

THE MIASMA IS NOT
FOR US TO SAY



MARTHA A. HOOD

PRAISE FOR THE MIASMA IS NOT FOR US TO SAY

An innovative take on a classic tale, *Miasma* examines the practical side of having an eldritch monster haunting your small town. Stephen King fans will enjoy finding the answer to the question: what if the only thing standing between you and armageddon was the city council?

— Justin Robinson, author of the acclaimed neo-noir pulp monster series *City of Devils*

A rollicking saga of horror meeting the quotidian, and my first encounter with a dead cat lady! Paranormal high jinks are set against down-to-earth efforts to manage quarrelsome neighbors and city government in a small coastal town. Hilarious and wistful, the book engages with the petty and destructive aspects of mundane human nature, as the miasma reaches out from beyond the grave to...run for political office? Which could give new meaning to “Foggy Bottom.”

— F. J. Bergmann, poet, editor of *Star*Line*, winner of multiple speculative poetry awards

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For honest contractors and dedicated public servants—all those who work to mend fences and build bridges, both the literal and the figurative.

CHAPTER ONE

So Diane told her parents we were back together, and her mother, particularly, was less enthusiastic than she'd hoped. It's hard. I mean, they're nice enough to me, but—

"Carlos, what's that smell?" Mayor Carol Asher interrupted the contractor.

"Oh yeah, right. I was meaning to show you." He led the way across the concrete slab to the crack—almost an inch wide in some spots—that zigged and zagged like a Jack-o'-lantern grin.

Over near the entrance, sliced-up rolls of indoor-outdoor carpet waited to be hauled away. Carol had hoped the smell might be coming from the old carpet. It was not. "So. What does this mean?"

Carlos Fowler pulled his hair out of its man-bun, shook his head, and redid the hair as a ponytail. "It'll slow us down a day or two, but it should be okay."

Carol was a tall woman and her gaze was level with that of the contractor's. "What about the foundation? Is this part of a bigger problem?"

"No. A nuisance, that's all." He stepped away and squatted on the other side of the mini-chasm. "Smells like beach restroom."

"And sweat socks. But you're saying you can seal it up?"

"Yeah."

“And the smell should go away, right?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“The winter formal is less than two weeks from now.”

“For the high school?”

“Right.” Something about the young man’s demeanor—a fidgetiness—made Carol ask, “What’s wrong?”

Carlos stepped over the crack and stood side-by-side with the mayor. “Just had a thought. You heard of the miasma?”

That took her aback. “The miasma. That was well before your time. Well before mine, even. What makes you think of that?”

“Just some stories I heard as a kid.” Carlos traced a level along the edge of the fissure. “Even if it is, we have better sealants now than we did then. Once we’re done, nothing will seep through.” He pulled out his phone. “I’ll get my guys back in and we’ll get this done today. It can dry overnight, and...” He snapped his fingers. “...problem solved.”

While Carlos made the call, Carol walked out onto the veranda. Such a beautiful view, and a beautiful, sunny day. Not surprisingly, the beach below the pavilion was busy even though it was a Monday in January. Mothers with preschoolers, playing in the sand. Gulls, skimming the top of the water. A few surfers, braving chilly waves.

The town of Lovely enjoyed a mild climate year-round, and its inhabitants suffered little from the climate variations that troubled other locales. Sitting in a cove surrounded by hills, it was isolated from the bustling megalopolis to the north and the larger towns to the south and east. It retained its small-town charm. Kids might grow up, go to school or work elsewhere for a few years. Yet a surprising number of them returned to raise their families, even those who worked in neighboring towns like Sandune, just to the south.

Carol went back inside after Carlos had left. She looked up at the rustic beams that made up the vaulted ceiling, across at the massive stone fireplace. Despite the renovation, the pavilion remained emblematic of the era it was built in. It was a retro classic.

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While admiring what had been done so far, Carol tried not to look at the horizontal band of mist hanging above the crack in the floor or the oval swirl that seemed to be trying to form within it. Almost done, this space for dances, banquets, and wedding receptions. This source of income and pride for the city, restored to its former glory. Better than former glory. Down the hall, fresh and bright new restrooms gleamed with tiles and chrome. On the other side, the new kitchen shone sleek with stainless steel and commercial-grade appliances.

Carlos Fowler called her later that afternoon to confirm he and his crew had filled in the crack and leveled the floor. Wisps of gray vapor wafted out no more. Once level and dry, the floor was laid. One week later, Lovely High School students held their winter formal there.



The miasma emerged. It tried to form without knowing it was trying. No eyes, no ears—nothing had time to form before the cold cement poured down. It fought the darkness. It did not know it fought; it fought nonetheless.

CHAPTER TWO

The Monday after the winter formal, Mayor Asher received a call. “The contractor told me,” Councilman Win Speed said, “what you and he did.”

“And that would be?”

“A crack opened up on my patio. Foul smell. I called Carlos to fix it.” The councilman and his wife owned a home on the bluffs above the pavilion. “I wouldn’t let him touch it once he told me it might be the miasma. What on earth were you thinking, pouring a bunch of cement down there and not saying anything?”

Carol had just arrived home from the hardware store with a new flapper for her upstairs toilet. She held the flapper, still in its packaging, while she listened to his rant.

“I expected better of you, Carol.” The councilman used his most patronizing tone. “This is the miasma. You needed to say something. You needed to bring it to the attention of the council and the town. You had no right to try to handle this on your own.”

“We have zero evidence it’s the miasma.”

“Evidence. You want evidence. It smells, Carol. It’s right outside my kitchen, and I think it’s looking at me.”

“I doubt that.”

“I want you to get Herman Lee over here immediately. He was involved the last time.”

“If this is the miasma, Herman isn’t going to want to be anywhere near it.”

“He’s a city councilman. It’s his duty to help if he can. He

helped kill it last time.”

“And nearly burned down the whole town.”

“Fine. So we get the fire department out there too, ready to go, when old Herman drops the bomb this time.”

“It was fireworks. They used fireworks.”

“Wrong. It was a Molotov cocktail.”

“Either way. Herman’s not going to be dropping any explosives anywhere.” Time to change the subject. “So, did Carlos fill in the crack for you?”

“Hell, no! I need Herman to confirm what it is.”

“Whatever it is, you want to fill in the crack. You don’t want that in your back yard. And you definitely don’t want it in your house.”

“You just want to sweep this all under the rug, don’t you? You’d love to wriggle out of your responsibility here.”

“I’m not trying to wriggle out of anything; I’m only trying to solve problems, and not see an abyss in every crack of concrete.”

“I want to call a special emergency council meeting for tomorrow night,” he said.

“We’re already having our regular meeting.”

“Then this is our agenda. Nothing else. Only this.”

She had barely recovered from the councilman’s call when she received a text from Carlos.

Sorry I spilled the beans to Captain Asshole, followed by a string of red-faced emojis.

Don’t worry about it, she texted back. And then she worried.

She set about finishing what she had started with the toilet flapper. She installed the flapper, flushed to make sure it worked, and dropped the old one in the wastebasket. She washed and dried her hands and went out to the kitchen to finish some cold coffee from earlier. She caught one of the paper’s headlines, the one about the governor’s recall election, and read a bit of the article before she drained her coffee and called Herman.

"What I experienced was not the original. Stories about the miasma go way, way back."

Herman Lee lifted his suit jacket from the back of his kitchen chair and put it on. A possible reunion with the miasma was, apparently, an occasion to dress up. But that was Herman. He straightened his tie and motioned Carol to lead the way.

The drive to Win Speed's house was short, but silent and fraught. The older man was usually full of smiles and cheer. A joy to work with on the council. But the man beside her looked every bit of his ninety years, frail enough to blow away in the wind.

They parked in front of the house. It was in a beautiful neighborhood on the upper bluffs, with a view of the ocean. Win and family were on the slightly less desirable side of the street, where the fronts of the houses had the view rather than a panorama in back. Herman climbed the steps with jaw set.

Win opened the door and looked at them like they were missionaries about to drop pamphlets on his spotless porch. Stress lines furrowed his short forehead. He didn't bother to greet them with a *good afternoon* or any such niceties, but scowled and gestured them in.

Herman stopped just past the threshold. He grabbed Carol's arm. He looked at her with a kind of pleading horror. Carol smelled it too. He half-shook his head. "It still makes me sick to my stomach, after all these years."

"We don't have to go any farther, if it's too much."

Win's heavy brows scrunched upwards, approaching each other across the bridge of the nose. "Yes, we do have to go farther. That's why you're here."

Herman pressed his lips together, took a heavy breath, then said, "Just let me brace myself."

"Take all the time you need," Carol said.

Win gave her a look of pure murder. Carol gave him one right back, and took Herman's elbow. Herman accepted her support and shoved his glasses up on his nose. He kept one hand on the back of a sofa as they made their way through the living room. As they entered the family room they saw it,

seeping out of a crack at the base of the sliding door.

Carol dropped Herman's elbow. "It's in the house!"

Win threw his hands up. "I told you. As usual, you failed to take the situation seriously. And you show up here with no emergency services. No police, no fire, no ambulance. What were you thinking?"

Herman straightened his shoulders and held his head high. From behind, Carol could see how he stooped forward, just a little. He dragged his fingers through his precisely parted, coarse white hair. He moved forward more boldly, until he was within two yards of it. He reached out, almost as if to touch it, then pulled back, as a frond of fog came out toward him.

The mist coalesced into the rough ovoid shape Carol had seen at the pavilion. And before them both, the face of a young man appeared. It had a mouth, and it appeared to be trying to speak.

Herman grabbed Carol's wrist. "Oh God, oh God." With surprising strength, he pulled her into the living room.

Win followed, arms held wide. "Now what are you doing?"

Herman shook his head. "We have to get rid of this. I don't care how. Even if we burn half the town down again."



He didn't know what he was, or how he came to be here, but now, he knew he was. At least that. He recognized things. Windows. A house. Although this didn't look like any house he would have known. This house had different things in it, bright and shiny and all lighted up, for which he had no context.

He didn't know there was a context to be had.

He didn't know these people who lived in the strange house, and their fraught energy both attracted and repelled him.

He swirled.

More people came in. He recognized one of them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Martha A. Hood is the author of over two dozen short stories that have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Interzone*, *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*, *The Sockdolager*, *Allegory*, and *Tales of the Unanticipated*. She lives with her husband and two cockatiels in Irvine, California in a house built on expansive clay soil, constantly shifting and settling, with cracks sprouting on every surface.

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