

## Extraction

By Jeanne M. Rideout

What sane person walked in the marsh at night, when the orange disc of the harvest moon shone on the mist creeping over the cranberry pond, and even the scoffers bolted their doors?

Bad things happened to those who refused to believe, including little blond girls in frayed red sweaters, little girls who disappeared.

Rev. Archie Malcolm turned off the chandelier and closed the drapes. Sitting down behind the glowing candles, he placed both wrinkled hands on the oak table to show that his hands, like his faith, were unshakable.

“Who are you afraid is going to see us?” Deacon John Guy asked.

“Perhaps it is not a ‘who’ but a ‘what,’ if you believe Millie,” the old man said with a sly smile. “If Millie is right, the girl’s foster parents should be sprinkling Holy Water on their doorstep and wearing garlic bulbs on a string around their necks, not filing a missing person report.” He chuckled.

“So we stand on common ground,” John said. “We both don’t believe in vampires.”

“But this does not mean we shrug off the wishes of a parishioner,” the minister said. “According to the police report, the dentist was the last person to see Penny, and if Millie thinks the man’s a ‘weirdo’ and asks us to pay a pastoral visit, we should. As a Medieval priest once penned, aren’t we all angels born with one wing? It is by embracing one another that we fly.”

“We’re talking about a woman who claimed that the circles left in her tub by a rubber bath mat were made by ray guns and proved that the little gray men from Mars exist,” John said.

“When people don’t have the facts about occurrences that frighten them, they make up fiction,” Archie said. He looked at the curtained windows, beyond which the night hid everything.

“Anything could be out there,” the minister continued. “A coyote, a wild dog, a man gone mad. To get home from the dentist, Penny probably took a shortcut along the path by the pond. I’m asking you to go to his office, maybe chat up Dr. Moore, and retrace the child’s route home. A simple request to mollify a parishioner.”

“Then why haven’t you done it?” John asked.

“And what would that look like to the church council, for me to go chasing after frivolous rumors? After what happened to me in Boston? I made one error in judgment, and I was extracted from my position to this one-horse town that doesn’t even have a horse. If there is even an appearance that I am not living up to my calling, where will I end up then? A parish in Siberia? The North Pole?”

The woman’s screams cut through the walls of the rectory.

“Help me! He’s killing me!” she shrieked.

“Millie!” the minister gasped. He froze in his seat, but he was between John and the door, and the deacon propelled Archie into the night. Then John was not behind him, as he paused to punch 911 into his cell phone.

So Archie reached her first.

Millie sprawled on the dead leaves, clutching the gatepost. Blood trickled down her chin. The minister dropped to his knees with a cry and reached out to her, but his hands halted in mid-air. He felt eyes burning on his back. He peeked over his shoulder and, for the briefest moment, saw the dark shape in the mist at the edge of the churchyard. The vapor roiled and a snarling dog coalesced, fangs dripping, glaring at him before loping away toward the pond.

Millie slumped on the ground and John was there, rolling her into his arms. She stared up at him, horror widening the pupils in her eyes. Then all emotion was gone, and her eyes were dead as glass. Her jaws gaped, exposing a bloody pit where a front tooth had been extracted. John put his hand under her chin, gently closing her mouth.

The hearse disappeared in the ground fog before even reaching the end of the driveway.

“So I guess we should pay the dentist a visit,” John said.

“No, just you,” Archie said quickly. “No need for me to go. Doubtless this whole thing is nothing.”

As soon as the deacon was gone, Archie hurried inside the rectory and bolted the door. Then he splashed Holy Water into his eyes. The water stung and he splashed and splashed, but he couldn't wash away the image of the seven-year-old brown-haired girl with the big brown eyes from South Boston.

“Angel, Angel,” he moaned.

Dr. Evan Moore's office, dubbed the Molar Mansion by his younger patients, was in a white Mansard colonial with black shutters that was old when Grover Cleveland was a boy. A giant, yellowed plastic molar hung from chains below the sign engraved with *Pond Dentistry, Emergencies call 877-MOLR*. A large circular fountain lined with onyx glass beads that glistened like eyes under the rippling water covered much of the side yard. As John stood on the dark front porch, the water cascaded into the basin with a strange beat like a distant, ancient chant. Those unblinking black eyes under the ripples had made the hairs stand up on the back of John's neck ever since he was a little boy and his mother brought him in for his first annual checkup. He suddenly pictured Penny, wearing her red sweater, peering over the edge of the fountain before walking up the steps of Molar Mansion.

Before going to his desk at Pond Bank and Trust the next morning, John sat on the cracked green vinyl couch in the dentist's waiting room, twirling a ball point pen in his fingers. The answering machine on Nurse Jane Brackett's desk crackled on with the tense voice of a man seeking an appointment immediately, which was not a happening thing. Through the partially open door to the treatment room, John saw Dr. Duzmat, who worked the day shift, just finishing up with one patient, and the next appointment had arrived 20 minutes ago. Dr. Moore was not going to be in until the evening and was much too busy for a social call, Nurse Brackett brusquely informed John, and so, if he didn't need dental work, he could just go along.

Penny had now been missing for 36 hours.

John didn't get out of work until 8:00 that night. He walked along the path by the pond, his boots crunching on the small stones, alone in a gray world. A cold wind pricked the hair on the nape of his neck, and he pulled up the collar of his jacket. On his left, the pond lay suffocating under a heavy mist. On his right, skeletal tree branches poked through the wall of fog surrounding him.

Molar Mansion was closed and dark. He meant to climb up on the porch, turn around, and retrace the path back through the marsh to the backyards of the houses on Cranberry Place, the cul-de-sac where Penny's foster parents lived.

That was what he meant to do.

Then he spotted faint bars of light falling through the cedars.

John pushed his way through scraping twigs with withered blue berries, following pale light to the shuttered window of the treatment room. The louvers were closed and locked from the inside. John took the pen out of his pocket and worked the rotten wood until he had a peep hole.

A child with blond hair wearing a red sweater slumped under sedation in the dentist's chair. A tooth dripped fresh blood on the metal table next to her. Nurse Brackett stood over Penny, pressing a small paper cup under the hole made by the extraction. She straightened up and handed the cup to Dr. Moore. The vampire fit the cup between his incisors, sipped, then smiled and nodded.

The bizarre image of a wine tasting swirled in John's mind.

"Excellent bouquet," the vampire said. "Return her to the pit."

And what if Penny's blood had failed the taste test? John winced at the image of a small, decomposed body floating to the surface of the cranberry pond, another suspect drowning destined to end up in the cold case file.

Brackett had her hands under Penny's arms, lifting her out of the chair. In moments, she would be whisked away to... where?

John yanked out his cell phone and dialed 877-MOLR.

"I'm out on the front porch," he said into the answering machine. "I have a toothache that's driving me crazy, and I'm not leaving until I see the dentist. I know you're in there, so don't pretend like you're not."

Anger flashed across the vampire's face. Brackett dropped Penny down in the chair, and she and the vampire strode into the waiting room.

John ran his credit card between the shutters, popping up the latch. The shutters swung open with a squeal of rusty hinges. He thrust up the window, and he was in.

John grabbed Penny. There was no way he could climb back out the window with the little girl in his arms, so he didn't even consider it. He leaned as far as he could over the sill and gently lowered her to the ground. Then he scrabbled out, thrusting the shutters closed behind him, hoping to purchase moments. Too far away, a single pinprick of light shone through the trees from a home on Cranberry Place. He'd never make it. John grabbed Penny and raced toward the pond. He hid her in the reeds, splashing water onto her face.

"C'mom, wake up," he murmured.

A howl pierced the night. John yanked off his jacket and hugged it in his arms like a sleeping child and sprinted down the path. The harvest moon, a predator's moon, highlighted him in orange as he ran decoy. He heard the paws of the dog closing in, he felt the hot breath on his back, and then he felt nothing.

Pain rousing him, hands clutching him, dragging him by his feet down the path, dragging him over wooden steps, gouging his back, whacking the base of his skull- *Lift his head, I want him alive.* The ceiling tiles of the treatment room swarmed above him, then a descent into darkness, into a dank tunnel. Pain in his left wrist, then in his right, as iron rings clamped down, and blackness closed in.

Penny shivered in the cold, lying still, so still that frost grew over the arms of her red sweater. She watched her breath curl and float away, orange wisps gliding toward the pond. She didn't wonder where John was. She knew. He was in the pit, with the others. Tonight she was free, but tomorrow....

"Tomorrow, they'll get me," she whispered.

John looked up. Above him, sunlight filtered through glistening black glass beads. The distant throb of music, some ancient beat, throbbed in the gash on his temple. In his frontal lobe, grotesque creatures twirled.

His arms ached. He tried to move and couldn't. He was chained to the bricks of a cistern. Around the wall, men and women slumped, some flush with color, some almost bled out. Twin punctures covered the jugular veins. On some necks, the holes were distinct. On other necks, the edge of the punctures stretched out from repeated use.

Nurse Brackett loomed over him.

"You're in the sunroom so you'll keep better," the nurse said. "Fine blood needs sunlight to age properly. Your time here may be short or long, depending on the quality of your blood. Good blood means you will be savored and saved for another meal."

"So is my blood bad or good?"

"Dr. Moore hasn't had a chance to have a taste, since you never had an extraction," the nurse said. "Pray your blood is good. Bad blood, and you will die unpleasantly because you let the girl escape, and her blood...." Brackett rolled her eyes. "I have never seen Dr. Moore so pleased with a sample. And she is young. Carefully farmed, she could have supplied the dentist for decades."

Penny. His heart jumped with hope. If Penny went to the police....

"She can't save you," Brackett said. "Who will believe such a crazy story from a little girl? Don't you understand that we have procedures in place for such a breach? Believe me, no one will believe her."

Only an unhinged old woman like Millie would, John thought, or the minister. Millie was dead, and Archie.... John winced. Archie's resume should have listed his profession as moral coward. John had more hope for Millie to rip the tubes from her body and, spurting embalming fluid, spring up from the mortician's table than he had for the minister to confront Dr. Moore.

Nurse Brackett strode upstairs to the waiting room, because she was going to be very busy that morning. Dr. Duzmat was due in soon, and she needed to be by his side. Dr. Doesn't-Matter, as she thought of him, was dull and lazy, the perfect pawn, but let one kid fall off his skateboard and crack a tooth, and he acted like it was open heart surgery.

Between patients, the nurse planned to be on the phone, sniffing out gossip. If Penny was with her foster family, the vampire would know where to find her. Should she try to hide in the woods, he would sniff her out. Either way, it ended tonight.

As sunlight strobed through the trees, Penny skirted through the woods toward the church. She almost made it.

Harriet Klemford always said it was like she was born with a phone in her hand, like telephone wires carried her life's blood. Yet just let anybody tell her today that she misspent her days cuddled up on the couch with a cup of java in one hand and the phone in the other, gazing out at the ever-changing view of the pond as she chatted.

It was Harriet Klemford who spotted that missing foster kid and immediately, immediately ended her call with her hairdresser and dialed 911.

"I caught a glimpse of that red sweater and at first I thought it was a pile of leaves, and then I said to myself 'Leaves don't walk,' and I called the police right then and there," Harriet told Daily News reporter Mark Jones as an ambulance rushed Penny to the hospital. "Without my quick thinking, that child would have died of exposure, or worse."

Mama Tammy brushed Penny's hair away from her forehead, the worry lines etched deep into her pretty face. Mama Tammy was the prettiest woman in the world, and all the dish washing and laundry and baking in the world could never make her touch coarse. The only nicer person in the world was Daddy Bob.

"You're going to be our little girl forever," Mamma Tammy said, sitting next to Penny on the hospital bed. Penny wore one of those dumb blue and white cotton gowns that tied in the back, and her clothes were tucked in a paper bag next to the barf basin in the bottom of the bedside table. The doctor meant for her to stay a while.

There were two dinner trays crowded on the bedside table. Penny ate all of her burger and fries and butterscotch pudding, but mama had not even taken the plastic lid off the plate with the roast beef sandwich.

Penny faked a shiver.

"I'm cold. Can I have my red sweater?" she asked. Mama got the sweater out of the bag and helped Penny put it on, then got an extra blanket from the closet shelf.

Penny faked a yawn.

"I'm tired, mama, can I go to sleep now?" she asked.

As mama kissed her goodnight and headed for the door, Penny asked her to snap off the light.

Penny lay as shadows pooled in the room, listening to the sounds of the busy ward. She slipped out of bed, pulled out the plastic basin, and wrapped her sweater around it. Quickly, she bunched the sheet up under the blanket and topped the lump with the basin wearing the red sweater. Penny hoped anyone glancing in would think she was asleep, with the blanket pulled over her head and just her shoulder in the red sweater peeping out.

Quickly she dressed, hiding behind the door until she heard a gaggle of visitors leaving. Like lightning, Penny bolted into the hall and mingled with the crowd heading for the elevator, and, a button push later, she was in the lobby and free.

Beyond the churchyard gate, sundown slashed the horizon, glowing crimson on the minister's hands as he lit the white tapers on the rectory table. Having told her story, the little girl waited for his answer, an arm tucked behind her like an angel with one wing. Words tumbled in his head, words he grabbed at, trying to seize the right ones to extract himself from this situation. He tried to speak, then slowly, like a dazed man, he just shook his head.

The girl drew in one sharp breath, her blue eyes widening until they grew much too big for her face. Her eyes narrowed, and he saw her contempt.

"Then I'll save John by myself," she said. "Goodbye, minister."

The girl ran out the door, leaving behind only her unspoken accusation that merged with the sunset, a darkness pooling over his soul.

John tugged the chain in a sawing motion, working at the bolt in the cistern wall. The chain, crusted with old blood, was connected to the cuff on his left wrist, ran through the bolt, and connected to the cuff on his other wrist. He rocked the bolt back and forth, pulling it from the wall a nano-inch at a time. Crumbles of cement fell on his arm and into his sleeve, but the progress of pulling the bolt out of the wall was slower than the shrinking circle of sunlight filtering through the glass beads above. The light was shifting toward the wall in a thinning crescent. Soon, the vampire's night would be upon him. He didn't have much longer to save Penny.

Through the porch window, Penny saw Nurse Brackett leave the front desk to assist Moore in the treatment room. That was when she scurried into the waiting room and into the rest room. She left the stall door ajar to suggest the stall was empty and squatted on the toilet seat so her sneakers wouldn't show. Her calves began to burn long before she spotted Brackett's white nurse's shoes make a perfunctory check of the bathroom before turning off the light. Penny waited, counting off the seconds, 300 of them, before steadying herself and quietly stretching her leg down to the tile floor. Pins and needles shot up first one leg, then the other. She clenched her teeth and limped out of the restroom.

She tip-toed to the middle of the waiting room, looked into the treatment room, and couldn't go any farther as the memories flashed in her mind. She saw herself dragged over the carpet and through the oak door with the antique doorknob that opened onto a closet with no back, only an opening into blackness. She felt the nurse's hand clamping her mouth closed, so she couldn't scream, she couldn't bite, she couldn't resist, as Brackett dragged her down a stairway and into the tunnel to the pit, where the glowing black glass beads above her head stared down at her.

Penny shook. She turned and ran to the door to the front porch and turned the knob and set one foot outside. Then she remembered other eyes, the eyes of John, the eyes of the others in the pit. Her hand slipped off the doorknob.

Sunset shone on Brackett's desk, glittering on something silver. Penny grasped the letter opener, running her fingers along the slender shaft to the sharp tip. She entered the treatment room. The memories, like specters, again sprang into her mind. But she gulped, swallowing the terror, and carefully, quietly, opened the closet door, spilling orange light onto the top step. Penny made her way down the stairway.

As Penny crept down the tunnel leading under Molar Mansion, Archie was in a dark tunnel of his own.

In Boston, he had let a child die. The little brown-eyed girl came to him one morning while the others were in Sunday School, lisping a tale about how daddy hit her a lot and made her bleed. Archie came close to calling social services. But the girl's father was prominent in the community. Every Sunday, the bull-shouldered man sat ramrod straight in a front row pew in his expensive business suit, next to his proper teacher wife in her below-the-knee wool dress, with the child beside her, well-dressed and clean. Every Sunday, the father dropped a small white envelope with a big check in the collection plate.

Who wouldn't hesitate to accuse such a man of child abuse?

Before the little girl died in an ambulance rushing toward the hospital, she told the EMT about going to her minister, but he didn't stop daddy from hitting her. That was how Archie came to be banished from Boston.

At first, Archie thought being disgraced and nearly dismissed from the clergy was the worse thing. But when the little girl started showing up in his dreams crying out for his help, Archie realized that was the worse thing.

To salt the wound in his soul, the little girl's name was, of course, Angelina.

He thought of Penny's plea for help.

Again, he had broken an angel's wing.

Penny tiptoed down the tunnel toward the circle of light. The moans were soft. Those in the pit had long ago given up hope that anyone would hear.

John was shackled next to the door, throwing all his weight against the chain, pulling, pulling against the bolt.

"I'm here," Penny said softly.

His head jerked back. His eyes were rimmed with white.

"Penny, get out of here! Get help," he said hoarsely.

"There is no help but us," she whispered. She jammed the blade of the letter opener into the widening gap between the bolt and cement and dug. The bolt popped out, slamming John in the back of his head.

He scooped Penny up in his arms, casting grotesque shadows in the sinking light through the glass beads above, and dashed into the tunnel.

"Don't leave us," a man wailed. "Don't leave us here!"

For a moment John turned.

"I'll be back for you," he promised.

The tunnel stretched ahead, a gullet with a mouth on their freedom. John's shoes splashed in the moisture as he ran, clutching Penny to him. She felt her heart thudding against his chest. He reached the stairway. He took the stone stairs two at a time and leapt into the closet. Through the open door to the treatment room, Penny saw the sunset hovering above the trees, slashing gold underscored with red through the porch windows.

"We made it!" Penny breathed in his ear. John pushed the door fully open with his elbow and took one long step forward.

"Well, isn't this nice," a voice rasped.

The door crashed shut on John, tumbling him backwards down the steps, the links on his manacled wrists clanking against the granite. The letter opener dropped from Penny's hand. Then Nurse Bracket stood over them, breathing heavily. The door at the head of the stairs rebounded, bouncing open from the force of Brackett's thrust.

With a screech, she yanked Penny out of John's arms and thrust her shoe against his throat. John clasped her ankle and shoved her off him, clambering to his feet. Brackett fled toward the pit, holding Penny so tightly she couldn't breathe.

"Duck, Penny!" John yelled. Penny doubled over. A loop of chain skimmed past her head, pulling out several strands of hair, lassoing Brackett. As John yanked the chain, pinning Brackett's arms against her sides, Penny squirmed free. She fell back, onto legs.

Dr. Moore stood behind her.

"Rip her throat out!" Brackett shrieked.

Penny scrambled away from the vampire and Brackett flailed, tossing her body back and forth, blocking the way out of the tunnel. The vampire reached for Penny, and she ran into the pit, into the shrinking crescent of light against the wall of the cistern.

The vampire laughed, waiting in the shadows just outside the sun.

The night crept toward Penny. She bent her knees away from the darkness, where red eyes gleamed.

"Hold her, John!" a man's voice boomed in the tunnel.

"No!" Brackett screamed. Suddenly, there was scuffling in the tunnel.

Archie loomed behind the vampire, his hands, one holding a crucifix, thrust out before him.

"Look out, Penny!" The minister rushed the vampire and shoved him into the light. Penny rolled out of the way just as the vampire landed on his back in the pit, screeching as the light fell upon him. The vampire rose, flames trailing down his hands, and pounced.

Archie shoved the cross into his face and the vampire recoiled. The minister pushed his advantage, forcing the creature back into the yellow acid.

Brackett's scream punctuated John's gasp, as though he suddenly had his breath knocked out of him.

Brackett sprang at the minister, wielding the letter opener. Penny thrust out her leg and Brackett tripped. Brackett landed on her side, twisting her wrist, driving the blade into her chest.

Flames burst on the vampire's skin. He lunged, grabbing Archie's wrist, pulling him down. The fire spread up the sleeves of Archie's cassock, but the minister held strong.

The fire leapt and swirled, spiraling sparks, until Archie lay gasping on a pile of ash and charred bones.

### Serial killer dies in fire

By Daily News Reporter Mark Jones

A once-respected dentist stands revealed today as a serial killer who kept his victims in chains in the basement of his office, where he subjected them to a slow and agonizing death by abuse and malnutrition.

Dr. Evan Moore, who practiced dentistry for two decades in his Pond Street facility, set himself on fire as police closed in, responding to a tip by a local clergyman, the Rev. Archibald Malcolm.

The body of Jane Brackett lay nearby. Brackett, whom Moore had employed as a nurse, had been stabbed to death by the dentist, investigating officers theorized.

Rev. Malcolm, hailed as a true hero, was seriously burned as he attempted to rescue the emaciated victims shackled in the bottom of a cistern, described by one victim as “the pit.”

Ambulances raced to aid the four men and two women, all former patients of Moore, who were freed as police swarmed into the chamber of horrors. Even seasoned officers stated they were shocked by the crime scene.

Daddy Bob looked up from the newspaper story he was reading out loud. Penny sat on the edge of Archie’s hospital bed, holding Mama Tammy’s hand. John sat on a chair next to Archie.

“Listen to this part,” Bob said, turning the page. “The rescued victims showed deep psychological trauma, claiming they had been imprisoned by a vampire.” Bob shook his head. “Sad,” he commented. “Their brains must be fried to believe something like that. Everybody knows there are no such things as vampires.”

“What foolishness,” the minister said. “What this all comes down to is that when people don’t have the facts about occurrences that frighten them, they make up fiction.”

John and Archie shared a look.

“So we stand on common ground,” John said. “We both don’t believe in vampires.”