# A BETTER HATE

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CHRISTMAS LIGHTS TWINKLED throughout downtown, from power poles and street-shop windows, sparks of shimmering color outshining even the orange haze of sodium vapor bulbs polluting the quaint charm of Onageo Flats, New York. Wild packs of carolers sang on distant streets, voices quaking out harmonies in the unseasonable cold. Over the Red Coyote Bed and Breakfast, the lights flickered in the pre-solstice chill, and shadows played beneath them, turning once-jovial wreaths into ice-rimed specters.

Uncle George spat a gob of tobacco juice off the porch. Benny watched it skitter across snow glazed with a sheen of ice, frozen before it hit the ground.

"Manitou," George said.

Benny sighed through uncontrollable shudders his ridiculous puffy coat had no power to suppress. "No such thing as a manitou, Uncle George. High Hat's just some angry bigfoot knockoff displaced by the dam like the rest of us."

George spat again. "Not *a* manitou. Manitou. The way your ancestors meant it. This town's life-force is failing."

Benny's ancestors, as far as he knew, were more from Eastern Europe than the wilds of New York, but George always insisted their Algonquin blood overruled all that, "especially out here beyond the Western Door." Things like this were important to Uncle George, even a mile off the Reservation, so despite a waiting cup of hot chocolate with peppermint vodka and a wood stove set to blasting, Benny hunkered down further in his coat and stamped his feet in his too-thin boots and asked a question he didn't want answered.

"How's that?"

"When George Washington pushed the Mahican from the River, most fled north into Canada, but a few of us found another home among the Seneca people. Just a few of us. But we brought with us our manitou, our

spirit, and even today it survives, even today it fights against the violence done to our bodies and our ways. Maybe the Onodowaga's manitou could have held this place, but the white man's manitou is weak, from stolen water. And it's failing."

The lights flickered again, and George raised a withered hand to gesture vaguely at them, as if they made some kind of point.

"That's just the wind, Uncle George." Another icy blast emphasized Benny's point. "The only vengeful spirit around here's in the shed. I think—"

"How can you think when you don't know? Kids today don't learn the history, don't learn the lore. All they do—"

Benny let the old man grumble-ramble a few minutes about the swampland drained to make the town and a dozen other things, then breathed a sigh of relief when Uncle George finally wheeled forward, the signal that he wanted to be pushed back inside, over the lip into the foyer, where the warm air scented with cloves and cinnamon hit them like a wall.

"—and now that it's come, you'll see it's nothing to laugh about."

"I wasn't laughing, Uncle George."

His mother—Uncle George's niece—bumped the door closed with her hip, then handed them both a cup of spiked hot chocolate as soon as they'd removed their coats.

"Leave the boy alone, George. It's Founder's Day!"

George glared at her with his one good eye over the steaming mug of cocoa. "All the more reason to take care, little girl. These times carry power, and it's not something to take lightly. This town is ripe for a harvest."

She snorted. "They're tourists, not grain."

"Much the same."

She scowled at him, he returned it, and Benny caught something unspoken he didn't understand, something he knew they wouldn't tolerate him asking about. George wheeled himself in front of the great room television and set about ignoring them in favor of *The Price is Right*.

Benny's mother's scowl turned into a smile as she turned to him. "Now finish your drink and check on the guests in room three. They didn't come down for dinner and maybe want some room service." She lowered her voice. "We could use the scratch, and that squash soup from Thursday isn't getting any fresher."

He bounded up the stairs and walked down the hall to what had once been his father's study, back when their home was a home and not a revenue-generating machine dependent upon tourists looking to carve out a slice of memories from a hunk of Americana, back when the town was just a dying coal-country town and not a hot-spot destination for those escaping "The City," be that Pittsburgh or New York or Philadelphia or even Cleveland.

Back when he had a father.

After three unanswered knocks, he tried the knob.

Icy air rushed from the open window, billowing the filmy, gossamer blinds that overlooked the Norman Rockwell downtown that had once been boggy marsh. Beneath the window, the Colemans lay entwined on the bed, mouths agape, eyes wide in the unending horror of death. Ice crusted their ravaged bodies, and purplish, ropy entrails lay scattered and spattered about the room. Bright red gore smeared the walls and soaked into the bedspread and mattress. Marlie's thigh and buttocks lay exposed, great hunks of muscle and fat torn from white bone. Andrew's left arm ended at the shoulder, a ragged, crimson mass of torn meat. His right foot lay next to the nightstand, shattered bone protruding where his toes should have been.

A pinprick pair of lights drew his eyes to the window. They grew larger, and larger still, to the size of quarters, bloodshot sclera and ice-blue irises ringed pupils so black they sucked in the universe. It blinked twice with sideways eyelids from deep under a knobby brow. The creature pulled back and, left-handed, set a giant stovepipe hat on its head. It grinned, and Christmas lights that should have come down a month ago twinkled in the bloody sheen on its serrated teeth.

Benny opened his mouth to scream, and the thing vanished from the window in a soaring leap onto the roof of the pastry shop next door.

He stumbled back, almost fell down the stairs, and when he reached the landing, wrapped his mother in an embrace. His gorge rose, and he swallowed the acrid bile into a stomach already churning.

"Abe is loose."

Her body went rigid. After a moment, she dug her nails into his arms, then released, took a deep breath.

"That stupid, pig-headed bastard," she said in his ear.

"We need to—"

"Son, let me worry about George. You know where it's going."

He sighed, deep and long, and tried not to let the fear creep into his voice.

"I'll get the gun."

Marcy put her hand on her uncle's shoulder. He reached up and squeezed it, his papery skin hot with fever.

"You let it free."

He wheezed by way of reply, anemic and weak.

"Why?"

George cleared his throat. "They took our land, killed our people, drove us—"

"Why *now*? We agreed Benny would be twenty. I had another year to train him."

"He's a man. And I couldn't bear one more Founding Day ceremony. Might not live to the next, and what then?"

"He's a *boy*, who knows too little of the old ways."

"And whose fault is that?"

"As much yours as mine. And his father's. And your brother's."

He grunted, as close as he ever came to a concession.

"I had another year."

"And now you do not."

"You unleashed a *demon*. Again, George."

George grunted. "High Hat is a demon, yes, but a *New World* demon, driven mad by the dam at Kinzua and the flooding of Cornplanter's grave. A New World wendigo needs a New World man to bring it to heel. The boy is up to it."

Despite herself, she snarled. "Tonight is the festival at the gazebo, you old fool. It's going to kill them all."

He chuckled. "All? No. Just enough. And that's why it had to be tonight. Hundreds gathered in their coats and mittens to see the town hall light up, chanting their prayers to their dead god in gratitude for stolen land and drowned magic. And when that building lies in ashes among their bodies, your boy will be a hero."

"You may have killed him."

After a long slurp of cocoa, George licked his lips.

"Maybe. But we all die, Marcy. And if you're right, then this . . . this isn't a mistake I'll live through." He held up his empty cup. "Be a dear and get me another?"

Benny caught the first footprint in the dirty snowbank next to Caruso's Café, a bloody smear over dingy white, and another bloody smear eight feet up on the streetlight pole. He already knew Red wouldn't track High Hat—dogs are smarter than humans on that score—but he had a good guess where the demon was headed.

He tried to ignore the tourists and erstwhile skiers frosting their lungs in the bitter cold, their wide eyes and shocked gasps at the shotgun. In thick gloves and a thicker coat, he had nowhere to hide it, no way to even make it less obvious. At least he held it halfway up the barrel, as unthreatening as possible a way to lug a gun down Main Street. Shivering in the bitter cold, a part of him burned with satisfaction at the ruination of their rituals—the leafers and the skiiers and Christmas crowd were bad enough

to the townies even as they ate at their restaurants and shopped at their stores, but nothing beat the Founders Day rush for sheer bumbling stupidity, rushing to a nowhere town to celebrate its great whitening. The local stores, on and off-Reservation, even sold dreamcatchers and little carved totem poles in blue and white to Live Laugh Lovers too dumb to tell a Seneca from a Chippewa from a Tlingit. Or a Chinese sweat shop.

But none of the tourists ran, as they should have. A ten-foot giant with an Abe Lincoln hat should have scared the shit out of everyone, but they didn't run, no, they only gaped at *him*, the brown-skinned local with the shotgun. For a giant, High Hat had a way of not being seen. A manitou, or whatever the Seneca would call it; a spell.

Headlights rounded the corner behind him, washing the street with a sparkling glaze, a winter fairytale turned donut. The flicker of blue and red drew a groan from his throat quickly overwhelmed by the sharp blip from what had to be a police cruiser.

"Whoa, there, mister, where you going with that thing?"

Benny stretched his arm out, keeping the gun as harmless as possible without dropping it, and turned around. Even the police car had a blue and white bow on the hood. The spotlight blinded him, blasting even the headlights into so much after-image, and he squinted against the onslaught in a vain attempt to see.

"Hey," one of them said. "It's Marcy's boy." Then, louder, "What are you doing, Benny?"

*Tracking a giant cannibal my great uncle kept locked in the shed out back, of course.*

"Doing, Officer?"

"You can't bring a long arm to the festival, you know that, right?"

"I'm not going—" Only, *shit. That's exactly where I'm going*. "I'm just going . . . hunting."

"At night? This isn't the Reservation. Why don't you put the gun down and we can have a little talk."

"I'm kind of in a hurry." *And I've never even lived on the Reservation, you racist prick.*

He couldn't see it, but the unmistakable sound of a hocked loogie indicated the deputy's opinion of that statement.

"Not anymore. Put the gun derukkk—!"

The choking noise turned into a panting, keening wail. Gunshots rang out, a pistol maybe, six, seven shots.

"Jesus! Jed!"

Benny stumbled back, spun around the corner of the building and squeezed his eyes shut. Sparks of color danced around a giant blue after-image behind his eyelids.

The man's screaming cut off with a gurgle. Things snapped, like a boot

on dry kindling, followed by a sloppy wet splash like spilled chili, then lip-smacking chewing noises.

Now people screamed. A lot of them.

He choked up the gun, got his fat, gloved finger on the trigger and the stock against his shoulder, opened his eyes to a squint and rounded the corner.

High Hat stood in front of the car, a cop hoisted one-handed above his head, face buried in his abdomen, slurping. The body shuddered and tried to kick, mouth wide and gaping, eyes wider still in uncomprehending panic. The other officer lay on the ground underneath High Hat's boot, neck spurting steaming blood across the pavement, turning the dirty snow cover black under the sodium glare.

Benny pointed the gun center-of-mass and pulled the trigger.

The blast deafened him, the flash another spot in his already-compromised vision.

High Hat's roar combined the worst aspects of a barking deer and a yowling mountain lion, a hundred times louder. Streetlights burst in a series of pops, and the blue-and-white strings of lights adorning the poles flared too bright to a burnt orange, then went out altogether.

Blinking, holding his breath, Benny strained to see with the police car's lights in his eyes. Nothing stood there—no hat, no glistening eyes, no serrated teeth.

He took a step, listened.

Another step, sweat freezing to his exposed forehead.

Nothing shuffled, nothing growled or roared or even breathed.

Another step. Both cops lay on the ground, literally in pieces, butchered meat strewn about the empty street. He dared suck in a trickle of frigid air that squeezed his lungs and hurt his lips. No odor rose from the dead officers, the cold robbing them even of the stink of death.

*Where'd you go, you poor fucker?*

Another step.

Finally behind the headlights, he picked up a pistol, checked the magazine—six rounds, to compliment the four left in his shotgun.

The lights had died several blocks in every direction, plunging the idyllic downtown into blackness under a gray-washed, cloudy sky. In that blackness, a twenty-foot flailing tube-man slowly deflated in front of the hardware store, but nothing else moved, nothing he could hear, nothing he could see.

"Abe? You out there, buddy?"

If High Hat heard, it didn't reply.

But in the distance, voices rose over a crackling speaker, singing the town's official hymn. "Herein Herein We Make Our Blessed Home" called townspeople and tourists alike to the gazebo for the annual lighting of the town hall.

Marcy brought him another cup, this one with a double-shot.

"Why the gazebo, Uncle? And why Founder's Day?"

George took a sip, then another.

"Well, why do you think I caught him there? Why did they center the town there, to hold their ceremonies and hang their criminals on that particular ground? What is it about that place?"

"I don't know. It just—you tell me."

"When they built the dam and flooded the Reservation, the Army Corps of Engineers condemned a half-dozen towns on either side of the border. The Onodowaga rebuilt in other sites where they could, but here? This is the killer. The white men drained the upland marsh, irrigated it right into the growing reservoir. All the birds and beavers and fish had nowhere to go. And neither did it. But unlike the *kìgònz* and *mikinàk*, the fish and the turtles, it couldn't just die and make way. So it stayed."

"It—that thing—*lived* there?"

"It doesn't live at all, not like you and me. Maybe it did, once, and maybe it didn't. I'm thinking it didn't."

"And why's that?"

"When I caught it, there wasn't much nothing there. No real spirit inside, not even a spark of manitou, nothing but emptiness, despair, and rage. A shell full of hate. Powerful, but it isn't hard to bind a thing like that."

"No?"

"No."

"Then how do you do it?"

"You give it something to hate *more*."

Brent Gallo waved and put on his best shit-eating grin, hoping his eyes carried what the crowd couldn't see behind the scarf. Three fingers of scotch hadn't touched the bitter cold, and three more felt wholly inadequate but sent his stomach into a queasy churn that threatened to explode out his ass at any moment.

Shitting himself in front of a couple hundred constituents and tourists held about as much appeal as dying of hypothermia for a fucking lighting ceremony. Three stories tall and bedecked with the finest livery these backwater rubes could afford, the wood and brick

building looked a hell of a lot nicer than any of the homes or other buildings, and the roof shingles could likely beat most of those residents in a game of wits. At least the tourists had a little class. And the right habits, some of them.

It might have grown from a shit-hole swamp into a shimmering shit-hole tourist trap, but Onegeo Falls sat six hundred yards from the anything-goes Pennsylvania border and two miles from the fuck-it-bribe-me Reservation, which made it the perfect node for the movement of certain goods. Fireworks, mostly—the yeehaw rednecks in New York couldn't get the good stuff legally and paid out the nose for it—but also tax-free cigarettes, booze, and the occasional crate of firearms or brick of fentanyl-laced yay.

It almost made leaving Jersey City to rule this little plot of heaven worth it. At least for a while.

"Mr. Mayor?"

Speaking of yeehaw rednecks, Brent turned to his chief of staff, literally his only employee, the corn-fed and husky Denise Heron, built like a Saint Bernard and twice as smart, her teeth chattering in the frigid breeze. Oh, how he wanted to slap the "I Love NY" hat off her piggish head.

"What?"

"Th-th-there seems to be a problem."

He kept waving, thankful that the scarf hid his scowl.

"And that is?"

"Earl Buck—you know, at the, at the dam?—he's r-reporting a surge. It's pretty bad, and he's got to shhhhut down a g-generator or two to check it out." She rubbed her arms through her coat. "Jesus, it's cold."

"What are you saying to me?"

"He's going to turn off the t-town."

"He's going to—right *now*!? Is he *insane*?"

"Sir, it's pretty—"

"You tell him that when I flip this switch, if that fucking hall doesn't light up like a goddamned Christmas Tree, I'm going to shove the whole goddamned thing up his ass sideways, you understand me?"

"Yes, s-sir. But he's—"

"*TELL HIM!*"

Behind her, a pillar rose out of the well-trampled, snowy grass, too tall to have been there in the first place. Perhaps a foot in diameter, jet black and made of some kind of leather or hide, it carried wriggling shadows with it. At first he wasn't sure what he was seeing, but when the brim materialized, the image resolved into a stovepipe hat, well-weathered, fit for a giant Abraham Lincoln.

Coming right out of the ground.

White gloves followed, dirt sloughing off them without revealing the

slightest stain, the tips removed to accommodate great curved claws like a cat's, only larger than any cat he'd ever seen.

He blinked. Shook his head. Blinked again.

It didn't help.

Denise shrieked as the claws dug into her thighs. The town went black.

Hot liquid splashed across his face as Denise's scream cut off. It tasted of raw meat and sick-up, like his mother's fazool minus the tomatoes left too long in the fridge, and stuck to the felt of his gloves as he pulled his fingertips from his lips.

"Denise?"

Hot, fetid breath washed across his face, and he gagged.

"Denise?"

In the darkness something twinkled, like a pair of flashlights with dying batteries.

*Eyes*.

"Denise?"

He reached out a gloved hand, and something took it.

Benny screeched to a halt in front of the town square, throwing him against the steering wheel as the squad car stopped way better than anything he'd driven. The lights died—all of them. Only his headlights lit the crowd, a sea of silhouettes under a black tree. As he got out, someone screamed—no, shrieked, an almost inhuman wail of agony. One by one a hundred pinpricks lit the square, phones sparkling through the crowd with bright white LEDs.

"Oh, my God!" a man yelled.

Lights turned, and drowned in a thirteen-foot shadow, ravenous darkness in a ridiculous hat. High Hat's body swallowed the light, leaving visible only a pair of white gloves, glittering eyes, and teeth stained red with glistening fluid. Mayor Gallo's head stared out from its gaping maw, just long enough to burst in a red gush as those massive teeth snapped shut.

The giant exploded into the crowd in a spray of disembodied limbs, severed heads and crushed torsos. They broke, a screaming panic of bobbing phone lights, pushing Benny back against the car. He scrambled onto the hood to escape the press of bodies and choked up the gun.

"Abe! Hey Abe! I'm over here!"

High Hat turned at his nickname, the one Benny had used for as long as he could remember, the one he used when he delivered meals to the shed, the one he'd used when, at nine years old, he'd freed the creature in a fit of pity, only to have it kill his mutt Barney and two passers-by on its

way to the gazebo. The name he'd used when he'd cried apologies to it, begging forgiveness after Uncle George closed the manacles back onto its wrists and ankles.

High Hat cocked its head, squinted its sideways eyes against the headlights, still chewing on a wayward arm through cloudy gusts of hot breath. If his earlier shotgun blast had hurt it, Benny saw no sign of it.

*Closer*.

"C'mon, Buddy. You don't have to hurt these people. I'm not going to take you back. Can we—can we just leave? Go somewhere . . . nicer?"

It took a step toward him, turned to look at the gazebo, then back to him.

Benny hopped off the car, lowered the shotgun.

"Just you and me. We can find a nice marsh for you to live in, with lots of ducks and turtles and raccoons, far away from . . . all this."

It took a step toward him, and he answered with one of his own.

Then another.

"That's it, Abe. I'm not gonna hurt ya."

High Hat's eyes narrowed to vertical slits, and a deep rumble growled forth from its throat.

"No, really, I'm not." Benny realized that he meant it.

He crouched, set the shotgun on the ground, and stood with his hands raised.

"There's a huge swamp out east, near Syracuse. It's called Montezuma."

He took a step, and High Hat matched it. His voice shook, but he kept talking, kept walking.

"No hunters—they're not allowed. All the deer you can eat. Deer and bear and coyotes, sometimes maybe a jogger, but you got to avoid the DEC guys. Take any of them and you won't be able to hide."

They'd closed the distance to just a few steps.

"It'll be nice. I promise."

He opened his arms wide. High Hat leaned in, snorting and sniffling, charnel-house breath filling Benny's nostrils with the cloying smell of rotten meat and shit and acrid bile. The creature's serrated teeth brushed against his neck. Hot piss streaked down his legs, soaking his boxers and jeans and trickling into his boots.

Even so, he reached out, put his hand on the thing's chest—thick, wiry, wolflike hair somehow wispy and ephemeral, like spider silk that broke at his touch and reformed behind it.

"What do you say, Abe? All you got to do is come back home."

Its roar deafened him, hot spittle and worse things spattering across his face stung his eyes and set his lungs on fire. It reached down and clawed hands grabbed his wrists, wrenching them away from the pistol in his belt. It roared again, his head halfway in its mouth, a thick red tongue split like a serpent's flicking up and down his cheeks.

Pinpricks jabbed his throat and the back of his head.

"No, please, no. Abe, please!"

His breath left him as a hundred serrated knives sank into his neck and skull, each fraction of an inch an unending agony. He flailed and kicked as his flesh separated and blood flowed into the monster's mouth, but his feet had left the ground, and Benny had no purchase, no hope of overpowering the thing.

*I'm sorry, Mom. I've failed you.* He sent his dying thoughts to Bi-bon, the North Wind that brought the winter, that it might carry them to his mother.

High Hat chuckled, a deep, unwholesome rumble that shredded his flesh further. Blood welled in his throat, and he squeezed his eyes shut against the pain.

"*Widjigo*!" His mother's voice rang out in the silence of the night. She spoke rapid-fire in the lost language of the Mahicans, the language she and Uncle George had tried to teach him, that he'd been too impatient to learn.

It opened its mouth and turned its head without letting him go. Blood gushed from his wounds into his coat, hot and sticky yet so, so cold.

She stood on the gazebo, one hand on Uncle George's shoulder. Scraps of cloth bound the old man's arms to the wheelchair, and another formed a gag. He stared at High Hat, his eyes wide with terror, a stark contrast to the otherworldly calm he'd carried with him for so many years.

She spoke again, and in his mind's ear Benny understood her.

"My son offered you a fair bargain, and I seal it with this: my uncle, George Runs-With-the-Hare, who bound you these many decades, who kept you from your home, from your vengeance, from your rightful place alongside the *Pagwadjininì* from which you were born. I know you hate him, as you hate these savages who stole your land, drowned the land of your people, and drained the water that nourished and fed you and yours. With this hate, *widjigo*, I bind you to honor my son's bargain. With this hate, *widjigo*, I bind you to leave this land for another. With this hate, *widjigo*, I bind you to live out your days doing no harm to the Mahican, no harm to the Onodowaga."

Benny fell to his hands and knees as High Hat dropped him.

He struggled to right himself, struggled to keep his vision straight, cold-thickened blood oozing down his neck into his clothes. As the beast stalked toward his mother, Benny pulled the gun from his belt. Aiming through a haze of blood and pain, only his mother's upraised hand stopped him from pulling the trigger.

When the creature reached Uncle George, the streetlights flickered to life. As sickly orange merged with twinkling sparks of color, High Hat faded into shadow, and then into nothing. The speakers stuttered to life, "Herein Herein We Make Our Blessed Home" blaring out across the blood-soaked commons, calling out to trampled and slaughtered bodies, to broken tourists wailing for their loved ones.

Benny leaned back against the car, and lifted his hands to his neck. Thick, gelatinous blood oozed but did not gush from his wounds.

His mother looked down at him and smiled. “That’s going to leave quite a scar. I’m proud of you, Son.”

Uncle George said nothing, but blinked once with odd, sideways eyelids.

“Come on, let’s get you to the car. We’ve a promise to keep.”

They pulled onto the Thruway shoulder at three-fifteen a.m., well after the bars closed, well before the morning rush. The gibbous moon and fading stars cast the area into a black-and-white mosaic, tinged only at the edges by the hazy orange glows from Seneca Falls, Auburn, and far-off Syracuse. No frogs or insects sounded in the February chill, but deer barked and scattered as they heaved and hauled Uncle George’s catatonic body over the chain-link fence and into the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge. Benny did most of the carrying, though his mother helped with the occasional drag across the hard-packed, frozen swamp.

Once out of sight of the road, they tucked him into the hollow of a fallen tree. Benny’s mother leaned in and whispered words he couldn’t hear, and shadows claimed his uncle’s body, which became a swimming darkness with a pair of bloodshot eyes. Those eyes and a grin of serrated teeth faded into nothing, and for a moment the trees shivered.

“Bye, Abe.” Benny patted the log, and stood, and waited, his head a war of melancholy and relief.

After a while, he scratched at the scabs on his neck, and his mother put her hand on his shoulder.

“Are you finished?”

He chuckled. “I was waiting for you.”

She smiled. “Then let’s get out of here. The Schneiders want their breakfast at seven.”