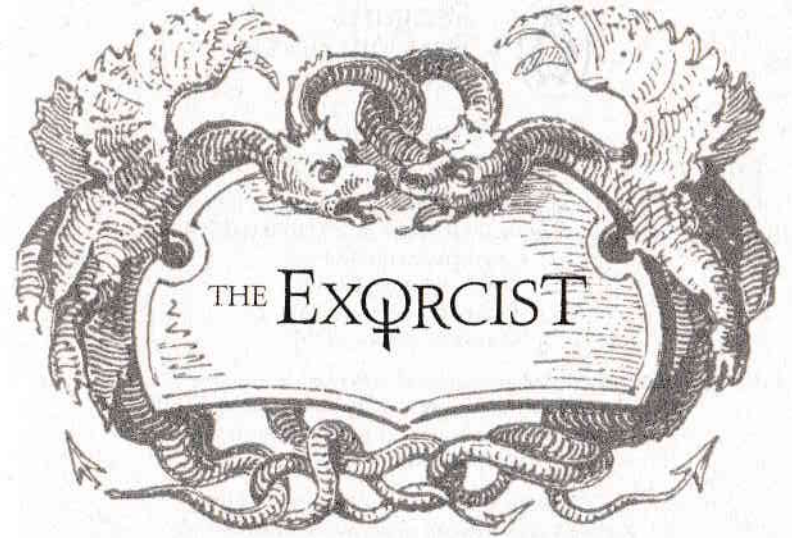


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THE DEFINITIVE EDITION



WILLIAM PETER
BLATTY



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Prologue

Northern Iraq . . .

The blaze of sun wrung pops of sweat from the old man's brow, yet he cupped his hands around the glass of hot sweet tea as if to warm them. He could not shake the premonition. It clung to his back like chill wet leaves.

The dig was over. The tell had been sifted, stratum by stratum, its entrails examined, tagged and shipped: the beads and pendants; glyptics; phalli; ground-stone mortars stained with ocher; burnished pots. Nothing exceptional. An Assyrian ivory toilet box. And man. The bones of man. The brittle remnants of cosmic torment that once made him wonder if matter was Lucifer upward-groping back to his God. And yet now he knew better. The fragrance of licorice plant and tamarisk tugged his gaze to poppied hills; to reeded plains; to the ragged, rock-strewn bolt of road that flung itself headlong into dread. Northwest was Mosul; east, Erbil; south was Baghdad and Kirkuk and the fiery furnace of Nebuchadnezzar. He shifted his legs underneath the table in front of the lonely roadside chaykhana and stared at the grass stains on his boots and khaki pants. He sipped at his tea. The dig was over. What was beginning? He dusted the thought like a clay-fresh find but he could not tag it.

Someone wheezed from within the chaykhana: the withered

proprietor shuffling toward him, kicking up dust in Russian-made shoes that he wore like slippers, groaning backs pressed under his heels. The dark of his shadow slipped over the table.

"Kaman chay, chawaga?"

The man in khaki shook his head, staring down at the laceless, crusted shoes caked thick with debris of the pain of living. The stuff of the cosmos, he softly reflected: matter; yet somehow finally spirit. Spirit and the shoes were to him but aspects of a stuff more fundamental, a stuff that was primal and totally other.

The shadow shifted. The Kurd stood waiting like an ancient debt. The old man in khaki looked up into eyes that were damply bleached as if the membrane of an eggshell had been pasted over the irises. Glaucoma. Once he could not have loved this man. He slipped out his wallet and probed for a coin among its tattered, crumpled tenants: a few dinars; an Iraqi driver's license; a faded plastic Catholic calendar card that was twelve years out of date. It bore an inscription on the reverse: WHAT WE GIVE TO THE POOR IS WHAT WE TAKE WITH US WHEN WE DIE. He paid for his tea and left a tip of fifty fils on a splintered table the color of sadness.

He walked to his jeep. The rippling click of key sliding into ignition was crisp in the silence. For a moment he paused and stared off broodingly. In the distance, shimmering in heat haze that made it look afloat like an island in the sky, loomed the flat-topped, towering mound city of Erbil, its fractured rooftops poised in the clouds like a rubble, mud-stained benediction.

The leaves clutched tighter at the flesh of his back.

Something was waiting.

"Allah ma'ak, chawaga."

Rotted teeth. The Kurd was grinning, waving farewell. The man in khaki groped for a warmth in the pit of his being and came up with a wave and a mustered smile. It dimmed as he

looked away. He started the engine, turned in a narrow, eccentric U and headed toward Mosul. The Kurd stood watching, puzzled by a heart-dropping sense of loss as the jeep gathered speed. What was it that was gone? What was it he had felt in the stranger's presence? Something like safety, he remembered; a sense of protection and deep well-being. Now it dwindled in the distance with the fast-moving jeep. He felt strangely alone.

By ten after six the painstaking inventory was finished. The Mosul curator of antiquities, an Arab with sagging cheeks, was carefully penning a final entry into the ledger on his desk. For a moment he paused, looking up at his friend as he dipped his penpoint into an inkpot. The man in khaki seemed lost in thought. He was standing by a table, hands in his pockets, staring down at some dry, tagged whisper of the past. Curious, unmoving, for moments the curator watched him, then returned to the entry, writing in a firm, very small neat script until at last he sighed, setting down the pen as he noted the time. The train to Baghdad left at eight. He blotted the page and offered tea.

His eyes still fixed upon something on the table, the man in khaki shook his head. The Arab watched him, vaguely troubled. What was in the air? There was something in the air. He stood up and moved closer; then felt a vague prickling at the back of his neck as his friend at last moved, reaching down for an amulet and cradling it pensively in his hand. It was a green stone head of the demon Pazuzu, personification of the southwest wind. Its dominion was sickness and disease. The head was pierced. The amulet's owner had worn it as a shield.

"Evil against evil," breathed the curator, languidly fanning himself with a French scientific periodical, an olive-oil thumbprint smudged on its cover.

His friend did not move; he did not comment. The curator tilted his head to the side. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

No answer.

"Father Merrin?"

The man in khaki still appeared not to hear, absorbed in the amulet, the last of his finds. After a moment he set it down, then lifted a questioning look to the Arab. Had he said something?

"No, Father. Nothing."

They murmured farewells.

At the door, the curator took the old man's hand with an extra firmness.

"My heart has a wish: that you would not go."

His friend answered softly in terms of tea; of time; of something to be done.

"No, no, no! I meant home!"

The man in khaki fixed his gaze on a speck of boiled chickpea nestled in a corner of the Arab's mouth; yet his eyes were distant. "Home," he repeated.

The word had the sound of an ending.

"The States," the Arab curator added, instantly wondering why he had.

The man in khaki looked into the dark of the other's concern. He had never found it difficult to love this man. "Good-bye," he said quietly; then quickly turned and stepped out into the gathering gloom of the streets and a journey home whose length seemed somehow undetermined.

"I will see you in a year!" the curator called after him from the doorway. But the man in khaki never looked back. The Arab watched his dwindling form as he crossed a narrow street at an angle, almost colliding with a swiftly moving droschky. Its cab bore a corpulent old Arab woman, her face a shadow behind the black lace veil draped loosely over her like a shroud. He guessed she was rushing to some appointment. He soon lost sight of his hurrying friend.

The man in khaki walked, compelled. Shrugging loose of the city, he breached the outskirts, crossing the Tigris with hurrying steps, but nearing the ruins, he slowed his pace, for with every step the inchoate presentiment took firmer, more terrible form.

Yet he had to know. He would have to prepare.

A wooden plank that bridged the Khosr, a muddy stream, creaked under his weight. And then he was there, standing on the mound where once gleamed fifteen-gated Nineveh, feared nest of Assyrian hordes. Now the city lay sprawled in the bloody dust of its predestination. And yet he was here, the air was still thick with him, that Other who ravaged his dreams.

The man in khaki prowled the ruins. The Temple of Nabu. The Temple of Ishtar. He sifted vibrations. At the palace of Ashurbanipal he stopped and looked up at a limestone statue hulking *in situ*. Ragged wings and taloned feet. A bulbous, jutting, stubby penis and a mouth stretched taut in feral grin. The demon Pazuzu.

Abruptly the man in khaki sagged.

He bowed his head.

He knew.

It was coming.

He stared at the dust and the quickening shadows. The orb of the sun was beginning to slip beneath the rim of the world and he could hear the dim yappings of savage dog packs prowling the fringes of the city. He rolled his shirtsleeves down and buttoned them as a shivering breeze sprang up. Its source was southwest.

He hastened toward Mosul and his train, his heart encased in the icy conviction that soon he would be hunted by an ancient enemy whose face he had never seen.

But he knew his name.

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The Beginning

Chapter One

Like the brief doomed flare of exploding suns that registers dimly on blind men's eyes, the beginning of the horror passed almost unnoticed; in the shriek of what followed, in fact, was forgotten and perhaps not connected to the horror at all. It was difficult to judge.

The house was a rental. Brooding. Tight. A brick colonial gripped by ivy in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. Across the street was a fringe of campus belonging to Georgetown University; to the rear, a sheer embankment plummeting steep to busy M Street and, just beyond it, the River Potomac. Early on the morning of April 1, the house was quiet. Chris MacNeil was propped in bed, going over her lines for the next day's filming; Regan, her daughter, was sleeping down the hall; and asleep downstairs in a room off the pantry were the middle-aged housekeepers, Willie and Karl. At approximately 12:25 A.M., Chris looked up from her script with a frown of puzzlement. She heard rapping sounds. They were odd. Muffled. Profound. Rhythmically clustered. Alien code tapped out by a dead man.

Funny.

For a moment she listened, then dismissed it; but as the rappings persisted she could not concentrate. She slapped down the script on the bed.

Jesus, that bugs me!

She got up to investigate.

She went out to the hallway and looked around. The rappings seemed to be coming from Regan's bedroom.

What is she doing?

She padded down the hall and the rappings grew suddenly louder, much faster, and as she pushed on the door and stepped into the room, they abruptly ceased.

What the fuck's going on?

Her pretty eleven-year-old was asleep, cuddled tight to a large stuffed round-eyed panda. Pookey. Faded from years of smothering; years of smacking, warm, wet kisses.

Chris moved softly to her bedside, leaned over and whispered. "Rags? You awake?"

Regular breathing. Heavy. Deep.

Chris shifted her glance around the room. Dim light from the hall fell pale and splintery on Regan's paintings and sculptures; on more stuffed animals.

Okay, Rags. Your old mother's ass is draggin'. Come on, say it! Say "April Fool!"

And yet Chris knew well that such games weren't like her. The child had a shy and diffident nature. Then who was the trickster? A somnolent mind imposing order on the rattlings of heating or plumbing pipes? Once, in the mountains of Bhutan, she had stared for hours at a Buddhist monk who was squatting on the ground in meditation. Finally, she thought she had seen him levitate, though when recounting the story to someone, she invariably added "Maybe." And maybe now her mind, she thought, that untiring raconteur of illusion, had embellished the rappings.

Bullshit! I heard it!

Abruptly, she flicked a quick glance to the ceiling.

There! Faint scratchings.

Rats in the attic, for pete's sake! Rats!

She sighed. *That's it. Big tails. Thump, thump!* She felt oddly relieved. And then noticed the cold. The room. It was icy.

Chris padded to the window and checked it. Closed. Then she felt the radiator. Hot.

Oh, really?

Puzzled, she moved to the bedside and touched her hand to Regan's cheek. It was smooth as thought and lightly perspiring.

I must be sick!

Chris looked at her daughter, at the turned-up nose and freckled face, and on a quick, warm impulse leaned over the bed and kissed her cheek. "I sure do love you," she whispered. After that she returned to her room and her bed and her script.

For a while, Chris studied. The film was a musical comedy remake of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. A subplot had been added that dealt with campus insurrections. Chris was starring. She played a psychology teacher who sided with the rebels. And she hated it. *This scene is the pits!* she thought. *It's dumb!* Her mind, though untutored, never took slogans for the truth, and like a curious bluejay she would peck relentlessly through verbiage to find the glistening, hidden fact. And so the rebel cause didn't make any sense to her. *But how come?* she now wondered. *Generation gap? That's a crock; I'm thirty-two. It's just stupid, that's all, it's a . . . !*

Cool it. Only one more week.

They'd completed the interiors in Hollywood and all that remained to be filmed were a few exterior scenes on the campus of Georgetown University, starting tomorrow.

Heavy lids. She was getting drowsy. She turned to a page that was curiously ragged. Her British director, Burke Dennings. When especially tense, he would tear, with quivering, fluttering