The Sirens Call

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Featuring:

Short Stories and Flash Fiction from the perspective of "The Observer"

Original Art Work by Robert Elrod and Eddie Rotten

Photography by Dark Angel Photography and Irene Snow

An extended excerpt from "City of Hell Chronicles Vol.1" by Colin F. Barnes

Open Submissions at Sirens Call Publications

Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

The eighth commandment; thou shalt not steal. But everyone covets something that isn't theirs...

We want twisted tales where the protagonist is either the perpetrator or the victim of a reaping. Either way, something vital must be stolen - Organs for the black market? Will be they be tricked out of their fortune? Or their soul? If the seeds of a story have been planted in the darkest recesses of your mind, then it's time to reap what was sown and deliver to us the cruelest stories of loss and thievery that you can possibly imagine.

In this anthology, there will be no happyendings...

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS IS MAY 28, 2012

Carnage: After the end Carnage: After the End

It's the beginning of the end. The Apocalypse has come; and left in its wake no more than small pockets of survivors battling to stayalive.

How it came about... you tell us. Be it monsters, mechanical horrors or natural disasters, anything goes. What matters to us is what is left behind.

In a world where society has collapsed, and where terror lurks in every corner. Harsh and brutal, no one can be trusted and nothing can be taken for granted.

Spin us your very best tales of Hell on Earth. The title for this anthology series is Carnage: After the End, and that's what we want to see in every word that you write. Take us deep into the stark, relentless reality of what surviving the Apocalypse really means.

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS IS JUNE 18, 2012

Please go to www.SirensCallPublications.com for more details and guidelines on submissions

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A barely audible scuttling noise catches his attention...

My Roint of Wiew

For those of you who know me from previous articles and interviews, or have had the pleasure of following my somewhat deranged ramblings on twitter, you may already know that I am the Social Media Coordinator for SCP, and also an UrbEx and Cemetery photographer. So when the topic of writing from the point of view of the Observer came up, I immediately thought it was a *no-brainer* – all blonde jokes regarding that last comment will be met with swift and sadistic retribution, you have been forewarned:

Back to the topic at hand – I believe that as a writer and photographer, I am constantly viewing things from the perspective of an observer. When I write, I write about what I have seen and how it has affected some element in my environment. As a photographer, I'm simply viewing that same environment through the eye of my camera. So how do I remove myself from the equation and spin a tale that tells its yarn in a voice I suspect someone else might use to express what they see? Hmmm...

Not everyone may have interpreted the challenge the same way that I did, but this is the path I chose to traverse when writing my piece. I didn't want to be 'the observer', I felt I needed to try on a new pair of eyes by stepping outside of my usual first person persona and into another perspective. Did I succeed? I'll leave that up to you as the reader to determine if the Nina writing to you now is the one who saw through 'The Glass Wall'.

The second part of this equation for me was to step outside of my comfort zone and stretch my wings a bit into a style of photography that I don't usually employ. While I have a great deal of respect and admiration for Street Photography, it's just not my thing.

I'll admit that packing up my camera gear and heading into a densely populated area filled with things still vibrant was a bit scary. Besides a few sarcastic remarks from those still above the ground, and the odd look or two (feel free to read the word "many" into that last bit) from passers by, it was an interesting and enjoyable experience... This would of course be prior to the minor incident involving my ID and the gentlemen asking the questions who showed me his officially sanctioned police badge.

"So Ms.... How do you pronounce that? What exactly are you doing wedged between the walls of the alleyway with all that electronic stuff?"

"It's not just electronic stuff officer; this is my camera gear, I'm shooting pictures for this great new edgy eZine that is

doing an issue on..."

"I'll need you to step out of the alleyway and put down the bags Ma'am..." (Ma'am???) "...so that I can verify that they contains no illegal substances, contraband or other paraphernalia - with your permission Ms. ... How do you say that?"

Wha???? Okay, two plus two usually equals four in my world, but not everyday, and not on every count – here is a perfect example of one of 'those' moments. Just because I'm about five feet up in the air, wedged in a three foot wide opening between two brick buildings this gentleman thinks I might be distributing narcotics? Possibly even selling small arms? (Nothing wrong with having little arms people, mine are little and they are fab, I'm talking about weapons here) Or perhaps my camera is a device of mass destruction that will obliterate a full four centimeters to either side of my now broken and charred corpse in an otherwise unobserved alley? COOL! - You see where my over active writer's imagination is taking this benign statement, don't you?

So after shimmying back down the walls, under his keenly observant gaze, I pick up my equipment, step out of the alley and in a grand gesture supporting all those who deserve the right to freely express themselves in a public space... I simply say "Yes Officer" and stand meekly aside while he riffles through my belongings.

In the meantime, glancing across the street, I notice a group of teenagers watching all of this transpire. Obviously snickering (okay, they were outright laughing), and with plenty of finger pointing, they were clearly enjoying the spectacle unfolding at my expense.

Looking back, I wonder what their point of view of the situation would have been? Maybe I should have asked. You never know, there could have been a budding horror author among the bunch whose sick and twisted psyche was just waiting for another such as myself to come along and unlock their fetid imaginings with the barest bump of encouragement:

Nina D

Think: That's All DAsk

I am cast into the role of an observer in everything that I do as a publicist. It's the only way to adequately assess how the tides of publishing are going to ebb and flow from one moment to the next. It's not an easy job; sitting back and assessing market trends, traversing through the muddy waters of controversy and observing the ways in which authors (read prospective clients) conduct themselves. This is certainly not going to be an expose piece. Instead, consider it a comment on the things that pass by me on a daily basis.

Indie publishing is a multi-faceted entity; one where you can either sink or swim. It sometimes amazes me to read the words of others within the industry, thinking to myself as I do did they really mean to say that? I wish the statement were more tongue in cheek, unfortunately it's not! Granted, a number of people don't have the benefit of a publicist or agent behind them, steering them into making the best decisions possible for their careers. Does that, however, excuse them from their actions? Only so many things can be explained away as a brain fart.

We live in a very open and public environment; the Internet. The Internet is forever. You can always delete a post but it never really goes away mainly because you have no idea who might have screencapped the words in question, from either the giggle it gave them or their shock of horror. Don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting that people walk around in a world full of rainbows and lollipops. I'm merely commenting on the fact that the industry and the public pay attention. It's always bad form to slag off one of your contemporaries no matter what you may be thinking personally; that should go without saying. Remember what your mother said about not having

anything nice to say?

As a public figure, you always need to be on your best behaviour. When they say that bad press is better than no press, I'm not sure they were talking about the independent environment... First of all, the Indie community is very large and when you have that many people conversing, secrets and idle gossip are bound to get around. It simple mathematics. People communicate therefore the expectation of privacy is limited.

Keeping in mind that anything you write on the Internet is being constantly evaluated by a multitude of other people, it's best to keep it civil because you never know who they are or who they may know. I just want to put this in here — traditional publishers are not evil, I promise!

Please don't take my opinions, and they are just that, *opinions*, as proof that all of us are being spied upon. While it very well may be the case in some circles, it's not the case in all. My point is that someone is always online so make sure that you're inviting them to read your words instead of ostracizing yourself.

Think. That's all I'm asking. ~ Kalla



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J. Marie Ravenshaw

A Spectral Vision

I've passed the Crossen home numerous times while taking my nightly walks. Why this night was any different was beyond me. I'd heard the stories of the lady in the window. Never once had I seen her with my own eyes. Like many other non-believers, I'd believe it when I saw her. Well, I'm now a firm believer.

One night, as I turned the corner onto Fillmore Street, chills ran up my spine. There was an unmistakable feeling of foreboding that made my stomach lurch. It was a very real 'stay away' feeling. I rubbed my arms to stave off the goose bumps that were sure to follow. As I walked past Mrs. Crossen's prized rose bushes, the feeling became stronger.

I stopped dead in my tracks and glanced around. It felt as if someone was watching me. I glanced toward the Crossen home and allowed my eyes to slowly roam the old Victorian façade. There, up in the turret window stood a woman.

The gauzy curtains were pushed slightly to the side to reveal a beautiful woman dressed in a white eighteenth century dressing gown. Her raven hair was worn loose and cascaded over her shoulders; her hair seemed to move in an unseen breeze. She was gorgeous and I was transfixed. She was staring off into the distance, as if waiting for her long lost love.

I started to feel like a voyeur. I looked down ashamedly and stuffed my hands into my pockets as I started walking down the sidewalk. But that feeling came back and I couldn't help myself; my eyes were inexplicably drawn back to the turret window.

The lady was no longer standing placid in the window staring off into the distance. I could see it so vividly, as if I were standing right in front of her. She was struggling against the window, trying to open it. Her bloody fists pounded against the jambs. Her hands left crimson streaks on the clear panes of glass.

She was covered in blood; her once white dressing gown was saturated and ripped showing glimpses of blood covered skin. She'd stop in her struggles only to bring a hand up to her throat and quickly glance behind her. Her eyes were widened, frantic. Her raven hair stuck to her neck and forehead. She was unbearably pale. She continued to pound, her mouth gaped in a silent plea.

I was in a state of shock; I just stood there like a dummy, my jaw unhinged. My heart raced; I could feel it threatening to come up the back of my throat. My breathing was much too fast; my chest heaved with the effort. I became light-headed. When the woman's eyes met mine, my blood ran cold.

I held my breath as she placed her bloody palm on the window pane. A pained expression etched across her face as she mouthed the words, 'Help me!'

Suddenly, I was in the room with the raven-haired woman. She was slowly running a brush through her long thick hair. Candlelight flickered throughout the room, casting oddly shaped shadows on the walls.

She sat at a dressing table and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. In the reflection, standing behind her, was a man.

The man was dressed in traditional eighteenth century menswear: breeches, leggings and spatter dashes. His white linen shirt was partially untucked and hung down to his knees. He threw his waistcoat onto the straight-backed chair in the corner as he strode toward her and impatiently pulled the rest of his shirt from his breeches.

She glanced toward his reflection in the mirror and asked, "To what do I owe this honor, husband?"

"You know what I seek, wife," he said as he started to unbutton his shirt.

The woman stopped brushing her hair and met the man's brown eyes through the reflection in the mirror. She smiled demurely. "I do." She set the brush down on the table and slowly turned toward him. Her features hardened and she sat up

straight in the chair with her hands folded in her lap as she said defiantly, "However, I will not give you what you seek tonight. I will not lie with you ever again."

Then she showed me why...

Gradually her husband came into focus. He was with another woman in the guest room; his loving caresses mimicked what he had done only twice with her in the past. She watched through a slit in the door, initially drawn by the sounds that came from within.

The woman writhed beneath him and raked her nails across his smooth muscular shoulders as he thrust his hips between her legs. The first hot tear ran down her cheek as they moaned in ecstasy. He kissed the woman tenderly afterward; then fell to his side in exhaustion and wrapped his muscular arms around her. The woman smiled dreamily as she snuggled into him. Weeping, the raven-haired woman ran to her room and locked the door behind her. She rested her forehead against the cool wood of the door. Then slowly slid down, and curled up into the fetal position on the floor. She cried herself to sleep there ... eventually.

The raven-haired woman shook her head, trying to break free of the memory. Despondent, she looked past him and wrung her hands in her lap as she said, "I know, John." She met his gaze and watched as he struggled to understand what she had just said.

Finally, his features straightened in understanding. His fists clenched at his sides and his face mottled red. Through gritted teeth he said, "What do you think you know, Sarah?"

Sarah stood from the chair. "Don't even try to deny it John. I saw you...b-both of you. How could you? I thought you loved me!" She thumped her fist against her chest. A stray tear ran down her cheek.

"Loved you?" He stepped toward her and threw his head back; a harsh laugh escaped him and echoed throughout the room. She winced and drew away from him. He slowly lowered his head and looked deeply into her eyes. "No Sarah, I loved your money. I never loved you."

In her eyes, this was the ultimate betrayal. Anger, sadness, loss, and a deep seated rage washed over her. Her heart was beating triple time, her breathing hitched amongst the sobs. She ran toward him and pummeled his chest with her tiny fists.

He laughed and grabbed onto her forearms roughly, his fingers dug into her flesh. She looked up at him; her eyes widened and she struggled to break free from his grasp. His voice was roughened, filled with anger as he yelled, "Now, I think I have had enough of you!" He threw her back onto the bed.

She struggled to turn over and attempted to crawl across to the other side of the bed. He grabbed onto her ankles, pulling her toward him. He turned her over roughly and pinned her with his body. His face was crimson and a vein in the middle of his forehead bulged. He settled his hips in between her legs and laid the full weight of his body onto hers. Sarah tried to push him off, but she just wasn't strong enough.

John pinned her arms above her head with one hand and tugged her dressing gown up over her hips with the other, ripping it in the process. She was frantic, tossing her head back and forth on the feather filled duvet. She screamed, "Please! Please! Don't do this, John!"

His eyes were wild, his hot breath puffed against the thin skin of her neck. His body practically vibrated against hers. He ground his erection into her; the rough woolen fabric of his breeches abraded the sensitive flesh between her legs. She closed her eyes, turned her chin to the side, and swallowed hard. She knew what was coming.

He raised his hips slightly; she heard the unmistakable tinkling noise of metal on metal and felt the coolness of his belt

buckle slap against her inner thigh. She struggled even harder.

"Nobody denies me, Sarah." he growled.

She heard the sliding hiss of metal against leather. Her eyes widened as he pulled his knife from the sheath attached to his belt and placed the sharpened blade against her throat.

His calloused knuckles scraped against her thigh as he spat out, "I will have what is rightfully mine in the eyes of our Lord. You cannot deny me!" With that, he plunged his manhood into her roughly.

The blade of the knife dug into her neck more and more with each powerful thrust. Warm liquid trickled around the blade and oozed down her neck onto the duvet. She whimpered in pain.

He licked her cheek, she winced and pulled away. John glared at her. The knife dug further into her neck. Bile rose in the back of her throat, she was going to vomit. He slid the sharpened blade swiftly and firmly across her throat. Her eyes widened.

Blood flooded her throat, choking her. She coughed; frothy crimson liquid sprayed out of her mouth and spattered onto his face. A tear escaped the corner of her eye, ran down her pale skin, and mingled with the crimson blood drops there. Her vision was fading, graying around the edges. Her body bucked with John's continued thrusts. He yelled out as he spilled his seed within her.

Afterward, he pulled out and stood over her as he pulled up his breeches. A sadistic grin slowly spread across his face as he watched her body spasm and struggle for breath. Her eyes were glossing over and her lips were blue tinged. He leaned over her as the light started to leave her. He placed his bloody palm on her cheek and whispered, "You'll never deny me again, Sarah."

It was like a slow motion camera pulling away from the horribly brutal scene. Sarah lay on the bed covered in her life's blood with her arms lying limply above her head. He left her horribly exposed; her gown was bunched just above her waist.

John shrugged and wiped his face with a white linen handkerchief. He buttoned his shirt and tucked everything in. He grabbed his waistcoat as he left the room, closing the door slowly behind him.

The spectral vision faded as the door clicked closed.

I awoke from the vision gasping for breath, tears streamed down my cheeks. I truly experienced Sarah's death along with her. I could feel everything she felt; hear what she heard.

Mrs. Crossen was kneeling next to me. I looked over at her wide-eyed. My heart was hammering in my chest. Her mouth was moving, but I couldn't hear what she was saying. Slowly her voice seemed to seep into my consciousness, "You... - right...mister?"

I sat up and shook my head as I slowly came out of my daze. "I'm sorry, what?" I wiped the sweat from my upper lip and looked back toward her. I was light-headed, but managed to maintain my sitting position.

She smiled; concern very apparent in her eyes as she rubbed my back. "I said...are you alright mister?"

'Y-yeah...I think so..."

"What happened?"

"I-I don't know..." I felt chilled even in the warm night air.

"I called 9-1-1 when I couldn't rouse you after five minutes. They're on their way. Don't try to get up just yet. Let 'em take a look at cha first, okay?" She searched my eyes as she awaited an answer.

I swallowed as best I could and nodded. I looked back toward the turret window. The woman wasn't there.

The ambulance showed up shortly thereafter. They checked me out and said I seemed 'dry' and 'shocky'. They wanted to take me into the hospital for more testing. I politely declined and signed the refusal form. The policeman on the scene offered me a ride home. I took him up on it.

I was wrapped in the brown wool blanket that the EMT gave me. I walked toward the cruiser, the Officer held the back door open for me. That sense of foreboding, that 'stay away' feeling flooded over me again. I stopped dead in my tracks. I was reluctant to look back toward the turret window. I just knew she would be there and was afraid of what I would be shown this time. Why did she feel it necessary to show me her death? Is there a lesson to be learned? Does she think I can help her? What can I do? Nothing. There is absolutely nothing I can do.

I closed my eyes and warred with myself for a few seconds. Resigned, I slowly pivoted toward the house. My eyes slowly roamed the façade of the old Victorian and finally came to rest on the sight behind the pane of the turret window.

Once again, the raven-haired woman, Sarah, was covered head to toe in blood, banging against the window jambs with her tiny, bloody fists.

That wasn't the worst of it though; behind her stood her husband, John, her killer. I gasped. His dark eyes seemed to bore into mine, he grinned. He strode up behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and dragged her, kicking and screaming, back into the darkness of the room.

I spun on my heel and jumped into the back of the police cruiser as fast as I could, slamming the door behind me. The policeman got into the driver's seat, started the engine, and glanced at me through the rearview mirror. I stared out the window toward the turret. I thought only of the woman, Sarah, trapped behind the glass and cursed to live out her murder at the hands of her husband over and over again.

J. Marie Ravenshaw is a married mother of two hailing from the upper mid-west of the United States. She enjoys spending time with her family, at her job, and trolling the internet for riding crops. Sometimes, she writes.

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Alex Woolf

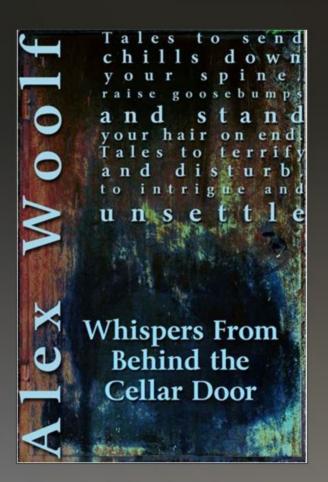
Alex Woolf was born in North London in 1964. During his teens he played the drums in a band, and during his 20s he rode his motorbike, travelled in America and Europe and worked variously as an accountant, a warehouse assistant, a print buyer, a dishwasher in a roach-infested restaurant and a doorto-door salesman.

Since 1991, he has been a book editor, and in 2001, he began to write. He has penned more than 40 non-fiction books on subjects including sharks, robots, asteroids and the Black Death. He also writes fiction, including Chronosphere, a time-warping science fiction trilogy, and Soul Shadows, a horror novel. Both are aimed at young adults.

Alex also writes horror for adults. His collection of shortstories, Whispers From Behind The Cellar Door is available for purchase. You've been warned...



For more information about Alexand his works, check out his website: http://alexwoolf.couk You can also follow him on twitter: @RealAlexWoolf



Tales to send chills down your spine, raise goosebumps and stand your hair on end. Tales to terrify and disturb, to intrigue and unsettle. Fans of horror and the supernatural will relish this collection of original stories, featuring among much else... a haunted swimming pool, something horrible in a garden shed, a doppelganger husband, a zombie mother-in-law, a ghostly sender of emails and an embalming that goes very wrong indeed...

Ayailable on Amazon



Steady hand. Fluid wrist.

He commences, conducting an orchestra of pain across flesh. Razor twinkles. Nary a wince.

Slash Slash Slash

Rinse. Repeat.

Torrid water singes skin. Crimson rivulets streak throat. Razor kisses flesh again; long unhurried strokes abuse corporeal canvas. Pauses. Countenance he measures within warped polished metal anchored into wall. Glimpses little. Save distorted haze of ruined reflection. He smiles.

Good.

Slash Slash Slash

Rinse. Repeat.

Water murky within stainless steel sink. Chunky with gore. He has no business dipping fingers into scorching bath. No business doing anything at all. Beyond unforgiving bars of his cell swells heinous cacophony. Thunder low and throaty upon hollows of the valley. But this is not thunder. This is anguish. This is hopelessness. So delectable.

This is hell.

Swirls razor into steaming mess. Watches idly frothy, bloody rings cling to sides. Ruined tissue. Barely audible, a squeak from behind. "Are you afraid?" he deadpans. Interest seized by serumy whirlpool churning within sink's bowel.

Scampering. Feet seeking purchase. Harried breaths.

"You shouldn't be afraid." Razor to flesh. Skin yields in neat flaps. Fine meat under honed slicing blade. "Not yet, anyway. Didn't I tell you this would happen? I did tell you, didn't I?"

Outside the bars, wails. Chaos. Lunacy. Choked voices plead mercy. Invoke God.

"Yes, I'm pretty sure I told you." Air trembles. Ripples with disorder. Sniffs air, he does. As canine, no. No. Inhales as predator. Bite of sulfur. Copper. Sickly sweet in throat. Delicious these nuances of suffering. "Yes, thinking

about it now, I'm absolutely positive that I told you."

Pops from beyond. Another, deafening, just down the hall. Again, a whimper from behind. "It's rare when one holds steadfast about something. Very rare. Take personal belief, for example." Razor to jaw. So steady, hand. So fluid, wrist.

Plop. Plop. Plop. Chunks plummet to sink.

Slash Slash Slash

"I believed this day would come for a long, long time. I'd have bet my life on it." Long strokes. Graceful. Measured mutilation. Rinse goes the razor. Plunk goes the flesh. "No, no. I stand corrected. Can I do that? Can I correct something already said? Why, I suppose so, if I'm the one doing the saying. So no, I would not have bet my life on it. But I would have bet my soul." Chuckles. "Can I share something with you? You won't judge me, will you?"

Gunshots once more. Outside bars. Just down the hall. From here. From there. From here and there. Each extracts a strangled sob. Behind him. Closer to the floor. "I don't like to be judged. Really, who does? Did you enjoy it when you were? In the literal sense of the word, you were judged. You received, what, nine years? Already had a few strikes against you, a few prior convictions. What did you expect? I'll tell you what you expected—you expected not to be judged. Your life was hard. No proper upbringing. You expected them to understand. You expected someone to give a damn. But instead, you were damned."

Outside bars, screams for a child. A boy. His name rips from father's mouth. Wishes to hear it, perhaps, before he dies.

"Yes, I've been judged as well. A long, long time ago." Blade to forehead, above brow. Steady hand. Fluid wrist. Left to right. Left to right.

Slash Slash Slash

Rinse. Repeat.

Splashes scalding water into eyes. Rinses free the gore.

"I didn't like being judged then. All because I simply saw things...differently. All because I held firm, positive in my sentiment." Teeth clinch. Snare vicious drawl. "Judge not lest ye be judged."

"I didn't like being judged then. All because I simply saw things...differently. All because I held firm, positive in my sentiment." Teeth clinch. Snare vicious drawl. "Judge not lest ye be judged."

Outside bars, prayer in wild howls. Fades. Cloth tears. Rending fills the void. Then an awful sound. Pigs to trough. Jackal to meat. Wet. Slobbery.

"So, yes, I did tell you this day would come. Yes. I'm positive now." Din deafens. Maelstrom of degeneration. Yet one voice heard above all. "I've enjoyed talking to you, by the way. Enjoyed your company these past few years. You've been a good egg."

Body slams into bars. Mangled. Glistening. Chewed.

He stares into distorted mirror. Hand hovers inches from face. An artist, he applies the finishing touches. Long, fluid strokes. Graceful, sweeping curves. Not much longer. Not much longer at all.

"Listen, you've got nothing to worry from me. Not a thing. I will not hurt you. It's those animals. Out there." Jerks head in direction of bars. Ploop ploop ploop the crimson splatters shoulder. Prison garment soaks. "Those things, they're you. What you see is only yourself. So look, this will go in one of two ways. Release your inner self, become them and serve. Or simply become part of them. I'll give you a minute to decide."

Putrid decay seeps into cowering shadows. Madness reverberates against walls. Tang of suffering clots the air.

"Time is up. Sorry, but I haven't all day. Places to go, people to see. Lots planned. Bet no one thought the end would ever start here. I mean, it is a penitentiary, after all. The monsters are supposed to be on the inside. But not anymore."

Razor drops into sink. "I blame all this on your judge. He thought he had all the answers. Problem was that he never asked the questions. Now it's too late for that."

He pirouettes. "He tried to make you into his image. Aren't you tired of wearing his mask? I certainly am."

And last of face oozes down chest.

"So what's it going to be, hmm? A brand new world awaits."

ABOUT JOSEPH PINTO - Horror author of two novels and numerous short stories. Member of Horror Writers of America, Garden State Horror Writers & online group Masters of Horror. Rumored lycanthrope, Saints fan & Mr. Mom. Share his unique spin at www.josephpinto.wordpress.com or join him on Twitter at @JosephAPinto.

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Coming May 26, 2012 Sirens Call Publications





Coming Summer 2012

The Falcon's Chase

from author Kate Monroe

Captain Reuben Costello is mere hours away from execution when the most unlikely of rescuers storms into his cell. Arianne Dalton needs the assistance of the infamous Black Swan to flee England. He finds himself more than willing to help the fiercely independent Ari in exchange for his freedom.

However, when they come to find their fates inextricably tangled in a plot that threatens the very foundations of British society, they are swept away on a chase that puts not only their lives, but their hearts at risk – and neither of them can defy the wild and stormy ride they find upon the Falcon...

Conscience of a Camera

Geoffrey scanned the bar code on the back of the DVD case while the customer stood waiting for a reply. He wasn't inclined to give one. The manager had already dressed him down for getting into arguments with customers. But then some of them just begged for it, like the guy standing in front of him now. He was a repeat offender--it seemed like he only rented movies he knew would offend him, just so he could complain when he brought them back. Whenever he walked in the door, Geoffrey's stomach knotted and he fought the urge to run into the back and force Clara to handle the counter instead. And that wasn't going to happen. Asking her to run a cash register was like asking for the manager to audit the drawer receipts looking for the fifty dollars he'd pocketed--that he would have pocketed if there weren't cameras always trained on him, watching, willing to report his disloyalty.

He waited. The customer seemed to be holding his breath, waiting for Geoffrey to say something conciliatory. He wondered if he just kept his mouth shut whether the guy would eventually pass out. Fine. He sighed. Might as well play my part and read my lines. "I'm sorry, Mr. Pareil. I can't give you a refund unless the disk was defective. But I can give you a coupon for a dollar off your next rental." Most of the shop's customers had fled for rental-by-mail and video streaming services. Even before that, Blockbuster had basically killed little mom-and-pop places like his. The only ones who stayed were the porn nuts-which he really didn't understand--since porn was free on the Internet--and assholes like Pareil who lived to accuse him of being a smut-merchant. Given the business they did, he was pretty sure the store was only open to wash the owner's other income, wherever that came from.

"I don't want a voucher. I want you to stop carrying this filth." Pareil stood, hands on hips, projecting what Geoffrey thought was supposed to be confidence but actually came off as adolescent petulance. He felt embarrassed to see a middle-aged man acting that way. He sighed again and Pareil's face turned a deeper shade of purple matching the Lord's Gym t-shirt he wore under his sport coat. "Don't sigh at me," he said, pointing a stubby finger. Geoffrey pursed his lips to hold back the smile.

Geoffrey slid a blank three by five card and a pen toward the man. The owner used to keep customer information on the cards despite the paperless rental system--in case the computer went down. Geoffrey had never filled out one of the cards, but they were there nevertheless. "If you want to write down your complaint, I'll make sure it gets to Mr. Warden and I'm sure he'll give you a call and--"

"I don't want to write anything down. I want my money back."

"Nobody gets free rentals"

"This is filth."

"Look, pal! I don't make the fucking films." Although, he wished he did. "I just rent them to losers like you." He jabbed a finger at the computer monitor even though Pareil couldn't see the screen. "This is the third time you've rented this movie and I don't think you're as offended as you're pretending to be, all right? Tell you what. I'll buy you a fuckin' copy of A Serbian Film if you promise never to come in here again."

"I'll have your job! "

"Dude, you couldn't do me a bigger favor than get the boss to fire me. His name is Joe Warden. You want his home number?" Geoffrey grabbed another index card and began scribbling.

"You are in big trouble, Mr...." The little man leaned forward to get a better look at Geoffrey's name tag. It read, G. ROPER. "Oh, very funny. Just wait. My church will be here every day until you have to lock the doors for good."

"Aw. I think you'll miss checking out the ladies at Planned Parenthood if you spend all your time here." I bet you keep those big placards you carry around in your bedroom, you loser. He wanted to say it, but kept his speculation to himself. Pareil's rental history said more about him than his gore-covered t-shirt.

"Whatever your name real is, I'll pray for you."

"That is my real name."

"The day of judgment is at hand." Pareil spit a wad of milky phlegm on the glass counter top and stormed out of the store. He tried to slam the door but was unable to overcome the hydraulic return arm.

Clara dragged ass out of the back room, rubbing her eyes with her fists. "What was all that about?" she asked.

"How could you miss that? Were you asleep?" When Warden first hired her, it seemed like she was going to work out great--Geoffrey actually feared for his own job for a day or two. She'd spent hours installing video equipment throughout the place, feeding it all back in to the digital recorders in the back. Warden was completely paranoid about "shrink." The place never made enough money for anyone to consider robbing it, but videos--especially pornos--walked out the door all the time. Geoffrey had even taken a couple that were impossible to find online. Old shit with an "actress" who'd gone mainstream and was working to get her back catalogue erased--collectors items for Ebay. Still, he hated being constantly taped whether or not he was stealing from the boss.

The only places Clara didn't wire were the sidewalk outside the front door, the bathroom, and of course, Warden's office. She seemed like a perfectionist and obsessed over the job for days. Once the installation job was done, however, she kicked back with her MacBook and did who-the-hell-knows-what, leaving him to interact with every nut case and serial masturbator with a membership card.

"I was until you started shouting at the customers, Mr. Angry-Pants. Warden's gonna shit and go blind if he finds out you lit into that guy." He wasn't sure what made him angrier, that Clara had been earning minimum wage sleeping in the manager's office or that he was being harassed by a guy who gets off to Cannibal Holocaust.

"Clara, do you think you can handle the crowd in here for five minutes?" He pointed to the security monitor under the counter. The channel was turned to the feed from the Adults Only room. A guy in a black jacket and a Padres ball cap was browsing the pornos. "I'm taking a break."

"What if he brings something up to the counter?"

"Rent it to him." He slid the bottle of alcohol hand wash he kept next to the register closer to her. "Then use like half a bottle of that after you take his money."

"Ew."

Geoffrey headed out through the back of the store. He lit a cigarette in the store room as he bumped open the push bar with his hip. Once through, he kicked a brick with his heel in place to prop open the door. It was a nice, calm evening outside. A light breeze rose off the ocean and carried the briny perfume from the beach up through the alley and into the dark parking lot behind the store where it died in the smoke from his American Spirit. Geoffrey stared off into the darkness beyond the small circle of light

underneath the sixty watt bulb above his head. From between the neighboring buildings he could see a hint of one of the girls who "rented" space along the sidewalk around the block--a purple miniskirted hip, a bare shoulder, and a bit of blond hair. Every night as he headed home he rode his bike past the working girls and the same one would smile and wave at him. He'd run into her one morning when he stopped in a cafe for breakfast. What was her name? Geoffrey couldn't recall. It wasn't a hookery name. It was a real one, like Andrea or Lauren or something. She'd been real nice over coffee and toast--like everyone else, she had wanted to be in movies, but she wasn't pretty enough, she hadn't taken acting lessons, she had a junk habit. Eventually, she ended up drifting down from L.A. and here she was. He thought about going over to say "hi," but he was pretty sure that the dude who sold Oxy next to the Circle K was her pimp. He didn't feel like getting gutted tonight.

He finished his smoke, dropping the butt on the ground without stepping it out, and went back inside. Clara was rubbing her hands furiously with the blue alcohol goop and wincing. She didn't seem like a prude when she started here. "What'd he rent?" he asked as he stepped up back behind the counter. He smiled, trying to guess which tawdry cover had gotten under her skin. He knew them all very well from straightening the room daily. The typical customer picked up a box, browsed until he (they were almost always men, except for the occasional couple) found a more enticing title and put his first pick back in the wrong place. Porno videos were like driftwood on the beach, moved back and forth by the tide.

"Nothing. I told him to get the fuck out or I'd call the cops."

"Why? "

The look of contempt on her face was withering. She pointed to the copy of *Hairy Twatter and the Sorcerer's Boner* lying on the counter like it was going to jump up and spit. "He handed me this."

"So what? It's your job to rent videos. Even the triple-x ones."

"Are you blind?" She stood back baring her teeth at him like she wanted to tear into his throat. "It has his fuckin' dicksnot on it."

Geoffrey leaned over and peeked around the cash register. "Ugh." That's cum, all right. His stomach tumbled just a little. They sent the videos home in plain black boxes without "artwork" because some guys just couldn't help themselves and had to work one out to the models on the front. He pulled open the special drawer under the counter and grabbed a pair of nitrile gloves, paper towels, and a spray bottle. "Sorry, Clara. I didn't think he looked the type." Except in retrospect, he totally did. He pulled on the gloves and slid the case closer.

"Whatever. I'm taking the rest of the night off." Clara pulled her smock off over her head, exposing a fishpale belly with a glittering ruby piercing in her belly button. She threw the apron on the floor and headed for the front door.

"I got you covered," he called after her. "I'll clock you out at eleven."

"Midnight, creep!" She held up her middle finger as she kicked open the front door, badly cracking the

bottom half of the glass door with her Doc Martens. The hydraulic arm frustrated her dramatic exit as badly as it had Pareil's and she barked something angrily at it before shoving through with her shoulder. Geoffrey knew he'd have to explain how the crack in the door got there. He looked up at the webcam pointed at the door and couldn't decide whether to save the video of her kicking the glass or not. If he did, he could get Warden to fire her bitchy emo ass. It'd be a sweet irony, he thought. Getting her fired using video from the cameras she installed. He made a mental note to hit BURN on camera number one before heading home.

The breeze through the slowly closing door carried the faint scent of bleach to his nose. His mind returned to the task at hand and he considered the defiled DVD case. "Guh. Fuck my life." He gently moved the video to a shelf behind him to dry. I'll clean it when the pervert's kids stop swimming. Stripping off the gloves, he sat down heavily on the folding chair behind the counter. He muted the television hanging in the corner of the shop showing Escape From L.A. so he could hear more easily if someone walked through the front door.

He glanced down at the security monitor thinking he should cycle through the channels once to make sure he was truly alone before sparking his end-of-the-evening joint early. Clara had set the channel to the feed above the back door. Was she watching me take my break? Freaker.

He kept flipping. Store room, Kids Zone, New Releases, Adults Only. All the channels were clear. He switched back to the parking lot door. On the screen he saw Andrea-or-Lauren leading a john through the alley into the lot. She occasionally brought johns back there for a suck under the light. Once, he'd felt like stopping on his way home to let her know that he could see everything she did under that camera. I'm not a weirdo, you know. I just, like, haven't had a chance to say anything until now. But he didn't say anything. He just rode by on his bike waving with a big smile on his face, afraid she might stop taking her johns back there.

"Perfect," he said as she backed the man up to the door and dropped to her knees. Geoffrey pulled his joint and a lighter out of the American Spirit package and lit up, ready to enjoy the show. He lit up and inhaled deeply. She produced a condom from her tiny outfit like a magician pulling a coin out of someone's ear, tore open the wrapper, and stuck the rolled up rubber in her mouth. Glancing up into the john's face, she almost looked like she was staring right at the camera. Geoffrey settled back for the show. He took another hit.

She undid the buckle of the john's belt and started on his black Dockers. Geoffrey wondered if the guy didn't seem a little familiar. Whatever, dude. You're just feeling the weed. The feeling persisted. He went to the manager's office and played back the video feed from the Adult section of the store, fast forwarding until the guy who'd befouled Hairy Twatter walked into the room. Geoffrey didn't need to go any further—he wasn't interested in watching a guy rub one out. Although the pervert was careful not to look at the camera, Geoffrey could see that it was the same person: black chinos, black windbreaker with a North Face logo on the shoulder blade, and blond hair poking out underneath a Padres ball cap. That's it. Same black cap with the yellow triangle. Oh, you so do not get to nut twice tonight, asshole. Geoffrey intended to blast out through the back door like Clara had tried to do in the front. He doubted it'd be very pleasant for Andrea-or-Lauren, but he knew it would be a load of pain for the john to get slammed in the back with a steel door. He practiced his, "Oh, dude, I didn't know you were back here" face and walked out of the office. He glanced down at the monitors to make sure the guy was still there.

"Wait, what ...?"

The john was jerking his hips like he was getting the suck of his life, but Andrea-or-Lauren lay on her back, feet toward the door. "What the...?" Geoffrey stood frozen to the spot watching the tiny screen. Clenching up his lower back and ass, the john thrust one last time before trembling and then dropping a rag--no, a wig?--in between the hooker's legs. Whatever it was, it bounced once like a heavy workout ball and then just sat there between her knees. The john stared at it for a moment, head cocked at an angle. Then he turned and looked up at the camera. Geoffrey took an involuntary step back. He could see the john's weak chin underneath the brim of his cap, but the rest of his face was hidden. Come on come on just a little more. Smile for the camera. Smile for the cops, you fuckin' freak. The john reached up and touched the brim and stepped off over the hooker's legs out into the dark. He just tipped his hat at me!

While he debated locking himself in or just running home instead, a dark shape passed by the front door of the shop. Geoffrey hit the floor. He waited, listening. The bell above the door remained silent. The video feed in the back looked like a frozen, buffering web video: the woman's legs in the light, blond ball between her legs--nothing moving. Except, between her knees, her blond hair blew slightly in the breeze. He stared dumbly at the video for another several pounding heartbeats before peeking up above the counter. The door was clear. For the first time he was happy that Warden blacked out the picture windows in the front with movie posters. It had always felt isolating to Geoffrey that his view was limited to straight through the glass door. At that moment, he was thankful that the view *into* the store was as narrow.

He crept around the counter and slinked up the far wall to the front of the store. He twisted the lock on the door and pulled down the blackout shade, covering the window. Closing the steel shutters would make him feel better, but they could only be locked from the outside with a pad lock--too long to linger out on the sidewalk with a guy hanging around the building who might have just murdered someone. Lock up, call the cops. Quit fucking around. He ran, crouched over, back to the manager's office and grabbed the phone. Dead. He patted his pockets looking for his cell phone. Shit. It's in my bag. He stepped back out front, pulled his backpack up from under the counter and dumped everything out. "Fuck!" He tried to remember where he had left his phone if it wasn't in his pants pockets or his bag. He had a vague recollection of checking his e-mail on it before Pareil came in. He dropped the video on the counter like an asshole and I set the phone down next to the register to deal with his shit. Did he take its Did the john when Clara kicked him outs He had no land line in his apartment; his only option was a pay phone. Where do you even find a pay phone now?

Two raps on the front door sent him lurching back into the shelves. A bracket stabbed him between the shoulder blades. He arched his back and craned his neck, hitting his head on the shelf above. The Hairy Twatter case tumbled off, sticking for a second in his hair before finishing its decent to the floor. He yelped in pain before clamping his hands over his mouth. "We're closed," he shouted through his fingers, trying not to sound panicked. A psycho wouldn't knock, would he?

Jogging back around into the store room and flipped the switches that shut down the spots lighting the shop sign outside. He considered turning off all the lights to better give the impression that the store had closed early, but he couldn't bear the thought of being alone in the dark.

There were only two ways out of the store: front and back. He looked at the security monitor again, flipping back to the back door. Same shot: drop dead legs sprawled out dead. His breath hitched as the body on the screen jerked once. The movement reminded him of watching a lion tug at a dead impala on Animal Planet. Whatever had pulled at her was out of frame. Then another tug. And one more. The hooker's legs slid into the darkness beyond the rim of the back door light, disappearing from the frame. His own legs refused to move and he crouched staring dumbly at the monitor, holding his breath. Still here. He's still here! He's in back. I can get out through the front. The cameras continued their vigil, recording the night, recording the inside of the empty store while he worked up the will to move. The monitor went black. He flipped back to the store room feed. Fine. Click. To the video racks in front. Empty. The store room: empty. The cash wrap. He paused, staring at himself from above, huddled below the counter, watching his life play out on a small screen—a television mediating reality. He'd told himself for years that as long as the violence was on the screen it couldn't hurt him. It's plastic and rubber and karo syrup and computers and not real—definitely not real. Click. Back outside. Still black.

Rap rap. The knocking at the front door snapped Geoffrey out of his trance. His guts turned over and his bladder threatened to let go.

"Fuck off," he shouted. "I called the cops! They'll be here any minute." As if on cue, he heard a siren spin up. Geoffrey's hopes swelled for a cruel second before the sound faded around a corner.

Rap rap.

"I got a gun!"

Rap rap.

"Please just go," he sobbed, dropping his head into his hands. "Just leave me the fuck alone. I didn't see anything."

He heard a key in the lock. The tumbler turned. He jumped up as Clara opened the door and calmly walked in. "What the hell, Roper? Warden's going to be pissed if he knows you tried to close early."

"Get inside," he hissed. "Hurry! What are you doing here?"

"I was all pissed off when I left and forgot my laptop."

Geoffrey, pushed past Clara, sprinted to the front of the store, and pulled on the door, trying to make it close faster. The return arm fought him. "You don't understand; there was a guy out there. He killed her in the back lot. Look!" He pointed back at the counter after he locked the door. Hesitantly, he peeked out past the blind into the night.

"It smells like you've been smoking. Weed make you paranoid or what?" Clara said. He ran back to the monitor and pointed at the black screen forgetting there was nothing to be seen.

"You're kidding me. This isn't funny, god damn it. What did you do? I don't want to be here all night fixing a camera." She began flipping channels.

"I'm serious. This guy... The one who jerked off on the video--"

"Don't remind me."

"He killed a hooker right there."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Bullshit."

"I'm not high. It happened."

"Wait here," she said, exasperated. "Do what I say." Clara called back as she walked into the store room. He fought the urge to sprint out the front when he heard her opening the back door.

"Wait. Don't!"

"Look at the monitor, asshole! See anything?"

He looked. The same black image. He waited, shoulders hunched, for her screams--the sounds of her dying. Instead, he only heard her curses under her breath. "Are you okay?" he asked. "What do you see out there?"

"I see a god damned waste of ninety bucks. What do you see now?"

He sat down in the chair feeling defeated. Maybe it was just the weed. Dude who sold it must have dipped it in formaldehyde or some shit. "Nothing," he called out weakly, slumping down against the wall.

"Switch to another channel." He changed to the store room camera. Clara stood on a chair in the open doorway. Her head and shoulders were cut off by the top of the door frame giving him a sick feeling of déjà vu. "Okay. Now switch to another one." He turned the channel to the horror section of the shop.

"Same shit."

"Okay, the next one."

He tuned to the Adult's Only room and saw the same empty room full of videos he never wanted to look at again. "Nothing."

Nothing.

"Clara?"

Nothing.

"What the hell are you doing, Clara?"

He peeked around the corner into the store room. She was gone. The door stood open, her overturned chair blocking it.

Rap rap.

He shrieked and ducked back behind the counter. The slack face of a woman staring off into the middle distance leered at him from the screen. Blood trickled from her nose. That camera's way up in the corner. He screamed again and leaped up. The john dashed out from behind the bead curtain holding a stained machete in one hand and the bottle blond mass of hair from the video in his other. Geoffrey hurled himself backward into the wall, videos raining down on him as he screamed and cried and let loose the contents of his bladder. He folded in on himself, unable to run. The john took a step forward, raising the blade.

The front door swung wide and Clara jumped into the store. "Cutt" Andrea-or-Lauren followed her, both of them laughing.

The john looked up from under his ball cap and smiled with a broad mouth full of gleaming white teeth. "Smile, man, you're on Candid Camera." He shook the latex head at Geoffrey. Moments ago, it had looked so real. "Booga booga!"

It took Geoffrey a long time to parse the situation. "How'd you get in?"

"I've been in here all night hiding in the camera's blind spot. Sucked, man."

"But I saw you..."

Clara smiled with pride. "You saw me in wardrobe like his. Pretty convincing head humping, huh." She spun around and rocked her skinny hips back and forth like Geoffrey had seen on camera.

"The head?" The john or whatever he was-the actor-shook the prop again, laughing.

"Pretty sweet, huh?"

"W-what the fuck, guys?" He inspected the front of his soaked jeans, feeling hot shame stinging his cheeks. "This shit isn't funny."

"It is funny. And it's going to go viral, dude," the john said. He walked over and gave Clara a wet kiss on the neck.

"Yeah, it's a little something I've been working on. We're going to do it up as a short for the Web and then enter the long version in some festivals. Reality horror. You should have seen the look on your face!" Clara walked around the counter and pointed at a tiny pinhole camera she'd installed next to the video monitor. You're great."

"I wasn't acting," he whispered.

"Neither was I, dude. Sorry about that." The pervert smiled and pointed to Geoffrey's hair. He and the hooker laughed again. "The things you do for art, am I right?"

"That's what made it great," Clara said. "I'm betting you're a shit actor, but in real life you did all right. You're kind of a pussy, but it won't matter. It'll work when I edit it. We need to get a final shot, though. The film's not done. I was really hoping you'd have run for the back. I want to get a little narrative symmetry between you and Angela."

"Yeah, I need to kill you." The john held up his machete.

"Go kill yourself, asshole. I'm done." Geoffrey shoved Clara's boyfriend back and grabbed his bag off the counter. He shoved his things into it and held out his hand to Clara. "My phone?"

"What phone? I don't have it."

"Come on. I know you took it."

"No really. I didn't."

"Whatever. You're buying me a new one then." The bell above the front door rang and Geoffrey spun around red faced. He'd had enough of surprises. He'd had enough of customers and coworkers and weak shit that he wasn't able to control. "We're! Closed! Get! Out!"

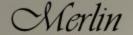
The gun in Pareil's hand roared in the tiny store making Geoffrey's ears ring and hum dully. The hooker's head rocked back and she crumpled to the floor like a clipped marionette. The john ran for the front door holding up his machete and Pareil fired again, catching him in the stomach. He fell, hitting his head on a rack of videos that spilled out across the tile. The blade clattered away impotently.

Geoffrey could see Pareil's mouth moving but he couldn't hear a word. The barrel of the gun stared him down like a deep black hole into which he was about to fall and never climb out. Clara grabbed his arm and pulled. She was screaming something he couldn't hear. "It's okay," he said. She screamed again and let go, running out the back. Thunder followed her. Wood from the door jamb shattered and peppered Geoffrey with splinters. "It's all bullshit for the cameras. It's all fake. Plastic and rubber and karo syrup," he whispered, not convincing himself. Mediating reality.

The black bore of the gun blossomed brightly in his face like a studio spotlight. The cameras hung high in the corners watching silently, doing nothing.

ABOUT BRACKEN MACLEOD - Bracken MacLeod has worked as a martial arts teacher, a college philosophy instructor, at a children's non-profit, and as a criminal and civil trial attorney. While he does his best to avoid using the law education, he occasionally finds uses for martial arts and philosophy. His stories have appeared in Every Day Fiction and Sex and Murder Magazine and his next piece will be published in the forthcoming issue of Grave Demand Magazine. He is a member of the New England Horror Writers organization. Join Bracken on Twitter at @An_Adversary and his blog http://luxferre.wordpress.com.





The scrying glass taunts me.

I have used it for ages. Used it until reality in this tower becomes difficult to perceive; am I awake or dreaming, looking into the mists of time or into my own hands. It is a thing of indescribable beauty, to look into the silvered glass, created from the molten sands of Kronos's hourglass.

The ancient god did not give up the sand willingly. Only with the strongest magic, and at great personal risk, was I able to obtain the mystic granules .

I wish now that I had not succeeded in my quest. I wish now that the Master Alchemist who crafted the temporal glass was less skilled, so that it could be destroyed.

I watch the birth of great civilizations, the death of kings, the murder of innocents, and the love of commoners. But one point in time, one place, one woman, haunts my memories and returns. The scene has played out so many times, I'm never sure if I'm watching her again, or dreaming of her memory.

The glass swirls—intertwined with my thoughts—and she comes into focus again. This enchanting woman is out to market for chickens and rosemary, to prepare a birthday feast. She is beautiful and happy, until the soldiers ride into the village. The chaos and screaming play over one more time. Everyone is taken by surprise. The men defending the village fall quickly, there are too few—most are out in the fields, or away in the King's service.

They find her and two children hiding in the alley. She fights to protect the children with only her knife, a small silver blade. Her battle plays again, the soldiers knock her to the ground and murder the children. They bind her hands and do unspeakable, beastly things to her. Laughing. Laughing at my angel's pain and anguish. She spits and fights them until her last breath, her body broken and used, but my wife's spirit never diminished.

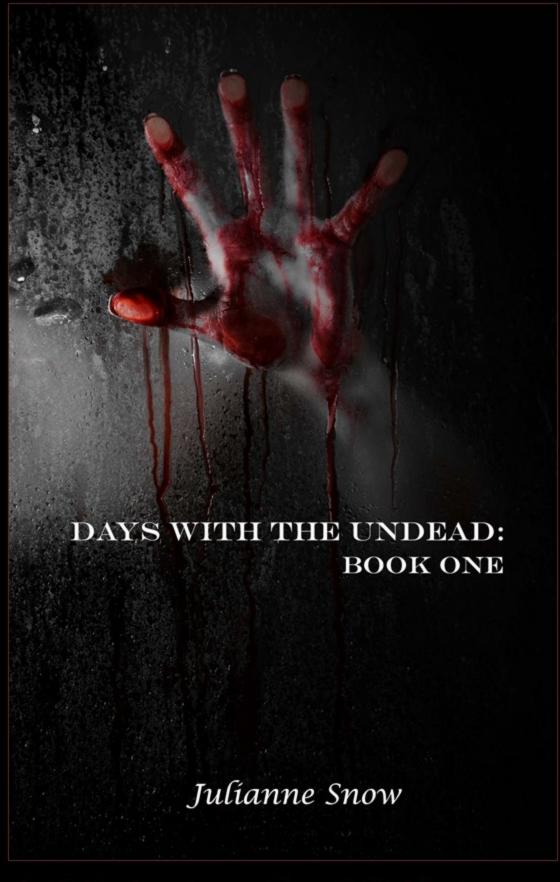
The glass led me to the soldiers. They are all dead; bones long ago bleached white by the sun in fields salted by my own hands. Their barbarian king begged for death before he slipped into oblivion.

Their screams did not ease my pain. Watching them die again brings me no comfort. I fear those scenes, for I know what I would see in the glass; a broken man losing his grip on sanity. I wish I never knew what happened to her, and now there is nothing I can do but watch. Again.

The scrying glass taunts me.

ABOUT J. WHITWORTH HAZZARD - J. Whitworth lives in the vast cornfields of Illinois with his wife, and four nearly perfect children. A Geek-for-Hire by day, he has worked for over ten years fixing minor computer problems, some of which he did not even cause. He prepares technical documents for a living and tries not to include any zombies in reports on server upgrades and network outages (although not always successfully).

Dr. Hazzard has a PhD in molecular biophysics that he now uses to figure out how to scientifically justify the existence of mythical creatures. Trained in science and critical thinking, J. Whitworth spends his leisure time writing fiction that would make his former professors cringe. He has been a life-long writer and has spent more than his fair share of time writing about all kinds of ridiculous things. His dream of writing for a living started in the 5th grade when his five page story "The Blood and Guts 500" entranced and thrilled his classmates. His passionate prosody received a standing ovation and from that day forward he was hooked on the art of story telling. Visit him online at http://zombiemechanics.com or on Twitter at @zombiemechanics.



Available through www.SirensCallPublications.com

A Ipper DA Chaney

A breeze tickles my nose and all of a sudden, it's there again. This lingering, faint musk that's almost...not quite here at all. I can't help but think it's peculiar, given my dire situation. If I dare to breathe it in deeply, the scent frequents the air like a grotesque perfume. Its raw and pungent fragrance mingles together above me, reminiscent of bloody stool.

Have I soiled myself? The aroma fades quickly as other, more familiar ones, slither by. My cheeks burn hot from the inside out. Beneath my head, the uncomfortable wet stone adds to my misery, and the strong desire not to care still leaves me feeling absurdly ashamed. It's not my fault.

My throat burns terribly, so I try to swallow but find that I cannot, and I gag instead. My windpipe belches blood from deep gaping cuts, and the slick surface serves to aid in punching through my ruined flesh like an accidental geyser. I feel it stain my face as hot sticky globs arc high. Tears pop in my eyes as I realize, to my ever rising horror, I can feel the leftover gore puddle and slide unchecked downwards in lumpy air begotten curds. There is nothing to be done while it chokes me just as effectively as the sadist at my throat. The suffocatingly thick and coppery wrongness of it all terrifies me almost more than the killer who looms quietly above me. He's watching me carefully. Seeming to examine my every reaction, as if he can expect anything other than what was actually happening, at any given moment.

The double-bladed knife had done a lot of damage a few moments ago, and as he moves again, everything inside of me clenches in fear. I feel myself flush hot and cold all at once. An uncontrollable stinky sweat, born of intense shock and alarm, breaks out over me. I don't care. Or, that's what I tell myself, anyway, even though I clearly do mind.

I can do nothing that will save my own life, not even mewl in terror as I lay aching. I can only sprawl here, staring at what he's doing to me, and feel the unforgiving sting of the sharp metal upon my body. Pinned beneath him, I am weak and broken, even though my will is still beating strong beneath my breasts.

A blinding anger triggers within me. As sure as I can feel the knife, I know I am a prisoner inside myself. He's done something to me. I still don't know what it is that he did. All I can attest to is I want to hurt him back badly. If my hands were free and under my own power, I would claw his eyes out like a rabid animal. I would gorge myself on his innards as he aims to play with mine, like toys. I want to live, I don't want to lay here and die. It's not fair that I am the one on the ground, helpless, and he is so free to do as he pleases. Even in the East End of London, where every single one of us is on first name terms with daily violence, this would top my list of exposure. And I won't survive it. Knowing that devastates me. And still, I glare at him through the growing haze in my vision. As I watch, the twitch in his cheek deepens as he works. He keeps the blade moving ever slowly lower, cutting clothing and skin. Slicing down, towards my soft belly.

God, I want to scream. It hurts so terribly bad and I want it to stop. Why are you doing this to me? I want to bellow my rage at his smug face. Even if I had the capacity to make a sound, is there anyone out there who would come to help me? It isn't very likely. People do not want to get involved.

I grunt involuntarily as I feel the blade pierce through something that must be important below my belly button. There isn't an evil enough word for what this man is doing to me, here upon the hard, damp stones. I don't know the right term for what it's called, this playing of innards, but I know it's not right. My blood flows from me like water from a tap, staining the moment. Sometimes it has pained me in the past that I am not an educated woman, but I don't need to be smart to know he's cutting and digging deeper into territory that no man should be allowed access to. It hurts so much. I don't know how long I can last, with this horrible pain twisting through my guts, sending lighting rods all through me. God, please, make it stop.

But He doesn't make it stop. Whether by ending my life or making my killer stop his torture on me, He does not, and I must withstand the agony. Is this my punishment for the life I've led? Is this the punishment You wish of me?

I always knew there would be a price, but I had not known it'd come with this high a price. All I can console myself with now is, that this...memory of pain would soon be short lived. I don't have long left. I can feel myself growing weaker. It's as if someone has put a lid over a fire, the flames are going out, and the warmth that was once there is now escaping the room. I am so cold.

I'm actually grateful this torment is almost over. At the pointy end of that metal, all I find is that there is no further need of hope.

This evil man had lured me in with talk of pennies and sex. Not so unlike the like the hundreds who had come before him, and this time at least, it hadn't been for a loaf of stale bread. Fat lot that does now. I should have gone with the man offering bread. At least I'd be alive tomorrow. I feel a bitter burst of regret stain my mouth, and I shudder. My teeth are syrupy, like gore coated candy.

I hadn't seen the danger in his offer. Unable to sense the darkness behind his crooked smile. There had been nothing suspicious to poke a stick at then. He was good at blending in and acting as though he was normal folk. A wolf in a sheep's clothing. He'd been innocent and eager. And I, I am a creature of pleasure. I'd responded to him as a lady of the night. A path I chose.

Over the hump of his shoulder, I can see the outline of the moon through the lumbering spread of thickening fog. It is playing peek-a-boo with me. No, I'm wrong. It's not the moon plying tricks, it's my eyesight, and I think it's beginning to go.

I can feel myself start to panic, my heart beats faster in my chest, and my left eye flutters rapidly, but I force myself to stop and realize. I had done my panicking already. I had struggled quite heavily at first when he had produced the knife, but it'd been far too late by then. I was trapped like a mouse. He had me where he'd wanted me to be, and I hadn't known until there was nothing I could do to escape. As was the case now. The fight is gone from me. I lay, occasionally twitching, faintly hearing my shoddy boot heels clack against the stones, and I await death's grip.

I wince as I feel him slicing harder into the recesses of my stomach now. The horrible burning sting of it pains me so forcibly that I utter a long drawn out groan. It's actually trapped gas, forcing my cold lips apart, as my heart continues to stumble inside my rib cage. I try to scream, because I can attempt to do nothing else, but I gargle on the blood. It's worse than any feeling I've ever had- far worse than the sickest I've ever been with the flux. I truly hope that I'm dead soon or that my senses will let me finally exit life. Though I have little doubt that fate will be so kind in death, for it was not the case in the forty years of my existence.

He murmurs softly and inadvertently blows a stream of hot exhalation that brushes across my cold face. His breath is sour in my nostrils, and ordinarily I'd wince with that high amount of rank coming from any human mouth, but I cannot, so I lay and bear it. The words he utters are intended more for himself than aimed at me. Still, I try to listen closely, simply out of curiosity at this point. Is he praying? Cursing? Counting?

But I can't make out his words because my ears seem like they've plugged up like a flooded loo. Muted. He could be shouting, though he wasn't, and I don't know if I could hear what he was saying. I've been primarily staring at his face, trying to memorize every line and curve, so that if I ever walk past him in Hell, I'll recognize him as my murderer and plan an exacting revenge upon him. But now, I look down the long bloated line of my body and see his gaze is steadfast on whatever terrible thing he's doing to my abdomen. His fingers are working quickly, and he extracts something from a bag nearby. A container of some kind? I watch as he sets it on my chest and then dips the blade back inside me. I find I can't watch anymore when I notice the weight inside my body cavity is shifting. It's appalling enough to feel what he's doing, I can't actively watch him take things from me too.

My gaze falls back to his head. His gentleman's hat has fallen away somewhere nearby, and his hair ripples with his jerky movements. He's straining. I can see dots of sweat bead his brow. But this is not a burden to him. No. This is the murderous action of an insane, yet satisfied mind.

Quite suddenly he stops, freezing like a startled deer, and quickly looks up from his work. His head is twisting this way and that, as if he hears something close by that disturbs him. His body braces, as if he is ready for an attack that will come from the darkness of the alleyway. Carefully and hesitantly, one hand raises the knife, carnage from my insides dripping from the handle like wet wax. My vision is blurry, but I can still see that he's gripping the hilt hard in his fist, while his other hand absently dumps something heavy into the pan lying on my chest.

A burst of exhausted but enduring strength tells me that while the situation is hopeless for me, maybe I still have a chance to get this madman caught in the act. I can choose my death to mean something. A part of me realizes that perhaps I should be past the point of acting generously, but the pain he'd put me through, I would not wish on others. And I want to die knowing that he's caught. It is merely the act of mentally pushing my physical body to move. I feel a horrible tension within me mount as I urge my boots to scuff at the stones. Make some noise, for God's sake. Am I causing any sound at all: I am pretty sure that I must be, because I know my heels are scraping wildly against the ground and my forehead is wet and clammy, but I can't tell how much pressure that I'm creating. Is it enough noise to be heard?

The man isn't concerned with me at all. He's still listening, head cocked to the side, and waiting. Then his shoulders relax, and the knife is lowered, and I know I haven't made enough of a difference to the situation. Sorely disappointed, my final tears well in the corner of my eyes, signalling my shame. There is nothing more I can do, and he'll do this again to someone else.

The man leans back over me and resumes. Finally, even though minutes feel as though they've lasted hours, I close my eyes, feeling my body shake like a deer carcass being emptied. Feeling myself fading away, I remember everything people have been saying in the past few days about him, with finite clarity. I have no question in my mind who my killer is.

My intended lover.

Instead, my gruesome thief of lives - Jack the Ripper.

ABOUT DA Chaney - DA Chaney currently resides in Western Massachusetts. She is the author the novella "Cryptic" as well as several short stories. She is also a movie reviewer for two sites, 'The G.A.S.P Factor' and 'Altered Realities Radio'.

When DA Chaney isn't writing her next piece, she is checking out the latest movies or playing video games in her spare time. Many of her short stories reference gaming, for those who enjoy the past time. You can find her on Twitter as: @DA_Chaney, her Facebook Page as: DA Chaney. If you're looking for her personal blog, find it at http://dachaney.wordpres.com



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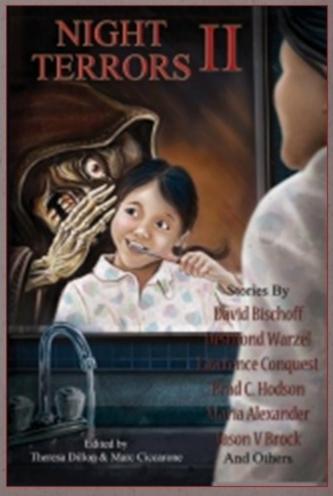
Amber Keller



Amber Keller is a writer living in the mountains of Tennessee whose speculative fiction delves into such genres as horror, thriller and suspense. Her works can be found in several anthologies. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, provides horror and science fiction movie reviews and contributes to various websites. When not writing, she can be found looking for things that go bump in the night. Many of her flash fiction stories can be found on her blog http://www.adiaryofawriter.blogspot.com

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NIGHT OF TERRORS II - Just when you thought it was safe to crawl back into bed . . . we've got a new set or terrors! If Night Terrors made you pray for dawn, Volume II will send you into total madness. Step inside the secret chambers of the Vatican and experience the dark side of the papal elections. Meet people only a mother could love; listen to the dead speak, and even more disturbing, hear them cry. Discover the darkness that lives inside the hearts of man, and hide from other worldly tormentors . . . and, if you manage to wake up after these night terrors . . . you'll wake up dead!



Look for Amber's stories in future anthologies from Sirens Call Publications – Childhood Nightmares: Under The Bed and Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity

Misplaced Obsession

I became aware of her a few months ago as I watched from afar, frightened but exhilarated. Occasionally I would see her cross my path in the woods, or see her working at the foot of the cave. But mostly her form punctuated my dreams. Or nightmares; I couldn't tell one from the other as those mesmerizing eyes and long legs conjured images of things both deeply desired and terrifying. Towards the end those potent pictures blurred together into a single visage.

Stuck in my mind, she was. Resistant. I couldn't focus on my day-to-day tasks as she loomed like a black monolith in my contemplations, often at the most inopportune moments.

I started to talk to her and the words flowing in return beguiled in a hypnotic fashion. They whispered dark hints of things to come. But I sensed even then that my view of reality wasn't what one could call accurate, but rather a machination of my psyche. It was the strangest of things, and yet so compelling. It's hard to explain the pull that it could have on my jaded self, and yet it pulled. Insistent.

A few weeks after these laconic exchanges, I started to see her regularly. Almost on a daily basis I would go in the morning to the mouth of the cave and watch her work. Watch those graceful arcs. Occasionally she would show herself to be ruthless and ferocious, but that only drew me in further. Her influence was a corrosive force on my resolve.

It was a few days later that I became completely absorbed. She came out of her cave and appeared to me one cold night. I remember it so clearly. It was the middle of the winter and the wolves howled their calls from within the woods. The half-moon shone behind wispy clouds, casting sliver light onto the small clearing behind my cottage. I heard nothing as she approached. She moved out of the woods like a shadow: lithe and deathly silent. She must have seen me watching her through the window, as I was lit from the light of the fire inside Kindling cracked and snapped. A clammy sweat broke out across my forehead as my blood froze behind warm skin.

She approached the window so that her large eyes gazed directly in line with mine. I watched my distorted self in those glossy orbs swaying in her presence. I don't remember how, but I was soon outside, bathing in her magnificence. She took me then. Grabbing me before I had chance to move. Something

sharp slid into my stomach and an overwhelming sense of sleep radiated throughout my being; my world dissolved and I was no longer the same.

I don't know how much longer it was before I woke. Could have been a few days or a few weeks. The hunger pains told me it was more than a few hours. I couldn't move. Limbs were trapped in a snug cocoon, warm and comfortable. She spoke to me through that weird period of stasis -- I didn't recognize the words but it sent my heart into fitful palpitations.

Later, I heard chattering noises echoing from all around me. I guessed I was in her cave, as I could smell the earthy dampness lingering in the air. My head was seemingly free of the cocoon; the tips of my ears and nose burned with the sharp stings of winter-frost.

I looked around and saw many others like me—white, wrapped cocoons—heads rolling, mouths grimaced. I thought I heard a whining noise coming from one of them. It looked like a young girl; her eyes bled as she cried.

I tried to gain my bearings; I think I was upside down and suspended because what I thought was the ceiling turned out to be the dusty floor. Small bones and what looked like patchy pieces of skin littered the ground. An entanglement of silvery rope blocked the light from the entrance of the cave. When my focus returned to me I saw her in all her glory. Her eight legs clung to the web with such agile ease. She moved closer to me. Caught me in those huge eyes. My reflection didn't sway this time. My mouth wide, and eyes clouded; I knew then that my obsession was misplaced.

She bent her head lower and opened her maw. Her mandibles dripped something acidic onto my skin. All light was lost beyond that point.

I don't know how I'm able to communicate this, or where these words are going. My body has been consumed, and yet I still exist—somewhere. I float aimlessly around this cave, looking for an exit. I still hear the girl's cry and I search for her in the gloom, but there is utterly nothing.

ABOUT COLIN F. BARNES - Colin is a writer from the UK who writes Speculative and Thriller fiction. He likes to take the gritty edginess from his surroundings and personal experiences and translate them into his stories. He also edits anthology and currently has two out: Killing My Boss and City of Hell Chronicles: Volume 1. Like many writers, he has an insatiable appetite for reading, with his favorite authors being: Stephen King, Ray Bradbury, James Herbert, Albert Camus, H.P Lovecraft, Clark Ashton Smith, China Mieville and a vast array of unknown authors who he has had the privilege of beta reading for. You can find Colin online at www.colinfbarnes.com and on Twitter at @ColinFBarnes.





There are three things everyone got wrong about time travel. As the inventor of the first working prototype for time travel I am in a privileged position of knowing this, although I am unable to convey this information to anyone else.

My name is Silas Jones, and I have been a scientist and scholar for my whole life. I learnt to read at an exceptionally young age, and indulged that passion for the written word. My mother, a caring but worn individual, encouraged me in this, despite my father's disgust. In my father's eyes, boys worth their salt showed courage on the football field, behind a baseball bat, or hunting in the wilderness. I do not know if this is one of the disappointments which lead him to leave my mother and me when I was seven years old. My mother's parents died before I was born, and I only met my paternal grandfather once, although he made a great impression on me.

He stopped by our house, perhaps to deliver some message between my parents. A small man, he stood exceptional straight, and all his muscles seemed slightly tense, as if permanently at the ready. He did not speak well, and even as a child I was unimpressed by his intelligence, but his eyes were most striking. One of them moved all the time, and sparkled brightly. It reminded me of a wild animal like a squirrel. The other was slightly duller and did not move at all. The contrast was quite unnerving. My mother told me later that one of them was a false eye, made of glass, and I remember wondering if it was the twitching eye or the steady one. For some reason, the image of those eyes has reappeared to me at odd moments throughout my life: a puzzle unsolved.

As I progressed through school, my desire for knowledge seemed to increase exponentially. I rarely saw the sun, but the librarian brought me tea and crackers to feed my physical body while my hunger for information was sated. Making new scientific observations thrilled me to the core. I won many prizes, and was accepted to the most prestigious university. Vaulting through my bachelors and masters degrees and doctorate, I am now retained as an invaluable research scientist. I see little of students, which suits me very well. I have peace to observe and study the world.

My researches into the field of time travel lead me to discover the first of the misconceptions about the art, and that is scale. Due to complicated Einsteinian mathematics which I would not expect you to understand, it is impossible to draw enough power to transmit the whole body through time. Really it is a simple balancing act between mass and energy. Thus, when a body is transported through time, it must emerge in the new time, many many times smaller than in its original time. Personally, I prefer to leave the whole physical body behind, nurtured by a reliable life support system, while the consciousness alone travels.

The second misunderstanding is about time itself. Popular culture held that time travellers would simply press a button, go through a gate or portal, and the transportation would happen more or less instantaneously to the participant. While I wish that this were the case, at this stage, my prototype only allows the travel to happen at approximately two hundred thousand times the usual speed of time, relative although that is. Hence if you wish to travel back, say eighty years, as I have now, it takes at least an afternoon to get there.

The third and final mistake was one which I did not realise myself until I tried the machine. As I locked the door of the lab, and strapped myself into the required life support systems, my fingers I confess, shook with excitement and scientific anticipation. Sitting back, I couldn't help but imagine the accolades, the envy of other scientists, when I published the results of my tests. I admit that the possibility of a Nobel prize did drift across my fevered brain. Being particularly interested in the second world war, a subject about which I had read a great deal, I planned to travel back to about 1935.

As the afternoon wore on, my mind, so used to being constantly stimulated, drifted over many subjects, but strangely the one which kept coming back to me was that visit by my grandfather when I was a child. How surprised he would be to see that skinny little bookworm as a professor! Which one of his disturbing eyes would open wide in wonder? After a while, the device started to take hold in earnest, and I think my conscious mind closed down in protection.

When I awoke, I could not at first understand where I was. It was still dark, but I seemed to be moving slightly. After a while, I could make out bright stars above, and the dark forms of hedgerows looming on either side of a narrow road. A sound was coming from nearby, and I realised that it was a man whistling, extraordinary tunefully. A light appeared ahead, and the lane led to a small town, with a gaslight shining out of the open doors of a hall. People were gathered around the door, and the style of their clothes told me that I had indeed succeeded in transporting myself back to the mid thirties! I wanted to whoop with joy, but with no physical body in this time, found my rejoicing limited to the intellectual.

The person I was travelling with stepped up to the crowd with confidence, greeting some of the men by pounding on shoulders and back, and some of the women with bold comments I would never have had the confidence to make. Surprisingly, they just giggled, and one woman with a striking red dress winked saucily. The inside of the hall was decked with colourful paper streamers, and trestle tables stood at one side, with food and what looked like a large bowl of punch. People kept coming up to my host and greeting him warmly, shaking his hand so fervently that my roost was shaken. I found myself

a little sea sick. Most confusingly at first, they called him by my own name, Silas Jones. It was only when I heard him speak clearly that my memory was stirred, and I realised that the device I had created had taken me back to my own grandfathers' life! It was not without shock that I concluded that my seat of observation was no less than the glass eye which had disturbed me as a child.

Even now, I do not know whether time travel may only work along ones' own personal timeline – that is, that of your own family; or whether my recalling memories of Silas Jones Senior when I was entering the process has carried me here. Both options expose the third myth about time travel, and that is your objectivity as a traveller and observer. Whatever the cause, I am now embedded as deeply as a bubble in my grandfather's glass eye.

That evening, he partook of quite a bit of the punch from the bowl, but also, and I alone saw this, from the flask which he concealed in his jacket. He danced wildly with many women, but the girl in the red dress was a particular favourite. It was not something which I normally would have enjoyed at all, but being cloaked in his confidence, rather than my own rather awkward body, I came to appreciate some of the joy of it. Towards the end of the evening, he started to reel a little, and my sensation of sea-sickness became quite strong. Suddenly, we jerked forward, and I realised that Silas senior had been pushed violently from behind by another man. We were suddenly chest to chest with a red-headed bully of a man, and the sight of his nostril hairs sprouting spikily out of a pocked face at close range is one I rather wish I could forget. Very quickly we were outside the hall, and slugging it out. My grandfather seemed to be a good fighter, despite his drunkenness, and the red head's ugly nose was soon bleeding profusely. Used to the dry life of an academic, I found it both quite repellent, and also quite exciting. If I had had a physical heart in that time, it would have been pounding in my chest.

A ruddy fist slammed into my observation port, and we were falling backwards. I think Silas Senior must have blacked out, because we lay still for quite a while. I saw, while he did not, the girl in red first berate our redheaded opponent, and then slap him so hard I felt his neck would break. Then she was crouching by our prone body, and the sight of her fine breasts

bulging from the dress is one which I would much rather remember than the nose hairs.

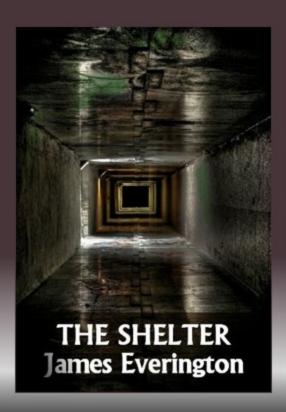
I should confess at this point, that although my academic career has been brilliant, my social one has been somewhat limited. I remain a virgin, and this has never greatly bothered me in the past. The whole mating ritual has always seemed rather crude and animalistic to me. But what was revealed to me that night, after the girl in the red dress had helped me home to my caravan, opened my eyes to my folly. Her beauty in the moonlight transcended any crudity, and their lovemaking seemed as much a meeting of the mind as of the body, one responding to the other with an almost telepathic awareness.

The following days were no less interesting and exciting. I rode a horse bareback with my grandfather, shoplifted cigarettes, walked long miles through the countryside, and slept under the stars. His life could not be more different than my cloistered existence, and the variety and rich sensory nature of it has at times appalled and frightened me, but also given me terrific stimulation and shown me superb beauty. Although he seems not to plan or intellectualise his actions, he has lived more in the last few weeks than I have in the forty-odd years that I lived my own life. I cannot feel what he feels, or taste what he tastes, but the senses of sight and sound alone has given me great and weighty gifts.

I find that I am unable to regain my own time, and I suppose that I will be a passenger with Silas Senior for as long as the life support systems in my laboratory hold out, assuming that our times move at the same rate. The strength of my mind allowed me to live a full academic life, but has blinded me from the real world. I have come to accept this though, as the gift with the greatest weight of all has been a life fully lived.

ABOUT KASIA JAMES - Kasia James is the author of *The Artemis Effect*, a soon to be released science fiction novel. It traces the stories of three groups of people from Britian, Australia and America as they live through the time when the Moon started to change. Kasia can be found at Writers Block, a page that features thoughts on reading and writing, book reviews, and information on the literary world, focused on science fiction, young adult and cross-genre titles. The address is http://kasiajames.wordpress.com. You can also find her on Twitter at @kasiajames.

James Everington



It's a long, drowsy summer at the end of the 1980s, and Alan Dean and three of his friends cross the fields behind their village to look for a rumoured WW2 air raid shelter. Only half believing that it even exists beyond schoolboy gossip, the four boys nevertheless feel an odd tension and unease. And when they do find the shelter, and go down inside it, the strange and horrifying events that follow will test their adolescent friendships to breaking point, and affect the rest of their lives...

Available on Amazon

The Other Room is a collection of weird horror fiction, containing twelve stories of the uncanny and the surreal.

A naive student finds that his crumbling bedsit can be as haunted as any Gothic mansion.

A man stumbles across another world which is the mirror image of his own.

A young woman who everyone thinks is beautiful wonders why, given what she sees in the mirror each morning.

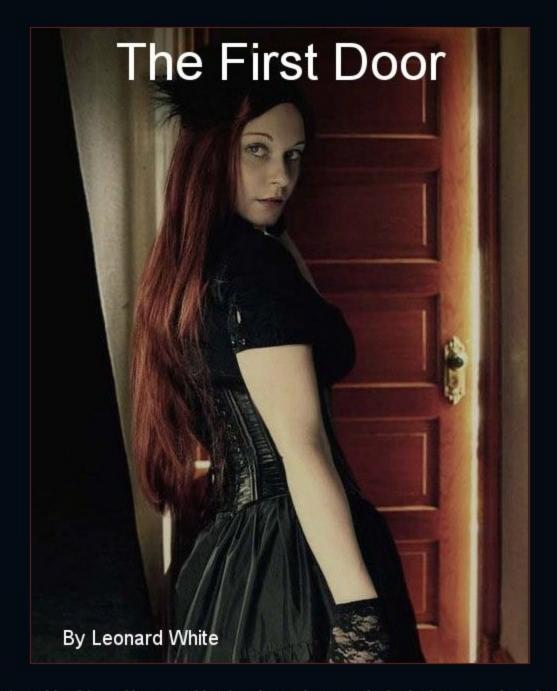
Influenced by writers such as Ramsey Campbell, Shirley Jackson, and Robert Aickman these tales, like all good horror stories, are as much about the psychology of the protagonist as the fate that awaits them.

The Other Room contains both new and previously published stories that will challenge your conceptions of horror and literary fiction.



The Other Room

Weird Fiction by James Everington



Lilly tries to blend in and be normal but just doesn't have any luck. She is constantly in the shadow of gossip about her family which her hometown just won't allow to rest. Old women tell stories about her grandmother and the things that she could do. Her father even had to leave town to find the space he needed to grow into the man that he became.

Things look to have taken a turn for the better when the guy of her dreams asks her out but Lilly is sadly mistaken. Not only is her date ruined but a supernatural force has taken an interest in her and she will have to fight just to save herself. A part time job at Dairy Queen and an honors diploma just don't prepare you for a future like this. What in the world is the average high school graduate supposed to do when faced by something that goes bump in the night?

Electric Eye

"I am elected electric spy/I'm protected electric eye Always in focus/You can't feel my stare I zoom into you/ You don't know I'm there" Electric Eye ~ Judas Priest

The video went viral in the matter of an hour. It was not as cute as the other ones that showed subway rat vs. homeless man on the train, this one was much more graphic, much more cruel. Mainly because the person, who just happened by the scene, chose to make his art rather than finding it like many of the videos that are drowning our senses today. The video was of a homeless man, sleeping, or under the influence of something stronger than alcohol, on the platform bench against the wall at the Columbus Sq. station. The camera was steady for a few seconds taking in a master shot of the scene before it moved in closer, the man was lying there with his mouth opened and as the camera came in still closer we were able to see his mouth was opened and the audio, though tinny and poor quality because of the surroundings, we were able to hear snoring. After a tight shot of the man's face, the camera angle widened and we were able to see a subway rat crawling across the man's inert body. It paused a few times and sniffed the air and continued to scamper up his body towards his face. It sniffed again and stuck its head into the man's mouth and began nibbling, it was a few seconds before the man came to. First, as he tried shaking off his stupor, he appeared confused then realized what was happening, he swatted at his mouth and screamed. He pulled at the rat and was finally able to extricate it along with a chunk of his tongue. The homeless man continued screaming as he ran down the station, almost falling into the tracks but righting himself at the last moment.

Ezekiel laughed and saved the video on his smart phone and immediately uploaded it. Ezekiel Wheeler was in his early twenties and looked thin and pale except for his cherubic cheeks, which seemed to retain some, if not all of his baby fat. He also suffered from Rosacea, so his cheeks were constantly red. Giving him, as his girlfriend would say, a just smacked look. He had taken to dying his blond hair black and forever ran his hands through it to keep it in that perpetual bed head style. He had painted nails and the hint of eyeliner, and was already down to wearing 8 gauge earrings to stretch out his ear lobes. At his High School his look often got him harassed but in college he had fit in just fine, and he was the norm for once. Even at his 9 to 5 one of his coworkers had 00 gauges and a lot of ink. Since they were all working in graphic design, the suits didn't bother the creative department. As much as he liked that environment he wanted to find success on his own. The longer he waited for it the more it seemed to elude him.

"Fucker should have fallen in front of an oncoming train, shit that would have been priceless." The wheels in his twisted mind began turning, but dismissed it almost as quickly as he thought of it. This was a little nasty but he wasn't really hurting anyone he thought.

"Well not anyone important anyway." He said to no one in particular. The urban snake roared through the darkness and of the tunnel stirring up a much-needed breeze that actually chilled him for a moment. Zeke safely tucked his phone away and got on the train for his ride home.

Sitting down he thought what luck he had seeing the man sleeping in the same place night after night. It only took him a couple of days to think of a cool scenario for a video when he saw a rat or two poking around at the far end of the platform. He laid down some scraps and figured something pungent would draw their attention, and who would have known how much rats would love cheese in a can?

He pulled the can from his pocket and shook it and squirted it into his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

"You had something to do with that rat biting that man didn't you?"

Zeke smiled and tilted his head to the side and tried to look innocent. "Maybe a little"

She threw her hands up and stormed out of the room. "I don't believe you. You could have knocked it off of him when it started hurting him. That's was cruel and —"

He had walked after her and put his hands on her shoulders, and tried to turn her towards him but she didn't budge. "I couldn't do that Marlee, I observe, record and report. This video alone got over three million hits. A few more of these and Hollywood will be banging down my door instead of me banging my head against theirs."

Marlee seemed to deflate. She turned to him and placed her hands on the side of his face. "Zeke, what you did was wrong, and someone could get hurt. I mean its bad enough you filming everything, but don't make things happen. Not like that."

He looked at her and nodded. "No, you are right. You are always right baby. I will go back to being the documentarian I was meant to be then. Just filming life as I see it unfold."

She felt as though she should have been relieved, but as she looked into his eyes as she reached up to kiss him, she saw cold hard lumps of coal staring straight through her. It sent a shiver through her body that chilled her very soul.

In college, after switching his major three times, Ezekiel decided he would become a filmmaker. While the technical aspects seemed to bore him, the actual directing and filming excited him. For his thesis, he shot a movie on his 12 megapixel digital camera and edited it on the computers in the film department at his College. It was a no budget romantic zombie flick entitled Brains N' Roses. He had open auditions in the Student Union Building for the leads, and just cast a bunch of his friends from his fraternity as the extras or the supporting cast. While he was losing favor with his fraternity brothers, they had thought he was getting weird, and turning into what they referred to as a little emo fuck, they thought it would be fun and went along with his little project. They had fun, at his expense, they were hard to control and often did what they wanted, and more often than not were loaded whenever filming was going on. Needless to say, his film sucked as badly as anything he had ever done up until that point in his life, and he almost didn't graduate because of how bad his work was. The only caveat of it all was that he had met Marlee during his open call. She was his leading lady, and she soon became the leading lady in his life as well. She is the one who urged him to make a documentary when his film fell flat, and he took to the streets of the city and made a documentary about viral videos. Not only did he graduate with honors, he started his own website and won several small, albeit prestigious, awards for some of his work.

He liked finding inspiration in the city, and for a few years after graduation he would be happy to just wander the city with Marlee and film anything and everything, sometimes he had some material he could use other times just some nice shots of his beautiful girl was enough for him. Slowly that changed. He could not really tell when but it did, and he knew there was no going back. He wanted something to happen; he wanted to see some action, anything. Then he got his wish. He was headed back home to Brooklyn from the city where he had been filming around the courthouses and became disheartened by the sheer ennui of everything and decided fuck it, and headed toward the bridge. Once over the bridge he only had a few blocks to walk home where he lived in his small apartment on Flatbush Ave off of Jay Street. This day he was walking across the bridge, not even looking at the people or anyone and he realized how warm it was and stopped to take his jacket off and tie it around his waist, when out of the corner of his eye he noticed something.

On the lower level of the bridge, the car level, he noticed a car stop, and saw a woman get out, and walk over the side of the bridge. Like a shark smelling blood, Zeke dropped his jacket and held onto his camera. Immediately he started filming. He climbed up on the ledge and crab walked until he was behind the woman. He sat on the ledge, precariously dangling over of the lanes of cars while he continued filming.

"Shit this is going to be awesome!" he said, squealing like a prepubescent boy getting his first glimpse of a tit. He continued to film even as other cars slowed down to look. He filmed when a few people got out of their cars to talk to the woman. He even filmed when she jumped off of the bridge and plunged in the waters below. That night he sold his footage to NY1, the local news station. He could have gotten top dollar at the major networks, but took what they offered because they agreed to interview him. He would announce his name, his website, and have people see his face, hear his name, and see his work. It was a step up for him. A big step up.

Marlee noticed that after the whole incident with the suicide on the bridge, Zeke started to become darker. He wanted more sensationalistic video. He started filming fights. It did not matter who, or what. Some videos he put on the site were bum fights. Others were kids outside of schools. It worried her that he may get hurt one day, but it worried her even more that he

that he did not try to get involved, or stop what he was seeing, or just put the camera away and call the police.

She rolled over in bed and turned to him, "Zeke?"

"Yeah babe?"

"Why don't you try to stop things? Like that fight where the three girls were beating up that woman?"

"The one in the train station?"

"Train station? I didn't even know about that one, no, the one in the Wendy's where those girls were beating up the woman who was cleaning the tables."

He was about to laugh at the memory but quickly stopped himself.

"They would've stomped my ass too. Did you see the size of those heifers?"

She put her hand on his arm. "I'm serious."

"Do documentarians in the wild save the poor zebra from being torn apart by a lion? No. Do they stop political executions? No. Do they-"

"Enough, I get it, I don't like but I get it. Though Zeke, you aren't like those others. I mean, this isn't an assignment you are on; this is like an obsession. And today that thing with the burn, that was over the line."

"Yes baby, I said you were right, I am sorry, I won't do that anymore, I won't even go looking for trouble anymore. You were right." He kissed her. "As always."

"Zeke, don't piss on my leg and tell me it's raining."

He looked at her and smiled. In the beginning he hated lying to her about anything. Though a little one here and there, it became easier. So it was no problem now. And he had gotten good at it, he was able to lie to her with a straight face, and she believed him.

"You got it babe. Just the funny stuff, easy stuff, I swear. I will go back to shooting credit cards and Popsicles over at the skateboard park."

She laughed because they were often hilarious, when they didn't happen to you.

In skateboarder nomenclature, a credit card was when you wiped out and the skateboard shot up as you fell on it and it nailed you in the ass, usually between the cheeks. The Popsicle was even funnier and more painful, as it usually nailed you right between the legs.

"I always loved the face plants myself." She said. She kissed him. They made love that night. It was the first time in over a month, and it would be for the last time.

Zeke never told her about some of the other videos he took. She stopped watching when he would put fights up. She didn't like those, whether they were the bum fights that were so popular on many pay sites or fights between strays. She found them distasteful, and soon she stopped watching them altogether. In the beginning, she would complain and ask him why he thought that they were worth filming, and why he wouldn't do something to stop them and it would eventually lead into an argument, and she did not want to be the one always playing the bad guy in the relationship.

Soon he said he stopped and went back to filming humorous things. Or some artsy stuff, as he would say. She would look sometimes and see he was truthful, but then felt guilty about not believing him and decided she wouldn't look at his site, unless he sent her a link to a particular video. He knew she trusted him, but just to be sure he had a sister site that had no link that she and her friends knew about. This was the place he posted some of the videos he knew she would not approve of. He had a few videos of a purse-snatcher in action, another of someone assaulting an old woman, another of a hit and run. He even had a video of someone exposing himself at a schoolyard. He had at least twenty of such videos up, and had blurred out the offenders faces, and in the case of the hit and run the license plate was clearly visible. He had blurred that out as well. He saw all of these travesties, these crimes, and did nothing, except for capturing it all for perpetuity, and for his own enjoyment. He had legions of fans on both sites, never the same ones interestingly enough. He also had some comments of hate and threats and the like but he didn't care; any press is good press, so he kept trying to top himself. Zeke wasn't aware, as he slept peacefully with Marlee's head resting on his shoulder, that he would get what he was hoping for tomorrow evening.

Strip club hidden camera was a no-brainer back in the day but with so much amateur stuff out there, there had to be a hook. Zeke had yet to find that hook but every so often would find himself inside of a strip club trying to film the girls. It helped to have a low cost cell for when he got caught. On one occasion he had to ram his I Phone down the crack of his ass just in time for the bouncer, Josiah, a former UFC Fighter, to grab him up, find the phony cell and smash beneath his apelike size thirteen. No warning, just destruction of property, and a look that told Zeke that next time it would be his face beneath those mammoth shoes. Zeke took the hint and didn't try to film in the main dance area again. He did score some shots in the dressing room once, but he wasn't going to push his luck.

On this occasion he just sat there to unwind, and every so often he'd see the big behemoth Josiah forcibly remove someone via the back exit, and he would follow and usually get a few minutes of a one sided fight on camera. This time was different though. On the other side of the bar, he saw the owner, Lucky Eddie, talking with someone at the bar. He didn't recognize the guy, but Lucky Eddie was a local bent-nose who ran this and three other titty bars, and also was into some other stuff. Nothing that could be proven of course, but this may be my lucky day, thought Zeke, as he got up and went to the men's room. The bathrooms were right off the rear exit, where one can be taken out into the alley and get tuned up. Zeke had about a half-dozen of these on his site, but as of late they did not do too well. Probably not enough blood for his frenzied fans. But this time seemed different because Lucky Eddie himself was escorting the guy out the back.

The ladies of the clubs, all four of them, had another name for him; they called him Fast Eddie. A name he would not be proud of; a name garnered because, as they would say amongst themselves, he came in like thirty seconds. None of them minded when he came on to them. They would get prime times to dance, and he'd tip generously and he never lasted long enough to be inconvenient to anyone. Though no one ever dared mention this since one time a few years back he had heard of the ill-fated nickname and sodomized the girl with an electric cattle prod. Eddie was not known for his sense of humor.

"So fuck stick, how is it that you don't have money to pay off your debts but you got money to stick in one of my girls cracks? Riddle me this Saul?"

The guy was sweating. Josiah smacked him against the side of the head. Hard. He was knocked back but didn't lose his footing. At that same moment Zeke got to the other end of the alley. He had exited from the main entrance and ran down the block to the side of the alley where he stood with his camera out. He tried to hide behind the building as much as he could without sacrificing his POV.

"No, Eddie, I came in to see you. I got some money."

"He's got some money he says. Ten large, you got that, because that is what you owe me Saul."

Josiah frisked the guy and came out with the man's wallet and a small roll of cash. He looked at the roll, which was wrapped with a thin rubber band and had a hundred on the outside.

"Not bad boss," He said as he tossed the roll to Eddie.

He eyed it suspiciously, "Better not be a Jewish bankroll."

Saul laughed. "Good one Eddie."

Josiah smacked him in the back of the head, "No one asked you."

Eddie spread out the money and there were two hundreds a few twenties and nearly a hundred singles. It was close to four hundred dollars. The wallet yielded another eight hundred dollar bills.

"So you got about ten percent of what you owe me. This ain't good Saul. And why the flashy roll? Need to impress someone? 'Cause it sure ain't me."

"Well Eddie, you see, I was—"

Eddie pointed at him and wagged his finger. "You better answer me carefully, but no matter what, if this conversation doesn't end with me getting more than a lousy ten percent of what you owe me, this evening ain't gonna end well my friend."

Saul straightened his jacket, and cleared his throat.

At the other end of the alley, Zeke zoomed in for the Oscar clip moment before the inevitable violent finale. As he was doing this, Rayzon, a homeless guy in his thirties, was walking by. He was dirty and dressed in layers of clothes, and had on a backpack and a canvas chair slung over his shoulder. He was walking and mumbling to himself, trapped within his own world, when he saw Zeke just to the left of the lip of the alley with his camera out. He smiled and walked faster towards him.

"Hey Zeke, want me to drink my piss again? I'll do it for ten if you want man."

Zeke froze and looked up at Rayzon. He gestured for him to shut up, but it was too late. As Zeke motioned to Rayzon, Eddie nodded toward Josiah to go see what was up. Zeke looked back down the alley to see a pair of massive hands grab for him.

"Yo man, why you acting like that Zeke? It's all good. You know where to find me. I could use some cash, so it's all good." He looked at Josiah and whistled. "Damn, you are a big mother fucker ain't you?" He continued walking down the block mumbling to himself.

Zeke was being dragged toward the end of the alley where the scene had been unfolding. Eddie grabbed the phone from Zeke's hands. "So what have we here? This the same ass-wipe you caught filming inside the club?"

"Sure looks like him. I busted his phone last time. Haven't seen him take it out inside 'cept to make a call lately."

Eddie turned it over, looked at the screen, and nodded. "Seems Speilberg over here was making another movie."

Zeke started sweating. He looked nervously at Eddie and Saul, who now looked as though he were happy that someone else was going to take the brunt of Eddie's anger.

"Now, I was going to call my girl and I hit the wrong button, and --

Eddie put a finger to Zeke's mouth to shush him up. "No, no, no my young friend."

He glanced at Saul. "It's your lucky night. You got another day to get my money. Beat it."

Saul's face lit up and he wore a shit-eating grin all the way down the alley as he ran away, not questioning his good fortune.

"You are not going to want to lie to me. I can see that you have been recording me, and my business transaction. Not to

mention you tried recording my girls, and probably did a few times, before we caught you."

"It was a mistake, you can erase it if you want, here." He reached out for it, but Josiah, who still held him fast, grabbed his hand and squeezed his fingers, crushing them in his overly large hands. There was a moderate pop sound as the thumb on Zeke's hand dislocated. Zeke let out a hushed cry of pain, but tried not to be too loud for fear the pain might be much worse.

Eddie smacked him in the face to get his attention. "You film shit all over the place don't you? I've seen your web site, I think. It sucks if you ask me. Pure garbage. People falling, bums fighting, drinking piss, and people's private conversations. You, sir, are a degenerate."

"You're right, I'm sorry. Take the phone, I am so sorry, you can have it, you will never see me again."

Eddie smiled as if he were struck with an idea. "Hey], who was that Greek mamaluke who porked his mother?"

"Oedipus, I believe boss. It means 'of the swollen foot'."

"Eat a piss? What's his foot got to do with it? He poked his eyes out right? I think that's fitting, don't you?"

"Sounds good Boss."

Zeke was squirming. He didn't think they were serious, but he did not want to get hurt in any way. "Look guys, I am really sorry. I want to be a film maker and I do this shit to try to get some attention by putting myself out there—"

"Hey kid, you got the reddest fucking cheeks I have ever seen." He grabbed one and gave it a squeeze. He let go and did not really notice a change in color. "Look at that, can't even notice I just pinched the baby's cheeks."

"J, I need you to hold him tight. I need to do this with one hand. I wanna capture this for posterity." He fumbled with the camera and started a new video. He pulled a Swiss army knife from his pocket and looked at the corkscrew. He held it in his fist. The corkscrew itself was projecting about four inches from his enclosed fist. He smiled.

"You can't do this, please, come on, don't hurt me, guys I won't say anything, Take the phone, I didn't see anything—"

"And I don't think you will again." Eddie said. He held the phone up with his left hand as he rammed the corkscrew into Zeke's left eye with his right fist.

Zeke screamed.

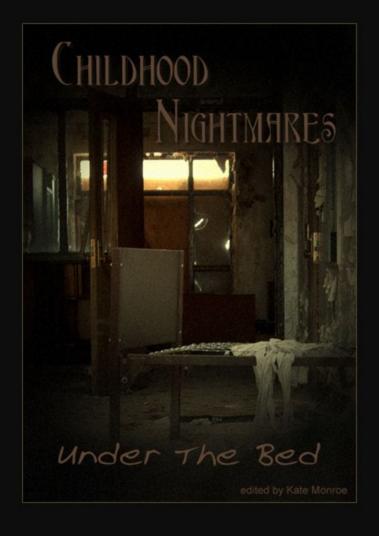
"No fair, you blinked, gonna hurt more now." He pushed it in deeper and gouts of black blood and clear ocular fluid oozed out. He twisted his fist and yanked out the corkscrew. The eyeball didn't pop out like he thought, though it tore a substantial chunk of it from Zeke's skull along with most of the eyelid. Now the screaming became like that of a banshee in heat.

"Do something about that, will ya?" Eddie said to Josiah while he zoomed in on his gore caked trophy like it was a treasure found in the bottom of a Cracker Jack box. Josiah released Zeke for a moment, letting him drop to the floor. Zeke clutched his ruined face and screamed as though if he were loud enough the eye would be magically restored. Josiah then delivered a blow to the back of Zeke's skull just below the ear, rendering him unconscious. Josiah looked at Eddie as he fiddled with the phone. Eddie looked up at him. He thrust the knife at him. "Clean this shit off, will you? And then pick his ass up. I ain't done just yet."

After removing the other eye and severing the optic nerve, Eddie wrapped it in tissue and took it with him as a keepsake.

He also saved the video. He checked that he did not get his or Josiah's face on his home made video and uploaded it to Zeke's site. He tucked the phone into Zeke's pocket and told Josiah to drop him off in the vicinity of a hospital. Soon after the video went viral, and his site was shut down, representatives from the world he so desperately wanted to be in rushed to get his exclusive story, and offered him the world for his few minutes of torture and the rights to his story. It seemed that the world wasn't really interested in what was seen through the eyes of Ezekiel Wheeler. No one cared what he saw, but they cared how he was seen. He wasn't born to be the auteur, but destiny chose him to be a star. Ezekiel Wheeler finally made it.

ABOUT DOUGLAS VANCE CASTAGNA - Born and bred in Brooklyn, Douglas has been a teacher in both Brooklyn and Staten Island for the past 19 years after receiving his BA and MFA from Brooklyn College. His first novel. *Teaching Can Be Murder* is a crime thriller set against the backdrop of today's educational system. Currently, Douglas also has two shorts featured in anthologies; *Randy's Night Out* is available in *Wake Up Dead* and *Rhodesian Nights* which can be found in *Ten Silver Bullets* both from Crowded Quarantine Press. An avid screenplay writer, he hopes to see some of his works produced into film. Douglas can be contacted via his blog http://www.cisthebigdog.blogspot.com.



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One Photograph - Three Points of View



Split

It was just a simple movement. Her head came into contact with the fence post in what seemed like a cruelly ironic twist of fate. I saw it for what it was; a subtly explicit cry for help. I could help.

But I won't.

The walk has been long and isolating, even if I did help there would be nowhere for us to go. Instead I follow along silently, mimicking the sheep all around.

I don't know where we are going. I think, deep down, I don't want to know. Chet is brutal sometimes and the malice he exudes rubs off a bit. I can feel where it has already stained my soul.

She struggles again, trying desperately to free herself from the twisted twine that holds her captive. In the fading light, I can see the abraded nubs of milky skin in stark relief to the angry crimson of the bands that encircle her wrists. Raw, like hamburger.

I'm suddenly ravenous. Are we there yet? It's taking too long. My jumbled mind consumes the thoughts of pain and violence my memories feed me. One delectable morsel after another. With my mind sated on remembered hurt, I now crave new pain to file away for those dark moments of need.

A sharp jerk and she stumbles to the ground. Her ardent shriek of pain hungrily swallowed by my evil. I offer a hand, hauling her back to her feet as if to say see, I'm the nice one.

The look on her face expresses distrust.

I know I am a monster for helping, but I'm not the monster. That's Chet and he's all evil.

I reach out to tenderly brush her dark hair away from the tear stained face, the umbilical of the tether slack.

"Please don't hurt me, Chet..."

~ Kalla Monahan

Goodbye

Eves wide, he stared,

In front of him, a man crouched low to lay his burden down upon the ground. Picking up the shovel that rested against the tree to his left, he dug deep, his rhythmic strokes opening up what seemed to the boy to be a vast chasm at his feet.

In truth, the hole was no more than six feet deep.

The boy furtively held his breath, unable to tear his eyes away from the scene in front of him as the man tossed the shovel aside and turned to his fallen comrade. He touched him gently as he tilted his head back to stare into the raging heavens. Silent tears rolled down the man's face as he slipped his fingers through the limp curls that stuck to the rain-drenched skin.

With a shuddering cry, the man reached into his pocket.
The sunshine glinted off the vicious blade of the scissors
that he pulled out. The boy's breath hitched. Mummy said
I mustn't play with scissors...he whispered under his breath,
somehow knowing that he should not be heard, that he should

With one cut a black curl fell into the man's cupped palm, buffeted by the winds that swirled around them. His fingers closed around it as his hand shot towards his chest, cradling it against his heart as if it were as precious as the chest of pieces o' eight in the story that Mummy had read last night.

Fat tears streamed from the man's dark eyes, mingling with the rain that was still pummelling the ground on which he knelt as he pocketed the lock of fur. The boy watched in silence as the man, shaking from head to toe, lifted the dog's body and gently laid it into the grave.

"Goodbye, old friend."

- Kate Monroe

Trust

I crouch cowering in the shadows of the barn. I should not be here. I was asked to stay away yet I could not.

The unnatural sound of bones snapping, sinew tearing, and skin stretching is a thing so foreign that it rends my soul to shreds as I witness it, yet for all the breath left in me, I can not turn away from this creature I see.

I should have respected his wishes and not intruded upon his privacy – one that he has guarded so warily till this day. Trust is what I offered blindly for so long; now I see that my trust was both justly placed and unspeakably abused.

The depth of sorrow that emanates from the eyes that I have so often peered into is more than one should have to bear. I now know why he asked to own this anguish in solitude; I now know why he felt a need to protect me from the torture of his full nature; I now know the extent to which he wished to guard me.

He suffers more pain, my heart weeps. I reach out to touch him, he begs me to stay away with his gaze – so longing, so loving, so final. Struck by a rising terror I've not felt before, my soul screams that he is no longer mine but belongs solely to the night. If only I had not violated our trust, we would have been as one forever.

Fully morphed, yet still I see him. He turns one final time – his eyes saying all his misshapen mouth is no longer capable of speaking. A blink; he is gone.

Rushing forward I see all that remains twisted upon a nail while I listen to his baleful cry carried upon the night's harsh wind.

~ Nina D'Arcangela





Beneath the leafy boughs, the woman waits. The glade is dark, lightless; perhaps this is why the book rests, unread, on her lap. She clutches instead at a pink rose, her wrist pale, and limp as her posture. Slumped against a branch, which she grasps with a slender hand, she stares longingly off into the forest.

Shapes dance beneath the trees; dryads, mocking shadows, assuming shapes of courtly intrigue. She doesn't care for books, for children's stories, the creations of idle fancy. Hers are much nobler interests; of elegant dances, refined dress-wear, handsome faces and not-so-handsome kisses, stolen by moonlight.

She is sick of the forest, of her sisters' taunts, of the trees – so old, so uncompromising. That is the greatest source of her sorrow, she knows; to loathe something so essential to her living. What is a dryad, a forest spirit, without its tree of origin? The women of the city – such beasts, such lowly beasts! – might be constrained by class, but they are free to leave to their homes at least, free to escape their domestic confines, without suffering.

The woman's fingers curl around the rose, clench tight, begin to tremble, until beads of viridian blood trickle down its stem.

She has no such freedom. Should she move a dozen feet from her willow — its pale skin so much like bone! — she would wither and die, and the tree along with her. Such is the fate of the dryad. Such is the link between body and soul. Her deplorable destiny.

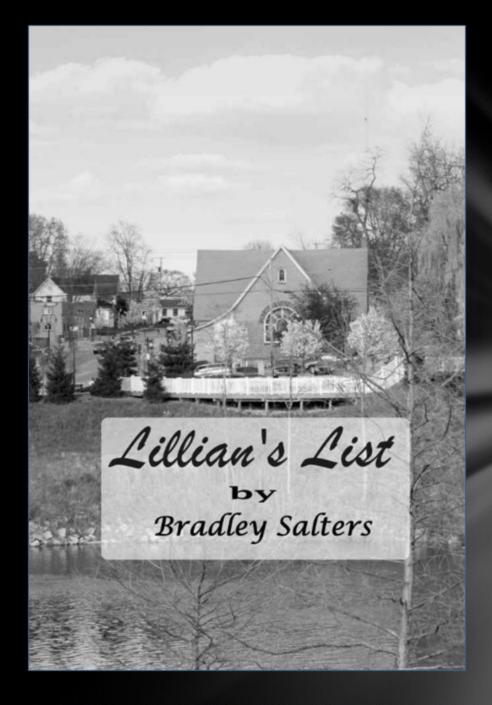
But wait! He comes. She can hear the crack of the forest beneath his boots. She has waited so patiently, fearing deception, but he has kept true to his word, at least; that red-blooded man. And how could he not return, really, after their last encounter? She could imitate the female form so well, it seemed; for who is more fit to assume such a shape than she; nature personified; the spirit of the earth and the bark and the leaf? Is not hers the most fertile and productive spirit of all?

She wipes off her hands, resumes her look of longing, and begins to weep. Is that not what the willow does best? And though she might be trapped here, reduced to watching, she need not suffer alone. A little company does wonders for the soul, or so she heard.

In the darkness of the undergrowth, far from the civilized world, where even the sun struggles to reach and the soil is always moist, the woman's eyes gleamed jade.

ABOUT THOMAS JAMES BROWN — A graduate of the University of Southampton 2010, where he read English Literature at a 2:1 level, Thomas is set to return this October for an MA in Creative Writing. Whilst at the university he took a variety of Creative Writing modules, in which he enjoyed particular success, and he cannot wait to return for an MA dedicated to the subject.

In between degrees he has been working at a coffee shop, where he acquired much of the terminology and experiences important for *REVIVE'S* authenticity. He also writes for the horror website, Dark River Press, where he holds a blog dedicated to aspects of literary horror.



Everyone who knows her loves Lillian Veldeen Marshall. She is the small town matriarch of Westphalia, Michigan. Wife of over thirty years, mother of three, grandma and winner of pie contests, her titles go on and on. Lillian's love for her family is nearly rivaled by her passion for organization and structure. Finding out that she is terminally ill, she sets out to write the lists and instructions her family & friends will need to live without her. The most challenging list materializes as she comes to the stark realization that her husband of over thirty years will be alone. This inspires her to swallow her pride and write a short list of women she approves for him to remarry.

What will Jerry do without her? How can he live in a world without Lillian? What will he do with Lillian's List?

Amber Keller

"What's out there? What do you see?" Sheryl's nasal voice cracked with fear.

Tim peeked out between the blinds, his fingers easing them down ever so carefully in case whatever it was out there might see him.

Large, dark shadows moved in the nebulous, wooded back yard. Tim swallowed hard, making a squeak because his throat was dry.

They had both heard the dogs start barking, and the loud squeals that followed. Not wanting to panic Sheryl, he quickly let the blinds go and turned to face her with his familiar half smile.

"There's nothing back there. The dogs must've chased some more raccoons. Now go on to bed." His lie didn't make him feel guilty, and that surprised him. He put his arm around her shoulders and gave a small squeeze.

Sheryl paused, but Tim turned her around, guiding her toward the bedroom.

Tucking her into the bed, he handed her a small, white pill and a glass of water.

"I will be back as soon as I gather up the dogs and get the barn locked."

Sheryl nodded.

Since the death of their only child a few months ago, Sheryl had not been the same. The doctors spoke of psychosis and chemical imbalances, but to Tim, she just wasn't Sheryl anymore.

The shadows crept back into his mind. He grabbed a shotgun from the gun cabinet and made his way to the back door. It had only happened once before, but there could be another bear out there and he didn't want any surprises.

With the door closed behind him, Tim stopped on the first step, peering into the darkness. He waited, listening. There was an eerie silence to the night.

Proceeding into the yard, his gun at the ready, he made his way slowly to the front yard.

"Max! Sadie!" Tim's voice died on the flat night air.

A small rustling noise in the woods in front of him caused Tim to swing the gun in that direction. His finger held the trigger tight. Squinting into the blackness, he could barely make out that the scrub was swaying close to the ground.

Tim eased up on the gun, but kept his knees bent, his body ready to pounce. All the while he looked down the barrel of the gun. His breathing was jagged and sweat covered his forehead.

As he neared, the brush stopped moving. He took two more steps and was only a few feet away. Reaching slowly to his side, he pulled a flashlight out of the pocket on his jeans. Pressing the button, a slender beam of light cut through the nightfall into the thick brambles.

He extended his long gun to move the underbrush to the side. There was nothing there.

Tim let out a burst of air and a small chuckle despite himself. His gun hung by his side in one hand as he used the back of his other hand to swipe at the sweat that was rolling into his eyes.

Suddenly a feeling of electricity shot up his back, spider-webbing from the base of his spine, into the sides of his torso. The hair on his neck stood on end.

From above came a bright light. At the same time, out of his peripheral vision, he could see something rushing at him from his left. Before he could turn his head to look, something hard slammed into him.

Tim fell to the ground; he felt his gun knocked from his hand. On his back, facing the sky, the light blinded him, and a sharp blow to the head rendered him unconscious.

Tim was slowly waking up, groggy and unable to focus. It was cold and damp wherever he was at. He wanted to rub his eyes but he couldn't move his arms. A metallic smell burned his nose, making his eyes water.

A set of strange gurgling and clicking noises were coming from in front of him.

He blinked rapidly to clear his eyes and the room came into view. It was dark, circular and industrial. There was a large, silver table about 10 feet in front of him. Surrounding the table were many strange creatures. Their hunched over bodies had slick, dark green skin, and were covered in knobs and bumps. They had three strong, muscular legs and two long, thin arms. They hunched over the table, crowding around something.

After their noises rose in urgency and pitch, they started to recede.

Tim could see that there was a person lying on the table. To his horror, the person, who seemed to have been a man, had been sliced open, his insides spilling over the edge. There was no blood however, and he thought he realized what the gurgling noise he had heard before had been. Each limb had been stripped of skin. The top of his head was removed, leaving his brain exposed.

As he watched in shock, one of the creatures pattered up to the table and using one of its skinny arms, slid the body off the table where it rolled into the floor, joining a large pile of dead humans.

Tim gagged and bit it back. He was feeling panic now.

They must be aliens, Tim thought. He remembered the shadows in the back yard. The light. He had been abducted.

A moaning noise beside him grabbed his attention.

Tim turned his head slowly, as much as his restraints would allow. He saw other humans lined up all down the curving wall. The only features visible were their faces and hands that stuck out of a clear, yellow substance. No one was moving except for the man that was moaning. His eyes were still shut, but his head lolled forward.

Soon, the aliens came filing back into the large room. The odd clicking noises followed with them.

Tim could see that they had large mouths that unhinged to drop open. Sharp, tube-like tongues flicked straight out, as if gathering information from the air. With their protruding, black, glassy, round eyes it was hard to discern where they were looking.

Tim froze, barely breathing, closing his eyes to where he could only see a sliver of light.

They marched past him and slowed, gathering together close by. Their bodies, always in motion, pulsated under the strange lights that hovered above the silver table.

One of the aliens had stopped in front of Tim. He watched its head twitch, and something that resembled gills along the back of its head fanned open and closed continuously.

Tim's lungs wanted to scream for air, but he somehow managed to keep his breathing shallow and quiet.

There was a ripping sound as the aliens violently pulled a person from their yellow attachment to the wall. The vibration rippled through Tim's body. He covered up the hitch in his breath.

Moans turned to screams.

As the aliens moved away from him, Tim opened his eyes again.

The man they had picked was riding atop the backs of the aliens; their arms must've been much stronger than they looked because he was barely able to thrash.

The aliens slammed him down on the hard table, startling the man and knocking him unconscious for a moment.

All at once, the aliens crowded the table, and Tim couldn't see what was happening. But he could hear sounds of ripping flesh.

The man woke up and his screams were horrific. They hurt Tim's ears in volume and tone. He kept screaming until he grew hoarse, and then his screams almost sounded like barks.

A few of the aliens left the table. Tim could see that the man's arms and legs had been devoured to the bones, yet his torso was intact.

The majority of the aliens filed out of the room, leaving two aliens that circled the table, looking down at the man. They danced around each other, sounding out little shrieks and clicks, their arms waving. Tim realized they were fighting over who would get the rest of him.

The man's mouth was wide open, gulping in air, and still yelling at intervals.

Tim wondered how long the two aliens would argue; how long would they let this man suffer. A strange curiosity washed over him, then he remembered the danger he was in.

Tim began to try and work his way out of his restraint. It didn't feel like metal, but not like plastic either. It was almost like a thick, cold skin stretched over him. His hands and head were sticking out of holes, like the other humans beside him, but the rest of his body was encased tight.

He wriggled and was able to bring his knees half way up to his chest. The more he moved, the tighter it seemed to hold him, and now his legs were losing circulation. He struggled to put them back in place.

Finally, one of the aliens at the table rose up on its legs and forced the other one to leave, which it did hesitantly. As it stalked off, it hissed at the other one.

Tim was trying to pull his arms in to his chest to see if he could claw his way out when the alien lifted its arm and brought it down on the man's chest.

Blood rushed out of the man in weak, pulsing waves. The alien quickly dipped its head and the long tongue came out. The blood was being sucked up into the tongue, like a vacuum cleaner. The alien sliced the rest of the way through the man's torso. The man's sounds had turned to bubbling gasps, and he eventually fell silent. The alien reached into the man and spread his chest wide open. It lifted his heart out and swallowed it in one gulp. Next, it consumed the lungs and the liver. The intestines didn't seem to interest it, and the alien twirled them around its fingers, almost lovingly, and with fondness like a girl that plays with her hair.

Tim didn't take his eyes off what was going on in front of him, but he had worked one arm in and was just about to get it to his side when one of the aliens jumped up from beneath him.

It was the other one, the one who had lost the feeding.

The ripping sound filled his ears, and a large sensation of suction ran over his body as it pulled him from the wall.

Tim tried to fight back with the alien, but it easily overpowered him. It began dragging Tim toward the table. Flashes of his wife and child raced through his mind. Tears stung his eyes.

He was hurled through the air and landed on the table with a thud, leaving him with a fair headache. Tim landed face to face with the man on the table, looking him in his dead, wide-open eyes. Tim tried to get off the table, but found he was unable to move.

A scream escaped Tim's throat.

The alien shoved the dead man off the table, and Tim could hear the other aliens coming back into the room again.

Another fight of sorts broke out when the alien who took him off the wall turned and tried to scare the others away. The room filled with shrieking and clicks.

One of the aliens broke free from the conflict and Tim felt sharp pain in his right leg. The metallic smell of his blood made him dizzy. The pain radiated from his lower leg into his thigh, and some of the other aliens were driven into a frenzy at the wound.

Soon his other leg was torn into. The pain became excruciating. It soon morphed into a searing heat, as if he were on fire, and he thought he might pass out, even wished for it, but still he stayed conscious.

A strange noise drowned out the clicks and shrieks. It took him a few moments to realize the sound was coming from him.

Tim's arms were next. The skin was peeled away. His body felt ice cold and he trembled uncontrollably.

His thoughts were fuzzy, his breathing rapid and shallow. He could feel himself fading away. The pain had become distant.

As two of the aliens descended on him and ripped into his chest, Tim's vision became a narrow tunnel.

He finally succumbed to the darkness.

ABOUT AMBER KELLER – Amber Keller is a writer living in the mountains of Tennessee whose speculative fiction delves into such genres as horror, thriller and suspense. Her works can be found in several anthologies. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, provides horror and science fiction movie reviews and contributes to various websites. When not writing, she can be found looking for things that go bump in the night. Many of her flash fiction stories can be found on her blog https://www.adiaryofawriter.blogspot.com. Amber can also be found on Twitter at @akeller9.

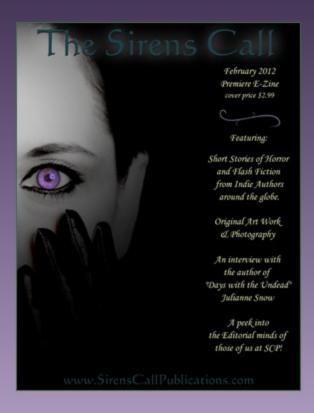


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She didn't know how long she had been in the box but she was sure that more than a day had passed. Urine puddled around the soles of her shoes where she hadn't been able to hold it anymore and the smell was terrible. The box was about three feet on each side so there was enough room to sit or crouch but no more. She hadn't been given any food since ending up in the crate and the gnawing pain in her stomach fought for her attention with the cramps in her lower back and legs.

She fought to keep control of her body as her guts twisted with their need to be emptied. As bad as the urine was she couldn't imagine the smell if she actually took a dump in the corner of the box. The holes near the top might let air in but they wouldn't let enough smell out.

Light blared into the box and she shifted to her knees while trying to peer out of the vents.

The room was filled with similar boxes and she could see eyes looking out of some of the closest. A large man opened one box and drug a small black woman out of it. Cuffs were slapped on thin brown wrists and the girl was hung by them from a chain in the center of the room.

The man rolled a toolbox over and opened it before stepping out of view. The girl looked into the box and started begging. "Please don't! I'll do anything you want! Please!"

He stepped back into view and shoved a ball gag into the woman's mouth. Hitching breaths and mumbled pleas continued for a few minutes as he stood back with his arms crossed. When everything finally quieted down a little a deep voice said, "It's time to have some fun."

She bit her knuckle, crying and flinching as he had his "fun" with the hanging woman. She tried to turn away but the muffled screams and agony filled grunts refused to allow her to do anything but watch as one horror after another was inflicted on the poor girl. She turned and puked behind her when the girl had her gag removed and was offered a chance to end it by wrapping her lips around a cold snub nose. The sound of sobs and vomiting inside the crate didn't cover the thunderous crack of the pistol that followed the decision.

After a few minutes she looked out again but the body was nowhere to be seen. The big man walked into view and approached another crate close to hers. He slapped the top of it and yelled, "Duck."

He stepped closer to her and slapped another crate, "Duck."

Closer again, "Duck."

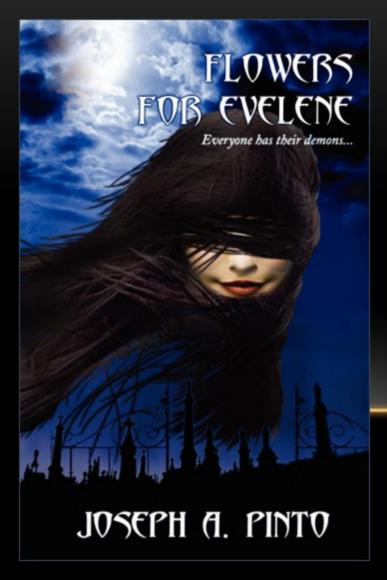
Shadows danced across the back of her crate as he stepped in front of it. Her bowels released as the crate rattled with the force of his hand landing on the wood above her.

"Goose."

ABOUT LE WHITE – LE is an aspiring writer living in southern Indiana. He has a loving wife, four children and a full time job as a computer programmer. LE is lucky enough to live and occasionally work on the family farm with his father and sons. He also does freelance writing, ghost writing and copy writing to earn a little extra cash. If you are looking for help with any project contact him for open discussion. Writing samples, references or a resume are always available upon request. Connect with LE via his blog, http://leonardewhite.wordpress.com or on Twitter at @leonard_white.



JOSEPH A. PINTO



EVERYONE HAS THEIR DEMONS....

DOUG PARKERSON KNOWS THIS ALL TOO WELL. HAUNTED AS A CHILD BY THE LOSS OF HIS LOVED ONES VANISHING FROM HIS LIFE ONE AFTER THE OTHER, HE WISHES ONLY TO PUT HIS GRIEF BEHIND HIM AND MOVE ON WITH HIS LIFE. BUT THERE IS ONE PERSON WHO HAS NEVER LEFT HIM...

AND NEVER WILL.

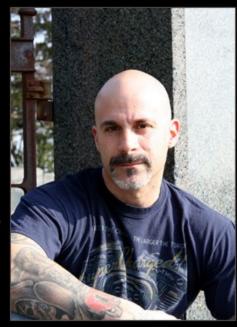
A WOMAN WHOSE INTENSELY
TWISTED DESIRES WILL OVERTAKE
HIS OWN AND DRIVE HIM TO THE
POINT OF NEAR INSANITY.

JOSEPH A. PINTO LIVES IN NEW JERSEY WITH HIS WIFE AND HIS YOUNG DAUGHTER. WHEN NOT ROOTING FOR THE NEW ORLEANS SAINTS OR GETTING A NEW TATTOO, JOSEPH CAN BE FOUND IN HIS DUNGEON BUSY AT WORK.

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The rest of the soldiers call me 'Drone' because that's what I fly - UAVs. Unmanned drones that can circle battlefields many kilometers wide, and deliver a precise Hellfire strike against any target in that zone, all based on commands from my computer terminal back at base. That distance in part accounts for my contemptuous nickname, of course - the pilots, the artillery, the medics, the infantry (especially the fucking infantry) are all in the firing line at some point, all in some theoretical danger even from the ragtag bunch of guerrillas we are fighting in the mountains. Whereas I am watching events on a screen miles behind the rest of them. They treat me like one of the civilian bureaucrats, and not like someone who has trained and fought alongside them, someone who has saved their ass on occasion.

There are other UAV pilots than me of course, but only I am 'Drone' and I know they mean something disparaging about my manner by this as well. I am not against this war (how could I be, when back home so many people voted for and continue to vote for the politicians who launched it?) but I feel no jingoistic bloodlust or hatred for our enemy either. Flying drones is what I have been trained to do, so I do it, in a manner I like to think is both precise and competent.

The enemy would be hard to hate anyway, for I barely see them. The screen I stare at is usually the washed out and ghostly green of night-vision, and I see the compound, the truck convoy, the tanks, but rarely the people. Even if I do they are just glowing smudges of infrared heat. I know the missile is on its way before they do - the numbers count down in the bottom-right of the screen. When they reach zero my screen fills with pixilated white light, and then the image returns, but emptier.

The drones can only send back visuals not sound, of course, so the strikes seem to take place in complete silence. If anything it seems even *more* silent afterwards, unless someone squawks their aggressive congratulations into my ear-pierce. But I am already back, flying the drone to wherever the plan says it needs to be next.

**

Back home, when driving I'll sometimes arrive somewhere and not remember the drive there - I've negotiated traffic, maneuvered round junctions, and even changed the radio station, all without conscious thought. Just conditioned reactions to the world on the other side of my windscreen.

This job is like that - trained reaction to stimulus. If I've fired I can normally remember the screen pooling with light, but not the decision-points, not the reasoning that got me, and them, to that destination.

Today was a fuck up and people are angry. 'Friendly fire' - I agree with them it's a slimy, mealy-mouthed phrase. We are supposed to be fighting for these people, whether they want us here or not, and that means alongside their 'official' army (some of whom are as young as sixteen but everyone turns a blind eye) but instead there was a fuck up and somehow a convoy of their jeeps and artillery returning *back* from enemy territory was identified as coming directly *from* enemy territory. Attack helicopters were dispatched, but my drone was already in the air.

I was hardly at fault so I don't see why everyone is looking at me like they are. I didn't identify them as the enemy, someone else did, and once that identification was made everything was just a matter of protocols, and training, and numbers counting down... The numbers had already started falling when my ear-piece squealed there was an error - I can deliver strikes from miles away but obviously once I've fired they can't be recalled. They tried to radio them, but another fuck up means their troops and ours use incompatible equipment most of the time...

I didn't look away, I watched the screen until it went white. Maybe the signal had interference (or maybe it was just sand in the computer again) but the white wasn't total this time, it had faint structure. Almost like...

But that must have been something added to the memory afterwards, from guilt.

I do feel guilt, despite what the others think of me. But feeling guilty doesn't make me to blame.

I am off active duty until it has been looked into.

It will be hushed up of course, the media don't really care unless some of our troops are killed. And who would they be to start accusing people anyway? All the newspapers and TV stations supported the war, just like all the politicians who voted for it and everyone who voted for them. If people make a decision they can't blame the people who carry out that decision if it's the wrong one. And everyone knows war is messy and chaotic - despite all the rules how could it not be, with all this pent up emotion always behind its logic? Not my emotions you understand, but I can feel it in others: in the way they shout over the mic, in the kill-tallies they paint on the sides of choppers and tanks, in the way they stomp sand from their boots and glare at me.

As predicted, I am back on active duty. I have been cleared of all blame - it is true that if I had been slower the order to abort the attack would have come in time, but they can hardly blame me for being *competent*. A few here at the base still give me funny looks but mostly they understand.

I actually feel a little nervous about tonight's mission; it's like being home from duty and driving for the first time in months, and it feels odd and unnatural for a few minutes, until you reacclimatize. Briefly, the stresses and dangers of driving seem real again. I feel like that about tonight's mission, although I will be fine once it has begun. Maybe it is a lingering reaction to how that silent white light looked when we knew we'd targeted the wrong side; how it had briefly looked like a face.

It happened again.

We'd been given orders to strike the industrial quarter of a small town in the lowlands - Intel said it had been cleared out of workers and was being used as a military supply point and refueling station.

I knew from the scale and scope of the operation that I'd get a chance to fire. Maybe a few times (my UAV carries up to six Hellfire missiles). I was nervous to start with, as expected, but then my training took over and I can't recall much until I was watching the numbers count down as the missile neared its target. I was calm then, so nerves can't have explained what happened. Sometimes you just know it will be a clean and precise strike, and I knew that this time.

My screen flared white and I was already starting to think about the next target when a dark, pixilated face flared out of that whiteness, and then another and another, and I knew they were all the men I had just killed. They looked out of the screen at me with hatred.

I didn't mean to but I cried out into my microphone. Of course I recovered myself, didn't tell anyone what I had seen.

When I had to fire again I looked away from the screen at the crucial moment, so that it wouldn't happen again. That hatred...

Rumor has of course got out that 'Drone' shrieked across the airwaves, that 'Drone' sounded like he was afraid even though he (and only he) was in no danger. People are looking at me oddly again. I feel that nausea I get when confronted by problems I can't solve by reason alone.

I mustn't let it happen again.

I can't keep doing this, I can't keep looking away or closing my eyes every time I fire. Even behind closed lids the

flash of light is white enough to penetrate, so that I almost see the faces each time even then. Seem to feel their hatred straining to reach me. And their disdain, for the enemy, these soldiers, are just like those on my side - they despise me for killing them from a position where I can't be killed myself; from the other side of a computer screen.

A few times I have tried to stare them out - to look into their faces in the bright light of the fire I have delivered and meet their gaze: men, boys, and women (we know we sometimes target civilians by mistake, but another blind eye is turned). To prove to them that it is not my fault; that the decisions, the votes, were not mine. But their hatred and disdain always makes me look away first.

I am to be transferred back home due to 'stress'. They want me to quit of course - far easier for them if I just leave rather than have to try and discharge me due to a psychological condition that started whilst on active duty. Ungrateful bastards. But I will oblige.

"Bye Drone; see you Drone" - I am glad to get away.

It's three months since I was discharged; I am shivering in a cold house because I can't afford to pay the bills. (It feels so fucking cold here after being there.) I can't get a job that I can hold down because I can't work anywhere with screens.

It started on the flight back; it was a civilian flight and in each seat people had screens folded down from the roof to watch the in-flight movie. I didn't pull down mine, but I could still see everyone else's out of the corner of my eye... especially when they seemed to slow, and show numbers counting down in the bottom-right, and then flash with bright light and hatred that washed over me in my seat. I sat clenched and terrified staring out the window; I was sick, but not for the reason the air hostess thought.

It has been happening more and more since I got back; and there are so many screens everywhere nowadays! My house is full of them - my TV, my laptop, my mobile - I have had to turn them all off. The GPS in my car blinding me; the screens in shopping centers showing adverts until / pass, when they fill with silent faces. TV shops with each screen in the window a single, separate face. (Have I killed so many?) And of course, any office I try and get a temp job in is open plan and full of PCs. I try to focus on the meaningless document or spreadsheet of numbers I am working on, when suddenly the numbers began falling and I knew what will happen when the countdown reaches zero...

Closing my eyes doesn't help; crying out doesn't help although I do it anyway and the whole office turns to stare. Before I am asked to leave I have no doubt acquired a nickname or two; I am still 'Drone' despite leaving the war.

I don't know how to stop seeing the faces - my parents wanted to show me a photo on their digital camera of their first grandchild (my brother's daughter) and how could I have said no? But then I flinched and dropped their camera (it didn't smash) when the screen filled with light only I could see, and a face that promised me damnation in return for what I had visited on her.

But why me? There's a whole army and air-force killing them all the time, and everyone I pass on the street lets it happen, so why me?

It may be over. For some reason I was feeling defiant today, and I plugged in my TV for the first time in months. By coincidence I watched the news, showing troop movements and drone strikes after the event. For a brief moment I felt the old camaraderie and wished I was back there, despite all that has happened. And then, as I expected, the TV screen flooded with white, silent light...

I picked it up and smashed it against the floor just as the first face started to appear.

For a moment I thought, You fool, you've let them out: because I felt the light and the hatred surround me. I closed my eyes. I imagined their forms as I had seen them in my night-vision: amorphous and glowing ghosts. And I swear I felt something almost like a hand start to pull at me, to pull me down.

Then there was a pause, like consideration, and then nothing.

I opened my eyes - the TV was smoking with its screen cracked down the middle, and I was alone. After a few moments I cautiously turned on my mobile phone, which I've also not used for months. Its screen filled with the bright light of its maker's logo, but nothing more. It's been switched on for over an hour now, and nothing has happened. I will call my parents on it to apologize; hell, I may even video call them.

I think it will all be alright now.

It didn't make sense for awhile, but now it does. I always knew I wasn't to blame, not solely at any rate. The people who voted for war or who just let it happen or profited from it - they are as guilty. Everyone I killed I killed with thousands at my back.

It started with army personnel on leave - killed, seemingly torn apart in a frenzy when they were alone. No one understood how or why - the savagery, the speed. Like they'd been blown apart but without any explosion.

Then a politician was killed in the same way, and then a newspaper editor, and then the CEO of a munitions company. It was all the news talked about, and there was speculation that it was a new terrorist weapon, and that we should step up our war effort accordingly.

And then a petrol station attendant, ripped apart in his booth between customers, and that confused everyone because why would terrorists attack someone like that?

And then the people who were killed were just people, normal people - a few every day, but *more* each day too, seemingly at random across the country. All killed in the same hideous way. Everyone is terrified but no one knows why it is happening but me.

I did let them out, after all. And they understood where the blame lies, understood which army of people their hatred should be targeted against. I wonder who, if anyone, they will spare as guiltless? It is one thing to imagine their glowing, infrared forms descending on an adult; but on a child, a baby... I think they will care about such things as much as we did, out in the desert.

They still hate and despise me *more* than everyone else though - for being cowardly, in their eyes; from watching their deaths on a computer screen miles away from even the faintest chance of retaliation... That for them is the final insult and indignity.

They do hate me, so they are leaving me to last.

To watch, like I've always done.

ABOUT JAMES EVERINGTON – James is a writer from Nottingham, England- most of what he writes is dark, supernatural fiction, although not necessarily 'horror' in the blood and guts sense. His main influences are writers like Ramsey Campbell, Shirley Jackson, and Robert Aickman. James enjoys the unexplained, the psychological, and the ambiguous in his weird fiction and thinks a lot of the best such fiction has been done in the short story form (although that's not to say he won't be trying a novel at some point...)

James' blog can be found at http://www.jameseverington.blogspot.com and you can follow him on Twitter at @JHEverington.

Kate Monroe

Kate Monroe is a red-headed author and editor who lives in a quiet and inspirational corner of southern England. She has penchants for chocolate, horror and loud guitars, and a fatal weakness for red wine.

Her interests in writing range from horror to erotica, taking in steampunk and tales of the paranormal on the way; whatever she has dreamed about the night before is liable to find its way onto the page in some form or another...

Kate is a fervent supporter of indie publishing - she not only writes in both the horror and erotica genres, but is also an editor with Sirens Call Publications





Shannon Kiernan has never enjoyed Halloween, for each time that it passes with nothing out of the ordinary happening to her, her frustration increases. This year, though, everything will change when she finds it impossible to resist the pull towards the grim and forbidding manor at the end of the street.

Equally impossible to resist are the sensuous pleasures and dark secrets that await her there; and that which she finds will change her life forever...

Evie's woken up the morning after a wild party with a naked man in her bed before - that in itself isn't unusual.

But the man she finds in her bed this time is no ordinary man, and this is no ordinary love story. There's something about the mysterious stranger that she can't explain, and even though he won't tell her his name, she can't forget him.

He knows that he should stay away from her. He knows that his desire for her could put her in the path of the most terrible danger. But some things just cannot be defied...











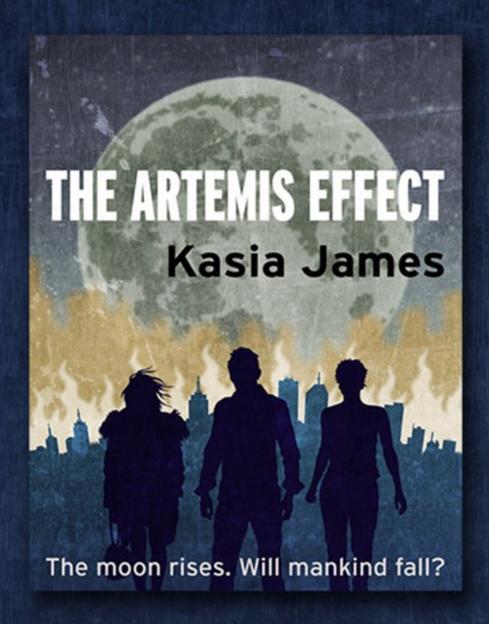


Additional Stories by kate Monroe are available in these anthologies

Coming soon...

Three comfortable lives are shattered when a wave of inexplicable events exposes the fragility of human society. With an unprecedented celestial phenomenon, devastating high tides, a breakdown in global communication networks, and the sudden appearance of violent ring-gangs swarming through cities and towns, Kimberley, Scott and Bryn struggle to understand the vast events unfolding around them. Will they survive the Artemis Effect? Will they discover the truth behind the collapse of society before it's too late?

Check out the new science fiction page-turner by author Kasia James.



Catch up with the author at Writer's Block blog: kasiajames.wordpress.com



Six millimeters. That's the diameter of the hole through which I peer. I know that it's dangerous for me to look, I don't want to make her angry but how else am I to know what is going on.

Nineteen days. That's how long I think I've been here. I don't even know where here is but I am not alone. So far I have been left alone, witness to all that is going on around me.

Three. That's the number of fingernails I broke the first day of my captivity. One of them is really bad and the pain makes me think that it might be infected. I don't dare ask for help; I know what happened the last time someone did.

It was five days ago. A new one was brought to the collection of wooden crates in what I assume is a basement or perhaps an underground bunker. It's cold and damp and smells like dirt, mold and unwashed, fetid bodies.

She was smart for the first sixty minutes, keeping quiet. Lessons are learnt quickly down here; crying out is distinctly frowned upon. It's part of the rules you are given on the seemingly endless walk into the cool clout of the subterranean cavity. Sometimes we cry a little but the minute the telltale sounds of doom approach, silence resonates.

Not five days ago. Five days ago she couldn't hold it in, begging for her life, promising any number of things. Through my minuscule window I could just make out the svelte but muscular frame of our captor. I've only seen her face once and it was as breathtaking as it was frightening.

It took only a few moments for those pleas to enrage our warden of terror. The rest of us listened in silence as the lock was meticulously unlatched and the door opened. From my vantage point, I could see the body of the new one as it flung itself down at the feet of our captor. We listened as a captive audience to the husky sounds of her voice, asking the new one if she was stupid. It was at that moment that we knew a punishment for disobedience truly existed.

It was horrible. The sounds of death beat at our ears like the rhythmic flaying of the drums. The new one ceased to make any sound and we knew that it was over. A part of me wishes that I could have helped her in some way but what good was I from the other side of a sheet of reinforced wood? I exist in my own prison, catching clandestine glimpses of a world not fit to live in.

My guilt keeps me company but what was I to do? I am just an observer of fate revealed in six millimeters.

ABOUT JULIANNE SNOW - It was watching George Romero's Night of the Living Dead at the tender age of six that solidified Julianne's respect of the Undead. Since that day, she has prepared herself for the (inevitable) Zombie Apocalypse. While classically trained in all of the ways to defend herself, she took up writing in order to process the desire she now covets; to bestow a second and final death upon the Undead. As the only girl growing up in a family with four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed some form of escape. Her choice was the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own.

Days with the Undead: Book One is her first full-length book, the basis of which can be found in her popular web serial of the same name. You can find Julianne's The Living Dead of Penderghast Manor in the anthology Women of the Living Dead and stories in upcoming anthologies called Childhood Nightmares: Under The Bed and Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity from Sirens Call Publications.

Connect with Julianne on Facebook at Julianne Snow, via her blogs; http://theflipsideofjulianne.wordpress.com and http://dayswiththeundead.com, and on Twitter at @CdnZmbiRytr.



Alex Woolf

The Original Incident

It's a mess, and all I can do is watch... Watch myself go to hell. Watch the others make their feeble plans for survival. Good on them. You've got to have hope, right? Or what's the point?

I can imagine this scenario playing itself out in every other house as far as god-knows-where. No time to think about what the fuck just happened. Just try to be practical. What do we do next? That's what humans are, right? We're practical. Adaptable. We're not going to take this shit lying down. That's how we survived the Ice Age and the Black Death. That's why it's us who are kings on this planet, and not the chimps. Or the fucking ants.

The pain's getting worse. I can feel my insides stiffening up. My skin no longer feels part of me. It's like a tight swaddling of some alien material. But I'm saying nothing about that. I'm saying nothing at all. If they even suspect I'm turning into one of those damn things, they'll take a knife to me. No question.

There are just three of us left in the house. Jackson, the girl and me. Four if you want to count the thing in the basement. But it's stopped its banging now. Been quiet for half an hour or more, and I'm telling myself it's dead. It has to be.

We're in my kitchen-diner. Jackson's tall, lean figure is in continual motion. His grey crew cut glistens in the pool of light cast by the single bulb hanging over the place where the dining table used to be. I watch him squatting close to the floor, fiddling with the TV, trying to get a picture. Now he's checking his mobile. Now he's over by the window again, peering out between the pine slats.

The girl – Jackson's latest former student – is as young as all the others he's had over the years. But his standards must be slipping. Or his charm. I can't see the appeal of this one anyway. She's like something that's blown in on the wind – a small, colourless bundle of female fluff.

Kalman and Flo took off just after it all started. They didn't make it further than the garden gate. We started barricading ourselves in after that. Smashed up my IKEA table and matching chairs and nailed the broken bits of pine over the doors and windows. Frey and Jackson did most of the work. The girl handed them the nails.

I was bleeding from the bite wound I'd got in the original incident. Just a little gash it was, in the spot where the neck meets the shoulder. Not much more than a graze it seemed at the time. But then the bleeding wouldn't stop. So I wadded it up with a load of bogroll, and with my left hand clamped there to try and soak it up, I couldn't do much more than watch as the others destroyed my furniture.

As for Frey, he was smashing and hammering with gusto, but I could smell the panic on his breath, and the way he kept eyeing his car, parked not twenty metres from my front door – I could see him doing the calculations. I knew exactly what he was planning and I wasn't surprised when he slipped out of the house just before Jackson began nailing shut the door. We all heard Frey's scream. It punctured the night like a steak knife in a sack of stale air. The girl winced, but Jackson wouldn't even meet my eyes. He just carried on banging in those nails.

That was two hours ago.

Since then, things have got a whole lot worse, at least for me. Eventually I had to head for the old sofa in the corner and lay myself down because of the pain. And just after that, the banging started up from the basement – angry, ragged bursts of it that shook the house and vibrated the glasses in the sideboard.

'Shitt' said the girl.

Jackson turned on me. 'I thought you'd killed the fucker!'

'I thought I did, too,' I murmured. I was still talking then.

The bursts kept coming, getting more furious and violent each time. I worried for a bit that the floorboards might crack.

But they didn't. They held. And the thing eventually quietened.

That was half an hour ago.

It must be dead by now. After what I did to it, how could anything be alive? But I don't want to think about that. I don't want to think about any of what happened tonight after the six of us first sat down to eat...

I watch Jackson prowling around, periodically checking the spaces between the crudely nailed slats for any sign of activity outside. 'We'll get out of this,' he keeps saying. 'Help's got to be on its way. You just wait. We'll be hearing the thump-thump of those helicopter blades in no time at all.'

The girl is this slight, blonde pixie with pale eyes and upturned nose. She must be twenty years his junior. Where does Jackson keep finding them? She's seated on the one remaining chair, following Jackson with her eyes as he prowls about, and I can imagine her in the front row of the lecture hall or the seminar room, watching him pace back and forth as he delivers his thesis on Hegel's dialectical materialism or Wittgenstein's Tractatus. He's like a god to her I suddenly realise. She believes in him and that's probably the only reason why she's still here. Jackson knows it. He's saying these things for her benefit. Well, he can't be saying them for his own.

The steady hiss from the TV in the corner is a quiet rebuke to his optimism. And the Internet, we know, is a giant echoing void, a ghostly snapshot of humanity in its final flailings, as we tried to comprehend the sudden arrival of our end. The last tweet on Earth went out two hours ago, and it made no sense at all. I hope that won't turn out to be the epitaph of our species. But it would be kind of appropriate if it was — ending as we began, with a witless, nonsensical burble into the big dark.

The pain in my neck is subsiding – it's dulled to a throb to the rhythm of my blood. But the rhythm feels different, just like everything else. My muscles feel tighter, more wiry, quivering in my arms and legs like twitchy metallic filaments on springs. My skin is hard to the touch, shell-like, almost like armour. My vision is... fantastic. I can see every sweat bead on Jackson's face ten metres across the dimly lit room as he paces and bends once more to check the view outside. But none of this is proof that I'm turning into one of those things. It could just be the stress and the effects of alcohol. I may just be coming down with something.

Even so, Jackson won't be taking any chances. He'll assume the worst. We may have been friends for more than twenty years, Jackson and me, but that sort of sentiment can mean nothing now. The esteemed Professor of Applied Ethics will knife me in the guts and throw me in the basement sooner than he can say 'categorical imperative'. So it's best I keep my mouth shut. That way he and the girl won't be able to see my teeth, which are already feeling bigger in my mouth, and sharp enough to sever my tongue. If they see my teeth, they won't fail to reach certain conclusions. The teeth are the giveaway, Jackson said, shortly after the original incident.

The thing is, and this is something I know they won't understand, the changes are all physical. My mind is still entirely human. I know I could write, if I could trust my stiff, springy new fingers with a keyboard. I know Jackson is my friend, my tennis partner, my cultural guru, my tutor in the finer appreciation of French wine and Queens Park Rangers Football Club. I could never think of him as food.

But try saying all that through a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth and see if anyone believes you.

And it's not completely true either. I have to be honest, my mind isn't quite what it was. I'm starting to forget things, as if an acid fog is eating away at my memory. The original incident, for example. I've been trying to block out some of the more sickening details, but now I don't think I could remember them even if I wanted to. I can recall the six of us sitting down to eat — was it only three hours ago? The steaming foil dishes of takeaway Chinese were on the table. The TV was on low in the background. Jackson and Frey were arguing about football. Flo was telling me about her cat. Everything was so normal until...

What?

News broke into the telly programme. About attacks, simultaneous attacks, happening all over London. Did that come first or

the banging that insane banging on the door

'No word from our correspondent on the street. We'll take you instead to... No, we can't get anything from there either...'

the neighbour colin came in only it wasn't colin

'Ah, we have Jenny in Croydon. Jenny, can you hear me? What's going on where you are?'

it looked like colin with the same ginger hair but he was moving jerkily

'We're all fucked. Fucked. Fucked! 'screamed Jenny in Croydon.

his skin was hard and shiny like his fingernails had spread back along his hands and arms encasing his whole body

The news anchor was bleeding. He was on the floor and the camera was on a tilt but it kept on filming. Then it began filming the carpet.

even his teeth and gums when he smiled were long thick sharp like fingernails

It's been so long since I've seen a test card on the telly.

i remember the sound the knife made as I slid it into colin's stomach

'We urge everyone to stay in their houses and keep calm.'

it rasped like a nail file

Behind the TV announcer's voice we all heard the screaming. Kalman started shouting hysterically. I don't remember when but at some stage in all that, I got bit.

there was no blood on colin

The banging has started up beneath us again. Colin's still alive for Jesus' sake. The girl lifts her feet clear of the floor and raises her knees to her chin, as if scared that it might break through right beneath her.

'They're not coming! 'she mutters, staring at Jackson. 'No one's fucking coming! And we're going to get eaten one by fucking one.'

Jackson frowns. His godlike status is slipping. He chews on his lip.

I'm doing the same inside my mouth, and I draw blood. It tastes gritty, like sand.

The glasses smash inside the sideboard cabinet as the banging reaches a crescendo. The girl starts to moan.

Jackson siezes a knife, the same one I used earlier and he heads for the trapdoor, which is positioned between my sofa and the kitchen – the trapdoor to the basement which, until recently, was an oubliette for my many long-forgotten hobbies. I wish it could lose Colin like it lost most other things. Jackson stares at the bolt, which trembles with each pounding blow. The girl's knuckles are white on the chair back.

'Don't,' she says. 'If you don't come back, it'll be just me and...'

They both look at me.

I wonder how I seem to them now. They haven't cast their eyes in my direction for a while. Is my skin looking shinier?

The banging stops and the room is silent again.

The girl gets off her chair and walks stealthily towards me. There's something in her catlike movement that triggers a hazy memory. Did I once own a cat? The acid fog has been doing its stuff behind the scenes and I'm astonished at how little I can remember of my life before this night.

She stands over me, her eyebrows flickering as she studies my face.

I'm lying there, still as a reptile, my lips tightly closed.

She sits on the sofa, so her hip is touching my thigh. She lays the palm of her hand on my shoulder. This close up, she must be able to see that I've changed. I wait for her to recoil as she touches the hard, shiny skin of my cheek.

But she doesn't.

'I think he's asleep,' she whispers as she stares into my eyes. 'His eyes are open, but I think he's asleep.'

'Come away from there,' says the man - I think his name is Jackson.

'He may still be conscious,' he says.

'I'm curious,' says the girl. 'Does he remember me at all?'

'No,' says the man. 'He thinks you're my girlfriend.'

'Those drugs you gave him must be very powerful to wipe away five years of marriage.' She has a vein, a juicy blue vein, snaking up the soft pale underside of her arm. 'Or else I'm just very forgettable.'

'It helps that he wasn't in love with you,' says the man. 'That always helps.'

'Don't rub it in,' laughs the girl. Then she frowns. 'Who does he think he is?' She's still staring at me with her plump, honey-soft cheeks. I want to bite her upturned nose.

The man with the short grey hair is unbolting the trapdoor and helping another man out of the basement. The other man, who has red hair, dusts himself off.

'He thinks he's turning into a hard, shiny-skinned cannibal beast,' red-hair says.

'What, you mean the same hard, shiny-skinned cannibal beasts we're supposed to be under attack from?' queries the girl. She's laughing now, and her throat is trembling deliciously like a ripe fruit hanging over my lips. Soon I know I won't be able to stop myself. If she could only lean in a little closer.

'With the big sharp teeth?' she laughs.

'With the big sharp teeth,' says red-hair. He picks up a claw-hammer and starts prising the timber slats from the windows.

Grey-hair comes over and sits beside the girl. His weight on the sofa causes my body to topple closer to her. I'm now inches from her forearm and her breast. But it's her throat with its fluttering pulse that I want.

Grey-hair puts his arm around her, pulling her closer to him. Their lips connect savagely. Sweet blood courses into the capillaries of her cheeks. Neither of them sees me lick my lips.

'It was a lot of effort to go to,' says the girl, breaking away from him.

'It was worth it to be with you, my love,' says grey-hair. 'And the beauty is he won't remember you or me or any of this. He'll finish up in some institution, like thousands of others, raving about monsters and the end of the world. No one'll pay him the blindest.'

She closes her eyes and makes a laughter sound like raucous bells. A sigh escapes her as she leans over my chest and wipes a hair from my forehead.

This is it. My moment. I open my mouth and feel the new springy muscles of my jaws strain joyfully, stretching my lips wide like elastic. I feel my big new razor-teeth jut forwards in my mouth as I bite down hard on the full softness of her throat.

Blood spurts across the room delightfully and I lean back in ecstasy.

'Oh!' I hear the girl cry out as I close my eyes. 'He kissed my neck. But why is he smiling like that? And why is he chewing?'

'He must think he's eating you, my dear.'

ABOUT ALEX WOOLF - Alex Woolf was born in North London in 1964. During his teens he played the drums in a band, and during his 20s he rode his motorbike, travelled in America and Europe and worked variously as an accountant, a warehouse assistant, a print buyer, a dishwasher in a roach-infested restaurant and a door-to-door salesman.

Since 1991, he has been a book editor, and in 2001, he began to write. He has penned more than 40 non-fiction books on subjects including sharks, robots, asteroids and the Black Death. He also writes fiction, including Chronosphere, a time-warping science fiction trilogy, and Soul Shadows, a horror novel. Both are aimed at young adults.

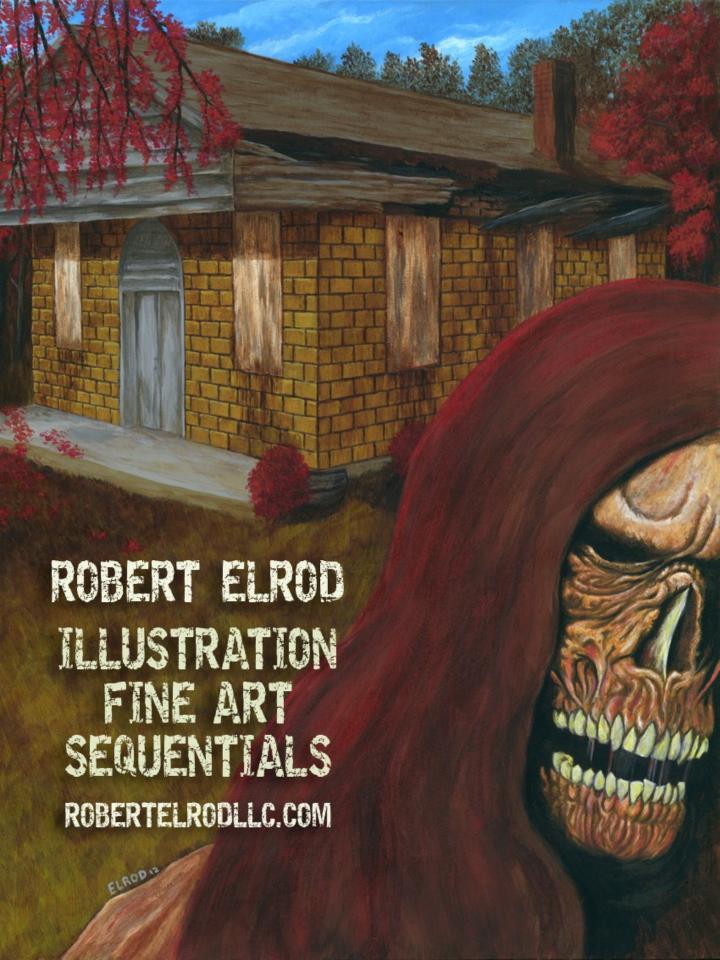
Alex also writes horror for adults. His collection of short stories, Whispers From Behind The Cellar Door is available for purchase. You've been warned...

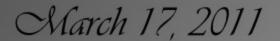
For more information about Alex and his works, check out his website: http://alexwoolf.co.uk. You can also follow him on twitter: @RealAlexWoolf



Sirens Call Publications







To: Eddie Rotten

My name is Alan LeBlanc

There is more than just one. I can hear dozens of them grunting just outside the door. My partner is the watcher, I am the runner, but only because he has the gun. Mine was lost in the last attack. My job now was to get supplies while he covers me. We had more with us when all this shit started, down to us two now. My mom and dad were taken in the last raid and this dude I'm with now, well... he's a loose cannon. I don't know how long I can trust him. He seems to be looking out for himself. My last two dash and grabs have been close calls because of him and his lousy attention.

Worst thing is that were not sure what happened. I used to work at a high rise in Houston TX. I paid my taxes and walked my dog, I was even engaged to be married. I wonder where she is now. Outside my window I noticed military helicopters flying low between the skyscrapers. Then the sirens came. I remember getting up from my desk and looking down to the streets from 14 floors up. Mayhem. Cars were at a dead stand still on the freeway and the streets. It seemed people were all committing a mass suicide. Jumping off overpasses, shooting themselves in the streets, willingly standing in front of speeding cars. But it was worse. Running after the screaming people, were.... what looked like lunatics. The people that didn't run away were tackled and ripped apart violently. Then more would come. Downtown was completely full of them. I have an idea where they came from but I don't want to believe it. There were bloody patches everywhere from my view, and then my office erupted in panic.

I chose to stay where I was. I ducked under my desk when the over head speaker ordered us all downstairs. Obviously somebody didn't look out the windows, and I wasn't going anywhere near that shit. If anything, I was going up to the 18th floor. A few others did as I did. I crawled to the window every 5 minutes or so to look out the window, down into the streets. I knew that this was more than just the biggest gang riot since Rodney King. This was much more. The people that were ripped to pieces were getting up from their pools of blood and shredded meat. The living that ran by were grabbed and bitten into. Literally like something out of a nightmare.

That was my first knowledge of this new world. We weren't walked into it very slowly. We were given hints and notions that things would change, but when they decided to change it. Well, it didn't take long. Like I said earlier, its me and this other dude (who probably wont last long). I'm contemplating taking him out myself for his weapon. My girlfriend is probably safe in a community shelter. I need to get to her though. I know she's still alive.... She's gotta' be!

All we know now is that the government, or governments are conducting a mass genocide for different sections of the world. At first it was hidden through wars over recourses. But that cover up didn't last long. Now, they are openly creating.... Zombies, to kill us all. They have a way of controlling them somehow.

This prick won't stop talking to himself. Pissing me off.

We all have the internet still, which has been a life saver. We found someone on Twitter of all places who has formed some kind of resistance group. Eddie Rotten. For what he's done you'd think he'd come up with a better name for himself. He has several people working with him against the governments of the world, trying to stop the zombie attacks. My hope is to find my way to him, then get my girl.

The zombies outside are getting rowdy. There was screaming a minute ago. Its gone now. Just those hollow, gargling moans from the walking dead. I'm posting here on this blog site, hoping that someone will help us. We have been here for 3 days now. I'm tired and we don't have any food left. The power is on but cuts on and off randomly, so its hard for me to post from my phone. This will probably be my last post, for a while anyway. My battery is low.

Babe, if your reading this, please be safe. I'm sorry for the fight we had before all this started. I love you. Tell your mom I didn't mean to be so bullheaded.

Wait.. This dude is... what the hell? He's looking at me. He dropped the gun... looking at his arm. It looks like... like.. He's bleeding. Fuck! He's been bitten! I'll post again if my phone isn't dead. I've got to handle this. Eddie Rotten, I'm in the Chase building. Stuck in Downtown Houston TX. S.O.S.

ABOUT EDDIE ROTTEN - Your either with us or against us... And you don't want to be against us. ZOMBIE FIGHTER. SECRET MILITARY and GOVERNMENT RESISTANCE WARRIOR. TRUTH SEEKER. HOUSTON TX ZOMBIE FIGHTER CHAPTER CAPTAIN. Find Eddie at http://eddierotten.com or on Twitter at @ EDDIEROTTEN.

Eddie Rotten ZOMBLE LIFE



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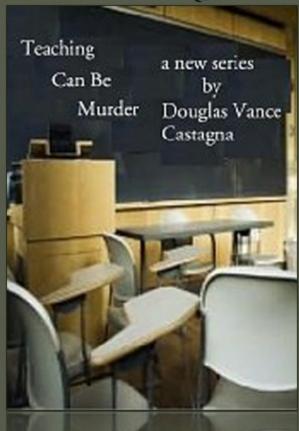
Read more of Eddie Rotten: Zombie Life at: www.eddierotten.com

Douglas Vance Castagina

Kyle Jefferies knew that being a Teacher in the New York
City public school system was hard, but he didn't know it could be murder. Someone has murdered his boss and the police have quickly arrested a suspect. The most obvious choice is seldom the right one, and Kyle goes on a crusade to find out who is the real murderer. When Kyle gets too close to finding out the truth the killer sets their sights on him.

Available on Amazon Teaching Can Be Murder, Wake Up Dead & Ten Silver Bullets





Born and bred in Brooklyn, Douglas has been a teacher in both Brooklyn and Staten Island for the past 19 years after receiving his BA and MFA from Brooklyn College. His first novel. Teaching Can Be Murder is a crime thriller set against the backdrop of today's educational system. Currently, Douglas also has two shorts featured in anthologies; Randy's Night Out is available in Wake Up Dead and Rhodesian Nights which can be found in Ten Silver Bullets both from Crowded Quarantine Press. An avid screenplay writer, he hopes to see some of his works produced into film.

http://www.cisthebigdog.blogspot.com

The Glass Wall

Turning the key in the lock and stepping through the doorway into the dimly lit foyer is the highlight of my day so far.

One meeting after another today, followed by the longest corporate contract negotiation I've had to deal with in a long time has drained the life out of me.

Popping off my Christian Louboutin's and leaving them laying in the foyer, I drop my keys onto the Rococo console table next to the door and pick up the phone to arrange a massage appointment for this evening. There are some distinct benefits to buying into the co-op style of living, and well worth the price if you ask me. After hanging up I glance at my watch, it's almost seven thirty that gives me two and a half hours before Belinda gets here for my massage – perfect.

Walking into the kitchen, I reach into the wine cooler for my favorite bottle of Gaja Barbaresco, and then up into the cabinet above for a wine glass. No, make that a goblet tonight, I've earned it, it's been an exhausting day.

With my glass in one hand and the open bottle of wine in the other, I pad into the living room still in my stockinged feet feeling much too lazy to bother changing out of my work clothes just yet. Buying this third floor open loft was the perfect choice for my lifestyle. The three-quarter glass view overlooking the river is breathtaking and the ambient light seeping in through the wall of floor to ceiling windows makes every inch of this inky space glow with the hush of the on-coming night.

Taking off my suit jacket and draping it over the back of a chair, I pause for a moment to pour myself a good amount of wine while unzipping my skirt and letting it fall to the floor. This has to be the most delicious time of the day. Grabbing the wine once again and swirling it to release its luscious raspberry scent, I continue on to the glass wall with its full length upholstered bench and pillows in deep cranberry tones that run the entire length of the floor to ceiling windows.

Sitting in my favorite spot in the east corner of the building, I curl up like a cat with my legs drawn up beneath me, silken hose sliding sensually against each other as I get comfortable and look out on the quickly darkening gloom. There is nothing like the first sip of wine to set a relaxing tone for the evening and help me unwind after a long and difficult day. The fruity flavor lingering on my tongue, my head resting against the cool glass of the wall, and my favorite pillow now cozily tucked into my lap, I look out over the water. Just a few moments of peace, that's all I'm asking for at this point, and after a day like today, I certainly deserve it.

My eyes must have drifted closed and my grasp on the glass in my hand gone slack as with a small shock I realize that I've spilled the wine I was holding all over my camisole and the cushions — crap! I'll have to have someone from the house cleaning staff come up and take care of that before the night is done. As I am about to get up and call down to the concierge once again, I notice a slight movement in the darkness just outside the glow of the security lamps mounted to the garage level of the building two floors below my windows. Looking down, I see a homeless woman pushing a shopping cart. Damn riff-raff! With what we pay for these re-gentrified factory lofts, security should be keeping these people away. It's bad enough I have to look at them when I'm heading into the office downtown, but here in my 4,000 square foot sanctuary it's thoroughly unacceptable. Membership, as they say, has its privileges, and I didn't go through years of law school and several suburban mortgages worth of tuition to be greeted by the view of a hobo on my buildings private riverfront property.

Christi Can't anyone pay attention and just do their job without having to be told to do so? Do I really need to call security and tell them to look at their monitors and get this trash out of here? Aggravated at having my serenity disturbed by not only the sight of this woman, but the fact that I have to be the one to do something about it, I start to reach for the phone when I see two men approach the woman and her cart. Initially I think to myself that someone in security must have been granted a small measure of brains and noticed movement on the camera prompting them to get off their lazy asses and throw her off the property; but then I see one of the two men punch her on the side of the head.

It's a surreal moment in which my overly analytical mind is telling me that there isn't a chance in hell that one of our security detail would hit an elderly woman no matter what her transgression, or their own level of ineptitude, but at the same time a part of me hesitates and I stay rooted in place to watch what will happen next.

Transfixed by what it going on below my cozy nest, I watch while the other man kicks the old woman on the side of

her leg knocking her off her feet. Where the hell is our security? Clearly all three are trespassers, and they aren't doing a damn thing about it. Can't they see that this vagabond is getting mugged on MY property? But in all honesty, do I really care what happens to this woman who has invaded my private and privileged space beyond the point of selfishly not wanting it to taint my perfect world?

Settling once more on the cushion, careful to avoid the damp spot from the spilled wine, I watch as the two men begin to riffle through the old lady's shopping cart looking for something of value. What could this old crone have that they would have any interest in owning for themselves? Clearly she is a homeless vagrant with nothing of worth in her cart or else she would have sold it or traded it for a night's shelter or perhaps some food or drugs by now. So what are they searching for?

The older woman is struggling to rise to her feet when one of the men notices her and kicks her in the hip knocking her back down to the ground. My wall of windows offers me a sound proof environment from the outside world, but I can clearly see the woman begging them to stop. Her arm stretched out in front of her trying to reach for her cart, she begins to struggle to her feet again. This is unbelievable! Doesn't she know that she should just lie there and let them take what they want so they won't hurt her any further?

After managing to get to her feet, she strikes out at one of the men digging through her cart. The cart seems to be filled with nothing but torn blankets, old clothes, paper and various junk that from what I can make out from my third floor vantage point is as useless as the woman herself. Why bother fighting for those items, it's just crap that anyone can find laying around?

She is still attempting to fend off her would be muggers, this woman is unbelievable! She must be out of her mind – well, I suppose that thought is a bit redundant at this point as she was wandering around the waterfront pushing a shopping cart wearing nothing but a house dress and slippers. It's almost sad really, this could be anyone's grandmother thrown to the street like the trash she's collected and is pushing around with her. Hell, it could be my grandmother for all I know.

But this old woman, there should be someone who cares what happens to her, shouldn't there? Obviously not, otherwise she wouldn't be in the filth ridden desperate state she is currently in — not my problem though, I think as I continue to watch what's happening below me.

Her apparent attempt to defend her meagre belongings seems to have enraged her combatants who are now bodily dragging her away from the cart while they pummel her with their fists and boots. What an amazingly primal sight to be witnessing. The woman is laying on the ground struggling to rise while both men pound on her. This must be one tough broad, I'll give her that. The bloodier she gets, the harder she fights, until she is able to roll away and scramble to her feet. She begins to run waving her arms above her head and is apparently screaming, though I can't hear it.

One of the men chases her down, grabs her by the back of her hair and begins to drag her back to the original scene of the assault where his partner is waiting calmly with his hands on his hips as though his posture itself is saying "You've got to be kidding me?"

Heels banging on the ground, arms above her head with her hands grasping at the fist clutching her by the hair, she is finally dragged kicking and screaming back to the cart and the second waiting assailant. The first stands her back up onto her feet facing the man who stayed behind and screams something into her ear. I either hear or imagine I hear the faintest shriek as the woman seems to scream out "No!"

Before anyone else can move, the woman's arm strikes out and her hand claws its way down the face of the man standing in front of her. Clearly he is hurt, he jumps backwards and starts what looks like a rant of epic proportion as he clutches at his face.

The first man who initially dragged her back is still holding her by the hair when the second man slowly looks up to face her again. The incessant rage he is feeling is boiling out of every pour of his body. It's obvious that he's breathing hard, and his face is severely damaged. From where I sit, it looks like she has managed to gouge not only a good portion of his flesh but his right eye as well – the socket is grotesquely swollen with a glossy gore protruding from it

His body posture and his look of animal ferocity clearly indicate that he intends to return the favor. After taking an exaggerated deep breath to compose himself, he steps forward and he pulls a knife from a sheath at his waist – one that looks to be at least 4 fingers long with a military style grip – the kind with the finger holds so that the weapon isn't lost in a scuffle.

The woman begins to struggle more violently now, trying desperately to free herself from the fist of the man holding her by the hair. It doesn't look as though she's going to be as lucky this time though. The man has a firm grip and isn't letting go. The look on his face is almost more frightened than the look on the woman's face. I think he may actually be as afraid of the other mans reaction as the woman is herself.

The man standing before her beings speaking while brandishing the knife menacingly before her face. What he is saying, I have no idea, but I almost leap out of my own skin when my cat jumps up onto my lap expecting to be pet.

Turning my attention back to the scene taking place outside, I can see that the man with the knife has slid it under the shoulder of her house coat and is twisting it from side to side cutting into her skin and letting loose blood that is flowing freely down her arm. The fabric is beginning to fray where it makes contact with the blade. With one swift and sudden move, he cuts the fabric of the housecoat away exposing her raw and ragged skin.

With a smile on his face, he pushes the tip of the knife into the raw abrasion he's created on her shoulder and begins to slowly dig the knife point in while leaning forward and speaking to the old woman. Again I can hear nothing of what is being said, but I can imagine what type of threats he is making after having his face torn open by this old woman. Standing very still with her jaw slack and eyes open wide, she is clearly terrified by what he is saying and in a great deal of pain. Damn it I wish I could hear even a part of what is being said down there!

From three floors below, I can almost taste the tension in the air as all three stand toe to heel to toe while I wait to see what will unfold next.

In a furious and unexpected movement, the man with the knife draws it out of the woman's shoulder and immediately plunges it dead center through the throat of the man holding the woman by the hair.

The woman is as stunned as I am; she stands frozen in shock in the same manner I am frozen watching the events unfold below me. She must realize that the man standing before her is clearly insane. He is no ordinary mugger that would be chased off by a struggle. This man has an unhinged mind and a lust for blood, no matter whose – friend or foe it would seem. What kind of psychopath would kill his own partner because an old woman damaged his face? Part of me wants to pound on the glass and scream at her to run, though it would be a useless gesture since the glass is too thick and will not carry sound three floors below me; but another part of me, a greater part of me is too enamored with what is transpiring to interrupt. That greater part of me, the 'rubber-necker' in me WANTS to know what will happen next.

Relaxing back onto my cushioned bench and plush pillows, holding my cat, I watch and I wait.

The woman, with the apparent realization that the situation has changed drastically for the worse, begins to backup very slowly with her hands in front of her in a placating gesture. Her physical demeanor certainly suggests that of complacency, but things have gone too far for redemption at this point.

As she steps backwards, the man with the knife steps forward each moving one step at a time. She with the hope of escape, and he with the obvious intent to cause her severe harm. In her back peddling, she does not realize it, but she is about to trip over the man who held her by the hair who now lies dead with his throat gapping open.

She takes one too many steps backwards and trips over the dead man, sprawling to the ground while her assailant leaps upon her. Knowing now that she cannot and will not get away, the man tosses the knife to the side and begins to

beat her with his fists. He pummels her midsection and chest with his meaty hands while she struggles not only for a way to escape, but to regain her breath, and protect her body as best she can.

He smacks her across the face and says something in what seems a vicious snarl. Her eyes go wide for just an instant before he begins to brutally, and without mercy, punch her repeatedly in the face until there is nothing but a bloody pulp left where her face and skull used to be. When he finally stops, his back is heaving from the effort to catch his own breath from the exertion. As he rocks back onto his heels to surveys the damage he's done, he looks around and up...

I immediately leap from my seat at the window hoping beyond hope that the meager light from the foyer does not cast enough of a back shadow to make me visible through my coveted wall of glass. I've just watch two people get brutally murdered below my window, and the only thought I have at this moment is please don't let him have seen that I was watching.

After a minute or two passes, I inch my way back towards the window to look down on the human debris below. The man with the knife is gone, the old woman lies beaten to death, face unrecognizable as anything other than mutilated flesh, cartilage, bones, and tissue — nothing left but a mass of pulp from the beating she has just suffered. Her corpse is lying sprawled atop the second dead body of the man with his throat cut open. The shopping cart that the homeless woman tried so hard to protect is sitting abandoned and forgotten where it was last left by both men.

Good God, who would have imagined such a scene would unfold outside my loft window. It seems as though it lasted hours, though it couldn't have been more than several minutes. How long ago did I wake up and began to witness this horrendous crime? Leaning further still so that my forehead is pressed against the glass, I look around as best I can to ascertain if anyone else has seen what I've just witnessed.

The doorbell rings.

With a start and a squeal, I jump about a mile out of my skin as I turn towards the door unsure what to do. Did the man with the knife see me before I jumped away from the window? There are only two lofts per floor; it certainly wouldn't be difficult to figure out which one I was watching from.

The doorbell rings again.

I silently creep a step or two closer to the door. What do I do? Can I call the concierge desk and ask for help after just sitting here and watching the murders while doing nothing about it? Does that in some way make me an accessory to the crime? Could the man have entered the building under false pretense and gotten past the concierge and is now waiting to slaughter me in my overpriced world of luxury and conceit?

Good God, what if he in some way managed to get past the concierge with his mangled face and blood soaked clothes? Or what if he killed the concierge the same way he killed his partner? Then there will be no help waiting for me on the other end of the line when I call for it.

Knock, knock, knock.

My heart is trying to pound its way out of my chest...

"Ms. Shaldon, you arranged for an in suite massage for this evening?" I hear Belinda's voice ask through the door.

Oh, thank God! It must be nine o'clock already. I rush to the door and open it to find my regular massage therapist with her blonde pony tail and bright blue smiling eyes standing there holding the portable table for the in suite massage.

"Ms. Shaldon?" she inquires of me as I'm standing there staring at her with my eyes wide open and brimming with tears of joy for myself that the monster from below did not find his way to my sanctuary.

"Come in, come in - I'm sorry, I was just napping and lost track of the time." I say as I switch on the soft overhead lighting in the loft, wiping away my tears of relief.

"Ms. Shaldon, have you cut yourself?" She asks as she gingerly steps around my shoes that probably cost more than she makes in a month. "You have something red all over your Cami and stockings."

I had completely forgotten about the spilled wine. "No, no." I say, "I just spilled a glass of wine when I dozed off for my nap."

"Were you napping by the windows again?" she asks with a lilt in her voice. Bell is very familiar with my habits, and knows I tip her well so she pays close attention to the details when she's with me. "Would you like me to drop the privacy shades for you?"

I rush over to the corner of the window and take one final glance down at the lifeless bodies lying on the ground before using the remote that is tossed on the window bench to activate the privacy feature. "I've got it, Bell – but thank you." I say while the cinnamon colored blinds close out the night and shroud my safe haven from the prying eyes of the world and all its ugliness. "Why don't you set up the table while I clean myself up and change into my bathrobe? And if you wouldn't mind, would you please call down to the concierge and have someone from housekeeping come up in about an hour and a half. I'll need someone to clean up the mess I made when I spilled the wine."

"I'd be happy to do that for you, Ms. Shaldon. May I also pour you another glass of wine and set it out to breathe while you get ready for your massage?"

I answer as I'm beginning to turn away, "Yes please, if you wouldn't mind Bell that would be wonderful – it's the open bottle of Gaja Barbaresco in the wine cooler there, and the glasses are..."

"Don't worry Ms. Shaldon, I know where both the wine and the glasses are." Belinda answers with a sunny smile as I head off to the bathroom to wipe away the wine and the grime of the world before my massage.

ABOUT NINA D'ARCANGELA - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic and fantastical things could be in her own head when the doll's was so very vacant. As a relative new comer to the writing scene, Nina is just beginning to let the world have a glimpse of not only her imagination, but darker ruminations as well.

Enamored by the classically woven tales of Edgar Allen Poe, Lovecraft, or H.G. Wells, and with landscapes dancing in her head prompted by the likes of Edgar Rice Burrows and Arthur C. Clark, magical worlds took form from their inspiration that would keep her awake night after night reading by flashlight under the covers, or nesting in a closet with the door shut so as not to awaken others by her insatiable need to read more wondrous tales. While willing to read just about anything that is well crafted, she has a soft spot for the darker side of writing in the Horror, Sci-Fi and Other World genres.

Nina can be reached through Sirens Call Publications at Nina@SirensCallPublications.com; or directly at darc.nina@gmail.com. Please visit her on her blog "Sotet Angyal: The Dark Angel" at http://sotetangyal.wordpress.com. Find her on Twitter at @Sotet Angyal.

DA CHANEY



DA Chaney currently resides in Western Massachusetts. She is the author the novella "Cryptic" as well as several short stories. She is also a movie reviewer for two sites, 'The G.A.S.P Factor' and 'Altered Realities Radio'.

When DA Chaney isn't writing her next piece, she is checking out the latest movies or playing video games in her spare time. Many of her short stories reference gaming, for those who enjoy the past time. You can find her on Twitter as: @DA_Chaney, her Facebook Page as: DA Chaney. If you're looking for her personal blog, find it at http://dachaney.wordpress.com

Ed and Brock are seasoned graverobbers with hundred's of body's stolen and sold to be able to put food in their stomachs in 1800's England. What they couldn't possibly know is that while it's not easy living topside, there has been a vicious underground battle between two kinds of unnatural creatures being fought beneath their feet since before they were born. When a grave robbery goes wrong and the two are sepa-rated, Ed tracks Brock to an estate in the countryside where the war has begun to hit the surface when a Lord has been infected by a virus that leaves him hungering for human flesh. To survive, Ed must outwit zombies, a race of primitive creatures, and human foe alike to escape a terror that has been waging under-ground for hundreds of years and is ready to see the light of day.

D.A. CHANEY

Available on Amazon



A twig snapped from somewhere behind Sherylynn. It fell on deaf ears. Normally, she would have jumped to attention and quickly sought out the source, knowing that it was probably one of the flesh-hungry fiends that they had spent every minute trying to avoid since the outbreak. But she couldn't take her eyes off her son's terror filled gaze. He was screaming as three of the ghouls bit into the muscles on his arms and tore the dangly red meat from inside him. It happened fast, almost instantly, but her mind had slowed it to a frame-by-frame event.

She leaned onto the large oak tree in front of her and pressed her cheek against the coarse bark. Tears rolled down her face and soaked into the thick brown surface. The three ghouls had finally taken Brian to the ground and were tearing into every part of him. Two more stopped their advance on the car and joined the feast. Blood pooled around her son, and the group seemed to writhe in pulsing unison as they fed on her little boy.

Every rip of her son's skin, every gnawing bite tickled her womb and stabbed her heart. A distant voice of reason begged her to run to her children and try to save them. The blinding instinct that had seized her mind and legs when she realized that Brian had opened the car door and let them in had paralyzed everything except her gaze.

The next wave shuffled past Brian and his attackers and headed for the open car door, where her daughter, Kaylynn, clutched her doll, screaming and kicking with fear. She watched her daughter kick viciously sending one of her sneakers flying off into crowd of foul creatures. The first one that had gotten close to her, a man in a tattered suit coat, grabbed her flailing leg and bit into it just above the knee. A contorted look of pain flashed over her daughter's face and she fell down behind the driver's seat, out of sight. The ghoul climbed the rest of the way into the car. She could see his outline bobbing up and down, obviously ripping into her daughter. More of them fought, bumped, and pushed each other to edge their way into the open car door to get their share. Sherylynn convulsed, silently holding in her sobs. Her mind began to blur as her thoughts drifted back to the hours before their little safe haven had been overrun.

Sherylynn watched her son peering out of the crack in the curtain of the back bedroom window.

"Brian, get away from that window. What've I told you about that?" she called to him, as she worked at turning the crank on the can opener.

"Mom. Something's moving in the woods!" His voice echoed through the small trailer.

Kaylynn dropped her doll and ran to have a look.

"I want you two away from that window, this instant! You always think something's moving in the woods. We haven't spotted a..."

"Zombie." The two little voices finished her sentence in chimed unison.

"Say ghouls, I hate that word."

Sherylynn's fears were validated instantly. Somewhere in the trailer park, a car alarm began to wail with a constant shrieking chirp. Another second later, loud metallic bangs.

"They're coming from the woods! There's tons of 'em!" Brian shouted.

"Get over here, we have to get to the car!" she yelled to her children.

Brian ran to her side, dragging his sister by the arm behind him. With her kids in tow, Sherylynn bolted for the door. Suddenly, she realized that Kaylynn had let go of her brother and had darted back across the room. As she yelled for her daughter, she saw the shadowy outlines of movement silhouetted against the drawn shades of the front room window. She watched as her daughter bent down and retrieved her doll from where she'd left it.

"Forget the doll Kaylynn, we've got to get out of here!" Sherylynn screamed.

Kaylynn tucked her baby doll under her arm and ran back over to them. As Sherylynn opened the door, a scraggly woman lunged at her. The woman's eyes were opaque, and swirled with metallic teals and silvers. It growled and snatched at Sherylynn face.

Sherylynn brought her leg up and booted the grotesque figure back out the door. It stumbled, lost its footing and tumbled backward over the handrail, making a soft thud against the grass. It was all that she needed. The rest of the oncoming horde hadn't made it to the porch yet. She made a break for it, dragging her children by the arms so hard that they cried in pain.

Her heart sank into her stomach as she jogged toward the car, which was parked across from the abandoned slab of cement where a trailer had been hauled away and never replaced. It was locked, and in that moment, she couldn't remember if she left the keys with the supplies on the counter. She dropped Brian's arm and told him to keep running, while she dug into her front pocket. She laughed through the tears that were building up at the edge of her eyelids as her fingers touched the pile of keys at the bottom of her pocket. They were going to make it.

They stopped at the car and she yelled for them not to move. She fumbled with the keys as she looked for the correct one, and she dropped them. They bounced off her shoe and disappeared beneath the car. She frantically dropped to the ground and peered under.

"Please, please please..." she uttered.

Her finger curled around the key ring and she turned her head just in time to see the shambling group closing on them. With her hands shaking violently, she sorted through the keys again and found the one she needed. She jammed it into the lock, turned it, and flung the door open.

"Get in!" she yelled.

Brian pushed his sister into the seat and climbed in behind her. Sherylynn slammed the door shut and ran around the driver's side. She had learned her lesson and kept the necessary key pinched between her knuckles. In one graceful motion she unlocked the door and leapt into the seat. It took a moment to realize what she heard. The high pitched voices and shrieks from the back seat were from her children.

"They're too close! They're too close! We have to get out and run Mom!" Brian screamed.

The ghouls were closing in on them and her little boy who, prior to this whole mess, had insisted that he was old enough to ride his bike all the way around the block by himself, was panicking. His hysteria had sent Kaylynn into an instant crying fit.

"Stop it! Just let me..."

Before she could continue with her sentence, she realized what had happened. Brian had opened the door and was trying to get out in order to run away. He was too far out of the car for her to simply reach back across the seat and pull him back in. She opened her own door and got back out of the car. They were all right there, snarling and groaning in with maddening sounds. They were so close. She knew instantly that she had no chance to get to Brian, or Kaylynn for that matter, before the things would be on top of them. Panicked and resigned to the fact that she could not save her children, she turned and ran for the trees on the far side of the vacant lot.

Heaving breaths clutched at her lungs and brought her back from her dazed reminiscing. The rest of the massive crowd had moved in and surrounded the vehicle. Her children were gone.

Virgil didn't know their names, but had grown fond of calling the mother Jillian and the two children Tom and Sue. The first time he'd ever laid eyes on them, he was camped up in his tree stand near the highway. Sleep had nearly stolen them away from him, but in the midst of nodding out periodically, their car had come into view and grabbed his attention. The tack strip he'd set up took out their front right tire. Rather than stopping to change it on the highway, the woman had continued on toward the exit. The only thing there was a sign that read *Vista View Meadows Trailer Home Community, with* an arrow pointing toward the entrance.

His instincts didn't usually allow him to get so close, but it was nice having a roof and a bit of comfort from the elements when he decided to set up camp in the trailer kitty-corner from the one the family had chosen. Red rings had formed around his eyes from the set of binoculars he used to watch them. He felt so sorry for them all. No one should have to live in pain or fear like they were. Obviously the "greens" had already taken the husband and father. He'd seen the scenario a thousand times. He had watched and waited for the right time to help them. It had to be perfect, and he certainly didn't want to add to the anguish they were already experiencing.

That morning, a small herd of white-tailed deer had cut through the trailer park and darted off into the distance. Only one thing would have moved them out of the forest. A horde of greens was coming, and he knew it was time to act.

As he crept up on the mother, he accidentally stepped on a twig and it snapped beneath his weight. He froze and waited for her reaction, but Jillian was too distracted by the *greens* eating her kids to look back at him. A long piece of white rope slithered from his pocket as he unfurled it. His eyes studied her reaction as she watched her children get devoured. It hurt him to watch people suffer. As he paused to reflect on all the others he'd helped to alleviate that same pain, a single tear slipped out of the corner of his eye and snaked down through his beard.

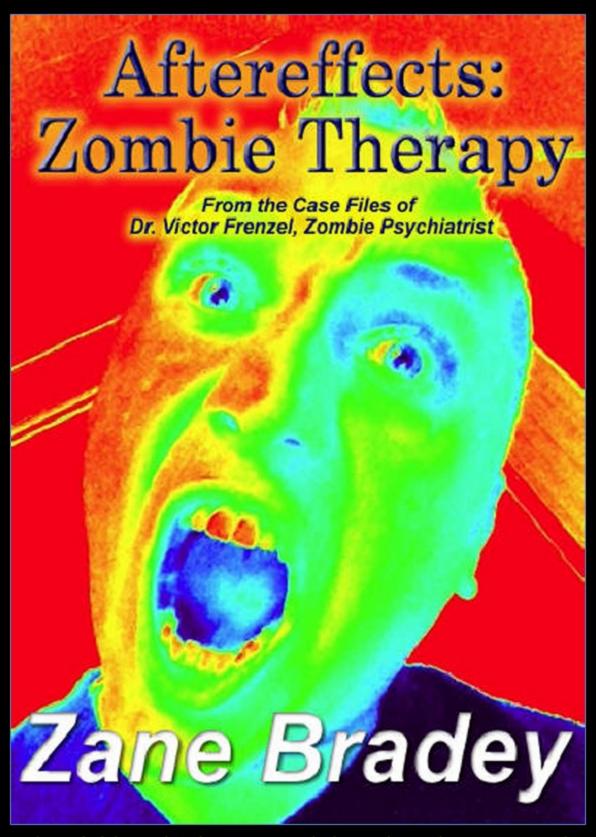
With much more carefully placed footsteps, he closed in on her. Soon he was standing right behind her. He twirled each hand one last time adding one more loop to shorten the rope another inch and pulled it so tight that it crushed his fingers together and caused his knuckles to ache under the pressure. In a fluid motion, he flipped the rope up and over her head. It landed softly on her shoulders and before she could react, he tightened it around her neck.

He planted his knee into her back and pressed as hard as he could, pinning her to the tree in front of them. The rope creaked as he pulled it again, taking up even the tiniest bit of slack. He placed his cheek against the back of her head. He didn't want to see them eat her children and he couldn't stand to see her face as he helped her. She wouldn't understand right now, she couldn't. He knew that she thought he was trying to hurt her, but she would understand soon, when she realized that he had taken away all of the pain.

Sherylynn made sharp gagging sounds. The man behind her pressed her face even harder into the tree, cutting into her lips and grating her teeth into the bark. Bits of wooden debris filled her mouth and coated her tongue. The air was being stolen from her as the rope closed her throat and the man's heavy weight against her chest squashed her into the hulking tree. She could feel her face getting hot as the muscles in her neck pulsed and ached. Every part of her begged her to draw a breath, but her small spastic attempts were fruitless.

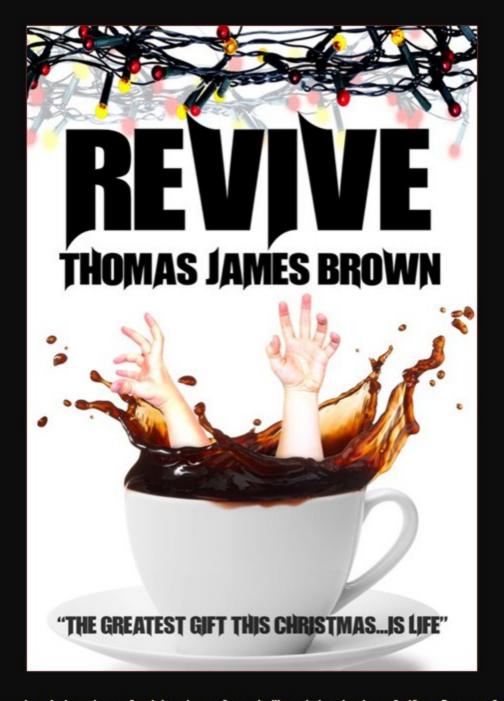
The world began to close in on her. It started as a black border that filled in the edges of her vision and slowly began to narrow. She craned her neck to one side and caught a glimpse of the crowd, still mulling over what was left of her lifeless children, but whoever had taken hold of her smashed her face into the tree again. A light, feathery feeling caressed her body and began to lift her consciousness. A part of her pondered what was happening, but the thoughts left as soon as they came. It didn't matter, she could feel the pain being taken from her and she was glad to be rid of it. She could feel him watching her as she mercifully slipped away.

ABOUT ZANE BRADEY - Born in Michigan, Zane Bradey still lives there with his beautiful family. Horror has always been in his blood as he grew up waiting for the Saturday-morning creature feature. An avid fan of the classics, he remembers watching Romero's Night of the Living Dead in B&W, and thinking that was what he wanted to write. In 2011, Zane set out to write his first zombie novel, Aftereffects: Zombie Therapy. Aside from being "the Zombie Guy", he's a full-time husband, father, student, and HR and finance manager currently working on his Master's in Human Resources Management. Connect with Zane at www.zanebradey.com or on Twitter at @ZaneBradey.



Available in both print and digital on Amazon and Barnes & Noble and digitally on Smashwords

www.zanebradey.com



Christmas is coming. It is a time of celebration, of goodwill and the sharing of gifts... But not for Tammy Becks. Her mum is sick, her brothers need looking after and in her desperation she turns to a coffee shop, a quiet little back-alley place, far from the bustle of the high street. It is called Revive.

Phil has lost his job of twenty years. With the festive pressure mounting and a family of his own to feed, he must do whatever necessary to make ends meet, even if that means donning a beard, jacket and boots for the foreseeable future...

Except even that proves uncertain, when a last coffee on Christmas Eve sees him at Revive. A subtle horror has been brewing and the untimely death of a regular unleashes it in all its ancient, bitter force. Even the dead can't resist one last drink before closing...



People talk a lot about horror. Horror in the bloodied, frenzied gore splattered across cinema scenes, or the intricacy of the horror that a skilled author can weave in a web of words that send shivers through your very bones as their scenes rise from the pages to play out inside the darkest recesses of your mind.

I can tell you, though, that true horror can be found in knowledge; or, more specifically, foreknowledge. Knowing what is going to happen, and finding yourself trapped in that infinitesimal yet agonisingly drawn out moment in which your decision will shape the future – that, ladies and gentlemen, is the purest and most potent form of horror I have ever experienced.

November 17th, 2011.

The date is etched clearly in my mind. Barely an hour passes that the events that played out in front of my eyes that night haunt and torment me once more, even now so many months later.

It happened in the depth of night - 2:17am, to be precise. I was walking home from a night shift; head down, eyes fixed to the ground, inviting no trouble and hoping not to inadvertently stumble across any. My fervent wishes were not to be fulfilled.

The city was always busy, even at that late hour. So when I first heard the heavy footsteps picking up speed behind me, I paid no heed.

The low hiss that built in crescendo, though, was something else entirely.

I froze, my leaden feet unwilling to move, unable to obey my frenzied command to flee even as the sounds of the oncoming gang's catcalls and jeers enveloped me. I knew that they were coming for me - a gang like that, acting the way they were, could have only one intention.

But I was not their target.

Ahead of me walked a man in a suit – sharp, welltailored. His wealth was evident to me, and clearly to the faceless men now surrounding him.

A moment of hesitation. A chance to intervene, to challenge them.

Too late. Gone.

They swarmed him like vultures around a corpse, a singular heaving mass of cruelty and violence. Moonlight glinted off a dozen blades as they flipped and slashed through the night air, shredding his jacket and skin simultaneously.

He crumpled to the ground, blood spurting in soaring arcs over his uncaring attackers as they stripped him of his possessions before turning back towards me.

Head bowed low again. I did not look up even the once as they streamed past me once more, leaving their victim's bloodied and broken body abandoned on the ground.

And that's what I live with every day. The horror of knowing what I did – or, more precisely, did not do that night. Above all else, though, it's the *not* knowing. Not knowing if I could have done anything to save him.

Could I have done more?

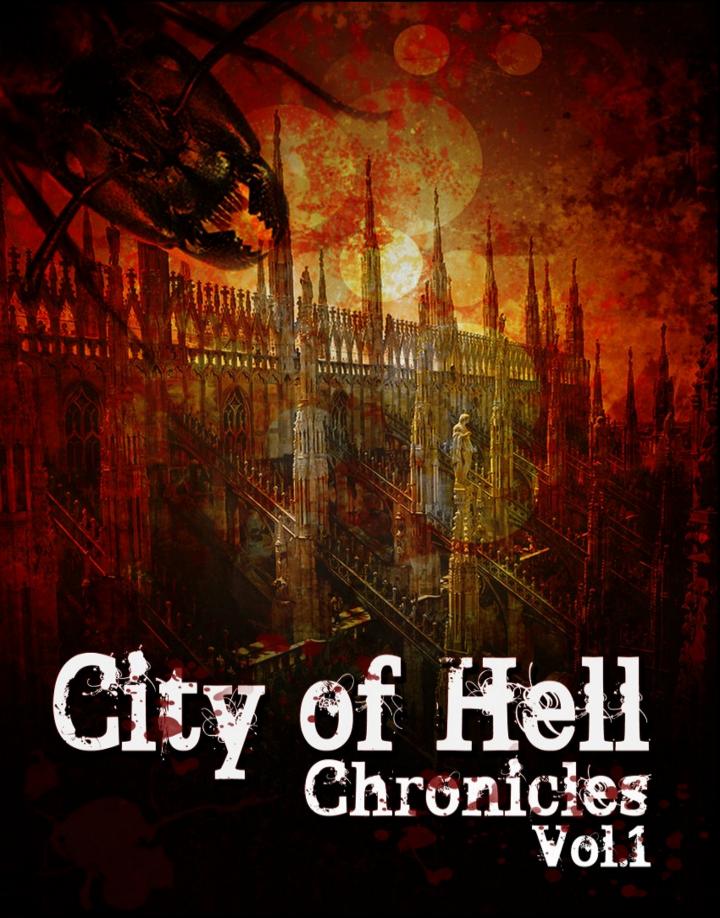
Should I have done more?

That much, at least, I do know.

ABOUT KATE MONROE - Kate Monroe is a red-headed author and editor who lives in a quiet and inspirational corner of southern England. She has penchants for chocolate, horror and loud guitars, and a fatal weakness for red wine. Her interests in writing range from horror to erotica, taking in steampunk and tales of the paranormal on the way; whatever she has dreamed about the night before is liable to find its way onto the page in some form or another...

Kate is a fervent supporter of indie publishing - she not only writes in both the horror and erotica genres, but is also an editor with Sirens Call Publications.

A selection of her stories are available for purchase through Smashwords and Amazon. Visit her blog at http://fromkatesquill.blogspot.com.



A Preview of City of Hell Chronicles Vol. 1



Wyoming City - December 1st 2020

Franklin Garret, retired clockmaker and widower, steps out into the cold, ashen morning. He scowls at the weather and hugs his arms close to his chest. A permanent grimace betrays his feelings. I'm getting too old for this. "Damned collectors," he mutters to himself referring to the impending debt collectors coming to claim his rent.

Arthritis has claimed his gait, and he walks crooked and bent at the waist. The sunken, grey flesh of his face mirrors the threadbare overcoat that hangs on bony shoulders. He pulls it closer to his thin body, but can't block out the cutting, chilled winds. "Bring on the summer." If I'm still around by then. Where did that thought come from? He's not sure, not sure of anything. Random thoughts enter then leave like a cry on the wind, no origin or destination.

He cuts through the throng of shoppers in the downtown district with an unintentional ease. Pedestrians, marching like insects, knock into each other and hastily side-step out of his way. They cover their noses with their hands, but he continues to rock and shuffle onwards. He notices their disgusted looks; it doesn't bother him anymore, he's used to it.

Tuts and sighs from impatient pedestrians surround him as he stops mid-stream; he pays no attention and turns towards a dark crack between gaudy fashion shops. He wipes spittle from his mouth with the back of a shaking hand and rubs it onto his coat. The dull stain contributing to a growing mass of grime and dirt. How long was it since he had it dry cleaned? At least six months, before his beloved Mary had died.

A bustling businessman barges Franklin onto the ground. A sharp pain blooms across Franklin's skull as he hits the hard concrete sidewalk. He watches the man's briefcase fall to the asphalt, busting open. Papers scatter across the busy road. The suited man stops and yells at Franklin, gesticulating with wild arcs.

You stupid ol' fuck. Why don'cha watch where you're going!"

Franklin doesn't take his eyes off the narrow passageway. With considerable effort, he pushes himself back up onto his feet and stumbles into the alley, ignoring the protests of the suited man. Franklin closes his eyes and takes a couple of breaths. Just a banged head, the pain will clear. In truth, a pain had been there before the fall, has been there for weeks, maybe even months.

He hobbles towards a dark wooden door adorned with a neatly painted sign that reads 'Mephisto's Pawn Shoppe.' It hangs from one corner and swings in ragged arcs with the force of the gusting wind.

The door opens, and a small girl in a pink dress skips out holding a cardboard box of old, broken dolls. She looks at Franklin and her smile melts into a frown. One of the doll's heads falls to the floor and she steps back, eyes wide. Franklin bends down with a sigh, grabs the head and stands. Holding it out to the girl he gestures for her to take it. She shakes her head, her eyes all watery; and then she runs past him.

"Wait, don't you want your doll?" he cries out, but she disappears into the heaving mass of pedestrian traffic.

Franklin approaches Mephisto. The sullen shopkeeper sways on thin legs like a reed. He's always grinning as if he knows more than he should. He hunches his narrow body over the counter top, tucking his elbows under his chest and regards Franklin with a wave of a bony hand. His eyes seem too big for his head, gives him the look of a mantis.

"You're early today, Frank," Mephisto says. He puffs on a cigarillo and stagnant smoke fills the tiny shop.

"It's Mr. Garret to you, if you don't mind. And yes, I suppose it is early. I've got a busy day ahead." Franklin waves smoke from his eyes and checks his watch; it's gold, heavy and ancient.

Mephisto raises an eyebrow and smirks. "Really? What are you working on now Frank... I mean Mr. Garretz"

"This and that," Franklin replies waving a hand as though swatting a fly. Not that it's any of your damned business.

"Right. So, what exciting crap have you got for me today?" Mephisto leans further over and stares at Franklin. He scratches his sweaty, bald head and flakes of scalp fall like snowflakes.

Forgive me, Mary, I'm desperate. Franklin takes off the glove from his left hand and slides off a silver ring letting it drop on the counter top. He starts to sweat, and wishes it wasn't so hot. "How much for this? I need cash, and now." Before those fucking leeches come.

"Hmm, interesting." Mephisto places the cigarillo in an ashtray the shape of a monkey's head. He picks up the ring and holds it to the single, bare bulb, and whistles. "Platinum?"

Franklin nods, shuffles on his heels and considers removing his coat. His throat tightens. The thought of Mary, his dead wife, looking on from beyond the grave makes him want to vomit. I need the cash, my love.

"Fifty bucks," Mephisto says.

"Are you high? That's worth over a grand just for the metal alone."

Mephisto laughs. "This your wedding ring, Frank? You that desperate?"

"Make it four-hundred and it's yours."

"It's inscribed, that will take the value down." Mephisto places the ring back on the counter and folds his arms, breathing deeply. He reaches for the cigarillo and uses it like a pointer. "You know, there's something odd about you Frank, have you seen a doctor lately? You look like you're burning up."

"Well, I wouldn't be if you didn't have the heater on so damned high."

Mephisto shakes his head, "Heater's not on,"

Franklin shrugs and wipes the sweat from his forehead. "Fine, whatever. How much?"

"Round these parts, there's not much call for such fine metal. I'm going to find it hard to shift, so that'll bring..."

"The price down, I know, everything brings the damned price down. You not heard of the internet:"

"I could ask the same question, Frank."

"It's Mr. Garret. I need cash — today. I haven't got the time to list it online."

"Well then, it seems you don't have much choice." Mephisto coughs into a handkerchief, looks at the contents and deposits it into a pants pocket. "Two hundred is my best offer. Take it or leave it."

"Three Hundred," Franklin says.

"I said take it, or leave it."

A deep sigh escapes Franklin's thin, dry lips and he palms the ring. Two feet from the door and he halts. He fidgets, looks at the ring, and then back at Mephisto; his wife-beater shirt is closer to brown than white and speckled with ash burns. How

can I? For so little, and to that bastard? He knew he didn't have much of a choice, not after the sale of his clock business to pay for Mary's medical and funeral expenses had left him penniless without an income. The paltry pension he received was barely enough to cover food and bills, let alone rent. It was no choice at all.

"You're scum, you know that:" Frustration burns through Franklin's body; he hates having to deal with a low life like him, and it's worse when the scum knows. I could just kill him. Take that iron poker over there in the corner and cave his bug-eyed head in, steal the cash. What was this madness? He shakes his head, clearing those mad thoughts. They weren't him, couldn't be.

Mephisto smiles, displaying rotten, yellow teeth. "Scum with cash." He opens the cash register and takes out four bills. "Fifty, one hundred, one hundred and fifty, two hundred."

Franklin closes his eyes, mutters, "please forgive me my love," and touches each shoulder and forehead. "Ok, but I want that in the deal too." He points to a small, bronze carriage clock with a broken fascia and a missing hand. It's nestled between a child's clown toy with buttons for eyes and a box of old, rusted farm tools.

"The clown? You got a secret kid you've not told me about, huh?" Mephisto laughs; seems to enjoy the moment.

"The clock," Franklin bows his head, "and no, I've never had children. Mary you see, she—" he cut himself off. 'Died during labor' he wants to say, but even now, the words choke in his throat and conjure the stark image of his wife and child twinned in death on the reddened bed of final rest. The stench of blood and surgical spirit dances in his nostrils; making him want to vomit. He wants to strike out at those doctors; strike out at anyone, but he swallows it, pushes it down somewhere black and cold.

Mephisto stops his laughing. "Sure, take the clock. It's junk."

One man's junk is another man's weapon.

Franklin approaches the entrance to his apartment building; the fat doorman doesn't acknowledge him as he passes. A janitor in a grey boiler suit is mopping the foyer floor. He doffs his cap as Franklin tiptoes through the water, trying not to slip. "Morning Frank," he says.

"All right, Joe?"

"I would be if I didn't have to do this. It's the second time this week something has shat all over the floor."

Franklin looks at his shoes, then to the mix of bleach and shit. He flares his nostrils. "Smells like sulfur."

"Yeah, and it won't go away." Joe stands upright and leans on the handle of the mop. "Everything all right? You don't look too well Frank."

Franklin walks closer to Joe, and lowers his voice. "I dunno Joe, something ain't right. I've been having the weirdest damned dreams. Nightmarish, but so real—"

"It's only been six months Frank, you've got to give it time. It took me a year to get over—"

"It's not Mary, something else. It talks to me."

"What does?"

"Dunno. I can never remember fully, but I've got this dread in my stomach all the time, and I feel real old. Older than I should be, ya know?"

"I think you ought to see a doctor, Frank, you know, to give you something—"

"I ain't going mad. I don't need no crazy pills."

Joe looks away, concern etched on his wrinkled face. And then he smiles a little. "Me and the guys are going out for dominoes at lunchtime, wanna come along?"

"Sorry Joe, I'm busy today." Franklin waves and turns his back before entering the opening door of a battered elevator daubed with red graffiti.

He steps inside and kicks at a half-eaten rat. Fifth one this week. He shrugs his shoulders and looks at his new old clock. "You'll be just the thing."

It takes a whole two minutes to reach the twentieth floor.

The doors open and Franklin walks out, clutching the clock close to his chest. He turns towards his apartment and sighs, dropping his shoulders.

A group of three teenage kids congregate around the door to his apartment: a girl, and two boys, wearing torn leather jackets, ripped jeans, and chains. A wiry, shaven-headed boy passes round a roll-up. The girl giggles at something one of the boys says and they all look at Franklin.

"Got a light?" the girl says.

"Any cigs?"

"No." Franklin replies.

He shuffles through the pack to his apartment, rummages in his pocket and pulls out a key, but drops it as one of the kids pushes into him. They all laugh and he drops the clock. It smashes onto the hard floor breaking the case, and small parts scatter amongst the dust and litter. "No!" He falls to his knees and desperately tries to gather the parts.

"Grab his wallet!"

The scrawniest of the kids darts behind Franklin and reaches into his pockets.

"Get off me, you little punk." Franklin swings an arm and catches the kid in the face with a sharp elbow. The kid's nose cracks with an audible crunch and blood pours over his face. Franklin spins on his heels and pummels a tight fist into his gut, again and again.

"You fuckers think you can do what you want to whoever you want huh?"

"Jesus Christ, man." The girl, with thick black makeup, helps the boy away from Franklin's frenzied attack.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you." The shaven-headed boy bunches his hands into fists and stalks towards Franklin, eyes squinting with violence.

A kick to the stomach folds him in two and Franklin brings an elbow down onto the back of his neck. The boy makes a choking noise and falls to the floor before rolling over and away from Franklin's brutal attack. The girl and the smallest kid

help him up, and they stagger back down the corridor.

"You're fucking crazy man; fucking nuts!"

Rage builds in Franklin's brain like a boiling kettle. The desire to kill and maim threatens to overwhelm him. It's all he can do to resist chasing after them and tearing them to pieces. Where has this rage come from? A familiar feeling tingles in the back of his mind: the dreams, the nightmares...he pants deeply, closes his eyes in an attempt to calm himself, but visions of flames and blood consume him. And then it subsides. The image of a clock-like device comes to him, reminds him... he dreamed it, he drew it... must finish it.

After several attempts, Franklin gets the key into the lock and falls into his apartment, slamming the door behind him. "Damned kids," he screams and waits for the adrenalin to dissipate, his heart to stop racing, and that thunderous river of blood to ease from his temples.

He sits with his back against the door in the narrow hallway. The apartment is dark. A streak of light sneaks through a gap in the curtains creating a beam of dust that cuts through the squalid room. His single bed is against one wall, his workbench opposite. It's overfilled with cogs, tools and boxes of odd parts. Plans and drawings of a device made from various clock workings adorn the walls...

With an ear pressed to the door he waits and listens.

Old bones click as he pulls himself upright. He checks the corridor through the peephole. Satisfied, he opens the door and looks for the clock. It's smashed, and various bits are strewn across the hallway. Amongst the components are various bits of torn meat. He kicks them away and gathers the clock parts.

The wooden chair at his workbench creaks under his weight. Swiping his arm, he clears a space and places the clock components onto the wooden surface. He reaches over the piles of parts and papers, and pulls a battered, green lamp close.

Franklin checks a drawing while sorting the broken parts of his clock. Some he places into boxes of similar parts, others he holds against the shapes on the drawing. *This will do just fine*. He matches intricate springs and coils to those in the drawing of a device with a multitude of cylinders, pendulums and rods.

"Let's see what we can do with these, my darlin'. They'll pay for what they did. Real soon my love." He looks at a picture amongst the debris. It's of a woman in a smart, tailored suit. 'Love, Mary' is written in calligraphic script below the photograph.

A barely audible scuttling noise catches his attention, and the faint whiff of sulfur fills his nose. As soon as he notices it, it disappears. He wonders if he imagined it. It seems to be harder to distinguish what's real and what isn't.

A red LED alarm clock blinks 17:37 in the near-black room. Franklin, slumped over his workbench, jumps at the intrusion of three loud bangs on the apartment door. What the hell? Disturbing images of oversized insects and rivers of blood dominate his thoughts as he comes round from unexpected sleep.

He wipes drool from his mouth and sighs. In front of him is a torn piece of paper with frantically scribbled shapes. He doesn't remember drawing them. In fact, he's struggling to remember drawing any of the plans for his current project. The veil of dream seems to linger and he forgets where he is, until another, more urgent, knock booms throughout the small apartment.

He feels older, much older than yesterday. His face feels craggier, too, as he rubs the sleep away. Blood stains his hand, and he notices droplets of it on the torn paper.

Another knock crashes against the door.

"Give me a minute will ya?"

Franklin wipes at his nose and stares at the dark red patch on his hand. A single droplet of blood drips over his lips and a deep-rooted compulsion makes him taste it. He grimaces. The image of his dead wife and child in a pool of blood on a gore-smeared hospital bed fills his mind. The doctors and nurses are frozen like statues, unwilling to act, and he screams inside, but they take no action, and his family is still dead.

Two more knocks on the door.

"Fucking wait," he shouts between hacking coughs. "Who is it?"

"Financial Services. Open up." The voice is deep and urgent.

Franklin stares at the door for a few seconds and then unbolts the latch. A large, black boot forces it fully open. Franklin stumbles backwards as two suited men enter the narrow hallway.

"He's Frenton," the smaller one says, pointing to his colleague and then himself. "I'm Hackett."

"You owe us two month's rent Mr. Garett," Frenton says. He looks like an ex-marine with his buzz-cut and firm stance. His colleague is smaller, but wiry and edgy. They hand Franklin a single sheet of paper, which he takes over to his workbench. He switches on the lamp and reads the demand letter. The blood on his hand looks rich in the dull light.

"I... don't have it all."

Frenton steps further into the room, his presence instantly fills the space. "Then we need to evaluate your goods to cover what you owe."

Franklin bursts out an exasperated laugh and widens his arms. "Evaluate everything you want, I have nothing of value."

Hackett steps out from behind the marine-alike, pulls at Franklin's right sleeve and points to his watch. "Really? This has got to be worth a few bucks."

The watch was a gift from his dear wife, Mary. It was the last remnant of her that he had kept; the last connection to a happier time, a time for a future. "You'll have this over my cold, dead body."

"Which by the looks of you might not be far off. Are you sick or something:"

Franklin shrugs his shoulders and pulls his arm away. "I can give you a deposit today and will have the rest tomorrow."

Frenton turns to look at him after writing notes on his clipboard. "How much do you have on you?"

"One fifty," Franklin pulls three fifties from his pants pocket and hands them to the debt collector.

"OK, we'll give you until 10am tomorrow to find the rest, otherwise you're out in the cold. You understand, Mr. Garett?"

Franklin nods and wipes at the trickle of blood coming from his nostril. "You'll have your damned money."

"I hope so. For your sake. You don't look like you'll survive a winter on the streets."

"Good day to you, Sirs," Franklin says, arm outstretched towards the door.

He watches as they walk down the dark hallway and can't help but imagine their faces while he strangles them with

his bare hands. Fucking vultures, like they've not taken enough already. He realizes that he's not talking just about the debt collectors. Everyone seemed to want something from him, but he was running out of things to give... He would give just one more thing to the world: this device that looms in his dreams and preoccupies his waking thoughts.

Amber lights flicker, creating dark pools of shifting shadows in the corridor. Movement and a scuttling sound in the distance attract his attention. He squints and follows. Focused on tracking the mysterious noise, convinced it's more than just a rat, he bumps into an elderly couple as they step from the elevator.

"Franklin isn't it?" the man asks, startled. He is smaller than Franklin, but looks equally as frail. He's holding the hand of a small woman with grey hair and an ill-fitting cardigan.

Franklin nods and raises an eyebrow.

The couple step back from him in unison. He enjoys their fear and continues to stare at them, challenging them to speak first.

"We... wanted to... erm... complain," the man begins.

"Not complain. Talk," the grey-haired woman cuts in. "You see, we live in the apartment above, and we've been hearing a lot of... odd noises come from yours for the last few nights. Gerald here has been having a terrible time sleeping because of it. Could you please stop? If it's not too much trouble." A nervous smile stretches from her thin, quivering lips.

"What are you talking about?"

"All the scraping and scratching. You sound like a giant cockroach," the man says. The woman gives him a stern look, and then smiles again at Franklin.

"It is quite loud, and goes on for hours. Are you remodelling your apartment?"

"No." Franklin rubs his eyes with the palms of his first. "I really don't know anything about a noise." He knew that was a lie as soon as it fell from his lips. That noise, it was in his dreams too, those dark, twisted dreams that made no sense, giving him images and sounds...yes, it was a scratching noise.

"Well, if you don't stop it, we'll have to complain to the super."

The man looks over Franklin's shoulder into his apartment. "Do you have someone with you, Franklin?"

"No." Franklin turns to see shadows move in his room. "I'll try and keep it down," he says in a hurry and turns his back to the couple.

Shuffling back into his apartment, he kicks the door shut and slumps into his chair; his mind is a maelstrom of confusion. He barely knows himself anymore, and the confrontation with the debt collectors and neighbors gives rise to feelings of rage and retribution; but why so much hatred? He was never like this before.

Something scuttles inside the room.

Franklin takes the lamp from his workbench, extends it as far as the cord will go, and shines the weak light into the corners of the room. Searching.

He hears movement from behind the nightstand and pulls it away from the wall. A hissing noise makes him gasp and he jumps backwards.

The ticka-ticka noise moves under his bed before becoming quiet.

He can smell sulfur again. A mixture of excitement and fear tingles up through his spine.

He gasps and struggles for breath.

Shuffling to the doorway, he mashes the button on his intercom with a shaking hand. It makes a series of buzzes before a garbled voice says, "Joe here. What's up Franklin?"

He leans into the dirty grill, breathing in short gasps. "Joe, I need your help — something's in my apartment."

"I'll be right up."

Two raps on the door make Franklin jump. "Frank, it's Joe. You ok?"

Franklin walks backwards and opens the door, keeping his focus on the bed. "There's something under the bed," he says without looking at Joe.

"Jesus, Franklin, look at the state of this place. It's probably just a rat." Joe, still wearing his boiler suit, approaches the bed, but turns to look at Franklin who's shaking and sweating profusely. "You really don't look well Frank, let me call a doctor."

"I'm fine. Can you please just check — it's bigger than any rat that I've ever seen. And rats don't make that kind of noise."

Joe squints in the gloom, looks at the workbench and the plans for a device strewn around the surface and pinned to the wall. "What are you doing with all this stuff? It's a right mess in here."

"I need the components."

"For what?"

"Just a project; something to keep myself out of trouble." How could be explain what he was building when didn't know either? It was the damned compulsion, and those dreams. Promises of retribution and peace. He has to build it. Nothing else truly matters anymore.

A lout chittering noise grabs Joe's attention. He snaps his head round to stare at the bed. "That's some big ass rat."

"I had the people above me complain earlier about noises at night— I don't do anything. I just sleep is all, make no noise. There's something here, Joe. I can feel it." And in here in my mind.

Joe takes a large flashlight from his belt. With the effort of a man who's been waiting for retirement, he lies on the ground and shines it under the bed. "Just old clothes by the smell of it," he mutters. He inches closer. Half of his body is under the bed. "I see something—"

A brief, wailing hiss like a truck's air brake blasts from the gloom. Joe cries out a desperate yell. "Holy fuck. Help me!"

Joe's body rocks violently; his back smashing against the underside of the bed.

Franklin grabs his ankles and feels resistance on the other side. He continues to pull and manages to slide him out. A dark red smear stretches from under the bed to the open series of deep gashes on Joe's face. A long thin centipede, as big as a

man, and colored with a glossy black and brown chitinous shell, darts out of the apartment.

So familiar, Franklin knows it, somehow... inexplicable, but then it dawns on him. That smell, that shiny lustre, those dripping mandibles: it's the thing, the terrible thing that talks to him in his dreams. A giant centipede with eyes that promise something greater. Something bigger than just an insect: an intelligence, a knowing. It feels like some kind of wall has fallen. Two realities smashing into each other and Franklin is a surviving fragment, only he can't comprehend; it's all too much.

Franklin stands, mouth agape. His attention is split between the open door and the screaming janitor whose face is torn to shreds. Flaps of skin fold backwards on his face revealing twitching, red muscle tissue. Black liquid drips from the wound with a hesitant viscosity.

"Someone call an ambulance." Franklin shouts into the hallway as he holds the gurgling janitor in his arms.

"He's in critical care, but should be ok. He's going to need extensive reconstructive surgery," the policewoman says to Franklin.

Like those useless bastards will do anything for him. "What about the black stuff?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know anything about that. Pest Control will be over tomorrow to investigate. Will you be ok here on your own? Do you have any family you can stay with?"

"No. I'll be fine."

Franklin closes the door on the policewoman, looks at the bed and sinks into it with a heavy fall. Sleep overpowers him. He doesn't resist.

The familiar, insectile scratching noise of a thousand legs wakes Franklin with a start. His thin tee shirt is soaked with sweat. He rubs his eyes and looks at the clock: 04:12 am.

Picking up Joe's flashlight, he wields it like a weapon and stalks about the room.

The noise stops.

"You're back aren't you, my dark friend? I hear you." A metallic chirp seems to answer from somewhere in the room.

Franklin's breathing labors in loud ragged gasps; he can't decide whether it's due to fear or something else. He grimaces and grabs his stomach as a pain rips through his body. Two small open wounds just below his ribcage drip a thin trickle of blood and something black over his stomach and onto the carpet.

"Oh no." He bends over and he bucks like a mule as he vomits a stream of dark liquid from his mouth in violent convulsions. He stumbles back, falls to the floor, and passes out.

He dreams of things swarming underground. An inhuman chant booms from all around and he pictures the device again, more intricate this time; specific components doing specific jobs within a highly detailed clock, but it's more than that. Etchings and symbols decorating the case seem to glow when the parts turn and tick. He realizes he needs more components, and knows exactly where to get them. He doesn't know if he is dreaming or simply thinking. The worlds combine: threads reach out and mingle through a translucent, thin barrier. He doubts he's in control anymore, but he doesn't care. He wants to

douse the hatred that is building within. Cleanse it with fire. He knows this clock device will be the method; his last gift to a world that has so wronged him.

06:35 am. Franklin sits at his desk drawing something. He is sweating still. Droplets blot the ink on the paper. It's calligraphy of some sort, unrecognizable characters and symbols. He doesn't know what they mean, but he draws them from the images that burn in his brain like a red-hot brand. Pinning it to the wall he stands and laughs before heading back to his bed. A colony of ants walk across his apartment floor and flies buzz around the single light bulb. He stares at the dark shadow of the thing that lurks underneath his bed and nods to it before lying down to sleep to dream of those terrifying yet tempting images: flames, blood and destruction.

08:23 am. He's awake, and is soldering together components. He checks an intricate plan hastily drawn with biro. He mutters something as he rocks back and forth on the rickety chair. Each swing makes it creak; each creak receives a yelp of laughter.

Franklin chants, "Ekoh, Hacken, Maurr, Maurr, Ekoh!" while putting a sprocket into a square device approximately 12 inches square. Cogs whirr inside. A pendulum swings between two round metal cylinders. He checks it against the drawings, looks back to his bed and makes a guttural clicking noise. He cocks his head to one side and listens. A low screech answers him and he nods, smiling. "Soon, it'll be soon. I just need a few more parts."

He stops and looks at the door, then at his watch. Not much time before those vultures return.

Grabbing a coat he hurries in a strange bent-over hobble out of his apartment. A large welt throbs on the back of his head. Dried blood fragments cover his top lip. Dark bruises underscore feverish eyes.

**

The quiet street is surrounded by tall apartment buildings and parked cars. Franklin shuffles down the sidewalk holding a hand up, shielding his eyes from the sun. Kids on bikes swerve round him, laughing and pointing as they ride past. I won't miss your laughing.

He reaches the end of the tree-lined road and stops at a junction. He waits at the curb, shudders and wraps the coat tight around him. He's still wearing the sweat-soaked tee-shirt underneath.

Traffic stops, and he hurries across the road, heading down towards a collection of market stalls. A few people mingle about, pick up items, inspect them, and put them back down again before moving off to another table of various antique objects.

"What can I do for you today, sir?" A bright, young man in a plaid shirt asks as Franklin stumbles into the stall, threatening to knock over a series of tall vases.

"I saw it here last week, a clock, do you still have it?" His voice is urgent, and he shakes violently, reaching into his pocket.

"What sort?" the boy asks.

"A black one with inscriptions on the back."

"Let me have a look — are you ok?" The boy's brow creases and he looks closer at Franklin with a hint of disgust on his face.

"I'm fine - I just want the clock, if you don't mind. I don't have much time."

The boy rummages through boxes. "This it?"

Franklin snatches the small, beat-up, black mantel clock. He turns it over and shakes it. Yes, this will be just the thing. He hands over his last fifty and before the boy can say anything, turns and shuffles away.

He pictures placing the last parts into the device. Everything seems whole, peaceful. I'll be with you soon, Mary.

Giggling incoherently, he makes the return journey back through the street. He watches as the group of kids who tried to mug him walk past him and towards the apartment building. One of the boys has his nose covered with bandages. They don't meet his gaze, but call out names as they make their distance from him.

An elderly man wearing gardening gloves waves as Franklin walks past a landscaped yard surrounded by a white picket fence.

Franklin stops and watches as the silver-haired man walks back into his house. Something glints in the sun beneath a rose bush: a hatchet. Franklin bends down and places it into his coat's largest pocket.

He tries to stifle a laugh. Thoughts and images of violence overwhelm him, and a shake trembles across his hands. His face twitches uncontrollably.

The doorman fixes Franklin with a strange expression. As he approaches, Franklin reaches into his coat pocket, feels the cool metal of the hatchet. I could do you right now, hack you down in pieces. The doorman steps away and Franklin wants to laugh, high on the fear in the other man's face.

The gang of kids, just three of them now, stand waiting for the elevator. A young girl cracks a joke and a heavyset boy replies with a large, guttural laugh.

"Fucking old crank," the smallest one says as they enter the open elevator.

Franklin hurries in behind them.

"What the hell?" The girl shouts as Franklin kicks her in the back, forcing her to the rear of the elevator.

The doors close.

Franklin takes the hatchet from his pocket and arcs it down into the spine of the girl. She spins round, opened mouthed, eyes bulging, but she has no time to scream as he pulls it out and hacks at her throat. Her fingers are unable to contain the blood. She opens and closes her mouth like a fish before falling to the floor, eyes rolling back into her head as her breathing makes wet sucking noises through the gash in her windpipe.

The two boys stand, eyes wide, pants wet with piss.

One of them stirs and starts towards Franklin but he sees him and strikes the hatchet across the boy's face and chest. The boy lets out a terrible high-pitched scream. The reverberations conveniently contained with the metal box.

Franklin kicks him in the face. The boy is no longer screaming.

The last kid is huddled in the corner, whimpering.

Franklin considers taking mercy on the poor wretch, but the feelings of retribution and anger swell in his chest. He swings

with all his strength, bringing the hatchet down into the skull of the boy. It splits the bone with an audible crack and blood seeps out around the blade. The boy's feet and arms twitch for a second, making Franklin laugh.

On the twentieth floor, Franklin steps out of the blood drenched elevator, muttering incoherent words to himself. He turns, puts a hand to his mouth, and something black oozes between his fingers. It's the same stuff from the thing under the bed, the stuff that smells of sulfur. Like the blood from earlier, a compulsion overwhelms him and he licks at it. A name, chanted, echoes inside his brain: 'Maurr, Maurr, Maurr.'

Franklin turns back to the elevator, pulls at the control box, and rips out wires and fuses. The doors open and close in staccato fashion, before slamming shut. He backs off and lets out a strangled yelp, delirious with violence and power and retribution. He treads thick, red stains onto the grimy hallway floor towards his apartment.

Settled on his chair, he places the black clock onto the workbench next to the square device. Cogs whirr, and the pendulum swings. Cockroaches litter the work surface. He stands fascinated, allowing them to crawl over his hands.

He reaches over the workbench and pulls a sketch off the wall. Holding it under the lamp, he traces his hands over a cross section of components drawn in fine detail and nods a few times. "It is nearly done."

He responds as if in a trance to the whistling, clicking sounds from under the bed, all the time rocking back and forth. "It's very nearly complete, my friend."

A pair of wet, black mandibles extend from the gloom and clatter together as if clapping.

09:52 am. Banging on the door wakes Franklin. He is lying on his back, staring at the ceiling. One hand dangles over the edge of the bed, and the giant centipede's black mandibles nip at his flesh and catch the droplets of blood. Black spots cover the skin around his knuckles and two red wounds mark the back of his hand. He doesn't understand why, but this feeding? He finds it comforting. This thing, whatever it is, needs him; and he needs it too. He's certain his dreams, those thoughts, the designs for his device are coming from it, and he doesn't want it to stop. For the first time since Mary passed, he's felt a sense of purpose. The world will remember Franklin Garret.

The door shudders within its frame as it is pounded on again.

"Open up Garret, time to pay," the barking voice says. It's Frenton from Financial Services: a polite way to say 'goons'.

Franklin sits up; his eyes are glassy and milked over like advanced cataracts and he gropes his way out of bed.

"I'll be there in a second," he says as though they were nothing more than friendly neighbors.

He walks to the workbench and covers his device, now more detailed in its construction: he's added yet more internal workings and a large button sits on its top. The outside of the device is a maze of electrical circuits intermingled with inscribed symbols that mirror those in his mind: one looks like a pair of scythes wrapped in a circle, while another resembles three interlocking diamonds intersected by a series of dashes.

He reaches over the ever-growing mound of crap and lifts out a rusted pole. It's as long as a baseball bat, and a hefty 3 inches in diameter. The end is jagged and sharp. He can't remember where he got it, probably found it somewhere shortly after Mary died and he had deadly desires to exact revenge on the doctors.

Franklin runs his good hand over the edge and quickly pulls away when his thin, grey skin catches on the sharp edge. He weighs it in his right hand and a smile stretches across his face.

"Garrett! Open up before we break this door." It's Hackett, the small, wiry one.

"I'm coming, I have something for you boys."

Before he reaches the door, three sharp hisses come from under the bed. Franklin laughs out loud and starts whistling an odd tune.

He lets the collectors in and they push past him, walking straight into the room.

Hackett, wearing a smart suit, starts to turn and is about to speak. Franklin rams the weapon into his face with a sudden lurch forward. It pierces Hackett's face, creating a fountain of bone, skin and blood. The force of the thrust knocks the small man against his larger colleague, and his blood covers Frenton's ill-fitting suit. Hackett screams, claws at the rusted metal lodged in his head.

Franklin yelps with delight, pulls the pole out of the man's face and swings it low, crushing the larger man's knee with an audible crunch.

Frenton whirls his arms but crashes to the floor gripping his leg.

Dribbling froth from this mouth, Franklin grips the pole so that the sharp end points downward and he drives it viciously into the spine of the fallen man. Frenton bends upwards like a fish, screaming once. Franklin twists the pole and the man gurgles a last breath before flopping lifeless to the floor.

Hackett recovers his balance. He clutches his face and is still screaming; his right eyeball rolls around the top of his cheek, hanging from a bloodied optic nerve.

Franklin hops from one foot to another in delight.

The centipede's clicks grow louder, and the thing darts out from its hiding place. It moves its myriad legs over the body of Frenton and pulls him under the bed.

Hackett paws clumsily at his dangling eyeball. "Please, stop!" he shouts. His face has a wide, ugly hole in the side of it. Spittle and blood bubble out of the gash as he tries to speak, but Franklin ignores his protest and pummels him to the ground; each strike rings like a bell through the hollow weapon.

Wet, crunching noises fill the room, and Franklin swings the gore-encrusted weapon above his head. He whistles an odd, dissonant tune. Dark grey residue runs from his milky eyes.

A screech comes from behind him, and Franklin spins round, dropping the pole to the floor with a clang. He stops whistling. In the door way stands a portly man in blue coveralls. 'Pest Control' is written across his breast pocket. He's carrying a clipboard in one hand, and a spray gun in the other.

He steps into the apartment, mouth open, and eyes wide. "Holy fucking Christ" He's not looking at Franklin but at the violently bucking, half eaten body sticking out from the under the bed. Thick, black fangs and glossy pincers flash outwards, tearing at Frenton's already shredded and mangled body.

A swarm of cockroaches, flies and ants descend on the man and coat him in a writhing mass of insect fury.

He screams. His frantic brushing pitches him forward and he drops the clipboard and spray gun to the floor. Franklin steps over Hackett's body and takes the device from the workbench. He holds it lovingly to his chest, tracing the outline of the circuits. With his other hand, he picks up the photograph of Mary and places it in his pocket.

Franklin turns to the thing eating its way through Frenton, "I think now would be a good time?"

The centipede, Franklin's dark passenger, and guide, looks up with glossy eyes. Its antennae twitch, and it nods its head.

Yes, for Maurr! It's time for him to rise.

On his way out of the room, Franklin kicks the heaving pest-control man in the throat, interrupting the flow of vomit. He steps over the man's overweight body and walks to the stairs, cradling the device as if it were a fragile baby.

Franklin's whistling ascends and descends in awkward intervals seemingly following no melody. He steps out from the stair well and stands in the middle of the foyer. The doorman catches Franklin's eye and looks away immediately.

Franklin places the device on the ground and holds the picture of his wife to his face. "This is for you, Mary. They didn't save you, but stood and watched you die with our still child, and now they pay. I'm on my way to you, my love."

He places the picture on the floor next to his device.

He looks at his watch and mutters, "It's time."

Franklin presses the button on the top of the ticking device with his foot.

It whirrs and vibrates; the symbols glow a fiery red and it seems to make the world stand still for a few seconds=. And then it explodes.

Franklin's skin is immediately scorched from the blast.

The explosion gathers devastating momentum and the entire apartment building is engulfed in flames.

From outside, pedestrians run shrieking in horror as windows blow outwards, showering the street in sharp particles. Bricks and stone are expelled at high speed, smashing into people, cars and the buildings opposite. The entire structure collapses in on itself, crumbling to the ground. A plume of black smoke curls and folds into a massive mushroom cloud.

The reverberations of the explosion echo up and down the street, sending people to the floor in panic.

Part 2 - Selene's Story

Selene, a pensioner from a building opposite Franklin's, presses her face against the cold, dusty glass of her bedroom window. She watches on as sirens disperse shell-shocked onlookers. Ambulances take away the bloodied and bruised. Police cars and army trucks block off the street. Yellow tape is run around the smoldering remnants, while firemen douse the flames.

A tall, gaunt officer leads a group of a dozen men and women into the remains of the building. Two of the officers carry out something long and flat, wrapped in a sheet. "A survivor!" Selene gasps in a wheezy breath. "Thank the Lord."

What looks like a series of long, thin centipede legs and an insect-like chitinous shell is exposed for a brief second as the sheet is blown open by the wind. Selene reels away from the window, confused, shocked. Jesus Christ Our Lord, protect us from... She tries to think of a rational reason for what she saw. Senility perhaps? Either way, she crosses herself and says a silent prayer. Maybe it's just the shock.

She continues, in morbid fascination, to watch them load the creature into a black truck. The tall leader of the group approaches the passenger door and gives a thumbs up signal. The driver nods, and moves the vehicle a few yards before a series of heavy quakes halt their progress.

Selene feels her building shift and tilt and she grabs onto the windowsill. The others outside stare open-mouthed as if waiting for something.

Away in the distance, towards Yellowstone, Selene watches with an icy dread in her stomach, black puffs rising in the sky like smoke signals. The tremors get louder and more violent and her building shakes, making a terrible groaning noise.

The officers move away into their cars and wave frantically at the pedestrians. The dumbstruck crowd regain their purpose and flee to their homes. The street is deserted, apart from the last crew of brave firemen.

Thunderous cracks echo down the street, ricocheting against buildings. A powerful underground eruption tears the street down the middle in a single jagged rend. Asphalt and concrete splinters upwards revealing black and white smoke and the orange glow of lava.

Selene stands rooted to the spot, unable to take her eyes off the gashed wound in the street. She's crying and shaking and wishes someone would hold her, but she has no one. Then she remembers the young family in the next apartment. She hobbles over to the door, unlocks it and makes her way down the corridor to No.34. The McArthur's. She raps on the door with feeble hands, waits. No answer.

The building lurches abruptly to one side, and she slides to the top of the stairs. Only an instinctive grab to the railings prevents her from pitching down head first.

Hot urine runs down her tights, and tears obscure her vision, but she makes her way down the two levels and out into the street. Dread turning to horror, she sees a few of the older-style buildings sway dramatically and topple into piles of rubble. Within minutes the ground is shaking so hard that the fire crew are knocked to the ground and buried under raining debris. Loose pieces of stone and cement fall from her building, smashing into the ground like bombs. Clouds of brick dust and concrete fragments spray her face, and she screams.

A smaller fragment looms large in her vision for a split second, and she is struck to the ground, unconscious.

Selene wakes to further tremors and an angry bruised sky. Rolling black shadows pass overhead and blot out the sun. Waves of nausea and pain throb in her head, but she manages to stand and makes her way out into the road, clear of fallen buildings and piles of rubble.

The remains of the dead litter the street like shreds of paper. Some are pushed against crushed cars. Others lie in the middle of the road, stained red from blood. A child's bike, with pink ribbons on the handlebars, rolls slowly away on training wheels.

The ash cloud makes it hard for her to breathe, the fine particulate catching in her lungs like glue. Selene tries to remember when she last saw another man or woman, it all seems so long ago, and she has lost all frame of reference.

Wiping a tear from her eye, she thinks of all those that have been lost. All those that won't be found, or those that still are alive, struggling under masonry. A cry from further up the street, near where a pharmacy building was, calls to her. She recognizes the young boy. It's Brian McArthur, and his face is covered in blood. He waves wildly at her and steps into the road to one side of the boiling gash. He starts to jog towards her, but she sees something lurch out of the crack in the ground, where the lava flows, from behind him.

Long, thick antennae twitch, and then a gigantic ant's head appears from the crack. The impossibly huge ant climbs out of its flaming tomb; globules of lava still glow on its dusky black shell and drop from its mandibles.

She frantically waves at the boy, tries to make him look round, or shut up, or simply hide. Her message is confused, and the boy keeps running. She wants to shout, to warn him, but her lungs and throat only allow a dried croak.

The ant is fully out of its hiding place. It spots the boy and instantly moves toward him with blinding speed. With a single swift attack, the ant bites the boy clean in half with its massive razor-edged mandibles.

Selene falls to the ground, buries her head. "This can't be real, this can't be happening, please Lord, have forgiveness."

She's ranting, retching, and shaking in a pool of her own filth. It's too much movement, or noise, and the ant approaches after handing the two parts of the boy to more ants that now line up behind it.

The ants swarm in and out of buildings and fill the street. One by one they take away the dead. They seem to communicate with clicks and whistles. Selene sees them and her face becomes deathly grey. She backs away slowly, muttering, praying. Let it be quick, bless my soul. She's trying to comprehend the situation and failing. She feels like she's lost her mind and wonders if this isn't hell. Wonders if she left a bad deed unrectified, or hadn't sufficiently confessed her sins.

The lead ant, blood from the boy still dripping from its mandibles, twitches its head and focuses its attentions in the old lady's direction. It stalks down the street, moving rubble and whole cars as though they were made of cardboard. It screeches and Selene falls on her backside, clasping her ears. Her mouth is wide open but her protests can't be heard over the cry of the ant. It's standing over her now, and she's lying on the floor holding her feeble, shaking arms; her head turns away and her body bucks with fear and panic.

In her mind she can hear a chanting, 'Maurr Maurr,' and she knows it's the name of a god, but not her God; He remains silent.

A single stab of a pincer, and the old woman crumbles into a limp bag of flesh and bones. The ant opens its mandibles and lifts her onto its back. It rejoins the line of soldiers, and leads the thousands of ants towards the Yellowstone caldera.

The lines of ants dominate the Yellowstone park as far as the she can see.

A deafening roar splits the sky as the caldera erupts.

Amongst the clouds of ash and boiling lava, gigantic claws grip the sides of the caldera and the ant-god hauls itself out from within the volcano. It's gigantic head, as wide as the volcano itself, peers over the edge and roars at its minions.

Selene's mind is overwhelmed by the chant of 'Maurr, Maurr, Maur'. She knows a god has returned to the earth, and has brought hell with it; the explosion in Franklin's apartment seemingly the catalyst.

The ant carrying Selene makes its way across the lava filled land, up at the side of the volcano, and drops her, along with hundreds of others, into the waiting mouth of Maurr.

She cries as she falls. The heat of the gas stripping the skin from her bones before she is consumed whole.

The screams of all the others is the last thing she hears.

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