though. Your kids will be a whole lot better off being raised by their own parents.'

"Then he turned and got into the driver's seat of our station wagon! June and I just stood there. Our jaws must have been hitting the ground! 'Get in, it's cold out there!' he ordered. I'm not sure why we did what he told us. I don't know why I didn't just shoot him. Instead we got in. He drove us to a chop shop and tossed the keys to one of the "mechanics" and said, 'Present for you, Donnie. Make this car disappear from the face of the Earth within the next twenty minutes.'

"'You got it, Gramps,' Donnie said, 'You're jalopy is in the back. Keys are in it. It's all fixed. Man, you sure did a number on it this time! Keep drivin' like that and the cops aren't going to need to suspend your license. You'll be a stinkin' corpse!'

"'I love you too, Donnie,'" he replied, reaching into his coat pocket to pull out a white envelope thick with what I was sure was a whole lot of money.

"'We did those mods, just like you asked,' Donnie said, taking the money. 'Sacrilege to do that to a '38 if you ask me. I'm going to burn in hell for that for sure. When St. Peter asks, I'm tellin' him you made me do it. What the hell, Gramps, you goin' to war?'

"'Something like that,' the old man said. 'Donnie, you were going to hell long before you met me! You can tell St. Peter anything you like about me. You're still not getting off the hook!'

"Donnie laughed and put the money in his pocket without counting it. The old man turned and walked toward the back of the shop, motioning us to follow.

"'Wait a minute!' I shouted. 'We need our car!'

"'The only things you need are your kids. Grab them and lets go!' he commanded. My hand was on my gun. I was seconds away from killing this crazy old man, but I decided to wait. We could always kill him later, and maybe he had a better car that we could steal than the one he'd just given away. Did he ever! His "jalopy" was a 1938 Mercedes-Benz 770 Grosser, the kind of car people dream about just sitting in, let alone owning!

"We got in, the two of us in the back seat, holding the kids. The car was big and comfortable and warm, and felt safe. He drove us to his home and fed us. We had hot showers and warm beds. Somehow I never got around to killing him. He believed in us. Believed we were good and treated us like it. He had new identities forged for us so that the kids could go to school."

"He even paid for Ron and me to go to college," Bev chimed in.

"That's right," Ben agreed. "Of course we didn't know that at the time. He knew we wouldn't have let him. He fixed it so we thought they'd both gotten really good scholarships."

"What Ben's trying to say, Milo," June said, "Isn't that we owe your grandfather our lives just because he saved them. Those lives were over. We'd thrown them away long before we met your grandfather. He gave us life. Do you understand? How do you thank somebody for that? We've devoted our lives to him all these years, but if we lived to be a thousand we could never pay him back for what he's done for us."

There was an awkward pause. I had no idea what to say. I was only in fourth grade at the time, and it was a little hard to even comprehend all that they were saying to me. My grandfather was harboring criminals? Was he a criminal too? But the "Friedlanders" were all so nice! And it seemed like Grampa had seen the goodness in them and brought it out. But had they gone to jail? Been punished for their crimes? Had justice been done? I just didn't understand it.

"We just wanted you to know," Ben said. "I know your mother says some pretty horrible things about him. We just wanted you to know what he was really like. He was a great man, Milo. Grow up to be like him, not like her."

I thought of the years they'd known my grandfather, and I was jealous of them. They knew him in ways I would never have the chance to. They felt his loss in ways I didn't feel too.

I chugged my lemonade. "Thanks for telling me," I said. "And thanks for trusting me. Where will you go now?" I couldn't imagine what it would be like to be that age and to be turned out of the only real home you'd ever known.

"Well," June answered. "Your grandfather left us very well taken care of. That is just like him, looking after us, even after he's dead and gone. We thought about buying another house straight off, but you know, we're just too young to be settling down."

"Your grandfather told us so many stories about the wonderful things he'd seen in this world." Ben continued. "Now it is our turn to see some of those places. And maybe do a little good along the way, like your grandfather would have done."

"Sometimes the mistakes you make..." June's voice trailed off. "Well, sometimes you spend your whole life trying to make things right, and then you reach a point where you wonder if the good you've done balances out the bad. Maybe it has, maybe it hasn't, but that isn't the point anymore. The point is there's just too many people in the world like you used to be. It isn't about atoning for your own sins anymore. It's about trying to make the world a better place."

June wasn't looking at me as she talked. She was looking at her daughter. Or more specifically, at her daughter's belly. I realized she was seeing her grandchild. I saw it now, too. How could I have missed it before? Her daughter was pregnant and just starting to show.

"Well, time to get you back to the other side," Ben said. "Your mother's going to give you holy hell if she realizes you are hanging out with us 'freeloading lowlifes.'"

Bev and June hugged me, and Roy gave me a hearty handshake, and they wished me the best of luck in all I did. Roy and Bev wrote down their addresses and phone numbers on slips of paper and made me promise to look them up if I was ever in their neighborhood, or even if I wasn't, or if I ever needed anything. "If you grow up to be half the man your grandfather says you'll be..." June said, stopping herself as if suddenly realizing she'd said too much. "Well, I'm just really happy we got to see you again before we left," and with that she gave me another hug and busied herself with the cleaning.

Ben walked me to the door, with an arm around my shoulder. When we were outside he stopped. "One more thing," he whispered, looking back through the screen door. "There is something else you need to know. I know your mother and sister have filled your head with all kinds of lies about him, but you have to know the truth. He was a great man."

"I know that," I said sadly.

"I'm not talking about your grandfather. I'm talking about your dad."

I stiffened and pulled away. "Oh. Well I think 'was' is the key word here. What kind of 'great man' doesn't even show up to his own father's funeral?"

Ben stared at me, mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, "Oh, you poor kid," he said finally. "I'm sorry. You don't know."

"I don't know what?" I shouted. "That my father ran out on us when I was too young to remember him? That my grandfather has been paying for all the things my father should have been? That he's never sent me a birthday card or Christmas card or done anything to show that he even cares if I'm alive?"

"I'm sorry, Milo," Ben said. "Bev was right. I shouldn't have said anything. It is time for you to go, and I don't want our parting words to be angry. I really just wanted to say thank you for all the things your grandfather did for me and mine. I just wanted to shake your hand, and tell you how proud he was to have you as his grandson."

He held out his hand to me and I stared at it for a moment. Then I smiled, all anger gone. He hadn't meant to upset me. He was just trying to do what he thought was right. I shook his hand, placing my left hand over our shaking hands, the way I'd seen it done in movies.

He walked me to the edge of the house, and patted me on the shoulder before giving me a final goodbye. He didn't want my mother to see us together, for my sake.

Even though I'd spent very little time there, it felt strange walking into Grampa's house. He wasn't there, but he was everywhere. Walking through the house was like walking through his memories. Everywhere were scattered souvenirs of far-off lands. Rugs, tapestries, sculptures, photographs, paintings and more. No two things were identical, and everything was exquisite. Of course, "exquisite" is probably not the word my fourth-grade mind would have used back then. More like it was a whole bunch of the coolest stuff I'd ever seen!

I could hear my mother shouting, "Junk! Junk! Junk! What is all this garbage? Where is all the money?" I wanted to scream at her. She was surrounded by what were undoubtedly priceless antiques, and all she could see was junk because none of it was gold, or had diamonds in it.

I walked toward the sound of her voice, feeling the sickness that I'd felt all week returning. I found her in the kitchen, dumping photographs onto the table and spreading them out. "Well, at least we ought to be able to fetch something for these!" she was saying to Albee, my grandfather's lawyer. I looked at the pictures. They were all photos of some of the most famous, and infamous people of the past century, ones I'd never seen before. Hitler in pajamas. Mae West chewing on a pencil, her forehead creased in concentration while she did the crosswords. John F. Kennedy wearing a Groucho Marx eyeglasses, nose and moustache mask, chomping on a cigar, while Jackie O doubled over in hysterics.

In that moment I found something I never knew I had. A voice. I used it to shout at my mother. "No! You will not sell those pictures!"

She was dumbstruck. I'd never stood up to her before. She never knew I had it in me.

Her shock vanished in a second. "Excuse me?" She snapped back. "I'm afraid you don't get a say in the matter."

"Pardon me, madam," Albee said, speaking as if every word had to travel through his nose. "I'm afraid Milo does have a say in the matter. Mr. Hunter very clearly left all the photographs to him, along with all his photographic equipment."

"So what?" she retorted, "He's still my son and he's still a minor."

"Be that as it may, madam," Albee replied, "The will also goes on to state that any item willed to Milo is to remain Milo's for as long as Milo sees fit. Without any interference, such as attempts to sell his inheritance without his permission, or to persuade him to agree to sell. Any attempts to do so will result in the immediate forfeiture of all inheritance."

I swear to God I saw steam coming out of her ears! Albee allowed himself a slight smirk. It was the first emotion I'd ever seen him display.

That marked the beginning of the end for me and my mother. Until that day I'd been just an unfortunate nuisance to her. At that moment our cold war turned hot. Disdain became antagonism. I guess I'd never had anything worth fighting for before. But now I fought. Oh how I fought!

She was fueled by relentless greed and hunger for revenge. Revenge against my grandfather, my father, and myself. She wanted to hurt us all. She knew that the things in the house all meant something to my grandfather, and that I loved them. She began a purge to eradicate any traces of my grandfather left on this earth. Everything that wasn't left to me in the will had to be sold or burned. I had to

fight with her to keep the stupidest little things. Things that had no value save that they reminded me of him. A cane, a hat, a coat, a scarf. "You aren't keeping that crap in my house!" she'd scream.

Some things she couldn't touch. He'd left me his books, his photographs, his stereo and his record collection, a few other odds and ends. He left me the camp, and all its contents, although it didn't really become mine until I turned 21. My sister was particularly offended by this. She was the oldest. She should have inherited it. The fact that she'd never hid her hatred of him was irrelevant. She wouldn't even speak to him when they were in the same room. My sister accused me of sucking up to him, just so I'd get more in the will. I was outraged that I could have killed her. Instead I punched out the nearest window, then screamed at her, shaking my bloody fist at her, "Don't say that. Don't you ever say anything like that again!"

My sister and I never really spoke much after that day. My relationship with my mother was strained, to say the least. We lived in the same house, but I interacted with her as little as possible. I was just biding my time until I could live on my own.

I guess by the time junior high rolled around, I was maybe a little more open to suggestion than I might have been at other times. Willing to agree to things that, in retrospect I should have given more thought to. I made a deal. Maybe not with the devil, but with, well...who did I make a deal with?

My home life was hell. School? I got straight A's without trying and was thoroughly bored. I wasn't popular, but I didn't really care. "Oh, don't worry about him. He's just shy," they'd say. That wasn't true. I just didn't like anyone. Actually, no, they were right. I was shy, but I told myself I hated everyone because that hurt less.

There are times when your life is shit, and you can look elsewhere and things look better and you can think, well, things are bad now, but they won't always be this bad. But back then there was no escape. An interminable Reagan administration had stripped educational and humanitarian funds while our nuclear arsenal swelled. I wondered every day when the missiles would start falling. The president had actually joked about passing a legislation that would outlaw the Soviet Union forever. Bombing, he said, would start in five minutes. It was all a joke. He didn't know the mike was on. Even if that was true, how could the "leader of the free world" find such a joke funny? Meanwhile the director of the "Environmental Protection" Agency decided that the best way to reduce the number of illegal toxic waste sites in America was to shred all the evidence that had been gathered about them. The AIDS epidemic was growing while the government ignored it because it was "God's punishment" for gays and drug abusers.

There was no hope. Evil was triumphant. There were no more heroes anymore. The closest thing the American people had to heroes were men like Donald Trump. He was a hero because he was rich. The fact that he'd become rich by kicking elderly and impoverished people onto the street so he could turn their homes into luxury condos didn't seem to phase anyone.

I wanted to escape that world. Other people turned to drugs and alcohol. I turned to the books my grandfather left me: Edgar Rice Burroughs, H. Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, H. G. Wells, Robert E. Howard and the rest. They were all first editions, many of them autographed. Probably worth a fortune, but I didn't care about any of that. It was the stories I loved. The worlds these men created many decades ago seemed more real to me than the one I lived in. They made sense. There were such things as good and evil, and if good tried hard enough, it could triumph over evil. It was just so much more attractive than the world I found myself trapped in. I lived in a world that rewarded greed, where "good" and "evil" were quaint, old fashioned concepts at best, political tools at worst.

Is it any wonder that when he showed up, opened up the door for me and said, "Come on, let's go." that I really wouldn't give it a second thought?

I was sitting in the café, where I usually went after school. It was a dreary fall day. All the leaves were off the trees and the drizzle that had fallen all day was hovering at the edge of sleet. The café was warm and cozy. They had a fire going, and Coltrane was on the tape deck. I had a bottomless cup of coffee going. Hazelnut, with a whole lot of cream and sugar. I hadn't really reached a point where I enjoyed the taste of coffee yet, but since I was hanging out in coffee shops, it seemed like drinking the stuff was the thing to do. I was reading A Merritt's Seven Footprints to Satan. Merritt was a recent discovery from Grampa's library. I was kicking myself for not trying him sooner. The epic adventure of Haggard crossed with the strangeness of Lovecraft. What could be better? I was so engrossed I hadn't noticed that it was getting dark out, and that I'd have to walk home in the freezing rain.

I didn't look up when somebody sat down across from me. I really didn't want to be disturbed. The hero of the book was ascending the stairs, and if he stepped on each of Satan's seven glowing footprints, then he would become Satan's master. If he failed, he'd become Satan's servant for all eternity. He was on the third step, about to take the fourth, knowing that the game was rigged and there was no way for Satan to lose! I had to keep reading!

"Some people spend their lives reading about the adventures of other people," the man sitting across from me said. "Others live the adventures. How would you like to stop reading and start living, Milo?"

I dropped my book and sprang from the table, knocking over my chair. The man leaned over the table and caught my coffee before it could fall to the floor.

"What's the matter, Grandson?" Grampa laughed. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

Be here next week for the next thrilling installment of **Castles. Episode Four: The Fool**. Milo struggles alone while Grampa is nowhere to be found. Grampa's return from the dead, and Milo's training. Milo makes a friend! The search for the killer! Milo plays Go, and (gulp) talks to a girl! (a living one this time!)