

HSA-32: John Butcher by Quixerotic

They leaned close and kissed, sharing the taste of pork loin on their lips. Her heat thrilled him. He considered pulling her closer, but his stomach ached for more food. She broke off and returned her attention to her own plate, but not before moving a hand under the table to find her husband's crotch and giving the hard lump she found a promising squeeze.

Lang struggled to get in the door while holding the tray. He didn't know they had a whole tea set, nor did he understand why the HSA kept one. The woman in charge of the site assured Agent Lang that it was a perfectly normal tea set ordered from a Sears catalog. He didn't think that verified its normalcy, but so far it hadn't caused anyone to morph into a monster. Usually people asked for water or coffee, but Mr. Keeler requested a cup of tea. Things spiraled out of control from there. Maybe it was a cursed tea set that compelled its use to the anguish of overworked and barely paid agents of a secret government organization.

The old man rose politely as Lang returned, but didn't move to help with the drink service. Mr. Keeler was tall and gaunt with papery yellow skin. In this regard, he reminded Agent Lang of his own grandfather, but the similarities ended quickly. Keeler had a thin and overly combed head of hair that was snow white. His ears and nose looked like they'd been fashioned out of clay by inexpert hands and mashed onto his skeletal face. The cheekbones jutted out severely and cut sharply down to a narrow chin. Even with all this, the man appeared friendly at a glance. He smiled quickly, if not easily, and rarely made eye contact. He kept his eyes on the tea tray until it was placed on the table. "Sit, please," he said in a soft voice. "I didn't expect such a fuss. Do you drink tea, agent?" He went to work moving around different pieces of the set into some arcane order.

"We drink anything that keeps us awake," Lang replied.

Keeler smiled sympathetically, "A professional hazard. It is actually what brought me to tea in the first place. Coffee is the blunt weapon of wakefulness. Tea can be more accommodating. Black tea, how appropriate. Yes, I believe this might offer some mild stimulation if you aren't already swimming in coffee." He set out a saucer and cup for each of them. Lang watched the old man's hands as they moved without hesitation or any sign of weakness. They had the same age as the rest of him, but he'd clearly been a man who took care of his joints. Most of the older generation Lang knew had worked hard lives and had the scars or gnarled hands to prove it.

With his cup in front of him, Keeler sat back down and took a slow sip. Lang expected some kind of revelatory sigh, but Keeler only nodded and placed the cup back on the saucer before crossing one knee over the other and resting his hands. Lang took a big gulp from the brew his guest had prepared for him. The heat of it scorched the inside of his mouth, but he swallowed it down and managed a grin. "Ready to get started?"

"Please," Mr. Keeler replied.

Lang leaned over to the large reel to reel console and pressed down the record button. He dragged the small microphone between them and gave it a tap. "This is Agent Peter Lang conducting an interview with Mr. Edmund Keeler. The date is July 16, 1971. As previous entries have indicated, Mr. Keeler has been cooperating with HSA agents for several weeks regarding HSA case files on which he has particular insight due to a private investigative life. The purpose of today's interview is to discuss file HSA-36."

Pausing to clear his throat, Lang took a quick glance up from his file to note Keeler's glassy stare looking at his teacup. Lang continued, "Mr. Keeler has indicated that HSA-36 is the origin of his personal interest in HSA matters. As such, Mr. Keeler requested the case file be approached in a manner that would preclude any bias due to his prior cooperation. To fulfill this objective, I have been assigned the case as per usual protocol and familiarized myself with the relevant details while not exposing my viewpoint to any of the other case files. Does all that sound correct, Mr. Keeler?"

"Yes," the old man answered.

"Good, then first I want to clear up a few clerical details. My research has been unable to identify any birth record for Edward Keeler, but I am under the impression that this is your given name?"

"Edward is. Keeler is the name I have lived under for the past fifty years, but my original name was Graham Edward Rochester. However, you will not find any record of my birth. I attempted it myself years ago, but the public records were destroyed in a fire in 1928. Private documents, who knows."

Lang nodded. It wasn't uncommon for their sources to have strange backgrounds. From what he'd gleaned from the other agents, none of whom qualified as gossips, Keeler's was stranger than most. "Would you prefer to remain, Mr. Keeler?"

"I would. Rochester was a name I left behind entirely."

"Like the city, right?"

"The very same. My great-grandfather was Nathaniel Rochester. Or so I was told, and not that it has significance to my life. My father was the sixth son of an eighth son, I believe."

"Ancestry not a point of pride for your father?"

"I don't remember. He died when I was nineteen. Hung himself." Keeler gave a thin smile. "I don't include that detail for vibrancy, agent. It is a necessary factor concerning where this story begins. Do you know how many people committed suicide the day the market crashed?"

"Can't say so, no."

"I doubt anyone knows a real number. I'm sure it wasn't zero, but it wasn't many either. No one knew on that day in particular how bad it would get for them. If my father had, he probably would have done for himself on the spot. But, no, he lasted another two months. Maybe he wanted to see through Christmas."

"Forgive me for saying, but sounds like a horrid thing to go through."

Keeler shrugged. “Perhaps. It was a different time. I barely knew the man. My sister loved our father dearly, though. She took it hard. Mama, too, of course. It was still fresh by the time the incident occurs, so it never had a chance to scar. Somewhat like worrying about whether you’ll remember the paper cut on your hand that’s just been lopped off with an axe.” His face pursed like he’d eaten something bitter.

“Right,” Lang said. “Well, we can get a formal history at the end if we need it. Honestly, having a somewhat recognizable relative, from historical perspective that is, does change our profile on you a little. How it might relate to your encounter and so on. But, we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, right?”

“Indeed.” He took another prim drink from his cup and settled it back with a rattle. “This event occurred in the summer of 1932. After my father’s death and family’s ruin, we were desperately poor. We had nothing, and our previous lifestyle had given us little in the manner of skills. Yet, I took us out of New York. We went west on the promise of work. The journey brought its own trials and hard lessons.

“Eventually we came to a place in mid-California, to the community of Jasper. The area was farmland at the time, but since then it’s become a dusty, arid place. I’ve gone and checked for myself every so often over the years. Water rights are the culprit for the area’s decline. The early signs of it were present in 1932, so it’s no surprise. I don’t believe it falling into disuse had anything to do with John Butcher. But, I have wondered if that monster was drawn to it somehow, like a fly to a festering wound.”

Eddie sat outside of their tent waiting for the sun to go down. The line at the wash pumps usually slacked off after dark. His mother, Maude, wouldn’t let him inside their pathetic home until he’d washed. Not that he minded much. She wasn’t good company even on her better days.

Their campsite, to term it generously, was a small rectangle sitting between bits of string stretched out from one stake to the next. Mr. Gregor had marked out all the plots himself. It was rough, but better than some of the other places they’d stopped in their travels west. The plot left enough room for some privacy between their tents and the tents of the other poor souls on either side of them. The one the community provided was supposedly big enough to fit a family of six. Eddie left it to his mother and sister. He and Tara slept in the tent they’d picked up before leaving New York.

His wife emerged from the family tent carrying two bowls. She gave Eddie one and settled down on the log beside him. “I think sometimes that you don’t wash so you avoid supper with Maude.” She pushed her shoulder against his. “I appreciate that, by the way. A wife should dine with her husband, after all.”

Eddie smiled at her. The expression faded as he looked down at the offered food. He spotted a few beans in it, but not enough to call it soup. When he’d been a boy, he’d once gone

down to the kitchen to pester the cooks for some type of pastry. He told them he was hungry, and it earned him a stinging palm. The head chef told him that “you have no idea what it is to be hungry”. Eddie resented that lesson for years. Of course he’d known what it was to be hungry. He’d felt the pang of a spasming, empty stomach almost daily between lunch and dinner. On some nights, the chef would offer some heinous amalgam supposedly from the menus in Europe, and Eddie would leave the table having eaten nothing but a bit of pudding, leaving him ravenous by the following morning’s offering of toast. The past two years had made the old cook’s lesson finally make sense.

“Weather’s nice,” he muttered to Tara. “No point in being cooped up for a meal when it’s not too hot.”

“Too hot keeps shiftin, don’t it,” she replied. “Last week, too hot would have been ten degrees cooler. Guess it can’t last forever though. Oh, look at the state of you. More dust than man.”

“I’ll wash before bed.”

“No, tomorrow’s Sunday. Did you forget?”

“Mmhm, I suppose I did,” he admitted. The bean water was salty. It didn’t fill him at all, but he choked it down. Strange that he could recognize the difference between the three cooks in his camp. His mother had clearly infused this soup with her extremely limited culinary knowledge. When Violet, his sister, made it, she somehow deprived the water of any taste at all. Tara was the only one capable of actually making it taste like soup. He had no idea how she did it, but it was one of the reasons he loved her. “Wash in the morning, then. Sure you want all that dust in our bed.” Calling it a bed still made him smirk.

“It’s nice out,” she said. “Nicer than inside. I’ll lay out the blanket, and we can sleep under the stars.”

Eddie managed another smile for her. They turned their attention to the coming and going of the camp as they ate. He could hear the muffled voices of his sister and mother talking inside. For as much as he’d suffered, he worried that Violet had it worse. At least he had Tara.

His father hung himself three days after Christmas in 1929. The subsequent two and a half years saw the family fall from social elite to starving. Plenty of his father’s peers had come out of the crash better off than they’d gone in. It was the people in a bad spot that the public heard about. Tragedy sold newspapers. The deceased Mr. Rochester had been heavily in debt and hiding it for years. Eddie still didn’t know if the family actually lost money in the crash, but it certainly swept away the fog his father kept over the finances. When he died, the collectors came like vultures. Eddie didn’t begrudge it to them. The recently deceased had lost their money, after all.

The stripping down of the Rochester family was brutal. The house was gutted with every

piece and parcel sold for pennies. Even the toilets were ripped out and set up for auction. The house itself was chopped up. The lumber, the nails, and the glass were sold off. According to a greasy haired man who carried around a ledger, the house was too big to remain standing. It would settle more of the debt if it were torn down so the land could be redeveloped. Eddie, his mother, and Violet were evicted and watched as the life they'd known was devoured.

For the first week, they stayed with the daughter of their father's valet. The daughter was sympathetic, but she had enough problems of her own with her father suddenly thrown on her. Maude's indignant behavior at having to share a bed and washroom didn't help. Eddie managed to salvage a few things before they were sold off. On a whim, he'd hidden away a tent his father had bought years earlier. The little kind they used in The Great War. They'd also secreted away his matriarchal grandmother's silver. He dispersed the majority of it to the house staff as a final, regretful payment. The little he kept for his family, he sold for a tenth of its value and used the proceeds to buy essentials. Clothes, shoes, pots and pans, a decent knife, a pair of blankets, and such necessities. So armed, he thanked the old valet, the old valet's daughter, and the old valet's daughter's family for their hospitality and declared they would be heading out of the city.

They certainly didn't have a car or horse. The little money Eddie saved went toward food, and he soon realized they needed to tighten their belts before loosening their pocketbooks. They stopped first in Philadelphia. They rented half a room for a month. Eddie went to work for a book keeper, transcribing records. Violet took whatever she could find, often involving laundry or needlework. His mother remained in the room, attempting to preserve her failed life. She spoke little and did nearly nothing. Near the end of the month, Eddie's employer informed him that the job wouldn't continue. Apparently things were getting worse everywhere. The local good will dried up, and Eddie decided to move on.

In Cincinnati, they stayed for another three months, through the bitter end of a cold winter. That place taught Eddie his hardest lessons. They didn't even have a half a room. They were allowed to squat inside a defunct factory by its owner who charged them every penny he could. The bastard collected the money himself and made a point to leer at every woman who came up short on the week's rent. Eddie went out for work every day, but rarely found it. He struck up some friendships with others, but made a careful effort to hide his background. On three occasions, he was found out and came away from the encounter with bruised lips and a bloody nose. He didn't know why the other men wanted to blame him, but he didn't exactly disagree with them. On the third occasion, despite never missing a payment, their slumlord threw him out for being a troublemaker. The awful man offered to let Violet and Maude stay at an increased rate and only if they agreed to work in his house. Eddie smashed a bottle on the back of the man's head for the implication.

He turned to farm work in Oklahoma for the summer of 1930. The job was long and hard, and Eddie soon realized he'd been raised soft. He collapsed at the end of every day, slept little on the hard packed earth, and rose again the next morning despite his body rebelling. He would have been miserable if not for Tara. She was the daughter of another impoverished family. The difference was that she'd never been rich in the first place. Her mother had, though, and before the Fever took her, she'd taught Tara everything she knew about kindness and

decency in a world that seemed determined to revile those qualities.

Eddie ingratiated himself to one of the landowners and got kept on after the harvest to tend livestock through the winter. He wasn't paid anything, but his family was allowed to live in a cabin on the property. It was lean and cold, but nicer than they'd had in a year. He and Tara married that December. The landowner's wife tactfully invited Violet and Maude to stay the evening at the main house, giving the newlyweds what would be their only truly private night together. It was the one occasion that Eddie allowed himself to feel happy or believe the future might not be so terrible.

When spring came, the farmer regretfully announced the end of Eddie's employment. More purses tightening along the chain meant nothing to pay hired hands with. Not for a while, anyway. But, word passed around the migrant hands that the farms out in California were desperate for labor. Eddie and Tara talked for a long time about the decision, but ultimately the changing attitude about out of town workers made the decision for them.

So, they arrived in California and found the Gregor place through word of mouth.

As he slurped down the last few dregs of supposed soup, Eddie noted a strange pattern of traffic in the camp. Usually, the only people still ambling about at this time of day were people going to and from the water pumps. Something else was rousing people from their suppers, sending them off to visit their friends in the camp. A similar notion brought Charlie shuffling up to Eddie and Tara. Charlie was an older man with a good heart and plenty of sense when it came to farm work and an entire lack of sense about everything else. He held in his hands a slip of thin paper. "Alrigh thar, Eddie?" Charlie called in his hard to decipher accent. "Cah yous read sommat?"

Charlie handed over the flier carefully since the gusty wind could easily strip it off into the aether without much warning. The man never liked to show ignorance, but when he did it was an earnest type of it. Eddie made a small name for himself shortly after arriving in Gregor's camp as he helped settle up people in the ledger books. It was where he'd first met Charlie since Charlie had been the only one not ashamed of admitting he couldn't work out the work cards they'd been given. Eddie smoothed out the crinkled page and read, "John Butcher's Kindly Feast. Music, Dancing, Food — As much as you can stomach. Tonight. Follow your nose."

Charlie held out his hand for the paper and squinted at it again. "Much as yous eets? Souns good, ain't it, Eddie?"

Already Eddie detected the prickling scent of smoke on the wind. "Sure does," he agreed. "Reckon it'll happen over at the center of camp."

Charlie ducked his head toward Tara, thanked Eddie again, and shuffled off in the direction of the smell. Now that he knew what they were following, Eddie could see a pattern to the movement of the other workers. Tara elbowed him in the ribs, "Should we go see?"

“Seems a little suspect, doesn’t it?” he mused. “Half the country is starving. Gregor’s been good to us, at least as good as any boss is going to be these days, but some kind of party? What’s it for?”

Tara took his bowl of watery dregs, shucking the remaining contents onto the hard packed dirt. “Some times folks are just nice. Maybe they slaughtered a cow and couldn’t find a place to sell it. So, it goes to a little charity. I can’t imagine how it could be bad to have some actual meat for once. I can smell it already, can’t you?”

“I can. I think I will go wash up after all. Head inside and tell Mama and Violet about it, see if they’re interested. Don’t let Mama keep Violet if she wants to go. I won’t be long.” He pulled Tara to him and kissed her forehead before heading off.

When Eddie came back, Tara waited outside the tent with his other shirt. He handed her the soiled one that had returned draped over his shoulder and put on the blue linen that passed as his nicest clothing. The low roar of many voices in a small space drifted on the wind, covering up the plunking tune of someone on a guitar. To Eddie’s surprise, it wasn’t Violet who emerged from the tent to accompany them, but Maude. His ashen face mother had changed from her normal brown dress to the austere black of mourning that she’d carried with them all the way from New York. When she saw her son’s judgmental gaze she cut off any of his questions, “I am going to ask for plates for Violet and I. I will not be seen in public wearing that rag, and this is the only thing I have suitable to wear.”

“Mama, if Violet wants to come to the party —”

Tara touched his chest as she finished buttoning up his shirt for him. “No,” she whispered, “I spoke with her. She wants to stay here.”

Eddie saw the exchange of hostile respect between his mother and his wife and decided it best to let things lie. He hooked his arm into Tara’s. “Alright then, let’s go see what this John Butcher fellow is all about.”

They headed toward what the workers called the front of the camp. It was a small area set off from the tents by a large, open circle of withering grass supposedly meant as a place for families to have picnics or play games. No one had food for picnics or the mood for games. So far as Eddie knew, none of the families in the camp had children. Gregor took on the able bodied, which often meant not having extra mouths to feed. Eddie’s group was anomalous in that he had the youngest member of the camp, Violet at only eighteen, and one of the oldest, Maude. At any rate, the small grassy area went unused except for occasionally dumping off workers from the back of a truck when they managed to catch a ride in from the fields.

So it was that Eddie and his wife looked at the dazzling lights with astonishment as they approached. He recalled seeing traveling carnivals as a boy and likened the scene to that of a

massive carnival tent split open to pour out embers and sizzling meat. The far side of the clearing was walled off by a large wagon which had unfolded placards of painted wood out either end to create a large board painted to say "JOHN BUTCHER'S TRAVELING FEAST!" From the wagon itself issued another long board that propped up into a table. On this, pots bubbled and hissed between piles of vegetables and jars of spices. At its end was a frame staked into the ground with a hook dangling from its center over a large, aluminum tub. A large slab of meat hung on the hook. Eddie wasn't too familiar with butchered animals, but guessed it was the side of a hog.

The makeshift kitchen led out to a fire pit. Large, smooth stones had been laid together in a ring with the center of it filled with wood that had since burned down to a large spread of red hot coals. Various sets of iron grills and spits sat above the bed of coals, and that was where John Butcher held court. Eddie knew him since he was the only face he didn't recognize. For a man with such a name, John Butcher did not look the part. He wore a white apron, at least, but otherwise he looked to be an extremely lost bank teller. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow and a pair of black slacks with polished black shoes. Butcher was narrow in frame and gaunt in face, but smiled wide and easy as he spoke with the unending line of hungry workers. The man's hands worked deftly, turning or prodding or lifting or flipping the various meats, sausages, and skewered vegetables arrayed before him. As each man or woman filed past with their tin plates, Butcher served out more than generous portions of the meat before sending the recipient off to a nearby table filled with other morsels.

Eddie didn't know the exact number of people in the camp, but guessed the size of the crowd to be near two hundred. Most already had their plates full and sat at tables set up for the occasion. Some spread out on the ground or sat around on logs, all eating with a voracious and enthusiastic appetite. Another group of strangers had set up on the left wing of Butcher's traveling kitchen. These men plucked at instruments to produce an incoherent tune as they tuned and discussed what to play. Charlie appeared as Eddie's group approached. He had a smear of grease on his face and carried an armful of plates. Without conversation, he put one in each of their hands and started off before Eddie snagged him and requested a fourth. After that, they joined the line. Eddie and Tara made light conversation as they plodded toward the heat of the pit, and Maude remained resolutely silent with the two plates clutched to her chest. The line moved quicker than most Eddie had stood in over the past years, and he soon came to be in front of the searing heat and John Butcher.

"Another new face," Butcher said. Sweat beaded across his brow and along his chin. He wiped it away with the back of his sleeve. "Three new faces, each prettier than the first. No offense, young man. And this lovely woman has the right idea of it from the start, coming for seconds on the first round."

Maude stiffened to the point that her son and daughter-in-law thought she might snap in half. "The second is for my daughter. She is feeling unwell, but if it isn't a trouble, I would like to take her some food."

Butcher exuded a sense of ease that flowed over Maude's embarrassment at having to

ask for food. “No trouble at all. When it says all you can eat, that means every man and woman, those in love or those sick with it.” He gave a roguish wink that Eddie didn’t understand before he swept a hand over the sizzling feast alongside him. “Now, what can I interest you folks in. There’s pork, ham hocks and chops and bacon rashers and loin even feet if you care for ‘em. Then here is the beef. Mostly rib eye steak, but there’s ground burger if you’re not a fan of chewing so much. And rump roast, tongue, and flank and flat, shank and sirloin. Whatever you like.”

Eddie’s mouth watered from the scent of roasting meat. Half of the cuts on the grill would have been pricey even before his family went bankrupt. It amazed him to see them arrayed in such a plebeian place, and though he knew next to nothing of proper meat handling, from the smell of it, it seemed like Butcher did. At the same time, it felt greedy to ask for the better cuts outright. He handed out his plate to Butcher, “Whatever you think is best. This is awful generous of you, Mr. Butcher.”

The man’s lithe form twisted over the grill as he plated a steak and chop for Eddie. He returned the plate and took the next three from the two women as he answered, “Oh, it’s nothing. Doing good in the world reaps its own rewards. I’m one to understand what real hunger is, and if it were up to me, not one soul on this world would go without three meals a day. So that’s what I set about doing, one man or woman at a time.” He handed the heavily laden plates over to Tara and Maude. “I didn’t catch the name.”

“Eddie,” he said. “And this is my wife, Tara, and my mother, Maude. My sister, Violet, is the one back at the camp.”

“Well, you tell Violet that she’s more than welcome to join us if she feels better, and it’s a pleasure to meet each of you. I hope you come back for seconds, and don’t go scurrying off. The Lean Boys are going to figure out how those guitars work pretty soon. They lay out a decent enough tune once they get their fingers warmed up. Enough to dance to anyway. Let the weariness of the world shuffle off you for a spell, enjoy the night. And enjoy the food.”

Butcher continued to grin at them as they thanked him and made their way down the line. They followed the other workers to the nearby table laden with roasted vegetables and pan made breads. Eddie’s mild embarrassment vanished entirely with no one to watch him load his and Tara’s plates while insisting on adding extra to the two in Maude’s hands. Maude tutted at him, but kept holding out her arms as he piled on gravy to everything. Once they had exhausted their plate’s capacity, Maude made a small attempt to get Tara to come with her back to the tent, but gave up quickly and headed off. Eddie and Tara went over to a relatively empty table where the other late comers had taken to sitting. Eddie surveyed his fellow workmen as they passed the tables. They all looked entirely different from their normal haggard fatigue. Smiles, laughter, and quick conversation interrupted long periods of chewing and utensils scraping the tin plates.

Tara sat down beside Eddie eyeing her own plate with fascinated joy, “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so much food on one plate. Is this how it was in your old life?”

“This? No. We ate like birds,” Eddie said. “Plenty of it, but not slabs of meat like this. Say, what’d the Butcher fellow mean about Violet?”

“Hmm? Oh, that, yes. Strange that he would know, but I suppose Leonard isn’t one to keep quiet.”

Eddie frowned as he gnawed a hunk of steak. The rush of flavor caused his heart to beat faster in his chest. It took effort to remain focused on the conversation after they both oo’ed and ahh’ed over the taste of the food. “Leonard? That boy from across the camp, what’s he got to do with it?”

His wife laughed. “Boy? Eddie, he’s maybe two years younger than you are. And, if you bothered to talk with your sister, you’d know that she’s been going on walks with Leonard for the past week. She was awfully sweet on him. But, they’ve had some kind of falling out. He came by while you were at the pumps earlier. They talked in a whisper outside the tent while I sat with Maude, mostly to keep her out of it. After, Violet was a mess. A shame, really, the idea of coming to this with him had excited her.”

Eddie scanned the crowd until he spotted the light haired young man who had apparently broken his sister’s heart. “There he is.” Seven tables away, Leonard was sitting alongside a woman Eddie didn’t know. “Who’s that he’s with? Only got his pa as family, right?”

Tara pursed her lips. “It’s not our business. But, that’s Jeannie, she arrived with her family a few days ago. Three sisters and a mother who have very little family resemblance between them, if you understand me.”

It was hard to stay angry as he scooped more food into his mouth, but a deep dislike solidified for Leonard. He knew Tara was politely avoiding calling a duck a duck. Camp women were as common as dirt. He’d run into a set of them before he’d met Tara and been sorely tempted by the prospect. He didn’t begrudge anyone the means of surviving and women’s work was even more rare than men’s labor. He only wished Leonard would have more sense than to give himself over to a woman that will drop him as soon as he has nothing left to give her. Particularly if it meant disappointing Violet in the process. He picked a chunk of fat out of his teeth and said, “If that’s the kind of woman that turns his head, Violet is better off without him.”

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Tara said. “Not so long ago, you were pretty easily turned by a flash of thigh. I think you’d have left your mother in a ditch if I’d made a fuss of it.”

His hand, still slick with grease slid under the table and drew her dress up past her knee before taking a greedy grip on her upper thigh. “If I have to balance out getting to lay beside you in bed with having a harpy mother follow me all the way to starvation, I think picking you is the right choice.” They leaned close and kissed, sharing the taste of pork loin on their lips. Her heat thrilled him. He considered pulling her closer, but his stomach ached for more food. She broke off and returned her attention to her own plate, but not before moving a hand under the table to find her husband’s crotch and giving the hard lump she found a promising squeeze.

Before they realized it, both had cleaned their plates. Eddie did the last few licks with his tongue, half to embarrass his wife and half to actually clean off the delicious drippings left behind. Tara took his plate and told him she'd bring back second helpings before going off to rejoin the line. The scent of meat and smoke had grown heavier. The Lean Boys, which was apparently the name of their band, found their playing ability, as promised. Upbeat songs clattered over the din of eating and talking. John Butcher had left the grill to one of his helpers and gone into his traveling wagon. He rolled out a barrel that a few of the men cheered along as it left small treads in the grass. They hoisted it up onto a table. Butcher brandished a spike tap to the cheers of the crowd before hammering it in through the wood with a meat mallet. A few seconds later, amber colored beer sprayed the ground. John Butcher filled a mug and tested it before raising it to the crowd. Though no one left the food line, plenty of people halfway through their first or second plate made their way to the keg and filled their cups to the brim with the beer. Eddie hoped everyone would have the sense to go easy on the liquor, even if it was mostly water. He'd tasted a beer back east, but otherwise had seen only moonshine being traded in the camps. Wherever John Butcher procured a whole keg of beer, the men were fanatically grateful for it.

Tara returned with two full plates. No sooner had she put them down than they both set into them with vicious hunger. At the back of his mind, Eddie wondered how he could still be so hungry after eating pounds of meat. In fact, no one's appetite seemed to be abating. Every person with food in front of them ate like wild animals, gorging themselves as fast as possible and barely tasting the things shoveled into their hungry mouths. The music changed as the last rays of sunlight disappeared from the sky. John Butcher prowled around the grill, stoking the fire to cast flickering light across the cheering, chewing crowd. The Lean Boy's choices in songs changed from the jaunty tunes most people recognized to a more plinking and even grating sound. Nevertheless, many of the camp members took to the clear patch of grass to do their best at dancing. Feeling he had to show the crowd what proper society dancing looked like, he led Tara out to the patch before realizing he hadn't the faintest clue how to match his memorized steps to the twanging song. Tara, however, had no such trouble. She found the elusive rhythm easily and led her husband in a twirling and swaying dance that pressed them close enough together to quicken their blood.

When the song stopped, another cheer went up from the crowd. The Lean Boys went into their next number right away, but Eddie and Tara had other things on their mind. They hurried away from the firelight and into the deserted camp. They passed far enough from the edge of the light for some privacy before Eddie pulled his wife to the ground. Tara hiked up her skirt as their mouths pressed together. Her hand went to her husband's cock, rubbing it through his trousers as his hand slid into her underwear. He stroked through the short hairs before sliding against her dripping pussy lips. She gasped, but he swallowed the sound with another kiss that broke as he smiled. He left a trail of kisses along her cheek as his hand slid up and down her lips, gathering her wetness for the inevitable plunge into her hot depths. He wanted to tease her so he could feel her writhing underneath him. They would have time for him later, though it wouldn't be needed if she kept up her work at his cock.

Her hand made its way into his pants through sheer force of will. They'd not had much time to be intimate together, and neither had claim to worldliness. As such, while he'd done his best to please her with his fingers as a slow introduction, she'd never taken much interest in handling his manhood. Feeling her searching fingertips reach his throbbing cock almost sent him into a frenzy. Her hand closing uncomfortably around him in the confined space caused him to grunt with frustration. He breathed hot against her ear and pushed his ring and middle finger into her dripping pussy. It sent a thrill through her that stunned her work at his cock and gave him a much needed breather to avoid making a mess of his pants. To his surprise, pushing in to the base of his fingers caused her to tense fully. Her head craned up into his neck as her other arm pulled him to her. She whimpered through clenched teeth as she came. Eddie remained still, allowing her to use him for leverage while mostly unsure of what to do. She'd orgasmed a few times in their hurried fucks since marriage, but never so easily or quickly.

Before they could move on to another activity, John Butcher's voice echoed out over the end of the Lean Boy's song. "Eat up, folks. No sense it going to waste. Enjoy it! Feast! The fatted hog knows naught of the farmer's new cleaver. Eat, sing, dance."

The phrase caught in Eddie's head as he pulled back from Tara. "What did he say?"

"He said we should eat," Tara said as she hoisted herself up. She grabbed Eddie's arm and pulled at him. "C'mon, I'm hungry."

They returned to the party to find others also shuffling out of the woods, called back by John Butcher's siren song of gluttonous promise. The line had been abandoned for mobs around large trays of meat. The workers weren't even bothering to put the meat on their plates, but grabbing it up with their hands. Eddie thought it was boorish and rude, but it didn't strike him as unusual. The food was delicious, it only made sense for them to eat it as quickly as possible. No shortage of it was in sight, either. He and Tara went over to the table where they'd eaten to find a wide platter entirely for themselves. Without a word, they grabbed the grilled chops and began to gnaw.

The music rose again and drew Eddie's attention away from his meal. Another of the couples that emerged from the dark had taken to the patch for dancing with plump sausages clutched in their hands. Leonard and Jeannie took greedy bites between the steps. When their treats were gone, they squashed together, greasy hands groping one another without decorum. Jeannie's dress was loose in the back, letting her fulsome breasts show more than was dignified, not that anyone minded. Seeing the jiggle of fat breasts on the dancing woman put Eddie in mind of his own unfinished task. Tara had a smear of gravy on her cheek. He pulled her to him and licked it off as she tried to crane back to the table for another bite. He grunted, pushing his body against her until she got the idea. She made a mollified tone as she pushed her palm into his hardness which had gained a wet, sticky spot seeping through the fabric. Taking his hand, she pivoted them around so that her back was to the darkness. She put his hand on her thigh and slowly drew up her dress until he touched her skin. A moment later, he realized he should have been touching her underwear instead. His fingers pressed into the side of her bare ass as she

grinned and looped her arms around his neck, “I left them in the grass so you can finger-fuck me any time you like.”

Eddie hadn't had any of the beer, but still he felt drunk. His heart was in a panicked race, and his skin was hot. He pulled Tara against him, running his hand further up her ass. As delightful as digging his fingers into her ass felt, it brought a sense of strange vertigo. Innately, he thought he was holding more of her than he should. He'd seen his wife's ass fully naked rarely, but he'd touched it enough to know something was different. He spread out his fingers, attempting to hold the cheek with one hand and found himself unable to do so. He certainly didn't complain, but it caused a surreal shifting of the world that refocused him on her body. He saw then that she was altogether fuller. Months with little other than soup had left them all bony and paper skinned. After one healthy meal, Tara looked radiant. She filled out her dress completely, pudging out the waist slightly as well as stretching it to its tenuous threads along her hips. Her chest arrested his attention entirely. The dress bulged, strained across a pair of tits that Tara certainly hadn't had even moments early.

He didn't get much time to process the difference before she took his non-groping hand and guided it to the same purpose as its other half. Eddie's fingers mashed against jiggly, pliant breasts. Greedily, he probed at them from the other side of the thin material until he found the hard buds of her nipples. His mouth watered at the idea of closing around them and sucking. Her hand moving back to his crotch removed most options from his mind. He prepared to haul her over his shoulder and drop her on the table to fuck her until she wailed, but stopped when she pushed a hand to his chest. “Is that Violet?”

Eddie turned toward the place Tara indicated. His sister sat at a table with her arms splayed out in brutish manners while she grabbed any bit of food within reach and wolfed it down. He was mildly shocked to see that she, too, looked different. Violet had always been waifish, yet she had changed like Tara, growing more fulsome from top to bottom. This quality had attracted the eye of a man Eddie had already decided to have little patience with. Leonard sat beside Violet, apparently disinterested in her due to the presence of Jeannie straddling his lap. A dull part of Eddie's thoughts believed he should be upset. His sister shouldn't be exposed to such a thing. Instead, he found himself wondering if Jeannie had kept on her underwear or if Leonard's virile cock was currently throbbing inside her, bringing the rutting pair closer and closer to cumming.

“She's fine,” he growled. “Good for her to get out, away from Mama. Come on, I need you.”

They fumbled back away from the sound of music and laughter. Eddie's body thrummed to the beat of an unknown rhythm as he hurried his wife into the shadows. They reached their small tent and fumbled inside as they tore at each other's clothes. Getting off Tara's dress was difficult, but once past her chest it came away easily. Getting off Eddie's pants, on the other hand, took a moment of focus. He didn't understand it as he looked down at a flabby stomach, but the worry faded as they fell away and Tara slurped his cock into her mouth. He blurted out a string of profanity that Maude likely heard. Her mouth around him felt heavenly, for a moment

even better than being inside her pussy. Her tongue slid around his aching dick as she ran her hand along his shaft. When she released it, she did so with a loud pop before slapping his cock to the side of her face, leaving a trail of her own saliva across her cheek.

She rolled back on her plush bottom and spread her legs. It was near dark, but Eddie could see well enough. Her opening lips looked delicious in their own right, and he wanted to repay her the joy of feeling her tongue alongside his cock. But, he had waited long enough for her already. Besides, he had something else to feast upon. Crawling on top of her, he let the wet head of his cock nestle in her dripping outer lips as his mouth lowered over the erect bud jutting up from her fattened breast. His lips closed gently around it before he sucked hard, earning a breathy gasp as Tara writhed beneath him. He could feel her hips shifting to push him inside of her, but he held himself back, even if it meant letting his cock drip precum down her pussy. He wanted her to moan for him, and she did as she pulled his head hard against her chest, urging him on in his licking, sucking frenzy.

Unable to hold himself back any longer, he flexed his hips forward. The head of his cock pushed inside her, but came to a stop. He shifted and pulled back before thrusting again. He made it deeper inside of her and felt the walls of her pussy rapidly stretching while still holding the front tip of his cock tighter than ever. She stopped biting her lip long enough to whisper, “Your cock got bigger. Fuck me with your fat dick.” Her legs snared around his hips and any hope of remaining gentle faded as she pushed him inside of her. They groaned in unison as they shared the blazing warmth of filling and being filled.

Eddie came up from her chest and propped himself on his hands planted to either side of her. His hips worked frantically as he watched the pale flesh beneath him jiggle and shake. Tara brought her fingers to play with her own nipples, teasing him with the idea as he slapped into her over and over. They lost any notion of privacy as they bucked together, wet slaps clearly audible outside of the tent. Neither of them cared. Their marriage had been one of practical love, appreciating one another and enjoying shared company, but this was something new. Needful, desperate passion drove them. Eddie wanted to fuck her until his own heart exploded rather than give up the feeling of being inside of her tight cunt. He knew she felt the same way, ready to take as much of his cum as she could hold and more. This understanding passed between them in nothing more than a glance as Tara squealed a high pitch, unearthly noise and came, pussy walls clamping down on Eddie’s cock and forcing his own orgasm whether he was prepared or not. He went stiff before making three more jerking thrusts and erupting inside of her.

A wave of lightheadedness hit him as he sprawled to her side. Her hand went to his cock and slowly worked the slick hunk of meat as she caught her breath. “We need to go back,” she said. Her voice sounded lower than normal, thicker somehow. “I’m still hungry.”

She didn’t wait for her husband. Tara rolled to her side and backed out of their tent on all fours, naked. Eddie tried to follow, but pure exhaustion slowed him. He understood why she would go. The ache of hunger had returned for him, too. Minutes passed with his anger at himself growing. Tara was back at the feast, eating all she wanted while he was flopped over like a used rag. When he managed to regain his strength, he prowled out of the tent, not thinking

to dress himself any more than Tara had.

As he approached the ring of firelight, he heard a noise unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Behind the plinking songs of the Lean Boys was a high pitched squealing punctuated by grunts. Before he could see the source of it, he came upon Tara. She laid in the grass, arms draped around the body of another woman. Eddie's guts clutched together while his cock painfully throbbed to full hardness as he beheld the sight of his naked, voluptuous wife cradling the chubby body of Jeannie.

At first, he didn't recognize the woman. Even when he did, he didn't think it mattered. Tara's hand worked at the other woman's pussy, fingers slick with arousal. As enticing as that was, it didn't fully hold Eddie's attention. Instead, he gawked at the strangeness of Jeannie's torso. Like Tara, the other woman's breasts had swollen to massive bulges of delectable flesh, but Jeannie's condition had progressed. Beneath her tits, other teats swelled out. Two other pair jutted out from her, coming to swollen points topped with dark nipples perfect for sucking. Tara's other hand stroked down these extra tits as Jeannie wriggled in the dirt. His wife said something, and, reluctantly, Jeannie rolled over to her knees. She jutted her wide ass up in the air and wiggled it until Tara joined her in the position. Their thick asses slapped together while their pussies dripped wantonly as invitation. "I got her ready for you," Tara said. "Promised she could feel your fat cock inside of her. Fuck her like the fat little piggy she is."

Eddie didn't consciously obey, but soon found himself sliding into the carnal warmth of another woman than his wife. His hands searched forward along Jeannie's body, mauling at the tits dangling along her form. His partner squealed with delight while Tara finger-fucked herself beside them. Eddie rutted against the plush backside until his heavy balls sagged down with cum. He thought to switch to Tara at the last moment and give his cum to her instead, but Jeannie's ass pushed back hard as he tried to draw himself out. Her walls clamped down on him as if sensing his desire to escape, and he erupted deep inside of her.

Again, he fell away, but this time the hunger outweighed the exhaustion. The world had become a dull buzz of existence. He got to his feet and stepped over the roiling pair of sows he was leaving behind. Tara had delved between her new friend's cunt lips to lick out her husband's spunk, entirely unheeded by the man who had left it. Eddie saw that the tables remained filled with food, but as he reached for another slab of meat with the intent of returning and fucking some new orifice on one of the two women, he noticed movement at one of the other tables.

The sight of Charlie was startling enough to shake Eddie from the spell on his senses. He recognized Charlie from the distinct overalls with the flyer jutting out of the top pocket. The man's neck had bulged into a thick cord of fat in which his face sat, but it wasn't his face any longer. The kind, simple eyes of the man had been replaced by feral, hungry eyes of a monster. Heavy jowls lined with gristle worked around thick tusks and broad flat teeth to chew. A short, blunt snout stuck out in place of a nose, and flopped, pointed ears dangled off the sides of his head. His fingers had not become hooves, but they had wedged together into clumsy digits. The man had become a piggish beast and continued to gorge on the unending supply of food.

The illusion and disorientation snapped fully. With mounting disgust, he realized what he'd just done, fucked another woman. But one realization followed the other. Tara, as she'd pleased herself beside them. His hand had roved to her ass, groping it with lustful need, and he had pulled at the sprig of curled flesh jutting out from her tail bone. The noise leapt up from the background as he scanned around at the writhing bodies. Men and women fucking or eating as far as he could see. Some of them had changed monstrously like Charlie, but others had milder features, merely growing fatter or more seductive. So much flesh on display called to the dark thing inside of him that urged him to return to the stupor, to eat another chunk of meat and return to his women. He refused it, forcing himself to stare at what the others had become. To his dismay, he focused on Leonard's porcine features hunched over a creature with fat, red dimples a snout and a body fit for nursing a full brood of eight piglets. *Violet*.

He screamed and pushed the table in front of him, but it went entirely unnoticed except for a greasy laugh coming from the far side of the fire. Compelled to find the source of such a wicked noise, Eddie walked around and got a better look at their tormentor.

First, he saw the Lean Boys as they truly were. They were still men, but stripped down to skin pulled tight over withered muscle. These ghouls worked to haul piles of bloody meat up to the front of the wagon where John Butcher sat. Though Eddie had no doubt that it was the same man or creature, Butcher looked nothing like the smiling, affable thing he'd been earlier. This Butcher was fat, piles of bulbous tissue caked on the vague semblance of a human form. His neck was as swollen as a tree trunk, complete with rings of fatty tissue marking the different levels of his obesity. Yet, in some heinous way, the man looked underfed, a condition he was rapidly attempting to solve.

Butcher's mouth was wrong. Too wide as it was and still it tore at the edge, opening his flesh with jagged tears. Inside were an array of flat teeth that grinded anything that came between them as surely as a millstone. Beyond the teeth was a black void from which came a hacking, choking noise. Eddie immediately prayed for the disgusting thing to choke to death. A second later, the hacking produced a splintered bone that flew out with some force yet failed to clear Butcher's bulky form. A Lean Boy shoved forward another tray of meat, but the Butcher waved at the thing to wait. He fixed his eyes on Eddie and grinned, "Woke up, did you?"

"What in God's name are you? What have you done to these people?"

Wet laughter preceded the answer, "Gave them what they wanted, didn't I? A night to be themselves. You felt it to, Edward Rochester. Felt it while you dumped your cum into that piggy slut." A flabby fist slammed the table and dragged the platter to Butcher. He picked up the raw slabs of meat in his fist and smashed them into the void of his maw. A few seconds of crunching *snicks* later, he barked out an order for more that sent tendrils of torn meat flying from between his teeth. He turned his attention back to Eddie, "I told you, didn't I? I know what hunger is. I am *always* hungry. Gnawing, raking, paining hunger. Every moment I exist, I want for more food."

"But...they've become...monsters. You've infected them with some curse."

Again the Butcher laughed, “Meat needs to be succulent.” His other hock of an arm gestured out at the sky. “This is not my domain, and yet here I am. All my hunger and nothing to sate it. A deal was struck. My hunger can be fed if I feed another, too. Fatten the body and fatten the soul, feed the lust and reap the toll. I gave you meat, and you turned sloven, gluttonous, and craven. The meat changed your bodies, and you became deviants, cuckolds, and cunt-slaves. The soul is taken, and the body is meat for my maw!” His hand slammed the table again rattling the different plates and drawing Eddie’s gaze to the Lean Boy’s work.

They had a squealing thing between them. Charlie, flyer still in his pocket, shook his tusks as the ghouls to no effect. They moved him with unholy ease, dragging him closer and closer to the wide basin filled with black, overflowing fluid. The hook gleamed from its position in the cradle. One of the Lean Boys held it steady while another two hooked their hands underneath Charlie’s arms and lifted. They dropped him with a violent crack as the sharp tip of the hook burst out from Charlie’s mouth. Eddie pitched to the side and vomited. As he recovered, he heard the gurgling squeal of his friend.

Charlie still drew breath, jerking and kicking weakly on the hook. The Lean Boys peeled off his clothes before taking razor sharp knives and carving off chunks of flesh that fell wetly on a platter held to hand. Blood splashed incessantly in the bucket beneath Charlie’s cloven feet, and Eddie finally grasped what the Butcher was eating.

“Heh, heh, hmngg. I eat their hunger. I eat their lust, their need, their sin. Fear sticks to the skin like a potent spice. This one had a great appetite. He will be delicious. Edward, would you like to join me? No? Then you should hurry home, Eddie. I am not the only one hungry.”

Eddie whirled around to find the disfigured form of Leonard approaching with bloody tusks. Eddie wished for some clothes as he fumbled back against a table. He grabbed up a cleaver in time to hear a rage filled squeal. Turning in time to meet the transformed man’s charge, he landed the cleaver directly in the center of Leonard’s head. It made a dull, wet noise and dropped the unfortunate man immediately. Eddie’s arm ached as he yanked the blade free and scrambled away from the sound of crunching bone and laughter.

He ran through the camp calling out for Tara. He didn’t find her or see many of the others, but he did see a bloody patch on the ground lined with something that look ground meat. Fighting back the sickness, he ran for his home. On the way, he heard distant screams mingled with bizarre moans and punctuated by the periodic sharp bleat of piggish distress. He was calling Tara’s name when he reached their tent. A noise rose in answer to his call, but from the main tent rather than his and Tara’s. Bloody cleaver still in hand, he pulled back the flap of the tent where his mother had stayed behind.

The thing never rose from its position bent over the hollow, meatless chest of Maude Rochester. A hard blow to the top of the spine with the cleaver ended the horrible noise of tearing flesh. He acknowledged the monster was female and chose not to see any more than that. He left the main tent and went to the one he’d shared with his wife. He took his other clothes

and dressed, taking the time to properly lace his boots. He returned to the main tent and took the small oil lamp his mother kept. It had little fuel, but a little was enough. He went outside, lit the wick as carefully as he could with a lighter, and hurled it at the dry cloth structure. The glass reservoir cracked, and flame rushed up the side.

Eddie took nothing else and went to the woods. He found a hollowed tree and cradled himself within it. He wrapped his arms around himself and clamped his hands over his ears to keep out the squealing screams.

Some time after dawn, he walked back to the camp. The place he'd called home as well as ten others had burned to nothing. Many of the other tents had signs of fire or been overturned. He saw no other person as he made his way to the front of the camp. John Butcher's wagon was gone. The fire pit had been dismantled with only a pile of char and ash left behind. A few dark spots marred the ground, and a large basin sat obscenely in the clearing, congealing liquid turning rancid in the rising sun.

Agent Lang let the shiver wash over him. He'd heard his share of brutal stories, but hearing it out of the croaking throat of an old man put things on a different footing. Mr. Keeler, the former Mr. Edward Rochester, picked up his freshly filled teacup and took a long sip. He partially smiled this time as he sat it back down. "Did you find any other survivors?"

The old man shook his head, "No. I did not stay long to look. With no other recourse, I went to the main house, hoping that Gregor had survived. I don't know what I thought I would tell him, but it turned out not to matter. I found my employer sitting at his kitchen table. Someone had taken a meat cleaver to his chest until it was mostly paste. At the time, I thought it some extra level of cruelty. Later I wondered if it was a message meant for me, but that may be assigning me a sense of unwarranted importance."

"Your wife? Or sister?"

Keeler's face tightened. "I know my wife died that night. Tara was a wonderful woman, and I have missed her dearly for ten times longer than I got to be with her. Violet's fate is less clear, but the state of Leonard when I encountered him led me to assume she died by his hands. I hope that's the case, for it means I was able to enact vengeance against the thing directly responsible if not indirectly."

"Did you ever encounter the Butcher again?"

For the first time in the whole interview, Keeler shifted uncomfortably. "After that night, I stopped eating meat. Didn't touch so much as a fish for nearly twenty years. Then, one day in 1950, nothing particular about the day that I recall, I had an intense craving. Before I knew what I was doing, I had ordered a raw steak and eaten the whole thing. I still have the napkin I used at the time, stained with the blood of the poor beast. Immediately after that, I went to a brothel from which I was thrown out for raving like a lunatic some hours later, notably once I had run

out of money. The man who threw me out did clock me one, but knew better than to knock me too senseless. He left me with a bloody lip sitting on the curb of a street in front of an alley. I wasn't drinking or on any kind of drug. I remember that day more clearly than anything else in my life, even the horrible night it all began.

“The sound came from behind me while my head hung between my knees. Such a particular noise that I'm not sure you can know it unless you've heard it. Grinding bone and masticated muscle accompanied by the wet smack of teeth. I smelled blood in the air and knew the darkness in that alley wasn't natural. It was John Butcher. Demon, or whatever he was.”

Agent Lang leaned forward onto the table. “How do you know? How are you sure?”

“Because he spoke to me,” Keeler answered. “He spoke with that gristle filled, clogged voice and said, ‘It's good to see you, Eddie.’ And what followed...it was a chorus of voices. I heard Tara's in it. They spoke as one and asked me, ‘Aren't you still hungry?’”

*File HSA-32
Additional Note Regarding Interview with Primary Subject, Edward Keeler, a.k.a.
Edward Rochester
July 17th, 1971*

Mr. Keeler's additional story about his evening in 1950 aligns with two events we can now safely assume to be related.

First, the disappearance of thirty-seven men and women from Ceder High Methodist Congregation in Chicago on the evening of March 12, 1950. The existing speculation regarding this even was a mix between cult suicide pact and tax evasion. Whatever the explanation, our colleagues at the REDACTED happily buried the story until I went looking. Upon reviewing their file, I discovered the attached photograph which matches a description Mr. Keeler provided in his interview. A large basin filled and overflowing with what appears to be blood. We can safely assume it no coincidence that Mr. Keeler's second encounter with John Butcher happened in Chicago on the evening of March 12, 1950. This puts at least a nineteen year gap between known appearances of HSA-32, but I continue to investigate other incidents in light of information provided by Mr. Keeler.

Secondly, a police report filed by Madam REDACTED on the morning of March 13th, 1950 indicated that a customer of her escort service brutally assaulted one of her employees. The unknown man first engaged the services of the young woman before attacking her ‘in a feral manner that resulted in multiple bite wounds along the inner left thigh and outer right arm.’ The man then fled the scene before any further action could be taken. Obviously, this could be an unrelated matter, but I would suggest that no one escorted Mr. Keeler out of the brothel he mentioned. At least, no employee of the brothel did so. The blood on Mr. Keeler's lip wasn't his own, and, if there was a man who carried him out of that building, it was some form of John Butcher himself.

Naturally, this brings some uncomfortable questions about Mr. Keeler's actions on that night in 1931. Alongside his survival and lack of transmutation, his inability to account for his wife and sister suddenly disappearing from his narrative is troubling.

—Agent Joshua Lang

