

Four local legends of the Southern Low Country weave their magic and power. Their stories intertwine in a world shaped by magic, hidden power, and the enduring battle between justice and control.

Powers of Persuasion

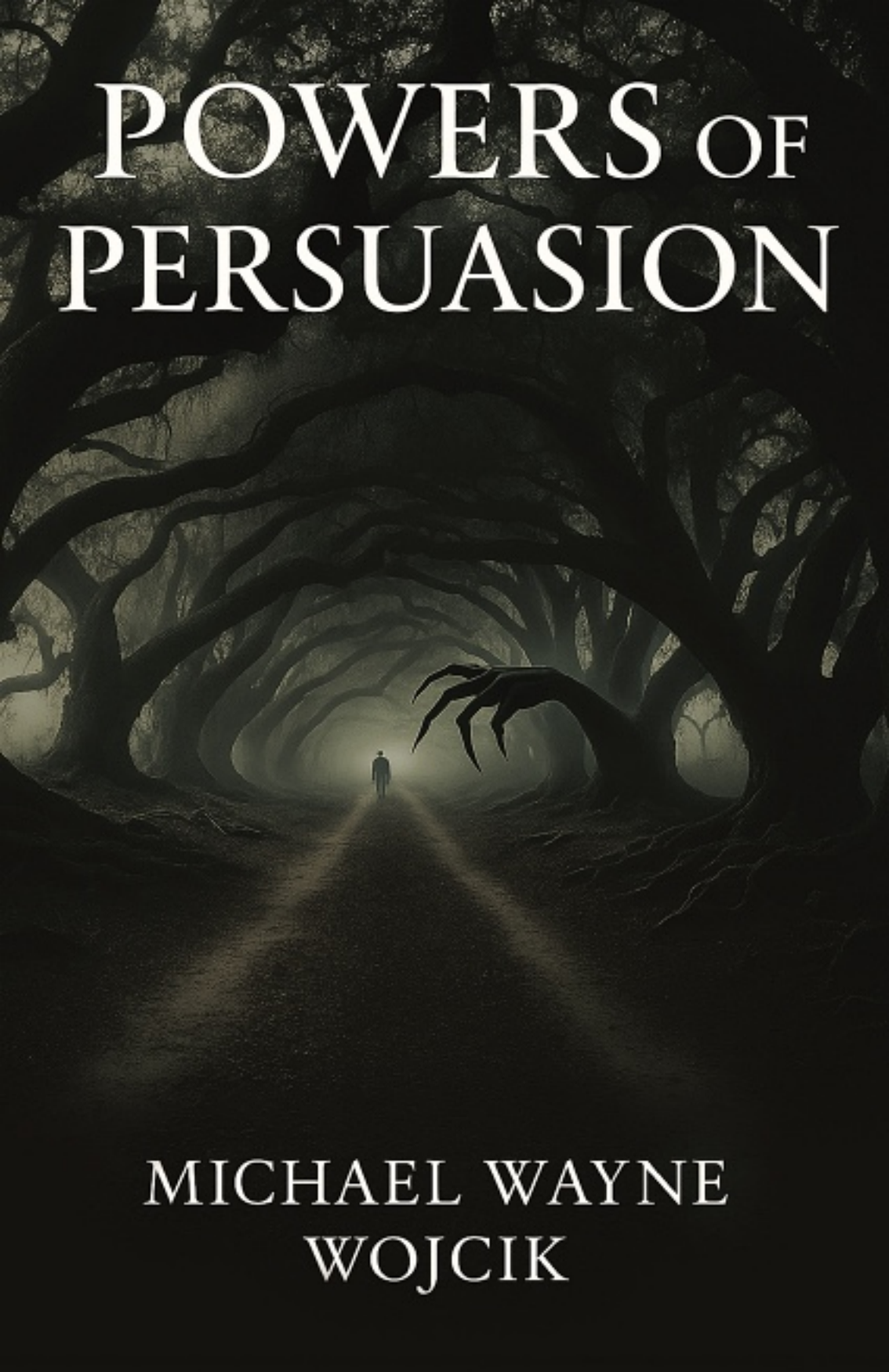
By Michael Wayne Wojcik

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POWERS OF PERSUASION



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This novel is a work of historical fiction inspired by true events, real people who are deceased, and documented history. The core of the story is grounded in extensive research drawn from books, articles, interviews, and archival materials, all of which are cited in the bibliography at the end of this book. While the main characters and events portrayed in the novel are based on actual individuals and occurrences, the author has taken creative liberties in reconstructing dialogue, dramatizing scenes, and imagining thoughts, conversations, and moments that were never recorded.

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Author's Note

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While the main characters and events portrayed in the novel are based on actual individuals and occurrences, I have taken creative liberties in reconstructing dialogue, dramatizing scenes, and imagining thoughts, conversations, and moments that were never recorded. These fictionalized elements were created with respect for the individuals involved and with the intent to honor their lives and legacies. None of the characters in this book are portrayed with malicious intent, and every effort has been made to avoid misrepresentation. The events and people that inspired this novel deserve to be remembered, and this book is my attempt to share their story with care and reverence.

As a tribute to the main characters who inspired this story, I have chosen to donate my proceeds from this book toward the Alston Legacy Foundation, which will award scholarships to graduating high school seniors from Beaufort, South Carolina, who have attended Robert Smalls Leadership Academy, and from Summerville, South Carolina, who have attended Alston-Bailey Middle School. I hope this contribution will help preserve Alston's legacy and inspire future generations to recognize the enduring power of education, leadership, and community.

Chapter 1

Michael Pickner, a Charleston businessman, curled up at the end of the bar in Beaufort's Gold Eagle Tavern and Inn. At thirty-five, he was good-looking and athletic, dressed impeccably in a double-breasted linen suit with wide lapels and a tapered waist. He had completed his business in town a few hours earlier. A fashionable South Carolina Sweet Tea Vodka in hand, he continually turned to look out the window as if he were looking for someone. As customers entered the tavern, Michael studied each one intently.

The Gold Eagle stood at the end of Bay Street in Beaufort, where it crossed New Street. The tavern, surrounded by water on two sides, dazzled with courtyards, balconies, and verandas. The walls were made of cypress trees from the nearby marshes, bringing a sweet fragrance to the inn. The saltwater scent from the river blended with the smells coming from the kitchen, where the cooks prepared shrimp and grits, fried pork chops, and local fish.

The bartender noticed Michael's anxious behavior. "You seem a bit nervous. Are you looking for someone?"

Michael stumbled over his words as he responded, "I'm okay. I just completed a successful business deal, and I guess I have a little anxiety."

The bartender looked at Michael with a quizzical expression. "If I had just completed a successful business deal, I would be celebrating. Let me buy you a drink."

Michael accepted the drink but first turned again to look out the window. The front door opened as he diligently studied the person entering the inn.

The bartender noticed Michael's continued, somewhat bizarre, behavior. "You are certainly spooked over something or someone."

Michael responded in a quiet voice, "I have this prescription for anxiety. Maybe I should get it filled. Is there a pharmacy near here?"

"Go down Bay Street and you will come across Luther's Pharmacy. Hope the medicine works for you."

Bay Street was the heart of Beaufort. A dozen buildings stood downtown, including a general store, a furniture store, and a jewelry shop. The street smelled damp and salty. An avenue of palmetto trees, indigenous to the South, lined the street beside live oaks draped in Spanish moss. Together, they wove a shifting pattern over the narrow, winding street. The gray-green river gleamed in the setting sun. The early prevailing wind, strong and gusty, suggested a storm was on its way. The long, intricate, gray moss tossed and waved like kites out of control. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Despite the approaching storm, Michael frequently turned around and glanced across the street to see if anyone followed him. He entered Luther's Pharmacy just as the clouds opened up, and the sky began to cry. The rain blew sideways, and all Pickner could hear was the wind in full force. Thunder clapped,

and lightning flashed. He quickly sat down at the soda fountain counter on the right side.

A voice from the back echoed, "I will be right there. That is sure some storm out there. Looks like you made it just in time."

The clean-cut pharmacist walked from the back in a white lab coat. His attire conveyed trust and professionalism. Most of his customers were White Southern men and women. Occasionally, a Gullah would seek herbs when their Root Doctor was unavailable. He tried to sell them traditional medicines, but to no avail.

The pharmacist greeted Michael, "Are you a black-and-white man?"

Michael stared at the man with a puzzled look. "Not sure what you are asking me?"

"You must not be from around here. It is a chocolate ice-cream soda with vanilla ice cream."

Michael shook his head. "Oh, no, thank you. I came to fill a prescription."

The pharmacist took the prescription and studied it with concern. "Some pretty strong stuff. May I ask what you need it for?"

"I have anxiety. I have trouble sleeping at night."

The pharmacist leaned in, his tone more serious. "I see. Are you sure you need a drug of this strength? Can you tell me more about your symptoms? I am a good listener. I promise not to judge you. Go ahead, it's all good. There's no one in the store but you and me."

With a look of trust, Michael disclosed, "I have a conflict with a person. I feel as though he wants to harm me. I sense his presence all the time. I am constantly looking over my shoulder. At times, I believe he has put a curse on me!"

The pharmacist nodded. "That is pretty heavy. The medicine may help, but If you are feeling adventurous, I have an unorthodox referral. There is a man on St. Helena's Island. He calls himself Doctor Robinson, but he does not have a license to practice medicine. The Gullahs always go to him for their remedies, especially for ailments like the one you are experiencing. Again, I warn you. He may suggest a remedy or two that will be quite different. You may be offended and frightened."

Michael nodded his head in agreement. "I will try anything at this point. Can I still fill the prescription if I decide not to see him?"

"Yes, you can, but please don't take this prescription along with anything Doctor Robinson gives you. I beg you. I'll call Robinson and let him know you're going to visit. Stay safe, my friend."

Michael left the pharmacy as the rain nearly stopped. There was a wet mist in the air. Pieces of the Spanish moss lay scattered on the ground. Layers of the palmetto canopies were pushed down by the wind, almost touching the ground. He decided to visit Doctor Robinson.

The blackness of night suspended over the Low Country surrounding Beaufort. A blanket of pea soup fog pressed down on the marshes. In the distance, fog horns sounded their eerie

warning. A car with a single driver crossed the bridge over the saltwater marshland. The car's headlights blinked in the mist. The wind became a whispering breeze as the fog crept in from the river. The car rolled along the grooved bridge, its tires humming across the tracks. The driver clenched the steering wheel, his forehead nearly touching the windshield. Beads of sweat slid down his brow. A road sign came into view, "Welcome to St. Helena."

Michael Pickner peered at the sign with relief. A Gullah fisherman stood off the side of the road near the river and stared up at him. Michael pulled over and exited the car.

"Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to the Oaks Plantation?"

"You don't want to go down there. It be dangerous."

Michael responded, "I have an appointment with—"

The fisherman cut him off, "I know who you lookin' for. You takin' away or givin' a Hag?"

Michael stared at the fisherman with a puzzled look. "I don't understand. What's a Hag?"

"I be messin with you," the Gullah boasted. "You best be careful. Make your next right. You be there."

The Gullah people, descendants of enslaved Africans, were Christians who also believed in evil spirits. These evil spirits known as Haints, Hags, Boo Hags, and Plat-eyes, were restless spirits of the dead who were unable to move on from the physical world. The Gullahs believed such spirits could enslave a person by controlling their will.

Michael walked back to his car with a dazzled expression on his face. *What was that old man talking about*, he thought. *A Hag. What's a Hag?*

The Gullah fisherman's directions took Michael right to the Oaks Plantation. He pulled into the driveway. The area around the house was pitch black, with no lights on the outside or inside. Michael knocked on the door. There was no answer, so he knocked again.

A tall Black man, dressed in all black and wearing thick, purple sunglasses, opened the door. His attire resembled that of a minister of the cloth. He sported a short-cropped beard and full goatee. Lines of experience carved out his forehead, suggesting he was an elderly person. Stephany Robinson was a descendant of a slave group made up of tribal healers who came over with other enslaved people. As time passed, the descendants' names were developed for their shamanic practice of root working, conjuring, tricking, and hoodoo. The first magical skill expected of a Hoodoo Doctor was the ability to place a spell on someone. The Gullah population gave Stephany Robinson the name Doctor Buzzard. He was said to be as powerful as a predator and to have the patience of one, too. His power and influence became unmatched. If you messed with a person's loved one or stole a chicken or cow, the "Buzzard Man" was called to put an evil spell on this individual. His specialty was chewing on a mojo root in a courtroom, which caused witnesses to change their testimony. Sometimes, they even passed out from the spell.

Mojo roots or bags were originally called gris-gris bags by African Islamic cultures. These amulets were created to protect,

heal, or connect the bearer with the spirit world. Root workers crafted them for people in crisis. Red flannel was commonly used to make the bag. Different ingredients, including a selection of roots, herbs, and animal parts, were used by the conjurer for different purposes.

“What do you want?” grunted Doctor Buzzard in a ghost-like fashion, wearing a crooked grin.

Michael nervously answered, “I’m looking for Doctor Robinson. I have an appointment.”

“You from Charleston?” snapped Doctor Buzzard. “Come in. I’m the Doctor you want.”

Doctor Buzzard led Michael into a dark, disheveled parlor. He lit several candles and motioned for Michael to sit. A black cat perched on the mantle, stared at Michael with piercing green eyes. The room was cluttered with many different and bizarre items. A canister marked Gunpowder, a jug marked Hoodoo Water, and a jug of whiskey filled a shelf. Small cloth sacks in assorted colors were thrown about the room. Feathers, animal bones, candles, and eggshell beads were scattered everywhere.

Dr. Buzzard looked into Michael’s eyes. “Let’s proceed.”

The Doctor took his patient’s right hand and pressed his palm with his three middle fingers.

“There’s a lot of tension in your body. You need to relax and let me ask some questions.”

“Yes, sir,” Michael whispered, avoiding eye contact with the Doctor.

“It’s a man who is giving you trouble.”

“How did you—”

Doctor Buzzard interrupted, grabbing Michael’s face and locking eyes with him. “It’s not a question. This man worked for you. There was conflict.”

Michael responded, “I had to fire him. Now, all he does is harass me. He spreads rumors and follows me everywhere. He tells my wife I’m having an affair. He even calls the police and tells them I beat her”

“Let’s take care of some business before we go on,” Doctor Buzzard asserted.

The Doctor took out a small piece of paper, scribbled some numbers, and handed it to Michael.

Michael gasped, “That’s quite a bit more than I expected. Can I write you a check?”

The Doctor shook his head. “My business is strictly cash. Don’t trust the banks. Evil White men run them.”

Michael dug into his pocket and pulled out the full amount. “That’s a lot of money. I sure hope this is going to work.”

“I wouldn’t be in business, would I?” bellowed Doctor Buzzard. “I only take new customers referred to me by satisfied ones. What’s the name of this individual? Please write it down for me. Write your name on top of his.”

Doctor Buzzard snatched the paper and disappeared into the back room. Mumbled chants echoed from this mysterious room. Michael leaned forward, trying to peer into the shadows near the closed door. Buzzard returned, taking Michael’s palm, and chanted softly.

“What was brought down upon me be returned to you times thirteen. May you get exactly what you deserve and more, from your head to your toe.”

Buzzard motioned for Michael to repeat the chant again and again. Michael obeyed and repeated it five times as he gazed at the Doctor, bewildered. The Buzzard Man raised a finger to his lips as he admonished Michael to be quiet. He handed his patient a half-black and half-white candle.

“Take this candle, and when you get home, inscribe the name of your enemy on the black part in reverse writing. Next, I want you to inscribe your name on the white part. Light the candle before you go to bed, and declare yourself rid of him by whispering the chant three times. Do this every night until there is no more candle. Michael, are you a religious man?”

“I go to church pretty often.”

Doctor Buzzard reached for a Bible on his desk. He opened to a marked page. “I wouldn’t call that devotional, but it will have to do. Every night after you repeat the chant, I want you to take out your Bible to Psalm one hundred forty and read lines one, two, and ten in a quiet voice. ‘Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men. Preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their hearts and stir up wars continually. Let burning coals fall upon them! Let them be cast into the fire, into miry pits, no more to rise!’”

Buzzard sat at the table and motioned for Michael to join him. He held a small, blue cloth pouch and began to fill it with strange ingredients.

“What are you making?” Michael asked quietly.

Doctor Buzzard exclaimed, “I’m making your mojo root.”

"My what?" inquired Michael.

"Be patient, and you'll learn. Only a fool is impatient," said Buzzard, almost like a sermon. "I have filled your mojo pouch with bindweed, a piece of snakeskin, a piece of a buzzard's feather, and other secret ingredients."

The patient's face looked confused and alarmed. "What is bindweed? Snakeskin? What secret ingredients?"

"There you go again, being a fool." Buzzard snapped. "Please don't question me. Take these scissors and cup," ordered the Buzzard Man. He thrust both items into Michael's hands. "Go into the bathroom on your right, cut off a small piece of your pubic hair, and pee into the cup."

Michael looked at the Doctor in a befuddled manner. "You want me to do what?"

"You heard me," the Buzzard Man snarled. "Go now. We don't have all night."

Michael entered the bathroom lit only by a few flickering candles. As he lowered his pants and snipped a piece of his pubic hair, he was embarrassed and ashamed. He carefully peed in the cup. Michael thought, *Why did I ever come here?*

Michael returned to the parlor, embarrassed and guilt-ridden. He looked down and avoided eye contact with the man in black. The Doctor took the hair, stuffed it into the pouch, and drizzled some of the urine on top. He sprinkled some graveyard "goofer dust" on top of all the ingredients.

"Did you bring me something from your enemy?"

“He left a gym bag in his locker at work,” disclosed Michael. “It’s in my car.”

“Go get some of his dirty underwear. It will have to do. A fingernail would have been better.” Michael headed to his car and returned with his enemy’s dirty underwear. He held it away from his body with a disgusted look. The clothing smelled of urine. Doctor Buzzard grabbed it, cut a small piece from the crotch area, and stuffed it into the pouch. The Buzzard Man held the pouch while he poured a small amount of Michael’s urine into it.

Michael watched intently. His face recoiled as Doctor Buzzard folded the pouch and wrapped a string over both sides.

Michael turned up his nose up and moaned, “It smells.”

“It’s the combination of the bindweed, goofer dust, and your urine. The urine will seal the spirit that I put in the pouch.”

“What’s goofer dust?”

Doctor Buzzard shot Michael with another annoyed look. “Why are you so questioning? If you must know, goofer dust is dirt around a tombstone. It will help remove and throw the spell back to your enemy.”

The Doctor handed Michael the mojo pouch. “I want you to pin this pouch on the outside of your underwear. It may sting a little. Do not fret. When you feel discomfort, the root is doing its job. Never, I repeat, never show this root pouch to anyone. Otherwise, it will lose its powers.”

He then passed Michael a small pillbox. "Take a pinch of this every morning. Don't wash it down with anything, let it dissolve in your mouth."

"I sure hope all of this works. I can't take this man anymore," whined Michael.

Doctor Buzzard put an arm around him and gave a firm, fatherly hug. "Your enemy is very evil. It will take a good month for this spell to work. Be patient. He will disappear. Death or serious illness will take over him. Once he disappears, please don't ask about him. Never mention his name again."

Michael exited the house, entered his car, and pulled out of the driveway. The morning sun rose over the steaming marsh. Gaps of blue sky broke through the trees. As he passed the fisherman, he looked down at him through the window.

The fisherman spotted Michael and laughed. "Watch out for dem Boo Hag spirits, my friend. They'll steal your soul!"

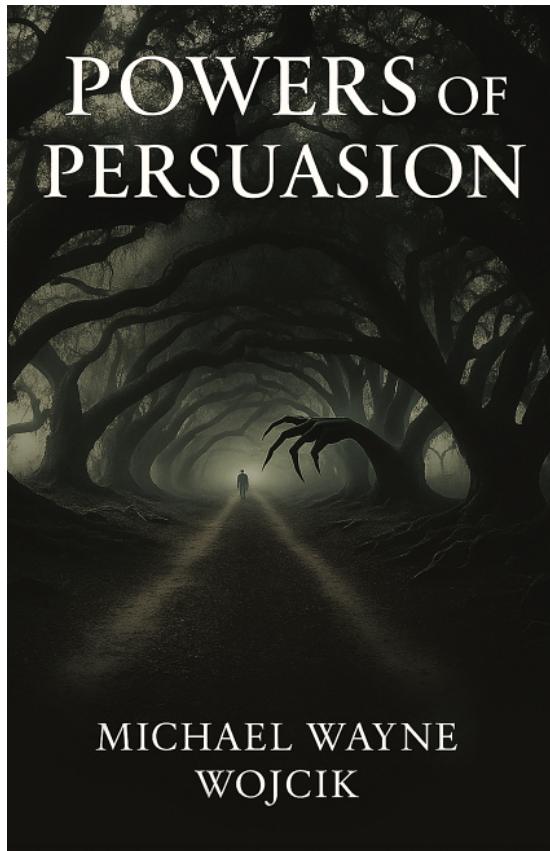
That man is crazy, Michael thought.

Michael lay in his bed at the Gold Eagle. The room was at the highest point in the inn. It was designed as a hunting lodge with a museum-like atmosphere. A round elephant-hide table stood in the center, surrounded by comfortable chairs. A buffalo head hung above the fireplace. Tusks and antlers were hung from the rafters. He pulled out his prescription and the pillbox from the Root Doctor. He remembered the plea from the pharmacist. To no avail, he swallowed one of his prescription pills and opened the pill box from Robinson. He took a small amount of the

ingredient inside the box, hesitated for a minute, and swallowed it.

Michael winced with pain. “Wow, it burns all the way down. I got five days of this nasty stuff to swallow.”

That night, Michael tossed and turned. He woke, drenched in a cold sweat, and slowly sat up in the bed. A repeating nightmare had robbed him of sleep. It felt so real. In his dream, Michael walked down Bay Street. He turned around and saw the face of his enemy. Michael spun back around and sprinted down the street, turning a corner, certain he had outrun him. He walked a few steps and turned around again. His enemy was right behind him, knife in hand. And then, Michael saw something behind his adversary. It appeared to be a dog, but the creature was much bigger. It was a Boo-Hag spirit resembling a buffalo that ran right behind the enemy. The spirit looked so real. The beast was skinless, with red muscles, protruding veins, huge fangs that dropped from his mouth, and reflecting eyes like Doctor Buzzard’s black cat. The beast had long, flowing gray hair, like a decomposed human corpse. The Boo-Hag jumped his enemy and mercilessly mauled him. Only pieces of the body remained in a pile of flesh and bones with no blood. The monster approached Michael, who put his hands over his eyes. Michael opened his eyes, and before he fell back to a deep sleep, the mounted buffalo over the fireplace winked at him. *A dream or the Gullah fisherman’s warning?*



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