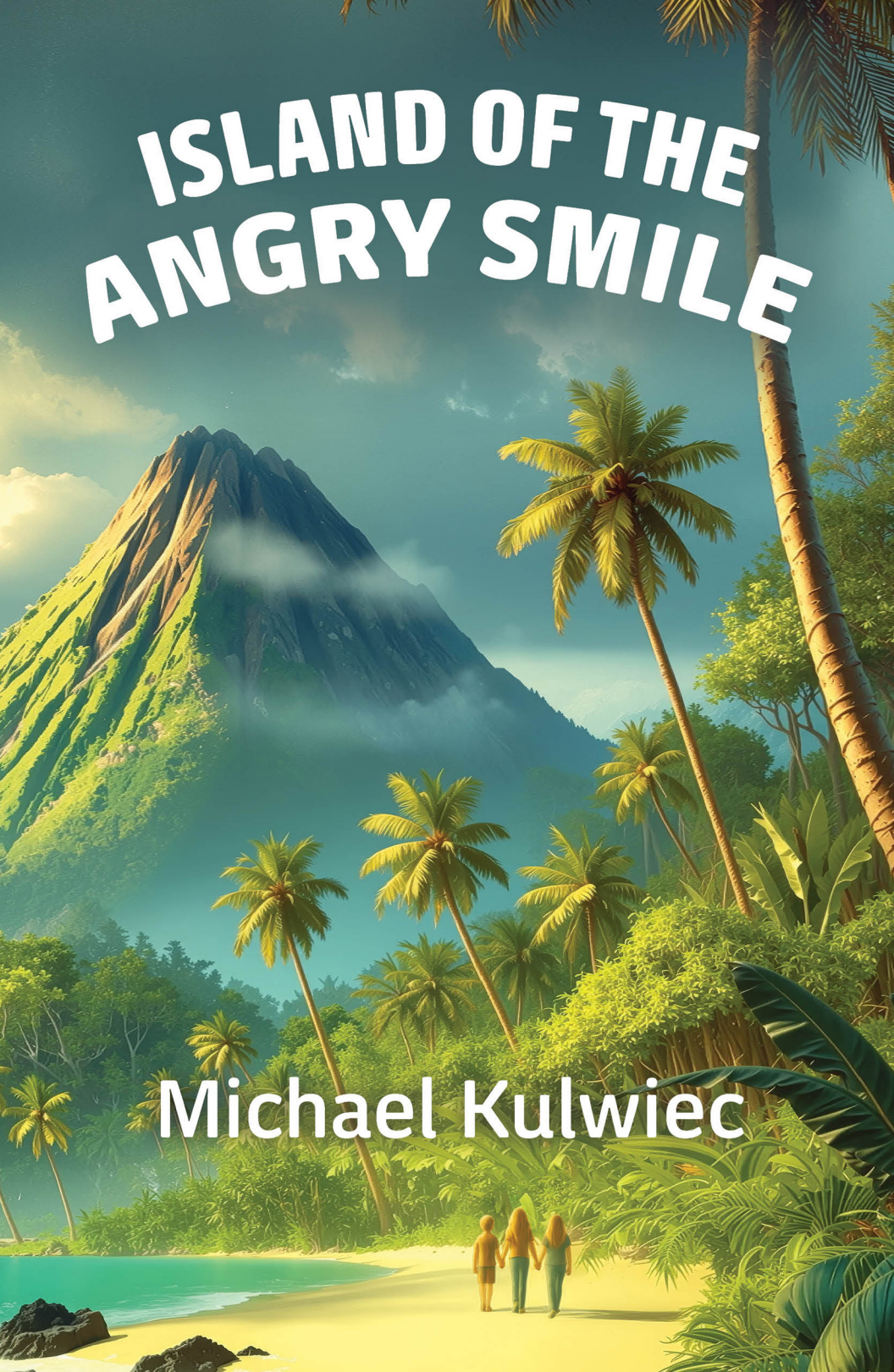


ISLAND OF THE ANGRY SMILE

Michael Kulwiec



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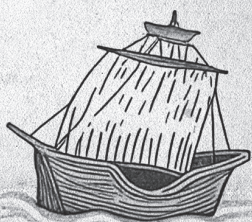
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IOTAS



*Creatures of
the Abyss*

THE BLOODY EYEBALL

K*nock, knock, knock.*

Normally, a porch light being off meant no candy here on Halloween. But the three kids had heard rumors. This house was handing out full-sized candy bars. Definitely worth the risk.

They walked along a shadowy street, oak branches arching overhead, their rustling leaves whispering like children saying trick-or-treat.

Near the end of the block stood a mailbox set on a short piece of an old telephone pole. The woodpeckers had drilled holes into it and stuffed each one with an acorn, as if they were hiding secrets.

That's where they turned onto a dark, winding path that led up to the front door.

They'd forgotten a flashlight, a rookie mistake for seasoned trick-or-treaters. At least they had each other.

Safety in numbers, right? their grandfather always says.

"Knock harder," the oldest said, her voice muffled beneath a rubber unicorn head, her go-to Halloween costume for the past three years.

Knock, knock, knock!

The youngest yanked her hand back and shook it to fling off the sting. “No answer,” she said, looking back at her siblings. “Maybe we should go.”

They always put the youngest at the front of the pack when trick-or-treating, their strategy to get more candy. Something about a child in a cute butterfly costume seemed to melt hearts. They weren’t sure it was needed this time, but why risk it?

The middle one adjusted his safety goggles and hiked up the sleeves of his too-big lab coat. He was the mad scientist of the group.

“No way! We stay!” he said, planting his hands on his hips. “We got raisins earlier. Raisins!”

Thump.

“Wait. You hear that?” the oldest whispered. “I think someone’s inside.”

“No, you don’t,” the youngest replied, shifting from foot to foot. “It’s your imagination. Let’s go. This place feels... weird.”

“Listen, I’m sure I heard something.”

They leaned in closer. The youngest pressed her ear against the door.

Chikichik, chikichik.

The rattling doorknob made them all jump back, bumping into each other and almost dropping their candy bags. They laughed a little too loud, the kind people use when they’re scared and hope nobody notices.

“This is how horror movies start,” the oldest said.

“Great! Now we’re all going to get eaten,” the middle added. “I’m too young to be anyone’s combo meal.”

“Chill,” the youngest said. “It’s just Halloween, not *Revenge of the Vampires*. Besides, if anyone ate you, they’d still be hungry. You’re only a snack pack.”

“You’re hilarious,” the middle said. “Comedy coming from a butterfly.”

Despite their nerves, they held out their pillowcases, ready for the full-sized candy bars.

Chikichik, chikichik... chikichik, chikichik.

It was the doorknob again. Then it went still.

They waited, arms drooping. The unicorn’s grin stayed frozen in rubber, the butterfly’s wings sagged, and the mad scientist’s goggles fogged up.

“Trick-or-treat,” the children said together.

No response.

“How long do we stay here?” the youngest whispered through a forced smile pointed at the door.

The others shrugged.

After what felt like the longest, strangest minute of their lives, the doorknob began to turn, quietly and slowly this time.

Creeeeeeeeek.

The front door cracked open just wide enough for a candy bar to slide through, but nothing came from the darkness.

“Shouldn’t they turn the porch light on now?” the youngest whispered. “That’s what polite people do when someone’s at the door.”

“Trick-or-treat,” they repeated, quieter now, afraid that speaking too loudly might upset whoever was inside.

And then, they heard it.

Uhbbh, huh, uhbbh, huh, uhbbh, huh.

A raspy, uneven breathing filled the air.

“Hello? Are you okay in there?” the youngest asked, trying to peer into the dark house. She glanced back at the others, eyebrows raised in a slow shrug. What if someone was sick? Or worse? What if it wasn’t a person at all?

The wheezing grew louder.

Uhhhh, huh, uhhhh, huh.

Something began to emerge from the shadows behind the door. It moved slowly, its form mostly hidden in darkness.

It was staring.

Unblinking.

Was it a person? A creature?

The door suddenly flung open wide.

“It was... The Bloody Eyeball!”

“Run!”

Taddy and his sisters screamed, then burst into laughter as their grandfather, Gummy, delivered the final twist of his story, the appearance of *The Bloody Eyeball*.

“Gotcha again!” Gummy said as he gave a wink from his favorite leather chair.

The kids lay sprawled on the living room floor, still catching their breath.

Parker, Taddy’s younger sister, clutched her pillow, giggling so hard she could barely speak.

Styn, Taddy’s older sister, rolled her eyes and checked her nails. *She always acted like nothing scared her*, Taddy thought.

“Why do you always do that, Gummy?” Parker asked, swatting his arm with a grin.

Gummy smiled. “A proper startle builds courage.” He gave a small shrug. “Never hurts to have a little courage tucked away.”

Taddy shook his head, smiling. He was the only boy in the family, but he never minded being outnumbered. He always had Gummy.

“One of your best stories yet, Gummy.” This one had definitely caught him off guard.

Taddy looked around the room. The fire flickered across Gummy’s chair, and the smell of Grammy’s cookies hung in the air. Parker’s laughter mixed with Styn’s fake sighs. It felt like home.

Taddy loved how Gummy got his nickname. Hanging gummy snacks on the tree in front of their house had made him a favorite with all the neighborhood kids, even before Taddy could remember.

“I knew The Bloody Eyeball was coming,” Styn said, lifting her chin like she’d known the ending all along. *She always thought she was the smartest*, Taddy thought. *She wasn’t.*

“Don’t lie, Styn. You screamed just like the rest of us,” Taddy said.

He thought back to all the times Gummy used The Bloody Eyeball to make them scream and then laugh.

Once, when Gummy was teaching them how to barbecue, he asked, “Do you know how to tell when the ribs are done?”

He slowly lifted the lid. “You open the grill and check if you can see...”

They all leaned in to look as Gummy flung open the lid and shouted, “The Bloody Eyeball!”

Another time, Gummy was telling a sweet story about how he knew Grammy loved him. “It was those three little words every man wants to hear from the woman he loves,” he’d said, then shouted, “The Bloody Eyeball!” Taddy had laughed so

hard his stomach hurt, though he suspected his sisters would have preferred to hear “I love you.”

And then there was the time Gummy was driving them to school and waited at a crosswalk for a group of people to pass. Even after they’d gone, he didn’t move the car.

“What are you waiting for?” Styn had asked.

“I’m just waiting for that guy to cross,” Gummy said, pointing at the empty crosswalk.

“Who?” Parker asked.

Gummy had turned around and yelled, “The Bloody Eyeball!”

Taddy thought they should have gotten better at seeing it coming by now, but he was glad they hadn’t. *Being scared is kind of fun*, he thought, *not the real kind of scary. The almost-safe kind, where your head knows you’ll be fine but your heart doesn’t agree.*

Like that one time at the fair, he and his sisters decided to ride Megafall, the notorious three-story drop tower. The year before, it had jammed and left fifteen riders stuck at the top for hours. Taddy wasn’t sure it was a good idea but gave in to Parker’s and Styn’s begging.

It started calm enough, but when they reached the top and the car began to shake, he grabbed his sisters’ hands on either side. *You’ve got to be kidding me. We’re stuck!* he thought.

Then he hiccupped. Loud. The kind that made his sisters glance at each other and giggle even as their knuckles turned white.

Then it dropped. They all screamed at the top of their lungs. The ride pulled them up and dropped them down. Up and down. Up and down, and by the end, they were laughing as hard as they’d been screaming.

Going through things with my sisters isn't that bad, Taddy thought, smiling.

When the Blink kids were little, they lived only a couple of doors down from Gummy and Grammy. Over the years, the two families became as close as any real grandparents and grandchildren. They celebrated birthdays and holidays together and even went on vacations as one big family.

Taddy always found it funny that Gummy and Grammy weren't actually related to Mom or Dad, but that didn't matter to him or his sisters. They liked to say Gummy and Grammy were their fairy god-grandparents—like they'd just appeared one day and never left. They were real family.

His actual grandparents lived far away, on the other side of the country, and visits with them were rare.

"We couldn't have kids," Grammy once said, "so God brought us you."

A few years later, Mom's job took the Blink family to the city, and visits back to Gummy and Grammy's became rare.

Then, about a year ago, Mom's work brought them back again. Everyone, that is, except their dad, who stayed behind for "business."

The word *business* always came with air quotes when Mom said it, and nobody asked questions anymore. Taddy used to believe Dad would follow once things settled down. He didn't believe that anymore.

When Mom told Gummy and Grammy they were moving back, Gummy didn't hesitate. "Why not live with us? We've got plenty of room," he'd said. "You're family, after all."

"That's perfect," Mom had replied. "I'll be working late most nights."

She cleared her throat. "And it's safer for the kids here than in the city."

She paused, her gaze shifting toward her children before she spoke again. "Things are changing there. This will be better for all of us. I'll have more control."

Taddy hadn't missed how carefully she chose her words. *What did that mean?*

He'd glanced at his sisters. Styn's eyes were locked on their mom, while Parker smiled like everything was fine.

The decision was made that quickly. Within two weeks, they'd packed up their apartment and moved in with Gummy and Grammy.

That first night, after they'd hauled boxes into their new rooms, Parker had flopped onto Styn's bed, wide-eyed and grinning.

"Can you believe we're actually living here? This is amazing!" Her voice dropped. "But why did we really move?"

"Mom wants someone to watch us," Styn said, straightening a stack of books like she was the boss of moving day.

"But Styn, you already watch us at night," Parker pointed out.

"Yeah, but Mom says this is safer," Styn replied.

"Because Dad isn't living with us anymore?" Parker asked.

Their mom worked late into the night at a place called Octomab. That's why Styn used to watch them.

Taddy didn't really know what she did there, but he liked the sound of it. Science always sounded like adventure to him—even if Octomab's logo, a red sea creature, made it seem a little creepy.

"I don't think that's the whole reason. It's something else," Styn said.

The word *safer* stung.

He'd never felt unsafe before. Not until then. He hadn't thought he needed a babysitter. Especially not at night. Definitely not Styn.

Sure, she was older, but he was certain he could handle things himself. And Parker, even though she was the youngest, didn't seem scared of anything.

But Mom had decided they needed to move.

Safer from what? Taddy wondered, even now.