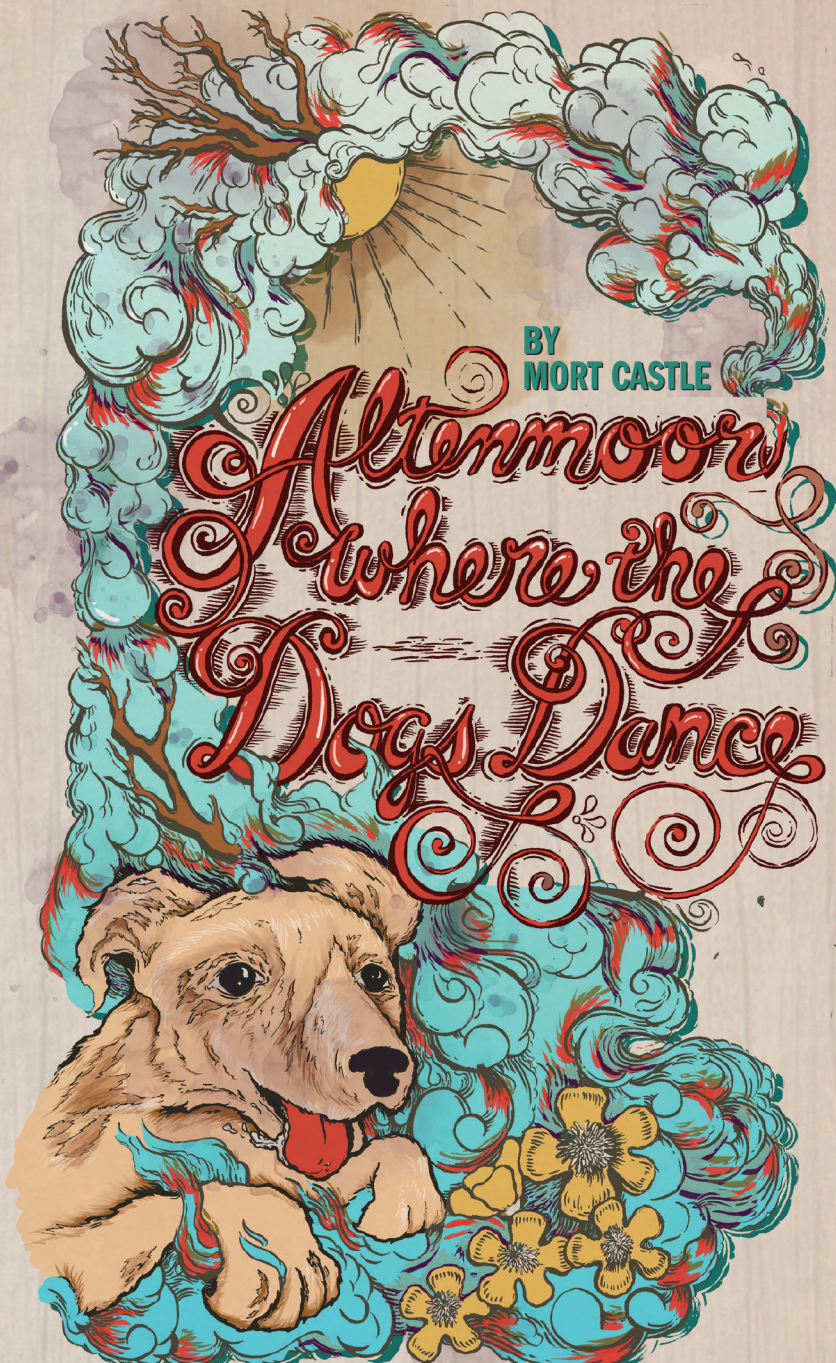




FLYLEAF

BY
MORT CASTLE

Attermoor Where the Dogs Dance



One day in spring, when the boy came home from school, he did not find Rusty in the backyard, on the screened-in porch, or anywhere downstairs in the house. He knew Rusty could not be up with Grandpa. Last winter, when the weather had gone so cold, Rusty's back legs had gone cold, too, so cold he could no longer climb the stairs.

The boy's mother took him into the kitchen and tried to explain, though he hadn't asked her. "Rusty's gone, Marky."

He hated being called "Marky," but she was his mom, so what could he do? Dad called him "Mark," and sometimes "Son," and that was better but it still wasn't right.

Grandpa knew and always called him "Boy." He felt like a "boy," not "Mark," or "Son," or (phoo!) "Marky!" Once in a while he wondered if that would change when he got older.

Mom said Rusty was very old. In a dog way, Rusty was more than a hundred. She said Rusty had had a very good life because everyone loved him a lot, and now Rusty's life was over.

The way Mom talked made the boy think she was trying not to frighten him. Then she hugged him so hard all his air rushed out and he thought Mom was trying not to be frightened, too.

But the boy didn't understand, so he said, "I'll go see Grandpa." Grandpa knew how to talk about things so the boy understood because Grandpa was very smart. He was so smart that long ago, when he could still see, Grandpa even used to write books.

"He'll like that," Mom said. "Go see him."

Upstairs at the end of the hall, across from his own room, the boy knocked on Grandpa's door. He waited one-two-three, then heard Grandpa say, "Enter." Grandpa

always made him wait one-two-three, never one, or one-two, or one-two-three-four.

Grandpa sat in a straight-backed chair by the window. Grandpa didn't have a rocking chair and the boy knew why because once Grandpa had told him. "Old people are supposed to sit in rockers. Seldom in life have I done the 'supposed to's'."

Through the window, the sun shone a square of light at Grandpa's feet. The boy stood with his sneakers at the edge of the square. If he stepped inside, it might break, the yellow oozing out like the yolk of a poached egg.

The boy said, "Grandpa, Mom says Rusty is gone."

"Your mother is truthful enough," Grandpa said, "though so sadly lacking in imagination it's often difficult for me to acknowledge her as my daughter."

"Oh," the boy said. Sometimes Grandpa talked funny, except he never did when he was talking about important things—like Altenmoor.

"Mom says Rusty was very old," the boy said.

"Indeed," Grandpa said.

"You're very old."

"Once more, indeed."

The boy remembered when Grandpa had been old, but not very old. Grandpa got very old when the cloudy-looking white film covered his eyes. After that, Grandpa couldn't read anymore, not even the Altenmoor books Grandpa had written himself.

"I'll miss that too, Boy," Grandpa said. "The picture of Rusty asleep and the sound of his adenoidal snore are preserved and treasured in my memory."

Grandpa tipped his head. For a second the boy thought Grandpa wasn't blind at all because the boy could almost feel himself being seen. "Do say on, Boy," Grandpa said.

“Is Rusty dead?” the boy said.

Grandpa said, “There are some who would say and some who would believe it as well. And you? What do you say? What do you believe?”

The boy thought. Then he said, “No.”

“No?”

“Rusty went to Altenmoor,” the boy said and he hoped he believed what he was saying. “He went once through the Rubber Tree Woods and he jig-jogged left past the Marmalade Mound. Then he followed the winding Happy-To-You River to Altenmoor.”

“Continue, Boy.” Grandpa leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands folded under his chin. “Speak to me of Altenmoor. So long since I’ve written of the noble realm and longer still since I’ve gone a-journeying there.”

“In Altenmoor, every morning is a Sunrise Surprise and the buttercups thunder like twelve tubas.”

“Only louder,” Grandpa said.

“Much louder! And the winds are all hot winds and happy winds and wild winds!”

“And the animals?”

“Oh,” the boy said, remembering the animals. “The pigs whistle ‘Dixie’ in four-part harmony and the cats play silver cymbals in three-quarter time.”

“And the dogs?”

“The dogs dance!” the boy said. “The dogs do dance all the day!”

“You see,” Grandpa said, “it was time for Rusty to be where the dogs dance. Yes. Rusty has gone to Altenmoor.”

The boy smiled but the smile didn’t feel all the way right because it pinched at the corners of his mouth, and so he had to ask. “Really?”

“Really?” The modern rephrasing of the ageless ‘What is Truth?’ The metaphysicians ponder as they will, all we

truly know, we know only here.” Grandpa patted himself on the chest.

The boy said, “There is a real Altenmoor?”

“Were there not, could I have written the seventeen books that comprise the complete Altenmoor chronicles? If there were no Oz, could Mr. L. Frank Baum have related the adventures of Dorothy and Tin Woodsman and Scarecrow? What of Treasure Island and Never-Neverland, or savage Pellucidar and Wonderland? If they did not exist, how could people tell of them?”

Again Grandpa patted himself on the chest. “Books, boy, are from the heart and of teh heart. That makes them not merely true, but truer than true. Do you understand?”

“Some,” the boy said. “Not everything.”

“Some is more than most people,” Grandpa said. “It will suffice.”

The boy had something else to ask. “But how could Rusty get to Altenmoor, Grandpa? It’s a long, long way and his legs were no good.”

Grandpa stretched out his arm and spread his fingers. In the sunlight the veins of his hand were ripply blue and strong. “I touched Rusty’s head, you see. I patted that bony knob at the back of his skull and tickled between his ears. I touched him, and all the strength I could give, I gave to Rusty so he could make the trek to Altenmoor.”

“And then he went?”

“He did,” Grandpa said. “He went once through the Rubber Tree Woods and he jig-jogged left past the Marmalade Mound.”

“Then he followed the winding Happy-To-You River to Altenmoor!” the boy and grandpa said together.

“Yes,” Grandpa nodded, “and now Rusty is dancing, he is dancing where the dogs dance. I believe that.”

“I do too,” the boy said.

On a winter night so cold that the house could not keep out all the winter chill, the boy awoke. He thought at first that a dream had frightened him awake, but he realized he was not frightened.

Then he knew it was a thought that had pulled him from his sleep.

He got out of bed. Even through the carpet the floor was shivery, so he slid his feet along instead of lifting them. He did not need a light. He stepped across the hall and quietly knocked on the door. It would have been wrong to wake Mom and Dad. They did not mind getting up if he had a stomachache or a bad dream, but his stomach felt fine and he was not dreaming.

The boy waited one-two-three.

Then he waited four and five and six and seven before he gently turned the knob and went in.

"Grandpa?" The boy stood beside the bed, thinking one-two-three-four-five-six.

Then the boy thought about what he would miss about Grandpa, things he wanted to keep in his memory. There were a lot of things, and once he was sure he had them all, the boy touched the back of Grandpa's hand, then took hold of three of Grandpa's fingers and squeezed.

Grandpa's eyes opened. Beneath the milky glaze his eyes looked right at the boy, and this time the boy was almost certain Grandpa could see him.

"Yes? What is it, Boy?"

"Are you going to Altenmoor now?" the boy said. Slowly Grandpa sat up. "Yes, I believe I am."

"Then I have to help you."

"Yes." Grandpa nodded. "Keep hold of my hand, Boy."

The boy did. It took a long time, but he could feel himself giving all the strength he could give to Grandpa.

He knew it was happening because he started to feel as though he were going to sleep, the way he did in the back of the car after a long day at the beach.

Then Grandpa said, "Thank you," and took away his hand.

"Grandpa, will you go now?"

"Shortly." Grandpa said. "No longer than it takes a pig to whistle 'Dixie.' Now you must return to bed. There is still much of a winter's night to sleep away."

"Okay," the boy said. He went to the door, then stopped and looked back. "Grandpa, you know. The Rubber Tree Woods and the Marmalade Mound and the winding Happy-To-You River."

"Of course, Boy," Grandpa said. "Where else?"

The boy said, "Goodbye, Grandpa."

The next morning the boy was up early because his mother and father came to his room and woke him and told him he wouldn't be going to school. Dad stood by the door. He had the same look on his face he'd had when someone stole the car last year.

Mom held the boy close to her. She was crying.

She said, "Grandpa is gone, Marky."

"Yes," the boy said. He wished he could explain but he knew she would never understand.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MORT CASTLE is a horror author and writing teacher who has published over 500 short stories. Twice a winner of the Black Quill Award and the Bram Stoker Award, Castle edited *On Writing Horror*, the primary reference work for writers of dark fiction. He lives near Chicago with Jane, his wife of 40 years.

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