

Night of the Pooka by Dennis Maulsby – 1st Place Winner

A light glimmered in the rectory study window well past the hour when its occupants would normally be in bed. Father Ignatius Patrick Donahey sat in his favorite old wingback chair. His body shivered as he turned the pages of an ancient book. Finding the reference, he paused and reached into a jacket pocket for his beloved meerschaum pipe and leather tobacco pouch. He sucked the flame of an age-scared Zippo lighter three times into the brandy-flavored shag packed in the bowl.

The tongue-bite and honeyed smell of the smoke settled his mind and slowed his heartbeat. He reflected on the mind-boggling tales that had come from the other side of the confessional earlier in the evening. The first of the stories he could have chalked up to hysteria. However, the two confessions meshed completely. And, they came from entirely different people. The witnesses to the events, a teacher, and a sheriff's deputy, were both salt of the earth members of the community.

I am much too old for this, he thought. Happily retired now, his service to the church had started over sixty years ago. Leaving a tiny backcountry Irish village at eighteen, he had progressed through the Catholic Church hierarchy from deacon to priest to Monsignor. His lifetime of employment in South American churches slowed by aging, the bishop allowed him to select from a worldwide list of parishes with light-duty positions. His natal village now only an abandoned dust heap of decaying thatch and tumbled rock walls, he choose to re-plant his rural roots in St Joseph's church in the town of Winterset, Iowa. He would spend his remaining years among a population consisting of the descendents of Irish, English, Scot, and, recently, Latino immigrants.

He had learned to love the land and admire the people, walking and biking over the surrounding country roads. Each year thousands of encircling acres grew lush with corn and soybeans — a land yet to have its fertility leached out by human exploitation. Time now to read all the books and think all the thoughts — desires delayed and dammed up these many years by subordinating himself to the needs of his flocks. His only remaining priestly responsibility: to fill in when the local priests were sick or traveling.

So, he was handling the confessional, when one of the haunts of his pre-priest youth reappeared. A creature described in stories told and retold around the night fires of his childhood. His mind reconstructed the events described in the confessions.

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Shannon crouched in the eight-foot tall rustling September corn. Her breath came in jagged gasps. The noise of her breathing and the pain in her side interfered with her ability to catch the sound of her pursuers. Running through dark fields clad only in bra and panties took its toll. Corn leaf edges slashed and scratched exposed skin — the death of a thousand gashes. She knew from her teen years on

detasseling crews that the cuts could easily become infected; exuding pus and itching like hell. Currently, this was a minor worry.

She was more scared of dashing headlong into a corn spider web. The huge webs, invisible at night, stretched across furrows. A spider, as big as a man's hand occupied the center. It would be terrifying to have one wrapped around your face, imprisoned over your eyes and mouth by its own sticky web. She would scream and the bad ones would find her.

Five minutes would have made all the difference. If she hadn't been working late correcting papers, the escaped convicts would have missed her. The pair threw off their pursuers by abandoning their first stolen car in the night-dark Winterset Middle School parking lot. In exchange, they took both her car and herself. Purse open to retrieve keys when grabbed, Shannon had presence enough to drop her wallet without her captors noticing.

With roads and highways shut down as law enforcement officials conducted a manhunt for the two escapees, they holed up in her old farmhouse. Thank God, she was single; there was no husband or children to threaten.

They had not molested her the first day, their eyes and ears glued to radio and TV news, only requiring her to prepare meals. Day two, tension rose. It started with hungry looks that made her shiver. Their faces took on the grinning idiot-look of men contemplating violence. Shannon managed to keep out of their way until evening. Under cover of making a late supper, she turned the iron to its highest setting and started boiling water.

They attacked in the kitchen, pinning her against the sink. She lost shoes, blouse, and skirt in the uneven struggle. Biting one on the ear allowed her to spring free. She grabbed the iron and thrust its red-hot soleplate against neck skin. A male screeched. Shannon ran towards the backdoor. Fingers seized her thigh. She grabbed the pot handle; threw boiling water on the ankles of the second man. The screen door slammed back with the noise of a gunshot. She raced across the backyard. Plunging into the cornrows, the tall long-leafed stalks hid her from sight.

There were ways of keeping your bearing in mature cornfields. If you went straight down a row, maybe a mile or better, you would eventually come to a gravel marketing road. However, the criminals forced her to go cross-furrow, which meant she was probably wandering in circles. Darkness had come quickly and with it cold breezes. An hour later, scattered moving lights appeared in the field. Searchers called her name. Shivering, she figured that the authorities had finally found her wallet and the abandoned car in the school lot. Yet, every time she managed to arrive at where the lights had been they were gone.

Shannon heard stalks rustling. The two convicts pushed aside corn plants.

“It’s time now, you bitch! A fist punched her in the chin. She lost her footing and flew backwards.

Attracted by the voice, something large crashed through the field from the rear. She gasped as a tall four-legged creature, as black as India ink, and monstrously huge straddled her supine body.

A shocked curse came from one of the men. “Jesus!”

Her eyes swept up along hoofs, fetlocks, cannons, and hocks. A horse. It smelled of primordial sulfur and iron. Head directly under its groin, Shannon’s mind recognized

. . . a stallion.

One of the men raised her daddy’s old shotgun. The animal reared, struck out. The sound of steel striking steel echoed down the rows. The gun soared off spinning like a propeller. A burst of gelatinous fire five feet long blew out of the animal’s nostrils and lit up the dark.

A convict screamed. The man’s hands slapped at the flames devouring his face. Hoofs slashed air. A sound like metal hitting bone and the attacker went down. The second convict cursed and ran. The stallion pursued. Dry stalks snapped and crackled. Another fluttering flare of fire cut off a shriek. The blaze set jagged shadows dancing. A pounding, stomping, earthquake vibration that seemed to have no end followed.

Car lights appeared. Shannon rose and ran. The end of the field neared. From behind her came the sound of the demon stallion. The headlights grew brighter. Thighs burning, chest heaving, her body hit the wall. She stopped and turned. Down the cornrow came the coal-black horse. Its eyes pulsing with flame, as unstoppable as a locomotive. She turned to run again.

Hardly slowing, its head thrust between her legs, scooped up the woman, and let her slide down its neck. Shannon knotted her fingers into its mane, as soft and strong as the finest silk. Stretching legs propelled them at a speed that glued Shannon’s body to its back. Feelings of terror began to be replaced by exhilaration. The creature’s body felt hot, its flesh warmed her like an electric blanket set on high.

The wraith broke out of the field, shedding remnants of corn stalks and dross. Shannon could see the silhouette of a sheriff's deputy in the blaze of light coming from a patrol car's headlights and flashers. The man flopped on his face as the stallion threatened to run through him.

The demon increased speed. The cruiser's lights blinded Shannon. Just as she thought they would cash, the horse soared. She whooped and laughed. Everything lapsed into slow motion. The stars overhead stretched out into long strings of light. The devil animal floated over the eighteen foot long Crown Vic. They touched down. Turning in its own length, the stallion shook itself sideways. Shannon tumbled off and hit the ground. The huge head dropped to her level. The flame in its eyes flared. It spun and disappeared into the darkness.

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Father Donahey knocked out the dottle and repacked his pipe. He retrieved a bottle of Templeton Rye, another product of his adopted state's fertility, from a side table. Pouring two fingers worth into a small glass, he warmed the eighty-proof liquor between his palms before sipping. The second confession had confirmed the first. The reported facts and another reliable witness made it hard for him to deny or misinterpret the story.

A frightened Sheriff's deputy, Shawn Morgan, had followed the creature's four-foot wide swath of destruction through the cornfield to find the remains of the two escapees.

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"Father," he whispered, from the other side of the confessional booth screen, "I'd not seen the like. The dead men were pounded into the earth. We weren't even sure they were human at first. Besides being minced into pudding, what was left still smoldered. They had been burned over half their bodies. Their flesh appeared to have been gnawed on.

'And the horse. Black as the blackest night, eyes afire, it raced over me and leaped lengthwise over my patrol car with room to spare. Must have been twenty hands high, if not more. No plow horse could move like that. The hoof prints were cut deep into the ground with knife-edges.'

"Where was your boss, the recently elected Madison County Sheriff all this time?"

"I spotted him at daylight coming out of the field as naked as a jaybird. Inside the cornfield, we found his clothes, boots, and hat all in rags and tatters, as if they had exploded from the inside out. Hoof prints led

away from the site. He swore me to secrecy. I don't know what to believe. Father, do you think the Sheriff could be possessed?"

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Setting down the empty whisky glass, Father Donahey read from the book spread on his lap.

The Pooka: A Celtic fairy known as a magical shape-shifter. Able to take many forms, human and animal, it is usually seen as a coal-black horse with wild mane and burning amber eyes. A high-spirited demon, it frequently takes solitary humans for wild rides. In its equine manifestation, it enjoys running through crop fields and knocking down fences.

Pooka, pronounced poo-ka is from the old Irish 'Puca, which means goblin. The most feared fairy in Ireland, it appears only at night. The Pooka can bring both good and bad fortune. While the spirit is generally thought to be more fun loving than evil, there are stories of pooka's killing and eating their victims.

The old priest wondered what he should do. As he remembered, Sheriff Rick, although an avowed Catholic, had never been inside the church — never entered consecrated ground. And, in spite of being a rabid Harley man, had never been present at the annual blessing of the motorcycles. He also operated the only commercial stable in the county — one more horse-shaped creature roaming around his place would attract no attention.

Perhaps he should send a report up through the church hierarchy. Would they send an exorcist? Perhaps, they would not believe a doddering old man. Whatever happened, his peace and that of the community would be disrupted. He stared across the room. The face of a forgiving Christ glowed from a painting hanging on the walnut-paneled wall. He counted to ten. No revelation came.

In this case, justice had been served — the kidnapped and almost raped Shannon rescued unharmed. The two convicts had met an appropriate end. Civil law represented by the unharmed deputy had been respected. Evil had been eliminated. Interesting, he thought, the sheriff's oath of office to protect and serve the community evidently bound the alternate demon personality as much as its human counterpart.

Father Ignatius smoothed out the page and closed the book. He would wait. Deep in his heart, there still resided the wide-eyed boy listening to the tales of his grandfather before the peat-fed fire of the Old Country.

(Story dedicated to Rick Hildreth. who was recently bitten by a Pooka.)