

The Sirens Call



April 2013

Issue #08



Featuring:

*Poetry, Short Stories
and Flash Fiction of
Horror exclusively
from Men*

*Original Images
of Art Work, plus an
interview with artist
Noistromo*

*Comparative Flash
Fiction - One Photo,
Two Stories of 300
words each*

*Interview with
Lane Kareska, author
of the upcoming novella
North Dark*

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Gender in Genre: Is it Important? *An Editorial by Julianne Snow*

What is genre fiction? Simply, it is plot driven fiction written with the intent of falling into one specific genre. Whether it be horror, science fiction, fantasy or romance (just to name a few), or the amalgamation of any of those into a sub-genre, it's widely popular and loosely defined. The only thing you shouldn't confuse it with is literary fiction. That's a whole different kettle of fish.

So let's take a moment to consider gender and I'm really hoping I don't need to explain that to you... But let me ask you a question – do you think gender has a place in genre fiction? And by that I mean: do you really think it matters whether a man or a woman wrote a book? Does it read better if penned by a man, or evoke emotion more if written by a woman? I'm of the opinion that it doesn't matter: the gender of the author is irrelevant when it comes to the enjoyment of a story.

Some of you might be wondering why I'm even choosing to talk about gender and genre. Essentially, it stems from the whispers and sometimes the shouts I hear around me. There are many readers in the world who prefer male authors for some reason or another. Heck there are even readers that will refuse to read anything by a female author. Keep in mind that those are the extremes, but as we can see from our Facebook timelines, the extremes tend to be alive and well. And vocal. We mustn't forget vocal. I choose a very different stance; if the work is good, it's good.

Simple. Easy. Done.

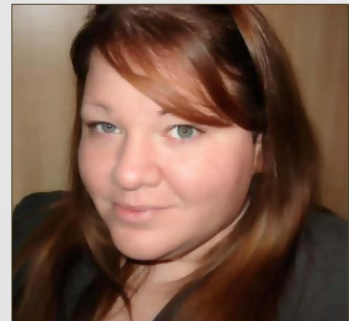
The amount to which one can enjoy a story, shouldn't be predicated on the gender of the author who wrote it. The whole point of reading is to get lost in the story. Think about it. Words are words and it's their connection to you as an individual that matters.

I'll repeat it again: words are words. When you consider prose, it's our own experiences that help us to gain insight from the way that an author has strung those words together. That meaning may be explicit, but sometimes there's room left for interpretation. As individuals we read a piece and see what we want to see. Is it what the author intended? Not always, but that's what makes reading so much fun.

So get out there and read! You will be surprised at what you find if you take the gender of the author out of the equation. Men write. Women write. As long as what they write appeals to you and evokes an emotion, does it really matter if they sit or stand?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Working behind the scenes for quite some time, Julianne has stepped out of the shadows and into the spotlight as Publicist at SCP. Passionate about the Indie publishing scene, she works diligently to spread the word about the works published by Sirens Call Publications, as well as other authors and presses.

It was while watching Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* at the tender age of six which solidified Julianne's respect for the Undead. Since that day, she has been preparing 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. As the author of the acclaimed *Days with the Undead* series, Julianne uses her words as weapons to bestow a second and final death upon them all.



The Double D Factor in Horror *An Editorial by Nina D'Arcangela*

Pick your scenario – a book in bed late at night, the flicker from the glow of the TV fluttering across the living room walls, or the lights dimmed low at the Cinema. Even though I'm going to talk in terms of film, let's apply the same cynical critique I'm about to deliver to all of those situations – ready?

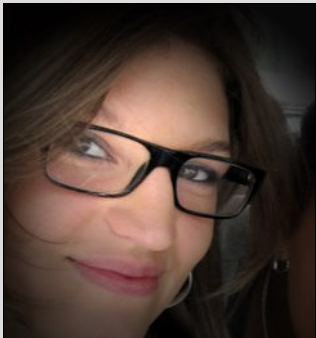
Ominous music is playing, something is coming, then (cue the loud shock riff), something happens! Our affable yet soon-to-be-deceased group of chums stumbles across a dead body, finds a legend scribbled in human blood on a wall, or everyone's post-teen besties gets it right through the gullet from behind by an unseen something-or-other! What happens next? If you were thinking the pretty young blonde with the ample double D cleavage (which is shown off to its best advantage) starts running UP the stairs to ESCAPE the would-be killer – then you've paid your way into the same usual mash-up that I have.

Are any of us wondering what happens next? Nope. Because we all know she's the next (or possibly first, depending on the lack of creativity in the opening sequence) to die. It's the modern media horror scenario. Does the smart brunette with the glasses who is telling everyone to stay calm buy it? No. Does the jock who only gets into college on a sports scholarship and his good looks get the axe, not yet – we save him for about half way through. Does the shy, but obviously unobvious cute but overlooked man/boy head off to the big blue? Not a chance! We need him to live so he can be the hero, rescue the damsel in distress and save the day – all that crap. What's the point to my pointedly pointless ramble?

We need some originality in our horror folks. We need to stretch our minds past the 'gee what a nice guy, he's got a dog' syndrome and inject a little fright back into our fear. When I was a kid, one of the things I loved the most about reading or watching horror was the anticipation of *what might be next!* While I still love my horror dearly, I have to say, I am surprised so infrequently that it makes a die-hard fan like me almost want to give up. All the old paths have been tread to death; all the shock-value of shock is gone; all the 'holy shit' screech has been sucked away by predictability.

Why this horror bashing editorial? The Double D Factor. Why can't the hottest guy in the group run UP the stairs screaming for his girlfriend to save him and be the first to have his head lopped off? Okay, I'll readily admit that's a ridiculous scenario. But my point is that if a male hero in horror is not only accepted but expected, don't a few of us want to see someone switch that up so we can go '*Oh damn! Did that really just happen?*'

Mix up expectation, give them exactly what they don't want, and they'll come screaming for more... I know I will. And if it's ever your turn, don't run UP the stairs – that's just stupid!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - 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 things could be in her own head when the doll's was so very vacant. As a reader of anything from splatter matter to dark matter; Nina is a lover of all things horror and scientific.

Nina is the Social Media Coordinator and one of the co-founders of Sirens Call Publications and Pink Pepper Press. She is a member of the writing group, Pen of the Damned, and the owner of Dark Angel Photography. You can find her on twitter at @Sotet_Angyal, on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/DarcNina>, on her personal blog at sotetangyal.wordpress.com, or by email at dark.nina@gmail.com.



Maybe I didn't find Fairbanks. Maybe he found me. Either way, I wish it had never happened. Already he has cost me some of my favorite books, and I'm afraid he might ruin my entire writing career as well.

I am fearful even writing these lines, not knowing if he's lurking behind the next corner.

Alas – time is of the essence so allow me to move on with this cautionary tale.

It was the fall of 20–, and I had vacated to my other, smaller apartment in Brooklyn to write my next book. Typically, I'd spend my days as follows: Getting up around nine (I have never been an early riser), making coffee, reading the paper and start writing around ten.

I stopped for lunch at noon, then wrote on into the afternoon, usually stopping around four or five when I would go out to get dinner.

Sometimes I ate in one of the many homely cafes, other times I just picked up some take-out and a six-pack, and ate in front of the television.

I'd made a habit of stopping by a brilliant little second-hand bookshop on M– Street (I'm omitting the name of the street for fear of contamination) once a week, to check for new arrivals and talk to the owner, Mr. Coover, a fabulous old queen and a veritable treasure house of anecdotes and minutia concerning American literature.

It was there, in Coover's bookshop one afternoon, I found the little black booklet entitled 'The Dionaean Documents'. There wasn't any author named on the cover, no publisher, nor even a year or a date of publication, just an image of the Ouroboros, the paradoxical snake that eats its own tail.

Something about the first couple of lines grabbed my attention, and I decided to purchase the book.

Even Coover, who kept detailed records of everything that passed through his shop, couldn't remember when or where 'The Dionaean Documents' had come from, nor find any proof of having purchased it at all.

The book was only 90 pages long and I read the whole thing in one sitting that same evening. I must admit I felt rather disappointed when I turned the last page. The story was a fragmented mess about a group of castaways who get stranded on an unnamed island and end up killing each other, except for one minor character who survives and is picked up by a passing ship in the end.

Almost impossible to make head or tails of it, the 'story' reminded me of some of Burroughs later works, but unfortunately, without the literary talent.

The nameless author was mediocre at best, and the story filled with deus ex machina coincidences and annoying on-the-nose metaphors. The only thing that kept me reading was the one character who, as it happened, was also the one who survived and made it off the island.

He was only ever referred to as Fairbanks, and the other characters seemed afraid of him. It was never explained who he was or where he came from, and descriptions of him were frustratingly vague. He was always just a "well-dressed, dark-haired man in his mid-forties" or a "distinguished, soft-spoken gentleman." I wouldn't be able to put my finger on exactly what fascinated me about him – maybe it was simply an instinctive recognition of 'the other', the utterly and completely alien.

I deposited 'The Dionaean Documents' on a shelf among my other books, and didn't give it much more thought, until a couple of days later when I pulled out 'Moby Dick' to re-read a few of my favorite passages.

And there was the Fairbanks character again.

I almost couldn't believe my own eyes. I'd read 'Moby Dick' several times, but now, all of a sudden, I found that a new character had attached himself to the plot.

The first mention of him was in chapter five, where he made a brief appearance among the sailors staying at the Spouter-Inn where Ahab and Queequeg meet. Again, the descriptions of him were sparse, though this time much more eloquent. Though a complete foreign body in Melville's text, it was as if

Fairbanks was able to wrap the prose around himself in a way as to disguise himself as someone belonging in the story.

I could tell he made the other characters nervous.

He was, as I later learned, an ideal predator of fiction.

I read on in horror as Fairbanks enlisted as part of the crew on the Pequod along with Ahab and Queequeg. In chapter twenty-five he killed second mate Stubb.

By some eidetic impulse I rushed over to my bookcase to see if any of my other books had been affected as well.

My heart was pounding in my chest when I discovered how Fairbanks introduced himself to Danny and the other loafers in 'Tortilla Flat', going on a wild drinking spree with them one night, only to turn Steinbeck's classic into a slaughterhouse the morning after.

In 'Frankenstein' he killed both William, Victor and the monster.

It was as if he was getting bolder with every work he assaulted with his presence.

He even found his way into newer books. I found him sneaking around in the beginning of 'City of Glass', and I had no doubt, as I put the book back on the shelf, that were I to check back a couple of days later, Fairbanks would have spread like a cancer to the rest of Auster's book, possibly the entire 'New York Trilogy'. But I wouldn't have been able to bear finding out if I was right.

I couldn't fall asleep that night. I could almost hear the low, crunching sound of Fairbanks clawing his way into the paragraphs of my favorite books, doing irreparable damage to beloved plot lines and characters.

I felt compelled to tell someone of my discovery, but I was afraid they would call me crazy and accuse me of having forged the books to get attention.

I tossed and turned, thought about calling Coover and dragging him out of bed and down to the shop to see how many books had been infected, but Instead I ended up searching the internet for information about Fairbanks till the break of a dull, gray dawn.

There were quite a lot of rumors and speculations surrounding him, and for a while I felt relieved to learn I wasn't the only one who'd made his acquaintance. That meant I wasn't crazy, at least. Unfortunately, no one seemed to have come up with a way of stopping him.

Some theorized that Fairbanks had found his way into literature through oral traditions when early lore and folktales started being recorded. There were even some outlandish speculations that the burning of the library in Alexandria had been an early attempt to stop Fairbanks from spreading!

The most well-documented case however, was from 1931, when an antique dealer named Joseph Cotton had set fire to his shop in Chicago, claiming to have done it for the good of world literature, to save the books from 'the killing name'. Many invaluable manuscripts were destroyed in the fire, but really, who can blame Joseph Cotton? What wouldn't you do to save your favorite books from a deranged fictional entity who goes on killing sprees through the stories you love? What would you say, for instance, if you picked up a copy of 'Winnie The Pooh' only to find that Fairbanks had already been there, leaving a trail of blood and teddy bear stuffing through the hundred-acre wood?

I also found a surprising number of artists' interpretations of Fairbanks. The most interesting was from a failed attempt to trap him in an image in 1838. Ludvig Richter, famous for illustrating the fairytales of the brothers Grimm, had been hired to produce an image that showed Fairbanks standing under a poplar tree, his face obscured by the shadow cast by the tree's crown, apparently watching a group of young people on a picnic.

I had the unsettling thought that if I were to stare at the picture for long enough I would see him move, and I had to close the tab on my browser.

I wonder where Fairbanks really came from. Did he slip over from some sort of parallel dimension of self-aware concepts, to find, here in our world, endless bookcases lined with defenseless prose? Or did he develop gradually, suddenly reaching a level of consciousness that allowed him to detach himself from the work that had originally spawned him?

Where ever he came from, he is clearly a voracious, sentient, killer-concept that preys on fiction.

He lives in prose like a pike in murky waters, and he grows stronger by the minute.

By now he has found his way into the novel I was writing. He's already killed off most of the minor characters and is currently holding the protagonist and his girlfriend as hostages in their apartment. I think he might be torturing them, but I haven't been able to bring myself to check up on them for a few days now.

I fear the worst.

If I don't find a way to stop Fairbanks he could potentially threaten our entire cultural heritage. And I wonder what will happen, if or when, he discovers the internet?

But there might be hope.

I'm studying him, mapping his habits and familiarizing myself with his modus operandi. I've discovered that the big Russians seem to be more resilient towards him than our own, native literature. There might be a clue to a cure or an antidote somewhere there.

And I'm working on something. A response to Fairbanks in the form of a fictional entity that can fight him in his own element. My theory is that fiction can achieve a relative state of self-awareness through sufficient complexity.

But it's tricky stuff. Even writing these lines I'm putting myself at risk. I've ceased all written correspondence, even text messaging, with the outside world, for fear of spreading him.

I'm actually realizing, just now, that by writing this piece of text I have created a potential vessel for Fairbanks to expand through. I can't allow that to happen. I shall stop writing immediately and burn these pages.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lars Kramhøft is a published comic book artist, illustrator and writer born in Denmark in 1984.

From an early age he developed a love of books and stories, particularly ones with a fantastic element, such as Poe and Lovecraft. He's had many different jobs, from drawing comics to washing dishes, but continues to write stories in an attempt to make sense of the world, the mess in his head - and most of all, to entertain himself. If anyone else wants to read the stories that come out of this, he is very grateful.

Blog: <http://raresightings.blogspot.dk/>

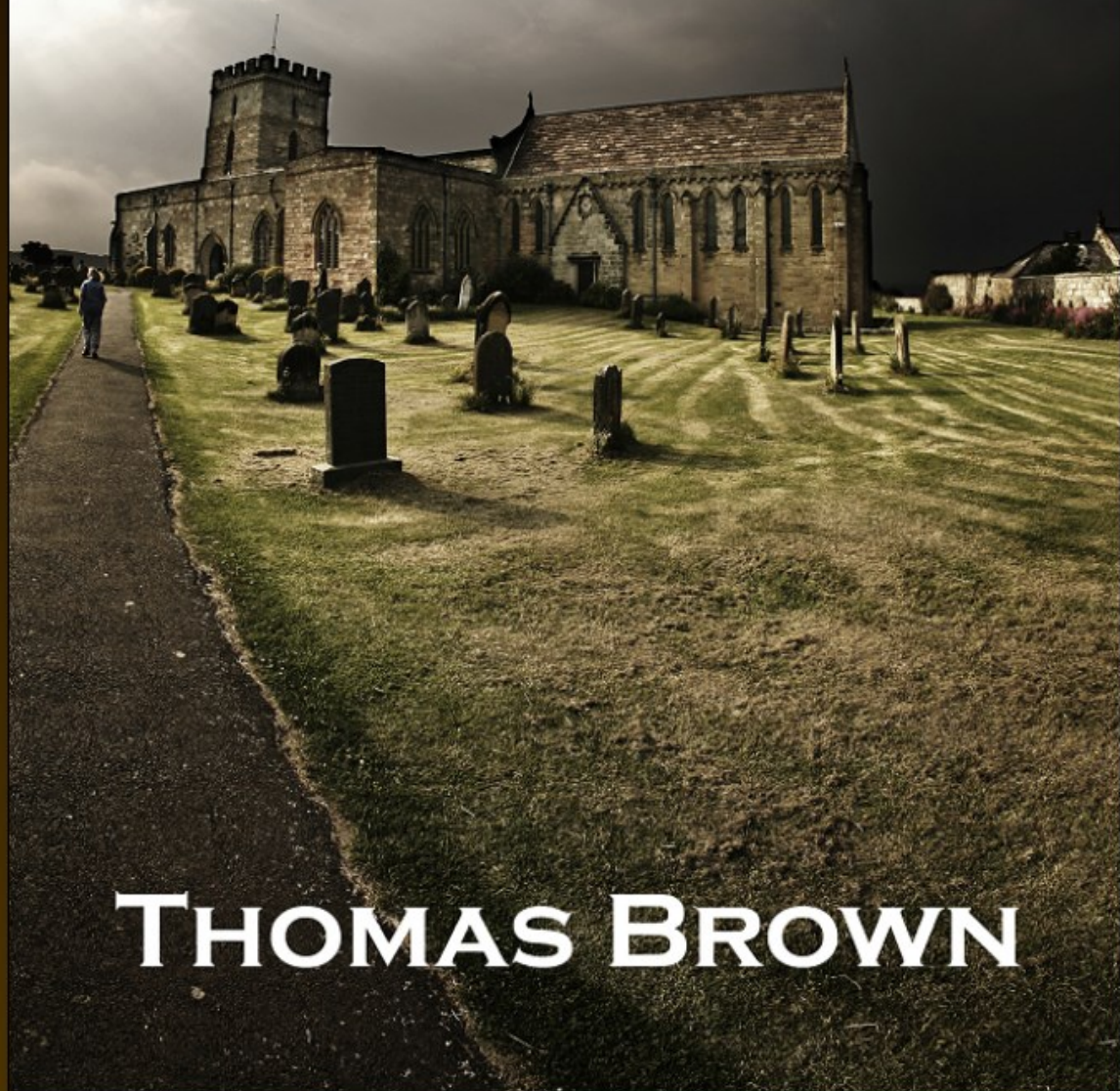
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LYNNWOOD

*The unthinkable is happening
in Lynnwood - a village with
centuries of guilt on its conscience*



THOMAS BROWN

Available on Amazon May 2013

Do Us Part *Brent Abell*

Harold knelt down weeping in the newly fallen snow. The roses he brought yesterday already drooped to the ground; the wilted and frozen petals covering the area below the thorny stems. Running his gloved hand over the gravestone's etching, he whispered her name over and over like an incantation. Each time her name crossed his lips; he felt her inside him and imagined her touch again. When Valerie died, a piece of him died with her and he couldn't stand the empty house and bed any longer. Work had understood at first, but after not returning calls for a week they fired him earlier in the day while he lay in bed clutching her pillow and weeping. The only time he escaped the memory of Valerie was to come to her grave and grieve alone.

Shivering, Harold climbed to his feet, blew a kiss to the granite marker, and took another long pull from the whiskey bottle. The temperature continued dropping and the cold howling wind cut through his coat like a knife. Still he lingered above her resting place and prayed, not able to pull himself away from her side. Inhaling the frigid air deep into his lungs, he closed his eyes. With the world around him shut out, he prayed one last prayer and his mind wandered to the news he heard on the radio.

News reports of the dead rising flooded the airwaves over the last three days, but coming out here to see for his self was pitiful, the old him never would have even began to believe it, but things had changed. Death can change a man. The ludicrous notion the dead were coming back to life gave him hope he'd see Valerie again, but standing there he felt hope die like the day she was killed two weeks ago. Every day since the burial, he made the trek through the cemetery, flowers and bottle in hand, until he reached her sleeping remains. Now it felt different, like hope's beacon lit his path and called for him to seek her out again. He knew it was a fool's errand, but he wanted to give it one last go.

The scream he heard piercing the quiet December evening snapped him back to reality.

Beyond the mausoleum, another cry filled the air and cut short. Harold hurriedly stumbled to his feet and ran to the tree line on his left. Stopping, he heaved gasping for air and turned to look behind him. The cemetery's rolling hills were silent again and the swaying tree branches were the only thing moving. He stopped and a shadow crept out from behind one of the old crypts in the cemetery's center. The person's foot left crimson drag marks in the snow and he saw the foot twisted backward and a chunk of leg missing.

"Damn," he muttered under his breath and moved away from the crypts. Harold stopped to check his surroundings again and gasped. The snow betrayed his location, his tracks marking the white drifts, leading whatever was out there straight to him. Pausing for a moment, he scanned the area again.

The bushes beside the mausoleum rustled and two shapes crept out from the holly. Shambling, the figures moved to the road and their eyes roamed around scanning the ground. The female lifted her head and sniffed the air like an animal. Sensing something, the male inspected the ground. Dropping down on his hands and knees, he buried his nose in the snow and searched the area around him. Stopping at the footprint, he lifted his head and hissed. The female slowly made her way over to him and hissed back.

Harold froze in place. Even in the frigid evening air, cold perspiration dripped down his forehead. Hoping to stay unnoticed, he fought back the shivers and didn't move a muscle.

A dog limped toward him from the trees. Growling, the canine slowly approached him, dragging its back leg behind him. Hearing the commotion, the strangers turned and scanned the tree line. Looking down, Harold noticed the dog's paws were bloody and its belly was laid open leaving an intestinal trail behind.

Both took a step toward the trees. Striking with his foot, he kicked the dog over and carefully raised his foot. Slowly, as to not bring notice, he sat his foot on the dog's head and pushed with all his might downward into the frozen ground.

Bones cracked beneath his heel and the weird growling ceased. The other two things drew closer to his position and the time wasted on the dog left him no time to get away. The branch in front of him covered his body from view. Gradually, he lowered himself down and laid flat on the snow cover. Reaching out, he scooped snow with his arms and buried himself beneath the frozen blanket.

Bit by bit, the people shuffled next to him. Blood dripped from their mouths and drenched their tattered clothes. Harold noticed the skin on the man's hands peeled back and the bone shone through the fingertips. The fingernails were ripped off where they dug themselves out from somewhere deep in the winter ground. Crimson drops dotted the virgin white, contrasting in the last fading light. Deep in his bones, the winter evening and the snow blanket drained his strength. Struggling to focus, he clenched his jaw shut so his teeth didn't chatter and he lowered his breathing to a faint rise and fall of his chest.

Once his mind had a moment to process the situation around him, it hit him, *Oh my God, they are real. The news is right!*

Harold stayed buried for what he considered an eternity. The last sun rays bleed away to the coming night.

The stench wafting from the corpses crept up his nose and his gag reflex kicked in. Rolling over, he climbed up and turned around. The female body grinned at him and fresh chunks of meat fell to the ground from beneath her blackened teeth. Batting her eyelids over liquefied eyeballs, she cried out an unholy cry into the twilight. A chorus rose from all around the cemetery in response.

Harold ran. Feeling around in his pockets for anything he could use as a weapon, he found only keys, cell phone, and a napkin.

Then an idea hit him, *the whiskey bottle at the grave!*

Remembering the empty bottle he left at Valerie's grave, he sprinted to his salvation. Moans erupted all around him. The sun's last rays cast a hundred shadows around the fallen markers and the piles of dirt pushed up from below. The wind bellowed harder and the sounds of the other dead drew nearer to him. Arriving at Valerie's grave, he bent over to grab the bottle and froze.

The vase of roses lay toppled over, the displaced dirt thrown around the area where her body rested. A branch broke behind the large stone cross behind him. Guardedly, he rose and gripped the bottle tight in his bitterly cold hand. Out of time, Harold reared back with the bottle and brought it down on the granite marker. Glass exploded and he raised the broken bottle up like a knife. The mix of tension and icy temperatures left his hands frozen and white. Ducking down, he crouched behind her marker. Another branch broke and a figure emerged from the shadows.

Steps crunched in the snow and Harold hid, afraid of what awaited him. Gathering all his courage and all his hopes, Harold stood and was stunned.

Valerie's dress flowed behind her in the gale and the driving snow covered her gray flesh. Her dead body took another step and stopped. Her head turned to the side like she remembered him, a memory fragment from the living past. The bottle slipped from his grasp and he looked to the darkened sky, thanking those above for answering his prayers.

Arms wide open; she stepped closer and groaned. The noise meant nothing, but to him it meant everything. Tears froze to his cheeks and he smiled. To him she was still the most beautiful thing he'd ever laid eyes on.

"Valerie, I love you," he proclaimed and wrapped himself up in her embrace. He ran his hands over her back and cringed touching the cold flesh.

Heat rushed through his body and something he hadn't felt in weeks smoldered in him. Holding her in his arms again, he leaned in and gently pressing his lips to her blue cracked mouth, kissing her.

Harold backed away after tasting his wife's foul breath and gazed into her dead black eyes. She looked at him and cocked her head to the side, a low rumble coming from her gas filled stomach. The truth screamed in his head.

"You're dead. My God, what am I thinking?" he whispered to her and felt all hope fade.

Drawing closer again, he embraced her and kissed her throat where she used to like it before they made love. Feeling her freezing corpse again, he closed his eyes and gave her a quick kiss on her forehead. In the distance he heard the others nearing and made his choice. Harold backed away and pulled the heavy coat collar away from his neck. He dropped his arms and lifted his head to the heavens while Valerie approached him.

Welcoming her teeth in his throat, he closed his eyes knowing they'd be reunited in their love, together forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Brent Abell haunts Southern Indiana and is joined by his wife, sons, and pug who devours the souls of the living. His work has been published or has upcoming stories from numerous presses and his debut novella was released in late 2012 by Rymfire Books. He is a cool cat to drink rum, smoke cigars, and debate the state of heavy metal music with. Stop by and join the blog party at <http://brentabell.wordpress.com>.

Twitter: @BrentTAbell

Facebook: The Dark Fiction of Brent Abell

Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed



**Available on
Amazon,
CreateSpace, &
Smashwords**

Legacies *Alex Chase*

Jorge Vasquez shoved the cool metal of the barrel to his forehead, gritting his teeth as his finger came to rest on the trigger. No matter how many times he'd fired his service-issue thirty-two, the sensation made his skin crawl. Now he was all the more unnerved to be pointing it at himself. "I told you- we live, or we die. I'm not lettin' you leave this world alone, and I know you wouldn't want me to do this."

Harris Lee had a laugh that sounded like steel wool being rubbed across asbestos, and it rang out across the rooftop, vanishing into the surrounding night. His left foot edged back, toward the edge of the roof. Emaciated, pale, and wrapped in the same loose-fitting jacket that Jorge had given him six years earlier, Harris seemed so frail and small that a mild breeze could've sent him flailing through the air.

"Ya always were a hard ass, wern't ya?" Harris said, trying to laugh again, though the familiar hack-and-wheeze of his asthma took over. Jorge desperately tried to remember the ink-stained face of his once-upon-a-time childhood pal, trying to re-hear the old jokes, see the blur as Harris raced by during track, but all he could focus on was a half-dead vagrant who'd traded his grandmother's cross in for another score. "Not like ya'd put yerself on the line like that fer me. I'm not worth yer trouble, Horge."

Damn it, there was "Horge" again. Harris said it was a good blend of Jorge and George, representing a blend of his Latin and American roots. Jorge never cared enough to object. Besides, he was never in a position to object.

"Step away, buddy. Come on, I can help you, you know? Don't make it end like this!" Jorge shoved the barrel up again, watching Harris watch it glint in the moonlight. Somewhere in the distance, a siren blared and Jorge briefly envisioned himself lying in the back of an ambulance by Harris's side, his head splattered like a watermelon while Harris bled from every orifice. One hell of a double suicide.

When he looked up, Harris had moved two feet closer. There was less than fifteen feet of clearance between him and the edge.

"Sides," Harris giggled, high from the euphoria of impending death. "No way you'd do that. Cop takin' himself out with his own gun? Nu-uh. Nope. Too cliché for mistuh lone wolf, mistuh top dog."

It was time to change tactics. "Fine, maybe not, but is this how you want it? Suicide? You know you'll go to Hell for that. You were always talkin' about earning your place in heaven. Did you give up on that?" His voice cracked; unprofessional, but unavoidable.

"Heaven? You think a guy like me has a chance of that? You led this case, havn't ya? You know the things I done, things I can't take back. Things God himself can't forgive. I'm goin' ta hell either way, so dyin' now jus saves me some trouble."

Jorge began to wonder why he was trying to save him at all- the selfish bastard squandered everything, took family, friends, and health for granted while Jorge worked his way up from the very bottom. But blood was thicker than water, right? He wouldn't make the same mistake his parents had. He couldn't.

"Damn, Harris!" Jorge screamed, drowned out by a baleful wind that threw dirt in his eyes, forcing him to blink. Harris moved further away, smiling weakly. Coughing, he sputtered, "How would your mom have felt? Your dad? Justin?"

Jorge didn't want to go that far, it was stressful for them both. In a few words, weeks of memories flooded back. Too many sights, too many sounds, too many sorrows.

"They all dead, man! You know that!" He snapped back, light returning to his dark eyes. Most never think about losing their parents, let alone losing them twice. "Think they care? Nah, you can't once you dead!"

"So that's it, then? Fell in with a bad crowd, make a few mistakes, so you give up? A red stain on the ground and a fifteen second blip on the evening news is the legacy you wanna leave? You think a chalk

outline does ‘em service? Who’s gonna leave flowers on their graves? Think that alkie motherfucker will?” Jorge wiped sweat from his eye as Harris shrugged, moving back. Five feet left and Jorge’s hand was shaking violently.

One summer, many years ago, Harris had kept a four-year-old pitbull from mauling him, rushing forward with a hoe to fend it off. Jorge vaguely recalled likening his almost-blood-brother to a knight fending off a dragon. He gulped; he wasn’t about to let the once-mighty fall.

“They loved you like they own, an’ I know you looked at ‘em the same. You do ‘em proud. I’m just a dope addict now. Who’d want me mournin’ ‘em, right?” A lonesome tear drooped through the valley of his sunken cheek. Three feet.

Jorge shook the gun, as if they’d forgotten about his empty promise. “I mean it, I’ll shoot.”

Harris chuckled, “See ya’, pal.” His foot raised up.

A crack rang out across the starless sky and Harris momentarily floated, weightless above the dirt-stained roof. His bloodshot eyes widened as the filthy brown straggles of his hair poofed out behind as he fell. The sound of his collapse was faint and empty in the wake of the gun’s roar. Someone below screamed, though Harris’s lips flapped wordlessly.

Jorge dropped it and rushed over, assessing the gaping red hole in the man’s shin. It wasn’t bleeding badly, but he’d need a long stay in physical therapy. “I warned you,” Jorge sighed.

“Hey, Mr. Goody Two shoes... what’s the deal, huh? Why you do that?” Harris croaked.

“You didn’t have a weapon,” Jorge felt a heat welling up in his cheeks. “Like you said, I’ve led this case... it all comes back to me. Now, it looks like police brutality. The case will get dropped, evidence dismissed.” They could hear sirens in the distance.

“Damn... you really are a good guy, huh?”

“Listen, we don’t have a lot of time. When they question you, tell ‘em the truth. Tell ‘em that you were up on this roof, I confronted you. We fought, I shot you. Nothing more, nothing less. It isn’t a lie, so it’s not perjury, it’s just the version of the story they need to hear. It’s the version you need to say.”

The moon broke through the clouds above, illuminating them. For an instant, they were kids again, playing in Harris’s backyard, back three lives ago. Jorge sniffed, almost laughing at it all, as he stood.

“What do I tell ‘em ‘bout you now?”

Jorge turned to face Harris as the sirens wailed below, the wind howling all around him, comforting him, inviting him into its hollow embrace as he spread his arms. “Tell ‘em... I went home.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Chase is a writer of many things, but most of all, of the dark edge of human existence that many dare not approach. He has had a dozen short stories accepted for publication in genres ranging from horror to science fiction to romance by Siren’s Call Publications, Pink Pepper Press and Angelic Knight Press. He is also scheduled to speak at Drew University on how fiction is crucial to public intellectualism. When not hammering away at his keyboard, he enjoys reading, cooking, and learning new things.

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Solitary *Jon Olson*

Chester Hadfield stood in the Solitary Hill Federal Correctional Facility's cafeteria line and looked over at the dozens of inmates seated at tables eating their lunch in an eerie silence. Their expressions were calm and projected the image of being docile but Chester himself felt frustrated with an uncontrollable rage building. This wasn't the same prison that his father depicted in his stories of when he did time at Solitary Hill. Those stories had captivated him at a young age and he anticipated the same when he was slated for a turn there.

"You should've seen it, boy," his father had said countless times, "it was like heaven. We ran the fucking place, not the guards. They didn't dare mess with us. We did our own thing... it was great."

Chester had been an inmate in Solitary Hill for two months now and it was the complete opposite of what his father had preached. The guards were in control and were treated with respect and no one seemed to step out of line. It was the ideal prison community for administrators but not for someone who had grown up imagining it to be an inmate's playground.

"Hey man, keep moving," fellow inmate Ben Peacock said behind him.

Chester ignored him and could not fathom how Solitary Hill had gone from being 'heaven' in his father's days to one where everyone followed the rules. There were no fights and any argument seemed to be settled peacefully, even by factions who in the outside world despised each other in a murderous way. He couldn't even remember the last time there had been an infraction.

The word going around was that everyone was afraid of doing time in solitary confinement. Chester would watch as fear blossomed on any inmate's face when talking about it but Chester wasn't afraid of doing a little bit of time by himself in a dark cell. He'd seen *Shawshank Redemption* and knew it would be a cakewalk.

Something needs to be done to get Solitary Hill back to its glory days, Chester thought, and it needs to be done soon.

"Come on, keep the line moving," Ben said again. This time he gave Chester a gentle nudge in the back.

"Not soon," Chester muttered, "... now."

He spun around and punched Ben directly in the nose as hard as he could. Ben cried out in surprise but did nothing to protect himself while Chester pulled back and hit him again feeling Ben's nose break with blood squirting out. Ben collapsed to the ground and there was a sickening crack as his head hit the tiled floor. Kneeling on top of him, Chester grabbed him by the hair and began to bash Ben's head against the floor. By the time the correctional officers pulled him up, Chester had felt the back of the Ben's skull cave in. He grinned as they led him out of the cafeteria with his head held high and proud of his actions but the looks the others gave him were not ones of approval or respect; they were glares of pity and fear.

Warden Frank Ennis stood looking out the large window in his office, which overlooked the entire eastern bloc of the facility, with his hands behind his back. His eyes roamed along the tall fences with barb and razor wire wrapped around the top. He was a heavy set man in his late 40s and was almost completely bald. From the back one might say that he looked soft but when he turned to face Chester he looked just as hard as any of the inmates that Solitary Hill housed. A thin layer of sweat glistened in the light but Warden Ennis ignored it focusing his attention on Chester.

Two large correctional officers, William Beckett and Ryerson Quinn, stood behind Chester each holding one of his wrists.

"Mister Hadfield," he spoke with a quiet but confident voice, "you are aware that your actions have left a fellow inmate dead?"

Chester nodded.

“So you are also aware that your actions require me to take drastic action?” Warden Ennis cleared his throat softly, “I’m placing you in solitary confinement.”

Again Chester nodded but this time allowed a small and arrogant smile to begin to curl at the corners of his mouth.

“Hmm, I can see by your expression that you believe you’re a *tough guy*,” Warden Ennis said, “let me tell you something, son. I’ve seen tougher men than you pass through this place. Men that would rip open your throat, take a shit in your trachea then wipe their ass with your foreskin,” Warden Ennis crossed his arms across his chest, “men that used to use your father as their own personal blow up doll.”

He watched as the grin immediately disappeared from Chester’s face. Getting the reaction he wanted, Warden Ennis moved on.

“These tough guys also got out of line and didn’t think that spending time in solitary confinement would be hard,” he said, “Those boys were dead wrong. It was the toughest time they ever served and I never had a problem with any of them, not a single one, afterwards.” He uncrossed his arms. “That being said, I am a fair man. If you show me some remorse for your actions I will find an alternate method of punishment that won’t involve sending you to solitary confinement. What do you say?”

“Warden... sir...” Chester looked down at his feet.

“Yes?”

Chester looked up at him with a large grin on his face, “The day I show remorse for my actions is the day I will bend you over a table and...”

In unison, Beckett and Quinn twisted both of Chester’s wrists causing him to cry out in pain while they spun him around to take him out of the office.

“Take him down to Gregory,” Warden Ennis said and added almost as an afterthought, “gently.”

Beckett and Quinn let up on Chester’s wrists but maintained their strong hold on him. Chester tried as hard as he could to look tough as they walked him through his old cell block towards solitary as some inmates looked on. Chester had been hoping for a little fanfare but only got silence.

The solitary confinement unit was essentially a short hallway with four cells on either side. Fluorescent lights gave a slightly green hue to the white walls and tiled floors that were kept clean. It was manned by Gregory Underwood who was sitting at a small white table reading a newspaper. Gregory was the oldest of the guards having been working at Solitary Hill since it opened. They marched him down to the very last door on the right, cell number 7 and the locking mechanisms echoed throughout solitary as the door unlocked.

“Anything you’d like to say before they put you in?” Gregory asked.

Chester looked down at the shorter old man and smirked, “Keel over and die, old man.”

Gregory nodded to Beckett and Quinn who pushed him into the cell, which despite light pouring in from the hallway was almost completely dark. Gregory shut the cell door and the locking mechanism bolted into place sealing Chester inside.

“Well,” Beckett said, “how long do you think it’ll take this time around?”

“It won’t take very long at all,” Gregory said sitting down at his table, “we haven’t had anyone in there in quite some time.”

“You let us know,” Quinn said.

The two large men left solitary leaving Gregory to his newspaper.

Chester found the darkness almost suffocating as beads of sweat rolled down his face. He had never

been afraid of the dark growing up but standing in the thick blackness of the cell he felt something wasn't quite right. Anger still swelled inside him as he remembered what the warden had said about his father.

First chance I get when I get out of here, Chester thought, I'm going to shank the warden.

It suddenly occurred to him that the warden didn't say how long he would have to serve in solitary. He turned and felt for where the door was, running his hands along the walls until he found it.

"Hey!" he yelled, "*Hey!* How long am I supposed to stay in here?"

As far as he knew he had the right to know how long he was going to serve at any point during his incarceration. Chester pressed his ear against the door and tried to listen for a response but couldn't hear anything, so he started slapping his hand against the door.

"Hey, officer," he yelled, "how long am I supposed to be in here? I want to know how long..."

Chester let his voice trail off as he became aware of a scratching sound emanating not from the other side of the cell door but behind him. It reminded him of elementary school when teachers had been allowed to write on chalkboards. He started to turn around and became aware that the darkness was thinning somehow.

It was faint but Chester could make out the interior of his cell for the first time which was empty except for a small bucket near one of the back corners. He squinted as his cell grew brighter from an unknown light source, one that was different from the greenish hue the fluorescent lights in the hallway as this gave off a blue hue. What startled Chester the most, however, was a little girl no older than six facing the far wall while writing on it with a piece of white chalk. She was wearing a blue dress with a white tee-shirt underneath. Her hair was pulled back into two pigtails tied together with a piece of blue ribbon each.

"What in the hell..." Chester said rubbing his eyes.

The little girl stopped writing and perked her head slightly to the side when she heard Chester speak. She kept her hand in the air with the piece of chalk still pressed against the wall. After a second passed she resumed writing. Chester took a step forward and she stopped writing again.

A loud giggle rose out of the little girl, echoing in the cell, and Chester took a step back. She slowly began to turn around and for some reason Chester dreaded seeing the little girl's face. The little girl jumped and spun the rest of the way around in mid-air. The sound of her feet hitting the cell floor was drowned out by Chester's scream.

"Get me out of here!" Chester screamed, "*For the love of God, get me out of here! She has no face!*"

The little girl's head was almost perfectly oval except for her slightly pointed chin. There were no facial features on her face: it was completely smooth with no blemishes. She stood facing Chester and then raised her hands to where her mouth should be.

"What's wrong, mister?" her soft voice giggled.

Chester began slapping the cell door as hard as he could.

"Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!"

The little girl's high pitched laughter filled the entire cell as if it were a physical substance. Chester turned his head slightly and peered back over his shoulder.

The featureless face began to split down the middle and Chester could hear what sounded like paper being ripped. A perfectly cut seam ran vertically from the little girl's forehead to her chin. It began to split horizontally starting at the point where her nose should've been and continuing until it reached her ears. The little girl stood in the middle of the cell with the newly formed seams running across her face staring straight at Chester. He stopped slapping the cell door and all was quiet in the cell.

"Boo!" the little girl suddenly called out and laughed.

With a grotesque crunching noise the girl's face ripped open into four equal jaws. Rows of immaculate white teeth lined each of the jaws while two forked tongues flapped out from a single pharynx tasting the air. Strings of saliva hung off of teeth and quivered through deep breaths. The smell of morning breath pierced the stale prison cell air making it all too real for Chester who wasn't even aware that he was still screaming.

"What are you afraid of mister?" she asked.

An inhuman roar erupted from the hellish mouth and Chester's screams were cut short as the cell went completely dark again.

Gregory looked up from his newspaper and saw that the blue light faintly shining out beneath the cell door was gone. He folded the paper and tucked it under his arm while he stood up. Glancing at his watch, he noted the time, then reached up and grabbed a small handle on the cell door. He pulled the handle and opened a small rectangular slot to peer inside the cell. At first he was unable to see anything so he flicked on a single light switch on the side of the cell door. A fluorescent light flickered then illuminated the entire cell.

It was empty.

Something had been written on the far wall and Gregory smiled as she usually wrote them a note written in Old Norse:

It had been so long I thought you had forgotten about me but I see that you haven't. Thank you very much for the present. I love you. Isabelle

Smiling, Gregory closed the slot, turned the light out and walked back to his small table. He pulled open a single drawer and took out his radio.

"Come in, Quinn," Gregory said into the radio, "Isabelle only needed 10 minutes."

Laughter came over the radio, "That's our girl."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jon Anders Olson works full time as Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L Stanfield International Airport. He has had some of his short fiction appear in the *Sirens Call eZine* Issues 4, 5 and 6, the anthology *Legends of Urban Horror: A Friend of a Friend Told Me*, and a piece of flash fiction called "Sinus Infection" published at *Flashes In The Dark*. While he is content to write flash and short fiction, he is slowly developing a novel that will eventually be finished sometime in the near future. When he is not working or writing he can be found at his home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada with his wife and four cats.

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First Person Shooter *Ken MacGregor*

Cain stands motionless, surveying the damage. He absently rubs the mark on his cheek; it has been there a long, long time, but he's not likely to forget the day he got it. Cain inhales through his nose; he has come to appreciate, even enjoy the sharp coppery smell of fresh blood. He lifts a foot, shakes some of it off the toe of his Italian loafer and steps back across the threshold. A job well done, he thinks, and drops the heavy cleaver on the floor. The blade thunks into the wood. As his footsteps fade, the flies begin to gather for the feast.

THIS IS INTOLERABLE.

"I know," Adam says. "But what can we do? No one can touch him; you made sure of that." He is careful to keep his tone respectful; he is stating a fact, not admonishing. One does not admonish Him.

THERE IS A LOOPHOLE.

"Really?" Adam arches a perfect eyebrow. "You never mentioned this before."

I DO NOT ENTIRELY TRUST YOU, YOU KNOW.

"Yes," Adam sighs. "I know. You hold a grudge better and longer than anyone."

I DO EVERYTHING BETTER AND LONGER THAN ANYONE.

Adam's eyebrow shoots up.

GET YOUR MIND OUT OF THE GUTTER.

Adam laughs, then gets serious.

"What loophole?"

THE MARK WILL ONLY AFFECT THOSE BORN AFTER CAIN. ANYONE OLDER THAN CAIN MAY DO HIM HARM WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE.

"Okay," Adam says. "But, there are only two people older than Cain."

PRECISELY.

Adam stares at his Creator for a long moment.

"You want me to kill my own son?"

ALL OF HUMANKIND ARE YOUR CHILDREN, ADAM.

"Technically, sure," Adam said, "but I wasn't their father. Not really. Not in a hands-on, kissing boo-boos, singing to sleep, teaching about the world way. Not in any way that counts."

YOU ARE THE ONLY ONE WHO CAN DO THIS.

"What about Eve?"

DO NOT SPEAK OF HER IN MY PRESENCE.

"I always forget how much you hate her."

I DO NOT HATE. I AM LOVE. STILL, YOU WILL REFRAIN FROM SAYING HER NAME. IT ANNOYS ME.

"Of course," Adam says. "Whatever you say. Since I seem to be the only choice, what would you have me do, exactly?"

YOU NEED TO PUT AN END TO IT. YOU NEED TO DO IT NOW.

Adam sighs. It's no use arguing with God. You never win.

Cain smiles at the cop in plainclothes, probably a detective, most likely homicide. The cop is holding the automatic steadily, pointing at Cain's center mass.

"Put your hands behind your head," he is saying. "This can go easy for you if you cooperate."

"And," Cain says, moving a step closer. "If I don't?"

"Then it will go hard," says the cop, undoing the safety. His legs shift to a shooting stance.

"Pull the trigger, officer." Another step.

"Detective." The cop is sweating. His gun hand shakes, just a little. "You're gonna want to stop

walking now, sir.”

“I don’t think so,” Cain says. “Detective. You go ahead and pull that trigger. I don’t mind. It would really be a refreshing change of pace.” Another step. The gun barrel is resting squarely against Cain’s chest. The cop is wet with sweat now.

“What,” he manages, “is that thing on your face?”

“My curse,” Cain says. “And, as it turns out, yours, too.” Cain gently takes the gun from the others hand; the cop is relieved to let it go. Cain turns it around, racks the slide, which is unnecessary but fun, and puts the barrel to the detective’s forehead.

“Why?”

“To get His attention. It’s nothing personal. Bye now.” Cain pulls the trigger and the detective’s last thoughts explode against the brick wall.

Adam knows it is a different world now; he checks in every couple hundred years. Heaven is perfect, of course, but he still gets nostalgic for his first home. Well, second home, he supposes. Knowing it’s a different world doesn’t prepare him for the noise. And the smells. And the dirt. And the mountain-high buildings. And the people. So many people! Adam feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility. *Look what happened!* Adam thinks. All of this, from me? Well, from God, of course, but through me. I have billions of children.

“Only, there’s one I have to kill.”

“Excuse me?” asks a woman at the newsstand, who is unable to hide how compelling she finds him.

“I am sad, because I have been tasked by God to kill my firstborn son.”

She steps away from him, confused and afraid. She doesn’t go far, though; she is unable to shake the feeling that she somehow knows this man. Somehow, that fact is important, significant.

“You understand I hope,” Adam says. “I don’t want to do it, but there is no one else.”

A crowd is gathering; they all look at Adam the same way: is he famous? How do we know him? Who is this guy? They are drawn to him and the crowd gets bigger. When Adam walks, they follow; soon, there are dozens, then hundreds. It’s an impromptu parade, stopping traffic and growing larger by the moment. Adam knows where he is going; he was put on Earth mere blocks from Cain’s last victim. He is drawn to Cain; he can feel him close now.

Cain holds the young woman’s head in his hands, gently. He looks into her eyes, strokes her cheek. A tear falls from her face; she intuits what is about to happen. Cain catches it with a finger and tastes it.

“Sh. Don’t cry. You’re quite pretty, you know? Yes. You are. So, I will leave your pretty face intact. Sadly, soon it will all be rot and bone and dust; beauty does not last, child. I learned that early on.”

Cain jerks, feeling a presence, one he knows, one that shouldn’t be here. He looks toward it and he can hear the tide-like click and swish of hundreds pants and shoes. Cain knows now that he got the Big Guy’s attention; he knows that steps are being taken to deal with the problem. It’s about fucking time.

His hands are wet. He looks back at the woman and the carnage that is left of her head.

“Damn it. Look what you made me do,” he mumbles, and wipes his hands on his shirt. He goes to meet his father.

Adam and Cain look at each other for the first time in millennia. The crowd, well over a thousand strong, spreads out, framing them on the wide street.

“You look good,” Adam says.

“You too.”

"Why?" Adam asks.

"How about revenge?" Cain returns. "I did suffer for eons in the Land of Nod; you have no idea how unspeakably dull that was. And, when they finally let me out, I spent another eternity wandering the Earth, condemned to live forever with this lovely parting gift on my face. So, I know you're here to reason with me, to talk me down, but it's not gonna happen ... Dad."

"That's not why I'm here," says Adam, pulling out a large caliber automatic. "I'm here to end this."

"Oh," Cain laughs. "This should be interesting." He leaps the thirty feet separating them, drawing a carving knife from his belt. The crowd gasps. It is graceful and terrifying, but Adam calmly puts five bullets in Cain's chest before he's halfway there. Momentum carries him nearly to Adam's feet.

"Ow," Says Cain, looking up from the ground. "Where did you learn to shoot?"

"Lethal Weapon movies."

"They have those up there?"

"Of course. It's Heaven." Adam smiles at his bleeding son.

"You turned out to be a pretty good father" Cain says, teeth clenched.

"What makes you say that?"

"I just wanted to die." Cain says. "I'm so damn tired."

"I know," Adam says.

"Will I see you again?"

"Yeah. Eventually. You'll go down first," Adam says. Cain's eyes slide shut, snap open again.

"Not much time left, I'm afraid." Cain says. "Would have been nice to talk. To catch up a little."

"Some other time," Adam says.

"Count on it."

"Cain?"

"Yeah?"

"Say hi to your mother for me."

Cain nods, coughs once and dies.

Adam stays long enough to smooth things over with the locals. It's easy, as the bullet-ridden body is the serial killer the police have been, sometimes literally, dying to catch. Also, because he's the First Father, and everyone wants to trust him. Then, having done the right thing, the hard thing, Adam goes home. The other home. The pretty, quiet one.

He tosses the pistol at God's feet and tells him it's done. Adam knows this gesture is pointless, that God already knows, but he does it anyway. The drama appeals to him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken MacGregor's short stories have appeared in the anthologies *A Quick Bite of Flesh*, *Erie Tales*, *The Dead Sea*, *Tortured Souls*, vol. 1, *No Holds Barred*, *For All Eternity*, *At Year's End* ("Autumn Waits" nominated for the Micro Award), *Shithouse Tales*, *D.O.A. II*, *A Sixpack of Stories*, *What's That Scuttling Down My Chimney*, *Dread Time Stories*, *Horrific History*, *Slaughter House: The Serial Killer Edition*, vol. 3 and *Oomph! A Little Super Goes a Long Way*; he has also appeared in *Body Electric* and *Siren's Call* magazines. Ken is a member in good standing of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers. He lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan with his brilliant (and remarkably tolerant) wife Liz and astounding children Gabriel and Maggie. He can be found on Facebook (Ken MacGregor - Author), Amazon and Goodreads.

Our greatest fear is of the which lays dormant and hidden within ourselves,
and the greatest horror is when we realize that monster has been released



Available on Amazon, Smashwords & CreateSpace

All or Nothing *Adam Millard*

"Are you a gambling man, Daniel?" he asks, placing the pistol down in front of me. I've never been this close to a real gun before, and so it isn't surprising that I am nervous.

"Depends," I say, hoping my obscurity will either pique his interest or send him on his way. I hadn't expected company at my dinner-table, especially not in the shape of a man carrying a gun.

The man smiles. "Don't be shy," he says. "I've got a little game that might interest you."

It is my turn to be intrigued. Truth be told, I'm an addict. I've lost more houses and wives than most people lose teeth. "What's the catch?" As a gambler, I'm not stupid; there are hidden clauses everywhere. The trick is discovering them before the bet's made.

The man grins; a solitary gold tooth glints at me from deep within his maw. "No catch. Just a good, old-fashioned game of Russian Roulette." He pushes the pistol towards me at the mention of the game, as if it will somehow aid my decision to take part.

"You're joking," I say, but I can see that he isn't. His head shakes with dissent as his grin widens.

"Nope."

I glance down at the gun as he explains the rules to me. One pull of the trigger. If my head remains intact, I'll win a million pounds. I don't want to ponder the alternative.

I scoop up the gun as the man produces a briefcase from seemingly nowhere. He opens it; I can see the money is real. Suddenly, the gun in my hand is no longer a weapon. It is a way out, one final roll of the dice.

"One shot?" I ask. The mysterious man looks different, somehow, as he nods. Were those tiny protrusions in his head there a moment ago?

I slowly lift the gun, place it between my lips. The money stares up at me from the case. The man – *darker now* – grins as my finger trembles upon the trigger. I wait. I breathe. I pray. I close my eyes. I pull the trigger.

And then I am somewhere else. Somewhere dark, some forsaken place unfit for humans. I hear the man's laughter, but he's nowhere to be seen. What *is* this place? Why is it so goddamned *hot* all of a sudden? Within minutes I realise I've lost everything, and the man's incessant mirth slowly starts to drive me insane.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Adam Millard is the author of thirteen novels and more than a hundred short stories, which can be found in various collections and anthologies.

Probably best known for his post-apocalyptic fiction, Adam also writes fantasy/horror for children. He created the character *Peter Crombie*, *Teenage Zombie* just so he had something decent to read to his son at bedtime. Adam also writes Bizarro fiction for several publishers, who enjoy his tales of flesh-eating clown-beetles and rabies-infected derrieres so much that they keep printing them. His "Dead" series has recently been the filling in a Stephen King/Bram Stoker sandwich on Amazon's bestsellers chart. When he's not writing about the nightmarish creatures battling for supremacy in his head, Adam writes for *This Is Horror*, whose columnists include Shaun Hutson, Simon Bestwick and Simon Marshall-Jones.

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Interview with Artist Mariusz ‘Noistromo’ Siergiejew

Mariusz Siergiejew, who uses the name Noistromo for his artistic creations, currently resides in Poland. Most of the techniques he utilizes have been self-taught as he found that the time spent gaining a degree in Art from the Pedagogical University wasn't very useful to his art form. The hours spent drawing, sketching, and painting are what have helped him to hone his skills, but he is always striving to learn more, try new things, and experiment.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Mariusz, what mediums do you work in? Is there a medium that you've always wanted to try but just haven't gotten around to yet?

Mariusz Siergiejew - Noistromo: I usually work in a digital medium, on my laptop utilizing a Wacom Intuos4 XL tablet. I use software such as Photoshop and Painter. For traditional techniques, I use a variety of methods from an airbrush with acrylic paint, to pencil or ballpoint pen for sketches, or sometimes colored markers.

As to something I've always wanted to try - perhaps sculpting. I took a course in college in clay sculpting, but the subject matter was very simple, not the style of artwork I wanted to create. It was a very brief opportunity to try, but the course itself didn't inspire me. I may try again someday, possibly with 3D sculpting software. It's a much cleaner medium, and holds greater interest for me.

SCP: As writers, we sometimes suffer from 'writer's block'; is there something similar to that in the artist/painter/illustrator world? If so, do you ever suffer from it? How do you combat it?

Noistromo: Sadly yes... I call it creative block. It's a strange feeling, and quite uncomfortable. I find my head devoid of worthy ideas, every image that comes to mind I immediately criticize and deem unworthy of creation. I don't even bother to sketch those ideas, I simply label them 'sucks' before I even start and end up frustrated and create nothing at that point. It's a foolish notion, but sometimes it sticks in my head. A good method for overcoming this is for me to have fun with drawing or painting, toss away my initial instinct to critique my own work (and I mean ALL) and just sketch. Doodle a little, have fun with a pencil, and not try to create something specific. Turn off my conscious mind for a while so that it won't corrupt my creativity. Sometimes I find that the less you think about it, the more the art flows. Critique is associated with fear, sometimes we fear to try because we are afraid of criticism, either self-inflicted or otherwise. Distractions help unblock my creativity as well. Sometimes I'll go for a walk, take a nap, watch a movie, play a video game; just focus my mind elsewhere so I can take a fresh breath.



Galaxy Shaper

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

Noistromo: I find inspiration in many different places: music, video games, books, the work of other artists; they all play a part in inspiring the art I create.

SCP: What is your favorite piece that you have ever completed? Why is it your favorite?

Noistromo: I don't have a particular 'favorite', I like some pieces more, others I like less. I tend to be partial to the ones that exhibit growth in progress, and a widening of my skill set. I also have an affinity for more expressive pieces and those that convey a dramatic feel.

SCP: What do you do when a piece isn't coming together 'on paper' the same way it does in your head?

Noistromo: I do my best to analyze what I want to create on paper or my computer by working on detailed sketches, trying to find a specific point of reference or inspiration that will infuse the piece with life. The worst thing to do is give up without trying. Even if I try and don't succeed to my satisfaction, at least I've learned something and gained experience, but to not try at all is to fail with nothing to show for it. That is true failure.

SCP: What is your favorite piece of artwork that you did not create?

Noistromo: I don't have one specific favorite piece of art, I like varying artists in many forms based on their style, creativity, or the overall mood of their artwork.

My first favorite artist was (and very probably still is) H.R.Giger. You can see his inspiration in quite a few of my works. Other artists that come to mind are Royo, Brom, Android Jones, and John Harris. There are many more, it would be impossible to name them all.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

Noistromo: Sometimes it's an image – a picture, other times a music track which stirs a dark vision, emotion, or feeling within me. And then there is only one thing to do, grab pencil or tablet pen and start to draw or paint.

What I am feeling when I create the piece is "coded" into it from my state of mind when I'm working on it, like a coded message. Those are the works that I feel are better, because there is a hidden "layer" that attracts the viewer that they may not even realize is there.

If you'd like to check out some of my work, please visit me online:

Online Portfolio - <http://noistromo.com>

Blog - <http://holographic9.blogspot.com>

Facebook - <http://facebook.com/noistromo>

One of my hobbies is photography; you can find my photographic images online:

Website - <http://photography.siergiejew.org>

Facebook - <http://facebook.com/siergiejew.photography>

My professional graphic design services include: business cards, book covers, album covers, logos, posters, t-shirts, and just about anything else you can come up with. I also do a fair amount of concept art design for characters, creatures, environments, objects, devices, structures, and weapons. I'm happy to try just about anything your imagination can come up with.

Thank you Noistromo for taking the time to answer our questions. All of the artwork displayed throughout this issue belongs to Noistromo and he has been generous to allow us to reprint it for this issue. Contact him if you would like to commission him for a project at Noistromo@gmail.com.



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The Stairwell

C.W. Schultz

This is dedicated to Neil. When my time comes, I know you will be there to swoop down and fly me up, up, up.

TRUE DARKNESS ISN'T EVEN BLACK. It's darker. We will all know what it's like one day.

Zach knows. He saw true darkness right before he entered the stairwell.

How did I end up here? Zach asked himself. All he remembered was the true darkness, and then he was here, standing at the very top of the stairwell.

He observed a second door that led to the roof. Then his mind quickly trailed to a more curious question: *What was before the darkness?*

That's easy. It was the BOOM. Two of them, actually. The first came as a surprise. Loud, but not deafening or startling. It then echoed into a ringing sound. The second came not long thereafter, but did not follow with the curious ringing. Then came the true darkness, and then finally the stairwell.

It puzzled Zach because one thing he prided himself on was his memory. He had memories going all the way back to when he was four-years-old. Actually, Zach had a memory he thought came before that; it involved a very similar darkness. It was an event he always thought was a pre-life memory, but considered it too crazy to tell anyone.

The solution to remembering what came before the BOOM was quite simple: just open the door and enter the hallway. *It'll all come back so easily that the real puzzle will be how I forgot in the first place.*

He turned around and looked at the door he had just exited. It had the floor number painted on it.

31. *My age.*

He grabbed the handle and pulled.

It wouldn't open.

Okay, well, there's only one direction I could've possibly've been going.

He walked down to the 30th floor. Locked again.

Shit, can't a guy use the elevator?

As he proceeded down the stairwell towards the next floor, he heard a muffled voice on the other side of the door.

"Someone there?" Zach said, turning back.

He knocked.

Nothing.

Another knock. "Hello? Is there anybody in there?"

He waited.

"Fine. Be that way."

Down to the 29th he went.

Locked again.

As he turned to head to 28, he heard another voice. He slapped on the door with the palm of his hand.

"Can anyone hear me? I'm locked in the stairwell."

No one came. He pounded both palms on the door now and yelled, "Hello!"

29 was a lost cause. Now to 28. Locked, of course.

There was another voice, and with another knock, there was again no answer. The voice this time was a bit clearer. He thought he heard the voice say, "Will you marry me?"

"I do," Zach shouted sarcastically.

Zach clenched his hands at 27 and hammered his fist against the door. Clearly, he heard a voice say: "I love you."

He used both fists as a response, but no one answered. With an even more hostile sarcasm than the last floor, he screamed, "I love you too!"

At 26, he didn't even bother grasping the handle. He didn't even bother knocking. Instead, he kicked the door several times with the soles of his shoes.

"You're on board. The first of next month you'll begin training," he heard a woman's voice from the other side of the door, seemingly uninterrupted by Zach's kicking. In fact, Zach thought he may have recognized the voice.

Can they really not hear me?

He didn't even bother to stop at 25. The number, as well as 17, actually represented something to Zach; not unlike how, to some people, the number seven is good luck or 13 means something bad.

Even though the number 24 had no significance to him, Zach decided he wasn't going to bother knocking. It just wasn't worth the energy. He decided to just walk down the entire flight of stairs and knew to be grateful he wasn't going up.

Getting out of the stairwell wasn't even a conflict anymore. What was now on his mind after going down several more floors was the voices on the opposite side of each door. They became clearer with each floor; and the better he could hear them, the more familiarity they had.

At 21, he heard, "Drinking isn't new to me. Drinking *legally* is."

At 18, he heard, "I don't smoke. I bought a pack just because I could."

16: "I've had my driver's license for over eight months and my mom still won't let me take the car out."

12: "First-grade may have been the good-old-days now; but one day, sixth-grade will be the good-old-days too. Stay young while you can, kiddo."

Dad?

This one especially shook him.

No. It couldn't be.

But despite the voice that sent chills down his spine, when he hit floor nine, it was no longer that voices that concerned him anymore. Now, he was focused on the realization that it was getting gradually hotter in the stairwell.

He picked up the pace, but it got hotter and hotter the closer he got to the bottom.

The heat caused Zach to tune the voices out completely, until he hit floor four.

There, the heat was too intense to go further. When he looked down to the bottom floor, not so distant anymore, he saw smoke coming through the crack of the door.

Oh shit! There's a fire down there. The building must be in lock-down and I'm stuck here! And heat fucking rises.

"I can't wait 'til my brother is born!" he heard a child say through the door of the fourth floor.

"Help!" Zach screamed as he ran to the door. When he grabbed the handle, there was a fierce sizzle and an intense burning at the palm of his hand. He shrieked in agony as he pulled his hand back.

Zach looked at his cooked hand, all blistered pinkish-white and proceeded to wave and flap it.

He ran for floor five.

"I hate them both," he heard a child say on the other end of the door.

"Help!" Zach shouted as he approached with caution. He steadily placed the back of his hand against the door.

"Fuck!" he said painfully at the moment of touch.

That's even hotter!

He peeked over the railing again. This time, he saw flames! They seemed to be rising step-by-step.

The bottom floor couldn't even be seen anymore.

All right, Zach, you got three choices, he said to himself. 1) You jump off the railing right now and give yourself a somewhat quick death; 2) You go to each door of each floor, burning slowly, hoping you'll get lucky and that someone'll answer... which they never will; or 3) You haul ass up to the roof—you may be stuck, you may still be fucked; but at least there'll be air, and maybe even RAIN! Yes; sweet, sweet rain.

The choice wasn't hard. He began running up the stairs. With each floor he reached, the flames were only a few steps behind.

He had to pick up the pace now, but that was no easy task. By floor eight, every pore was dripping of sweat. His shoes were slippery from the melting soles.

At floor 11, he commenced to stretch his legs three steps at a time. Skipping steps prevented him from running smoothly and it required more lower-body strength, but it seemed to pick up the pace.

He was up to floor 12. "Don't do it, Zach," a voice warned on the other side of the door.

Mom?

Just like Dad, he knew that wasn't possible either. She had died tragically when he was only 17.

At floor 14, he heard "I fucking hate you, Mom." Had he not been in a panic, Zach may have found it a bit humorous, since the voice was of a teenager with a high-pitch break.

"I've gotten good grades, did all my chores, obeyed your stupid rules and all I ask is to take out the car every once in a while," he heard the same teenage voice through the door of floor 16.

Halfway there, buddy, he said to himself.

No words at floor 17. Just a woman's loud scream.

18: "Dad, I'm a fucking adult now!"

23: "One of these days, he's going to get what's coming to him. Just like Mom."

His shoes were sticking to the floor. He removed his shirt and wiped his face and upper-body off with it.

A look down, he saw his bare chest was red and that his shoes were frying—the soles literally bubbling.

He began crying. "Oh God, I deserve this," he said aloud to himself.

Then, he heard something. Only a few floors up; maybe at 27. Ascending footsteps!

"Wait! Help me!"

Zach started his trek up to the top again, now inspired by the presence of someone else in the stairwell.

The smoke was now so thick that he couldn't even see. The railing guided his steps, and the voices told him what floor he was on.

A weeping plea: "Don't do it, Zach. I'm your father."

"Floor 25!" Zach quietly said to himself with a disturbed hint of pride. *I finally got rid of 'em both.*

The stairwell was an oven by the time Zach reached 27. His jeans were so hot that it had cooked every single leg-hair. The shoe-soles were now nothing more than a layer of polyurethane, as thin as a rubber band.

The thought had crossed his mind countless times in this ordeal, but now he was certain: *I can't make it.*

The sound of the fire was whispering in his ear. Toss some steamed rice in a pan of boiling oil and stick your ear right up to it; you'll get the idea.

But through the deafness and blindness caused by the blaze, Zach heard a sound and saw a light from above.

“Mister! Wait!” Zach yelled up in a tone of newfound hope.

When he made it to the top, miraculously, he was all but on fire. He could feel the flames grabbing at him.

The door to the roof was just inches away now. Directly to his right was the door of the 31st floor, and he finally remembered how he got there. “An eye for an eye, big brother. You especially don’t take life from the two who gave it to you. You made us orphans.”

Then came the BOOMS. He remembered only feeling the first.

Recalling this stunned him despite more critical things at hand. It slowed him a bit, and while his pace wasn’t hindered too much, it still gave enough time for the flames to finally grasp one of his ankles. *It actually happened. I’m actually on fire*, he thought, too shocked to cry out.

The flames quickly climbed up his jeans.

With his entire lower-body now ablaze, there was no reason to waste time testing the temperature of the door as he had done with the lower floors.

He shoved himself against the only door in the stairwell that required to be pushed to open. He went through the door without effort, his force causing him to fling freely to the outside.

While there was no rain, the breeze was more than satisfactory. Crepuscular rays of light shined through bright white clouds that told of no foreseeable downpour.

Zach dropped and began rolling around on the tar-and-gravel rooftop, which successfully extinguished him. The raggedy jeans were hanging onto Zach by just threads, and while Zach was stuck in that oven of a stairwell for well over eight minutes, less than 10% of his body were second degree burns, 40% first degree and over half his body wasn’t burnt at all despite the excruciating amount of pain. He would be fully healed within a month. Despite popular belief, burns of the third and fourth degree actually have a painless sensation because the nerves have been destroyed, so it was a good sign he felt pain. Zach, the parent-killer, was going to be fine... if only he could find a way off the roof.

He looked around, hoping there would be something to assist in his escape. Maybe a ladder?

He scanned the vicinity, but there was nothing. Just a boring flat surface with the door leading back into the building and a man standing at the ledge.

The man!

“Hey!” Zach called. He groaned as he pushed himself back on his feet with great effort.

“Hey!” he called again, limping towards the man looking off the building.

The man didn’t look over his shoulder. He just stared out at the city beyond.

This motherfucker better not jump, Zach thought, concerned that the man’s leap would be a sign that jumping was the only other options aside from waiting for the fire to catch up again.

Zach reached the edge and stood next to the man. Looking down, Zach saw that the ground surrounding the building was ablaze too.

Fuck.

Zach looked to the sky again, hoping to find a helicopter coming to the rescue. But he didn’t. Instead, he saw two birds circling them.

“What are we gonna do?” Zach asked the man. He leaned forward to get a look at the man’s face, but as Zach was coming in closer, the stranger got swooped up.

It took Zach a moment to process what had just happened. It was so quick, vanishing seemed like a possibility.

Zach looked up and saw the man being lifted away by an eagle, flying him higher and higher and higher, until finally, they disappeared into the light between the clouds.

Zach looked directly over again and saw the other bird was still present. But it was no longer circling

the building. It was coming in for a swoop.

And it lifted Zach off his feet and began carrying him. But it seemed that this bird's direction was different. It began circling the building again.

Zach turned his head back as far as he could to see the small creature that was strong enough to carry him by his bare shoulders. But what he saw wasn't an eagle. It was a colorful little bird with a breast as orange as the sun and eyes as red as the thick flames that had been chasing him. A starling, perhaps.

He looked away, a bit puzzled by the idea that such a small bird was carrying him with ease.

He looked back up. But this time the starling was looking right back at him. Upon first glance, the creature had the typical features of any bird: feathers, a beak and eyes at the side of the head. But upon second glance, it was someone he knew.

The starling saw Zach's recognition. Just as there is a darkness beyond black, there is a smile without lips, and Zach saw the starling's beak curve into a grin.

Then the starling released its grip from Zach's shoulders.

But Zach didn't plummet...

HE DESCENDED.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - For those who have read any of C. W. Schultz's three novels, "Yeal", "The Pack" and most recently "Jill", two words that might come to mind are "dark" and "edgy". Is there a better fit for Sirens Call Publications? Aside from writing twisted, gut-wrenching novels, Schultz has experience writing commercials, plays and films; "Watch", a movie released in October 2012, was recognized as the First-Runner Up for Best Short Film at the Gig Harbor Film Festival. Most recently, Schultz has started writing a children's book that is planned to be an ongoing series—gee, what has the world come to!

The following links are my website, facebook, twitter and goodreads account (respectively):

www.cwschultz.com

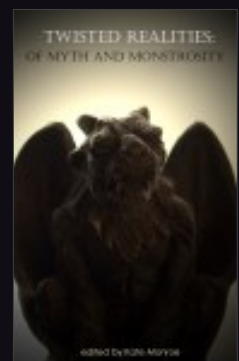
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Folks ask all the time how I came to be raising my brothers and sisters. I tell them that my Mama and Daddy, they just run off. Guess they tired of having us kids. I tell folks that. It's much easier than the truth of things.

We was poor back then. We still poor right now, but we was piss poor then. My brothers and sisters, we ate oatmeal from the same bowl. Notice I didn't say shared 'cause when it come to five hungry children, well, five hungry children they don't share. Five hungry children bite and scratch when food comes near. Mama, she gave up getting between us early on, on account that we needed to learn to fend for ourselves. I ain't raising no babies, Mama would say, even if we was only babies in our own right. My brothers and sisters and me, make no mistake, we all loved the other, but we learned right quick to eat that oatmeal the second Mama ladled it into the bowl.

Now Daddy, he be out working all day long. Sometime I hear him rustling around when the sun still down and then the whoosh of the front door as he left. If he was lucky, he'd come home just in time for dinner, all us still round the table. We ate that oatmeal for dinner, too. That's the only time we did share, 'cause Mama always ate first. Daddy too, if he was home in time. He'd scoop it right up from that bowl, right up onto his plate with those black hands of his. Daddy scrubbed his hands all the time with that bristle brush atop the slop sink, but Mama said when you work so hard sometime the dirt, it just curl up inside your skin.

Daddy worked real hard, I know that. He was never no lazy man. Sometime when you work construction, the money, well it just ain't there to be found, I remember Daddy saying. "Ain't no money to be found," he'd tell Mama and me and my brothers and sisters as we ate our oatmeal. "Still ain't no reason for me to ever stop looking." I was always proud of my Daddy. Proud of him and his black hands.

I eventually learnt that being hungry and poor does funny things to grownups. Us kids, we made do, mostly 'cause we didn't know any better. Us kids, we forgot we was poor until oatmeal time rolled round, mostly. After awhile Mama and Daddy though, they started grumbling under their breath about it. Time went by, their talking got louder and louder. Sometime us kids was sleeping, but other times, Mama and Daddy kept us up at night bickering about it. All that shouting. Cabinet banging, too.

Mama, she got real quiet round Daddy when we was all together. She got jittery-like. That made me nervous. And Daddy, we noticed the change come down over his face. He started coming home earlier and earlier every day. His hands not so black any more. Heard him whispering to Mama how the construction was nearly dried up. When Mama told him forceful like that he's got to look harder for the money, he turned around, face all swollen and red like he just got himself stung by a bee.

I remember real clear the time Daddy told me he was gonna rob the Tooth Fairy.

I was hanging laundry on the line for Mama. Daddy come around the corner of the house, wringing his hands worse than Mama wringing the washcloths. He called my name. When I see how wild his face looked, I nearly spilled my clothespin bucket. "How long that front tooth of yours been loose, girl?" Daddy asked me, voice all strangled like.

"Week or two," I say.

"Should fall out soon then. Real soon. Don't you think?"

"Yes, sir. I reckon it should."

He nodded, but it wasn't a nod like a man agreeing to something. Daddy nodded like he was sentenced to death. I ain't never been so scared in all my life. "Good," he said, but he ain't talking to me no more, he's talking to himself. "Good, 'cause that tooth meant to fall any day now. Maybe any minute. I'll be ready. Sure as shit, I'll be ready." My Daddy, he realized he never used cuss words in front of us kids, and it snapped him back to the here and now. "Listen, honeysuckle," he said, 'cause that's what he

called me, honeysuckle. "Daddy found a way to make money. I ain't proud 'bout it, but it's a way. Now you keep this secret from your Mama, and brothers and sisters too, you hear? I'm gonna take the money from the Tooth Fairy when it come for your tooth, you understand? Don't look scared now, girl. You know Daddy ain't never find no reason to stop looking for the money. Well, I been looking, and I been thinking, and I found us something real good."

"Stealing ain't never good. You taught us that, Daddy," I said, close to tears.

Daddy brings his face real close to mine, and my tummy hurt when I realize I don't know this man no more. "That's right, honeysuckle. But I know that Tooth Fairy gonna have more than enough of what we need."

I slept with my hands stuffed in my mouth, terrified about that tooth falling out of my head, pressing just as strong as I could press to keep it up inside my gums. I remember waking that morning, waking with my arms down along my sides. I scraped my tongue all around inside my mouth 'till I felt that horrible hole where that tooth should have been.

Daddy stood, just waiting there in the doorway, body all slumped like the air'd been sucked from his chest. His eyes was wilder than any animal I'd ever seen. He brung a hand to his lips and shushed me real gentle like. Leaving me trying to decide what terrified me more...the fact that the black was gone from his hands, or that he was rolling my tooth between his fingers.

"Don't go waking your brothers and sisters now," he says to me, 'cause we all crammed into the same room, our mattresses squeezed up one against the other. "I'm gonna lay this tooth 'neath your pillow tonight, honeysuckle, and come the morn I wager we'll be set just a little bit better." And with that, he just slipped away like a ghost in the stories me and my brothers and sisters scare each other with at night.

I did as Daddy said; I didn't say nothing to nobody. Didn't feel much like eating oatmeal that day either. I guess it was 'cause of keeping that hole in my mouth a secret.

Mama tucked us all in that night, and Daddy came in after. He kissed me last. I wrapped my arms round him like he was the teddy bear I wished he and Mama could buy me. His lips were tender on my cheek. Then I felt him fumbling under my pillow. He pulled away, and I wish I could of said Daddy don't do it, Daddy there's got to be better way! But he swore me to a secret, and I ain't never disobeyed my Daddy. It was late by the time I fell asleep, that tooth beneath my pillow giving me dreams something wicked.

I'm still not sure what time it was when that window started sliding upward. Mama kept it locked come autumn, but the draft still found its way in and the nip, it always got right down to your bones. But somehow that night, that window come unlocked and sliding upward. Sure enough, the wind start moaning through the room. I squeezed my eyes real tight and did my best to make-believe I was sleeping. The window, it just keep creaking open. I started praying to the baby Jesus that the wind howling through our room was the worst thing I'd hear. But it wasn't.

I heard *it*. It was a whole lot raspier than my brothers' and sister's breathing. Real harsh, like nails dragged across shingles. I straight near piddled my panties when something meaty dragged itself over the windowsill. I sensed something hovering over me, its shadow darker than the dark of my closed eyes. It snorted, its stinky breath wetting my cheek. Next thing I know, my pillow done lifted straight from the bed, then settled down again. Coins start rattling in my ear.

Our bedroom door suddenly banged open, and I heard a big tussle. Groans and grunts and screaming... god-awful screaming. Then a shotgun blast. Something splattered all over my face. When I opened my eyes, Mama was sliding down the wall, but she ain't got a head no more. And my Daddy, he

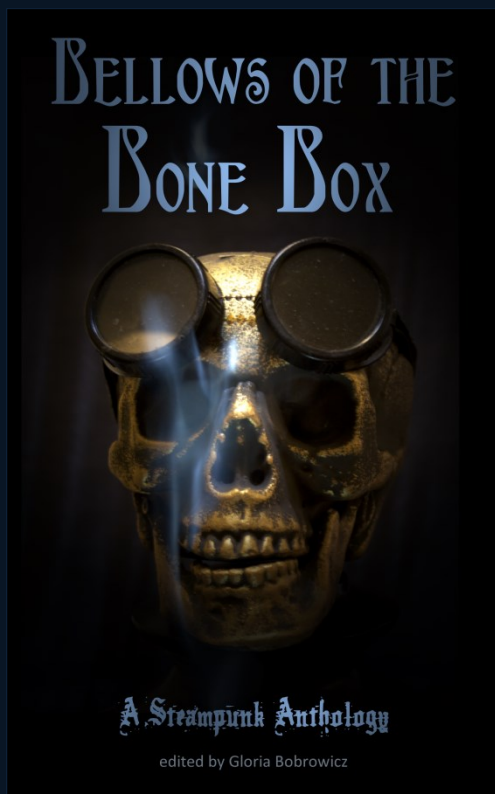
be choking on a knife stuck straight through his throat. I grabbed my brothers and sisters and dragged them half-asleep from the room quick as I could. We ain't never slept back in there again.

Since then, I ain't never had the chance to stop looking for the money. My hands are black now, just like Daddy's used to be. And those folks, they ask all the time how I came to be raising my brothers and sisters. No one's gonna believe the truth. The truth of how my Mama and Daddy really done killed each other. The truth of how I saw the Tooth Fairy leaving through the window. Crooked finger at its yellowy lips, shushing me real gentle into yet another secret. I don't tell no secrets, never have, never will.

We still eat that oatmeal. Got to—especially since I used Daddy's old pliers to pull out every last one of our teeth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Joseph A. Pinto is the horror author of two published books and numerous short stories; his most recent works can be found at Sirens Call Publications and Cruentus Libri Press. He is a member of the Horror Writers of America as well the founder of Pen of the Damned, a collective of angst and horror driven writers. Indulge in his unique voice on his personal blog josephpinto.wordpress.com and penofthedamned.com. You can follow him on Twitter @JosephAPinto. Joseph hails from New Jersey where he lives with his wife and young daughter.

Bellows of the Bone Box



Featuring 12 stories of
Steampunk Horror from
Brad Bass, Paul Boulet,
Laura Brown, Vivian
Caethe, Alex Chase,
Megan Dorei, O.M. Grey,
Tarl Hoch, Gavin Ireland,
Kirk Jones, Kate Monroe
and Christofer Nigro

Who are you, Ruth?

I saw you walk by my house
every evening,
stoop-shouldered and weary,
the problems of Job
crushing your hips,
grinding your bones to dust
underneath your fallow skin.

Where did you come from, Ruth?

One day there you were,
a ghostly figure
pushing her soul
to continue up the hill
past the staring eyes
through the restive neighborhoods
to your treasure
waiting for you
at the end of your
daily journey.

Where are you going, Ruth?

I followed you one day,
my curiosity peaked
and I needed to know
where you disappeared to
around the corner,
what void did you fill
with your presence?

What are you, Ruth?

I found the box
at the rear of the alley
and your clothes
on the ground around it.
I shouldn't have put
my hand inside
so nonchalantly
but I wasn't expecting
the teeth,
so many,
so sharp,

they pulled the skin
from my arm
like dressing a deer.
When I looked into the box
the swirling
black oil
snapped at me
and I saw you
swimming in the brine,
your face beatific,
but when I tried
to speak
you pulled me in.

Save me, Ruth.

I am blind
and hear only an
indistinct clicking,
the viscous liquid
is slowly consuming me,
snips and pricks
releasing my flesh and muscle
to float in the
crude, desiccating oil.
The pain is overwhelming,
I just want it to stop,
please, Ruth,
make the teeth stop.
Please, Ruth,
make the teeth stop.

Where have you led me, Ruth?

I can't feel your presence
any longer.
There was a shift,
the oil moaned
and you were gone.
Ruth, where have you led me?
When will the cutting stop?
Where are you wandering to now?
Ruth?
Who are you?
Make it stop.
Please.

She Took My Bones

Christopher Hivner

She took the bones
from my arms
with tin snips
and a crowbar,
whiskey to
heighten her lust
but none
to numb
my pain.

She stood
in front of me
the blood
coating her face
like a child
putting on make-up
for the first time,
my skinless arms
in her grasp.

"Tell me you love me"
she whispered
while using
the bones of my hand
to jerk me off
and slicing
through my balls
with the snips.

Snorting blood
through my eyes
I growl
"You know I love you, baby"
and before
I pass out,
"but fuck you
and your foreplay."

For Jill

Christopher Hivner

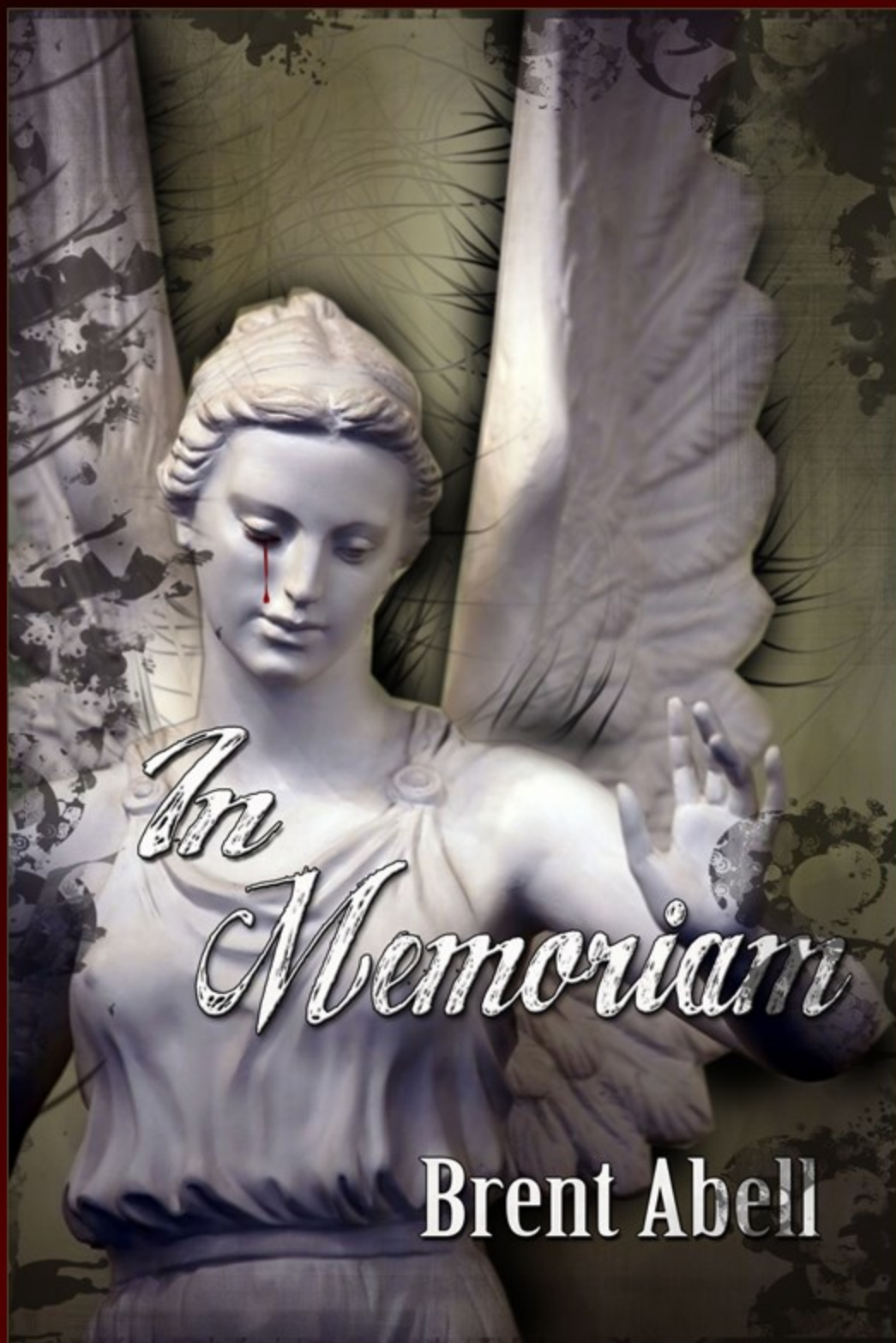
I will
destroy the sun
so we can swim
in the luxurious darkness.

I will
pull the sword
from the stone
to slaughter
all her other lovers.
For her I will
skin myself
to make a coat
to keep her warm.
When she begs for food
I will feed her
my lying tongue
and the beautiful day
when she births our child
I will bleed myself
to nurse the baby,
my tiny image
of Jill
who I will
no longer need.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Christopher Hivner lives in Pennsylvania, usually writing while listening to music and enjoying an occasional cigar outside on a star-filled night. He has recently been published in eFantasy, Dark Moon Digest and Fantastic Horror. A book of short stories, "The Spaces between Your Screams" was published in 2008.

<http://www.chrishivner.com/>
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twitter: @your_screams

"Abell should feel proud that he's mixed such painful emotion so artfully into true unabashed horror." ~ Amazon Reviewer



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Man's Best Friend *Chad P. Brown*

Henry stepped onto the front porch, holding the screen door open. He whistled and gave his keys a slight jingle. A German Shepherd strolled outside and glanced up at him.

"That time of the month again, George. You ready to head into town?"

George barked twice and trotted over to the rusted Chevy pickup parked in its customary spot of yellowish-brown grass, a tell-tale sign of how often it was moved.

Henry opened the driver's side door, allowing George to hop in. After a few cranks of the key, the truck finally turned over and they began the ten mile drive into town.

"What do you think, George?" he asked once they were on the road. "Is today going to be the day?"

George shot him an inquisitive look, cocking his head to the side. Henry laughed and scratched the dog behind the ears.

"It's coming one day. Mark my words, buddy."

Ever since Henry had seen *Night of the Living Dead*, he'd been convinced the zombie apocalypse would come one day. It might not happen like it did in the countless movies and books that sprouted up once zombies became such cultural icons, their putrefying pictures plastered on everything from bumper stickers to tee shirts to coffee mugs.

But it was sure as hell going to happen. Henry's gut told him it would. He'd holed up with George (named after the king of zombie cinema, of course) in his cabin on the mountain, vowing to never step foot in town except for his monthly trips to get food and supplies.

For ten years, Henry had kept his vow, positive the zombie apocalypse would one day hit with all the flair and severity of a Biblical plague.

When Henry reached town, he headed over to Miller's Meat Market, one of his main stops. Along the way, he didn't see any cars passing by, no one walking up and down the sidewalk, no children playing in the park - not even a stray cat rummaging in a garbage can.

Henry pulled up in front of Miller's Meat Market and killed the engine. He remained planted on the cracked vinyl seat, peering up and down the empty street as a growing sense of unease churned in the pit of his stomach.

Beside him, George whimpered, sensing it too. Henry placed a reassuring hand on the dog's head, his truest friend for so many years.

"Easy, boy. I won't let 'em get you."

Henry opened the truck door, the rusty hinges squealing across the dead silence. He winced, glancing around to make sure he hadn't drawn any unwanted attention. He stepped out onto the street and reached behind the front seat, pulling out one of the guns he always brought with him on his monthly trips into town.

"Come on, George," he said, making sure the rifle was loaded. "Let's see what the hell's going on."

George obediently hopped out of the truck and joined his master on the deserted street. Henry squinted against the afternoon sunlight, glancing into the front window of Miller's Meat Market. The store was empty. He stepped onto the curb and crept up to the entrance.

As soon as Henry opened the door, the rancid odor of rotting meat assaulted his nostrils. He gagged once and slammed the door shut. Looking down, he discovered George had already retreated a safer distance back from the foul stench.

"Guess things have been messed up here longer than I thought." Henry joined George on the street. "That meats gotta been bad for at least three weeks."

George licked his muzzle. Henry wasn't sure if the dog was agreeing or indicating he was hungry.

Henry hunkered down, tucking the rifle under his arm and pulling out a pouch of chewing tobacco. As he shoved a chew of the tobacco into his mouth, he chewed over the situation.

Damned if he hadn't been right. The zombie apocalypse had hit. Now, he needed to find out if any of the undead were still lurking around town. He whistled for George to follow and headed up the street, deciding to fan out from the center of town

It was a good fifteen minutes before he found one.

The zombie shambled out of the modest library on Main Street. From what Henry could tell, it was the old librarian herself, Mrs. Daniels.

For so long, he'd been expecting the zombie apocalypse, but nothing had prepared him for coming face to face with a real zombie.

The stench hit him first.

It was the most foul, putrid, rancid odor Henry had ever smelled, making the rotting meat back at Miller's Meat Market seem like a field of daisies.

Her eyes were bloodshot and wild looking, and her snarling, gnashing jaws reminded Henry of a rabid dog. Her skin was a ghastly pallor with sporadic splotches of decaying flesh. A few open wounds oozed a disgusting mixture of blood and some black, sticky substance.

When the zombie spotted Henry, an incessant moaning arose as she shuffled towards him with slow but determined steps.

George growled, flashing his sharp teeth.

"Easy, boy." Henry raised the rifle and took aim. "I've got this."

The bullet blasted through the zombie's head. Henry grinned from ear to ear, proud of his first zombie kill.

But his smile faded when he remembered how his first grade class had gone to the library and a much younger Mrs. Daniels had read a story to them. Henry wasn't sure but he thought it had been *Where the Wild Things Are*.

He shook his head, clearing his mind so he could focus on the task at hand.

Two hours later, Henry stood at the intersection of Fifth and Jefferson. He'd made his way through every building and home along the way. He didn't know how many of the undead he'd killed but he'd gone through all the ammunition for his rifle and was now using his shotgun. Even George had done his part, holding the zombies at bay until Henry could get to them or leading them right into the waiting barrel of his rifle.

Only one thing bothered Henry. With each undead he killed, a memory of their pre-zombie existence barged into his mind.

Most of the memories were just flashes of passing someone on the street or nodding hello to them in a store. He hadn't, after all, been the town's social butterfly.

Still, other memories were more intimate. Mrs. Archer, his favorite teacher in seventh grade. Bud Lewis, the bartender at the Lighthouse where he'd spent many weekends in his early twenties. Misty Watson, the first girl he'd kissed when he was in fifth grade.

He'd tried to fight off the memories but it hadn't done any good. They'd bullied their way into his brain, causing him to hesitate before finally pulling the trigger.

Henry turned the corner and headed up Jefferson, George close on his heels. He spotted Officer Tom Meeks shambling towards him. Henry came to a sudden halt, sure the cop was about to throw the cuffs on him and haul him off to jail for running rampant all over town and blowing everyone away.

He chuckled. "Thought I was gonna get busted there for a minute, George."

George yawned. Evidently, the day's activities were starting to take their toll on the aging dog. But he'd made Henry proud, valiantly standing by his master's side as they cleaned up the town.

Henry raised the shotgun and waited for Officer Meeks to get close enough for a fatal shot. When the zombie was ten feet away, he squeezed the trigger but the gun jammed. He worked the action, trying to eject the shell. It was no use.

Henry flipped the shotgun around and slammed the stock into the zombie's forehead, adding another whack for good measure.

Dazed, the undead cop stumbled back a few steps before dropping to the ground.

Henry sprinted over to his pickup truck parked in the middle of the intersection. He tossed the useless shotgun into the back and reached inside, grabbing his .38 revolver. He flipped open the cylinder to ensure it was loaded and snapped it shut. Spinning around, he aimed down the sights at the zombie.

"George, no!"

But it was too late. The German Shepherd had already leapt through the air at the zombie, determined to protect his master. The slow-moving zombie managed to catch the dog in mid-air and clutched him around the middle.

George snarled, snapped, and bit. But the zombie was oblivious to the chunks the dog tore out of his rotting flesh. The zombie lifted George up and ripped into the canine's stomach with his rotting teeth.

Henry fired the .38, the bullet hitting the zombie dead-on in the forehead. The zombie fell backwards, George's limp body thumping to the ground. Henry raced over to his best friend. He fell down to his knees in front of the dog, brushing his hand through the black and brown fur.

George whimpered in between heavy pants as he fought to breathe. Henry inspected the dog's stomach. Blood poured out of the visceral wound, pooling on the sidewalk.

Henry stood up and wiped the tears from his eyes. He glanced back and forth from the dog to the .38 in his hand, his eyes narrowing with determination.

"I gotta do it, George." Henry aimed the gun with an unsteady hand. "If I don't, you'll come back as one of those bastards."

George gave a faint, frail woof.

Henry interpreted it as the dog telling him to go ahead and do what he needed to do. He pulled the hammer back on the .38 and inched his finger towards the trigger. The slight tremble in his hand exploded into a jack-hammering shake. Tears stung his eyes and blurred his vision.

He couldn't do it. Even though he knew the possible consequences, he couldn't bring himself to shoot George, his constant companion and best friend for the past ten years.

Henry thought back to the day when he'd got George. He'd been running all over town buying the necessary food and supplies for his first month's stay in his cabin while he waited for the zombie apocalypse.

He was headed out of town, the bed of his pickup packed full with bags, and was stopped at a red light. Waiting for the light to turn green (the notorious long light at the busiest intersection in town), he'd turned his head to the left and spotted the front display window of Lori's Pet Shop. Six puppies were in the window, five of them frolicking rambunctiously with one another while one sat to the side, alone and with its head down.

The light had changed and the person behind him had laid on his horn. Henry had glanced in his rear view mirror to discover Stan Peters, the most hateful cuss in town, yelling for him to go.

Henry had thrown his arm out the window and flipped him off. Before accelerating through the green light, he'd thrown one last glimpse at the store window.

Although Henry doubted anyone would have ever believed him, he locked eyes with the puppy. When they did, the puppy took frantic leaps at the window in an effort to get to him.

Henry had made a sharp left (almost swiping into an oncoming car), parked in a NO PARKING spot, and marched straight into Lori's Pet Shop and bought that dog.

Looking into those same eyes right now, Henry realized he couldn't kill George. He wasn't even sure animals could turn into zombies. They hadn't come across any undead animals during the past two hours. So maybe George would be alright.

Dead but alright.

He dropped down to one knee and kissed the dog's head. "Goodbye, buddy."

Henry trotted over to his pickup truck, hopped in, and squealed down the street to finish cleaning up the town.

Henry's extermination of the undead infesting the town ended about three hours later.

He was tired, hungry, and had gone through damn near every box of ammo he owned. He planned on heading back to his cabin and grabbing something to eat. After that, he wasn't sure. He wasn't used to making plans without George by his side.

The trip to his cabin was a long one, taking him along a winding road. Quite a few times, he'd almost run George and himself off the road by not paying attention.

Out of habit, he leaned over to pat George on the head only to freeze in mid-reach when he remembered the dog was dead.

He clutched the steering wheel, trying to fight back the tears. But his grief was relentless, refusing to give even the slightest respite. Tears streamed down his eyes, quickly turning into uncontrollable sobbing as self-blame latched on.

It was his fault. He should've been looking out for George. He should've never left him alone with that damn zombie. Never, ever, ever.

Henry banged his head against the steering wheel in frustration, finding solace in the pain.

He glanced back up and slammed on the brakes. Too late, the pickup collided into the tree with a cacophony of broken glass and buckling metal, hurling Henry's face into the windshield.

Again, he found solace in the pain.

He felt a warm trickle streaming down his head as pinpoints of light flashed in front of his eyes. He shook his head and tried to focus his eyes. But his vision was as blurred and fragmented as the shattered windshield.

He reached over and yanked on the door handle, somehow managing to shove the door open. He slung his legs out and braced himself, his right hand on the steering wheel and his left on the seat.

With half-closed eyes and a spinning head, he pushed himself out of the truck. He stood on wobbly legs, the whirling in his head accelerating into a cyclone.

Two seconds later, everything went black and he collapsed to the ground.

Henry's mind was spinning with confusion. Slowly, it came back to him. He'd crashed into a tree. His immediate concern was whether or not George had survived the wreck.

The reality slammed into him harder than his truck had collided with the tree. George was dead, lying on the sidewalk back in town, killed by a zombie.

He squeezed his eyes shut, refusing to let the tears surface again. Right now, he needed to tend to his physical wounds. There would be more than enough time later for the emotional ones.

As he fought to regain his composure, he felt something wet slide across his cheek, familiar yet revolting. He forced his eyes open.

When George's snarling, gnashing jaws came into focus, Henry screamed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Chad P. Brown was born in Huntington, WV. Once he outgrew his childhood fears of haunted houses, clowns, and toy monkeys with cymbals (although the monkeys still creep him out a little bit), he discovered a dark love for writing. He is an Affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association and holds a Master's in Latin from Marshall University. He has appeared in the anthologies *SPIDERS*, *Gothic Blue Book Vol. 2 - Revenge Edition*, and *Fifty Shades of Decay*. His other works include *The Jack-in-the-box*, *Messiah of the Zombie Apocalypse*, and the recently released *The Pumpkin House*.

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Failed Experiment *Blaze McRob*

Stagnant air. The same as last night and the night before. It never fucking changes.

I attempt to work out of the restraining straps to no avail. Three of them for each limb. Cowards. They're taking no chances with me.

I'm totally naked. That means only one thing: Dr. Brown is my companion for the evening. I know what she wants. Okay, I don't object to that part of what she does, but the rest...

The buzz of the machines along the far wall angers me as they always do. Pulling harder against the straps, I feel them start to weaken, but they don't break. Damn!

Sweat flows from every pore of my body, the salt reaching into the sores created from my attempts to break through the straps. Roaring out from the pain, and filled with the anger inside me, I jerk over and over again, determined to break free.

You can do it, Charlie! I know you can.

Shit! Down the hallway they come: footsteps; tiny ones; how I hate the sound of them. That diminutive bitch's cocky attitude grates on me. Just who does she think she is? And, of course, there are always her escorts. The guards are always present. Only when she extracts her pleasure from me do they leave the room.

"Charles," she says, as she walks up to me, "how are you tonight? Not too angry, I hope. You know we have ways to calm you down."

Looking her straight in the eyes, I say, "I would be a lot calmer with some clothing on and the lights off, bitch. You know I prefer the dark."

Bristling from my verbal assault, she reaches inside her lab jacket and pulls out a huge syringe. "I would hate to use this now, Charles. There are parts of you that are quite appealing when your anger pushes you to reach plateaus normal men can never even dream about. I know you can control your anger. You have the power; you have since the beginning. You see, we only want you to achieve your full potential."

My thoughts go back to 'Nam, escaping from that camp hidden in the highlands, running in bare feet for two days and nights, grabbing water from off the foliage as I ran, not wanting to waste any time. How was I to know the leaves were dripping with Agent Orange as well as water?

"Your mind is drifting back to the beginning again, isn't it, Charles? Don't dwell on what happened. You were lucky. Yes, the deformities came, but something inside you is stronger than the defoliant. Your transformations, as well as your rage, were unlike those of anyone else. The others died. You just get stronger."

I spit in her face. "All you people want is a super soldier; one who can't be killed; one who takes the place of many. You're barking up the wrong tree."

She wipes her face and slaps me as hard as she can. Nice try, but no banana. No way will that do anything to me. Turning to the guards, she hollers, "Get out of here! I have something special planned for Charles."

"But..."

"No buts. Do as I say!"

They leave and the good doctor comes over to me, that wicked smile working across her face. "You're much more agitated than normal, Charles. I aim to take advantage of that tonight before we do the rest of your tests."

She removes her clothing and slides on top of me, allowing her already present moistness to arouse me. Once I am completely ready to drive deep into her, she takes her hand and guides me in."

"Yes, Charles, I was right. You are much larger tonight. Give me all you have. Do it! Show me what kind of a man you really are."

Even though she can not possibly take all I have to offer her, she continues to ride me, attempting to get all of me inside her. "Fuck me good, Charles! Don't stop!"

Humping for all she's worth, she shouts out, "Fuck me harder, you stuttering bastard! Harder!"

Twenty something years of humiliation rip through me, enraging me to the point I need to stop the present taunting. How dare she?!

My body explodes with an anger I don't wish to control any longer. Emitting a deep growl, I stare her deep in the eyes. "Stuttering bastard, huh?! Let's see how well you talk in a few seconds."

She tries to escape, but it doesn't come to pass. My hands push out and tear the straps loose and I hold her close to me, as my arms pulse with new found strength and size. My manhood grows even larger and I shove it in to the hilt, tearing her insides apart. Blood flows over me as the pain is etched on her face.

Even as the agony is running rampant over her, my entire body is wracked as well. My shoulder blades push through my back as my body begs to accommodate what is happening to me. I have no need to look into a mirror to know my face is a freakish display of bulbous deformity and that my limbs will soon be monstrosities unlike those of anyone else.

A few more seconds, and it is all over for her. An enormous shout leaps out at her last gasp of breath, and the guards come running in. I leap up and toss the doctor at one of them, knocking him down as I run for the second one. My hideous persona startles him long enough to where he's not able to reach his gun, and I tear his head completely off, the blood splattering everywhere.

The second guard has now extricated himself from the deceased doctor and draws his weapon, but I knock it out of his hand. He leaps for it, but I catch him in mid jump with my left foot hitting him square in the gut. He folds immediately, lying on the ground, nasty gurgling sounds coming from a throat trying to suck some air upwards. One stomp down from me and that throat is crushed.

I run down the hallway as the alarms sound, knowing I'll beat anyone who is stupid enough to come after me to the door. Freedom! I can taste it, smell it, feel it. There is no controlling my anger until I am free.

Their scent is carried on the breeze. It suffocates me. Animals. They are nothing but beasts.

Sitting in the protective enclave of thick pine branches, the night conceals me. There is no moon tonight, and the gentle lapping of waves from Klamath Lake upon the narrow beach instills calm in everything around ever vigilant self.

Yet, their presence is known to me. They attempt to approach without making a sound, but their efforts fall short. They are no match for me. My senses tingle at their controlled pace, the use of night goggles I only wished I could have had in 'Nam, and the Geiger counter like devices they carry. My body has been implanted with some kind of device that gives off emissions which these dastardly machines pick up on.

Heh, heh. Sometimes things don't work out the way they are planned.

After 'Nam, I came here: Kingsley Field. Something was wrong. I knew it, but I didn't know what. There were doctors and more doctors. And then, there was isolation. I would escape, only to be re-captured. But one day I escaped for an extended period of time. The Klamath Indians took me in. Sure, they knew something was wrong with me, but it didn't matter to them.

I even married one of them. Little Trout and I were very happy together. She was very pregnant when the people from the base found us, and I fought them off long enough for my people to escape.

So I sit in the tree, my anger boiling over, changing me to what I don't wish to be. The past reminds me of my future. I can control it now. Only, I don't wish to.

"He's here," one of the soldiers says. "My chip detector is going nuts!"

Yes, I'm here all right, holed up in a tree like a fucking coon. Damn! My transformation is taking too long. I need to be ready for them. I can't be brought back to that hell hole again!

The tree is surrounded, and all the detectors are going crazy. They look up into the branches, not noticing the blood at the foot of it.

"Herb! You and Joe load your rifles with the tranquilizer darts. We'll try to capture him alive, but I have no intention of dying because of this bastard. I don't care how important he is. The rest of us will be ready with full clips."

"Yes, sir, Captain."

Now the waiting begins. I've gone through this before. But this time things are different.

The wind from off the lake takes a decided upturn in speed and creates an updraft, starting at the men's ankles and slowly winding around them until the tops of their heads are touched by the phenomenon, engulfing their entire bodies in a cocoon of cold. Shivering from fear as much as the temperature drop, they barely manage to load the clips in to their rifles.

Mists roll in, cavorting between the trees lining the lake, playing hide and seek with the men too dumbstruck by it all to even attempt to ascertain what is going on. The wispy entities take on a solid persona, resembling the Native Americans from years ago, resplendent in the garb of the Klamath Indians, a tribe that Kit Carson called the fiercest of all those Indian tribes he had ever seen.

Crossing their hands over their chests, they stare at the soldiers, instilling fear in them like they have never experienced before. These were battle scarred veterans, but what faced them now was surreal horror in the visage of something that just couldn't be. The modern day Indians around here dressed like the ranchers in the area. Hell! They were ranchers. But... but these were no ranchers.

Sensing they were going to be attacked, the soldiers aimed their weapons at the stoic Indians. But before anything could be done one way or the other, their targets were gone.

"You guys are a little confused aren't you," I say, still morphing into my new form.

They stare at me, not knowing where I came from. Knowing I have mere seconds before I am not able to speak anymore, I point to the blood on the ground and say, "I found the chip in my body and pulled it out.

"It hurt like hell, but the looks on your faces makes it all worthwhile."

The change is almost complete now. My extreme pain will be forgotten as I do what I must. Two dozen of them and only one of me, but I'm not a normal man. Their rifles come up as I charge. I am knocked around by the power of the bullets plowing into my body as I get to them and methodically mow them down. But... but I am losing a lot of blood. Even at my strongest, there are too many of them. M-16's with full clips are devastating.

Low, guttural sounds come up from behind me as I twist around on the ground. Wolves, easily fifty of them, advance, spittle dripping down from their mouths, their sharp, white teeth visible even in the dark. The fur on their backs roll upward from their tails to the base of their skulls, looking like a field of wheat blowing in the wind.

Yellow eyes are everywhere as the pack tear into the soldiers. Twenty four men lie on the ground, either dead or doing the twitching that's called the dance of death.

I rise halfway from the ground to thank my fellow warriors, but I don't make it. I black out before I hit the ground...

Sunlight plays across my forehead and I slither to a dark corner of the room. She joins me, carrying two pillows and a blanket. Still shaking from the ordeal, I gently take them from her. She wraps the

blanket around my tortured frame and lies down next to me. When I wake, it is evening. The moons beams pour through the windows. Wow! I have been here a month.

Little Trout is still by my side, gently stroking my shoulders. I turn and kiss her on her forehead. "I've missed you, you know," I say.

"I know, my love. I have missed you too."

There is a knocking on the door. I sniff the air and smile. "Come in Deep Waters. Let me see you once again, my Father."

I rise and we hug. The old man and I are truly father and son, even though he is Little Trout's father.

"There is someone you need to see," he says.

He motions to the door. "Come here, little one."

The little boy walks confidently across the floor. It's like I'm looking in a mirror, only a younger one. His skin is darker than mine, but his face... his face mirrors mine.

"Daddy!" he shouts. "Daddy!"

I pick him up and we whirl around. My joy is his joy and his is mine. Little Trout and Deep Waters join in on the merriment.

But it is to be short lived. The mists roll in through the open doors and their forms change to those of the ancient ones. Within minutes, the yellow eyes will be ready to do what must be done.

My transformation starts taking place, the excitement of the upcoming battle helping to overcome the pain. I have gotten to see my family. No matter what happens, my prayers have been answered.

Roaring as we charge the invaders, the Chief to be is by my side, miraculously almost as large as I am.

"Let's kick ass, Dad!" my little Charlie shouts.

It's great to be home again...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Blaze McRob has penned many titles under different names. It is time for him to come out and play as Blaze. In addition to inclusions in numerous anthologies, he has written many novels, short stories, flash fiction pieces, and even poetry. Most of his offerings are Dark. However dark they might be, there is always an underlying message contained within. Join him as he explores the Dark side. You know you want to.

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Precautions *Jay Wilburn*

Gloria smoothed down the front of her plastic suit. She drew on the gloves and flexed her fingers. She pulled up the hood and cowed it around her face. She took two final breaths of desert air before she pulled on the respirator filter and the goggles.

The heat laid over her like a blanket. Sweat slicked under her hair and ran over her skin under her clothes encased in the plastic. She wanted to tear herself out of the suit, but they were her own procedures after all.

Gloria entered the site and passed under the white light filtered through the flat roof of the canopy. The rutted ground was divided into a tight grid by the taut string and spikes driven deep into the hard-packed sand. Students and paid workers dusted away with brushes and fished through pans.

There were a series of grunts behind other filter masks to greet her as she passed. A few of the digs had cut deep into the ground below particular squares in the grids. Others were yet untouched.

Dr. Brachard knelt shoulder deep in his square. Dust puffed up past his face as he used the air bulb to clear dirt away from the bones. Gloria leaned over his space from the walkway. Dust and grit sprayed up past his mask and rained against the plastic over her shoulder. He heard the noise of it and tilted his head enough to spy her through the leading edge of his goggles. He turned back and returned to brushing out the edges of the exposed bones with the fine, soft bristles of his brush.

His voice came muffled and harsh through the mask as it bobbed over his lips with every syllable. "Do you see it, Dr. Harm? You see the meaning of it, yes."

Gloria took a long, slow breath to calm herself. He worked for her. He drew salary from her grant at her pleasure and he damn well knew it. He should act like he knew it too as far as she was concerned.

She cleared her throat into her respirator before answering him. "Of course, Ronald. I see it. I saw it before I landed this grant or we wouldn't be here at all. Now would we?"

"No, Dr. Harm, we certainly would not."

He used the bulb to spray a tiny storm of grit up past his protective gear. Gloria Harm stepped back to avoid the lash of sand up out of the pit.

I'm too hard on him. He is not just presumptuous. He is excited. One can not fault excitement and appreciation for a discovery of this magnitude. Excitement and gratitude are distant cousins to be sure. I chose him myself from the applicants of my colleagues. He did not stow away in my luggage. I must take the whole person. I knew what I was getting into after all.

She stepped back up as Dr. Ronald Brachard ran the magnifier over the surface of the bone and fragments. The image was more distorted from her distance and angle, but she saw enough. He traced the surface multiple times nearly buzzing with the vibration of his enthusiasm.

"Brilliant. Magnificent. Gloria. Gloria. Just look at it."

She could not be certain if he used her name as a proper noun or as an exclamation. She ignored it and focused on the significant details of the examination.

The bone presented was abraded in at least three significant ways. There lay matching, parallel lines scoured over the surface down both slopes of the ridges of the bone exposed above the sand. The lines dug deep enough to be the work of a knife, but they were systematic, overlapping, and repeated. Teeth had macerated the bone again and again as to scour every bit of meat from the skeleton. The eater seemed to be gnawing his or her way to the marrow, but neglected to ever snap the bones to release it or suck it out.

The second abrasion appeared to be chipping as if bone struck bone. This seemed most odd since Dr. Brachard uncovered a complete skeleton. Such chipping action would have to occur after the skeleton was cleaned or once bone was exposed using another tool of equal hardness or another bone. Gloria baffled at the notion of bone weapons being used against downed skeletons or macerated creatures.

striking their exposed ribs against one another. The students discovered chips from the various skeletons scattered around the entire grid as if there were an explosion of bone shrapnel. The cataloging had been meticulous and Dr. Harm had fired multiple students before the seriousness of the detailed recordings sunk into the survivors.

The third abrasion came with an abnormal smoothing of the surviving bone and even some of the fragments. One might expect the blowing sand to smooth the artifacts, but this was something else entirely. The bone was rubbed down in spots from flesh. Living hands rubbed the bone in various spots before they were buried in the desert sands. This obsessive rubbing and smoothing became evident in signs of fingerprints embedded in the surfaces while other parts of the bone remained untouched. Dr. Harm was at a loss to explain the ritual that would account for what seemed like a burial rite performed on skeletons and fragments that themselves seemed otherwise discarded by the evidence in the site.

Gloria left Dr. Brachard to awe over his find as she walked to the cataloging trays. Students photographed and denoted the grid details. The computers did much of the work, but they scrolled through the material and tagged similar fragments and pieces to create patterns between scattered pieces in the field.

“Be sure to archive every fragment. We need to trace them back to the source skeletons and bones in the debris field. This is the key to understanding what happened here.”

She became angry as she heard the students mumbling over her. More firings were in order.

She followed their line of sight back to the grid where Dr. Brachard had discarded his goggles and respirator. Dirt and grit flung into his exposed eyes. It blew back past his hair and gathered in the plastic hood hanging back over his neck off his head.

I’m not seeing this. This nonsense is not really happening on my dig with my grant. This is not real.

She walked toward him with shocking calm. Everyone stared through their gear.

Great. Now this is a power struggle and all the underlings are watching to see how I handle it. I brought this upon myself.

She stopped short and stared at Ronald as the walls below his square collapsed away from his frantic work. He had removed his gloves. He dug with his bare hands. He had scattered his precious skeleton around his own feet. Blood already welled up in the torn flesh of his fingers and under the split, caked nails.

Gloria whispered into her mask. “Something is amiss.”

Ronald sneezed twice and clawed at his own eyes until they smeared with blood and jelly from the torn whites. He shook his head from side to side and growled. He picked up one of the femur bones and drew in a deep breath with it under his nose. He opened his mouth and bit it once. He followed by gnawing the bone along the ridge down its length and up the other way along the other side of his mouth.

The students whispered in their masks behind Dr. Harm as she watched. She rubbed at her sweaty head through her plastic hood.

You can’t fault enthusiasm.

He held the bone in one hand rubbing the surface between his thumb and forefinger. He picked up the other pieces and clacked them against the femur bone that he cradled and rubbed. Each time he shook his head in dissatisfaction.

Gloria grabbed his shoulder. “Ronald, come with me so we can talk.”

He threw an elbow back connected with her chin and staggering her. The world faded and her legs became watery for a brief moment. Everyone under the canopy gasped, but no one moved.

Gloria clawed off her mask and goggles. She spit blood down into the sand and stared at it for a long

moment. She took long, slow breaths as she stared down at the bloody mud she had created.

Stay calm. We don't want to overreact. Everything will be just fine.

The students mumbled in their masks behind her and Gloria smiled. She walked over to one of the tool kits and withdrew a rock hammer. She approached Ronald again.

He found the bone he sought and struck them together with a satisfying, crisp sound that made him smile as he continued to rub.

Gloria drove the sharp tip of the hammer through the back of Ronald's skull. He did not react at first. She widened the hole with subsequent blows and he collapsed in his square.

The students and other paid staff began pushing one another as they fled through the screened entrances. A few of them lost their masks as the crowd pushed. They tried to hold their breath as long as they could.

Gloria ignored them and pulled Ronald's body out of the collapsed pit by his legs. She undressed him slowly.

"I'm sorry things did not work out, but your actions require that I release you from this dig."

She dug her fingers into his ribs until the flesh tore. The skin on her own fingers split as she clawed her way to the rib bones. She rubbed them slowly with the bloody tips of her fingers.

She leaned into the open space to run her teeth over the surface.

"Brilliant."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jay Wilburn lives with his wife and two sons in sunny, coastal South Carolina. He recently left teaching after 16 years to care for the health needs of his younger son and to pursue writing full time. He has published many speculative fiction stories including his first novel *Loose Ends* and a piece in *Best Horror of the Year* volume 5 with editor Ellen Datlow.

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Ghosts in the Field

Nina D'Arcangela

Everyone around here knows the story, hell; everyone has a different version to tell. They all want to add their own tragic bit, make it sound like it damn near happened to them. Well, I can tell you it didn't, because it happened to me. Yeah, I was one of those iron workers they're all so fond of spouting off about. Christ, it irritates the shit out of me when someone wants to tell me my own story. You wanna know what really happened? What the hell, I don't have anything better to do. I'll tell you how it was.

Gus was working the planks that day. Man, we all got nervous when Gus was on the planks. He was unpredictable; joking, not paying attention, smoking, dropping shit because he was a clumsy bastard. Funny, but clumsy. Anyway, Gus was on the planks, maybe 65-70 feet up, when all of a sudden, a guy yells out "Fire". You understand what that means? An iron worker on steel girders with nothing but planks of wood between him and the ground below shouting fire! Just about the last word any crew member wants to hear. For many, it was. We had plenty of planks up that day, big push to get the job done, maybe 30 guys working. Gus was smoking a stogie, he'd put it down on one of the planks, must have forgotten about it. The site, it went up in a flash – all that wood around. Fire, it travels quick. Lots of guys just jumped. I can still remember the screams.

There are times I sit staring into the field, hours pass, but there's nothing out there except those damn gnats. Other times, walking past, my eye catches the color of rust and I hear that old metal creaking.

Forgotten

Julianne Snow

I can still remember the feel of the wind that day as it whipped me across the face. The sky had turned a glorious shade of crimson an unspoken indicator it was quitting time when, from somewhere deep in the belly of a cloud, it lashed out and hit me. Like a slap across the face, reminiscent of the last one I got from Gwendolyn. Not that I hadn't deserved it; I had, but that's beside the point now. Nothing much matters now.

That night is a night I will always remember. We had been buffeted by the wind all day but working out on the steel, you got used to it. Fast. Heck, it was the heart of the depression and no one turned down a job that paid a decent wage. No one. There had been a few close calls; times when the gusts just caught you in the wrong part of the body. You'd be left teetering on the thin ten inches of steel wondering if you would regain balance. You never *tried* to regain it; that was a sure fire way to end up overcompensating then tumbling through the maze of steel to the concrete below. No, you held your breath and waited, hoping your body would right itself.

Panic was hard to avoid, but after a week on the beams, you stowed it quickly or else you'd never show up again. But the wind that day was evil. It knew we'd poured the concrete earlier and that it hadn't cured yet. While it wasn't a soupy mess, it could still swallow a man whole if he wasn't careful. When that wind hit me, it hit me hard. I held my breath and prayed. God wasn't answering that day, and down I went. Swallowed. Buried. Forgotten.

Roadkill *Christofer Nigro*

Ken Gallagher hated his job. Okay, granted many people do, but he felt that he deserved a greater than usual amount of sympathy over this fact. If janitors and cashiers feel their jobs are nothing to brag about, what can be said by those poor souls who work in Ken's vocation? He couldn't help thinking of how he felt every time the question of his employment was broached whenever he was out to dinner with a special woman he hoped to impress, let alone at the dinner table with her parents for the first time (the few times he managed to that far, that is).

"Well, um... I'm sort of a cleaner."

"Oohh... so you clean clothing?"

"Um, no... I'm more of a... street cleaner."

"Ooohhh... I had no idea they had people who wash the roads to keep them clean."

"Um, well, I don't exactly do that."

"Well, what do you mean by 'street cleaner,' Ken?"

"Well, I... clean up the carcasses of dead animals that get hit by vehicles and... stuff like that."

"Oh. Oh I see. Well, good... good. Heh. Anyway, it's getting kind of late now, and I have to go to work in the morning..."

Ken truly wished his peers could understand how much he dreaded those particular moments when 'the question' was asked. His co-workers and closest friends often tried to assuage his concerns by reminding him that cleaning up after roadkill is a necessary job even if not very glamorous, much like working for the sanitation department. He then had to remind them that what people may technically know about something and how they *feel* about it can be two entirely different things. He was woefully aware of how much intellectual reason and emotional sensibilities often worked in opposition to each other, and emotion tended to trump reason all too often.

Poor Ken.

Nevertheless, each night at 11:00 PM through the wee hours of the morning when it's still dark outside, Ken diligently started his job of removing once-living refuse off of the roads, making them clean for... well, the drivers, he supposed. He reminded himself that by doing his job, so many drivers were spared the stomach-wrenching sensation they would have felt when seeing the crushed body of a raccoon with its exposed internal organs resembling a mass of rotten fruit laying out of a dropped basket. The sanctity of these civilians' morning peace of mind and enjoyment of their breakfasts—and later, the enjoyment of their lunches and dinners—would be spared unwelcome intrusions by the grotesque images that would be locked into their psyche for the rest of the day. They would be spared the perceived need to say aloud, "Goddammit, don't these animals *know* any better? I mean, I know they're just animals, but come on now, if they can understand a predator is dangerous, they can understand that goddamn *traffic* is dangerous!"

This evening appeared to be unsettling in a different way than usual, however. At first, it was just an inexplicable feeling of unease that Ken experienced as he drove into an area of lonely roads that aligned a wilderness region near the town of Lynchburg. As he proceeded to where various animal carcasses were reported to be laying in all their gory glory, he noticed what appeared to be a diffuse mist settling about. He had no idea what this could be, as the weather report didn't mention foggy conditions. He simply somehow knew that the uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach was connected to this mist in some way. Still, he had an unpleasant job to do that he wanted to get done as quickly as possible, so he ignored the unusual atmosphere surrounding him to start looking for dead animals.

As his company van approached a section of the road connected to a wooded area containing a plethora of wildlife that routinely met their maker here, his lights picked up the typically crushed form of a dead possum. He clearly recognized its freshly smashed intestines glistening wetly in the headlights. He pulled up to the side of the road several feet away, exited the van, donned his thick gloves, and gathered the equipment which his co-workers called their 'scooper gear.' As he walked to the area he had seen the possum cadaver moments ago, he noticed it was no longer there. He looked about incredulously, as he had

clearly seen it less than a minute previously, and there was no way even a coyote could snatch up the entire corpse so quickly. And coyotes tended not to abscond with such refuse, but to eat it while it laid there.

The feeling of strong unease like an ice cold hand squeezing his stomach then returned in force, followed a few seconds later by an intense hissing sound. Instinctually raising the shovel-like scooper in his hands, Ken looked about the darkened trees surrounding him. Never had he heard such a sound before, and it made his spine feel as if it was coated with Freon.

He quietly walked back into the van and forced himself to take off for the next reported cadaver location a mile down the road. He had no reason to stick around here any longer, and he wasn't paid enough to investigate missing animal remains. *Let whatever took the dead animal have it; it's not like a human corpse was stolen from the place where his life was crushed from him, right?*

As Ken approached the next reported area on his itinerary, his headlights revealed to him that this section of the road was made into a veritable outdoor abattoir by the traffic that day. There were at least five crushed animal bodies with tire tracks clearly marking where the speeding vehicles had cut their feral lives short. He recognized what was left of two rabbits, two raccoons, and even what looked like a red-tailed fox spattered on the road as if a mad vivisectionist had a field day with them. *Oh, geez, what a mess*, he couldn't help thinking to himself as he stopped near the slaughter zone and gathered his equipment. *Gotta love this job.*

He exited the van and expeditiously scooped up and properly collected the remains of a rabbit and a raccoon. Upon his completion of this unsavory task, he walked to recover the other three cadavers, only to find that they were no longer there. *All three of them were gone.* In fact, the displaced internal organs of each corpse were missing along with the still intact main bodies. The feeling of horrific unease returned to his stomach stronger than ever before, and he again noticed the misty 'texture' of the atmosphere in his vicinity.

"What the fuck is going on?" he queried aloud.

He carefully backed away from the section of the road where the three corpses had formerly laid spattered, his large scooper again raised, now intent upon making a report and taking the rest of the night off. It was then that he heard that hissing again. It vaguely sounded like the offensive vocalizations made by cats or raccoons when you antagonized them, only magnified tenfold and feeling as if it was literally detected by his entire body, not just his ears. The air itself seemed to vibrate strangely in concert with the hissing. It was as if the atmosphere about him acknowledged the sheer unnaturalness of the pulsations produced by that sound.

Ken began making a quick stride back to the van. However, the hissing sound was so pervasive that he couldn't discern precisely what direction it was coming from. Little was he aware that it was emanating from the very direction of the van itself.

No sooner had he approached within five feet of the vehicle then he saw the distorted form of... *something* silhouetted in the darkness with its outline highlighted by the misty vapor congealing in the air. It was slightly illuminated by the activated headlights of the vehicle, which revealed what appeared to be patches of grayish, bloody fur. Gagging involuntarily, his mind filled with crippling waves of unrelenting horror, Ken couldn't help but remain where he stood, too shocked to move, as the figure awkwardly ambled closer to him. As it did so, it soon stood fully revealed in the headlights in all its nightmarish majesty.

As best as Ken's terrified mind could tell, what now confronted him in a bipedal stance was what appeared to be a morass of parts from various disparate animal corpses mashed together to form a single polyglot creature. The dark mask-like fur surrounding the partially detached eyes appeared to have been acquired from a raccoon corpse. Its left front paw seemed to have been extricated from the broken leg of a coyote, whereas the right one was a bit too mutilated to make out properly—especially in Ken's state of mind at the time—but it seemed to be sufficiently smaller than the one on the left to surmise that it was taken from the corpse of an entirely different animal species. The torso and abdomen seemed to have been

gathered from what was left of a deer, a large buck whose intestines were still hanging and swaying back and forth from a huge rip in its gut; the shape of the tire tracks from a Mack truck were clearly embedded over the stomach and chest area.

It stood roughly five and a half feet tall on a pair of gray-furred legs too short for the body it constructed, both appearing to have been absconded from the corpse of a rabbit; it seemed as though the force animating this hodgepodge of animal parts that it required to physically interact with this plane of existence tried to make the legs somewhat longer by attaching what was left of the forelegs of a coyote to those taken from the rabbits.

Completing the anatomy of this seemingly gestalt abomination was the muzzle of some type of canine, with the upper and lower portions not quite matching, and twisted so that the mouth couldn't properly shut. Still, the sharp teeth constantly jutting from this muzzle were clearly of canid derivation. It opened its asymmetrically distorted muzzle and uttered that soul-searing hiss, its dried and cracked tongue flopping about outside of its mouth as it did so.

"Dear Jesus..." were the only words that Ken could utter as he raised the large scoop implement over his head and began to slowly move backwards.

What type of horror had that mysterious mist released into the world he knew? Why did it do so in the first place, and why here? What type of reality could harbor a bodiless entity that haphazardly gathered the remains of whatever solid organic animal life it could find to build itself the mess of a body it now possessed? And why, in the name of God, did it have to cross paths with *him*? Why not someone else, *anyone* else? Wasn't it just his terrible luck that he worked the specific job that would make him most likely to encounter this horror as it raided the dead organic resources of this world to create a vessel for dwelling in its new environment?

Ken had no time to ponder these questions, as the entity's partially detached right eye and fully dangling left one seemed to closely study his form while its malformed, semi-skinless head with a single ear sticking up from the left side of its temple turned from side to side. Its twisted muzzle then opened and released a hiss of a different tone, one that chilled the hapless man as if he had just been bathed in a pool of liquid nitrogen. This hiss didn't seem to be a sound simply designed to test what its hastily made vocal apparatus could do, but rather one that appeared to signify a sign of... delight.

"No..." was the only other word Ken could rattle out as he realized exactly what this being's intention was after studying him.

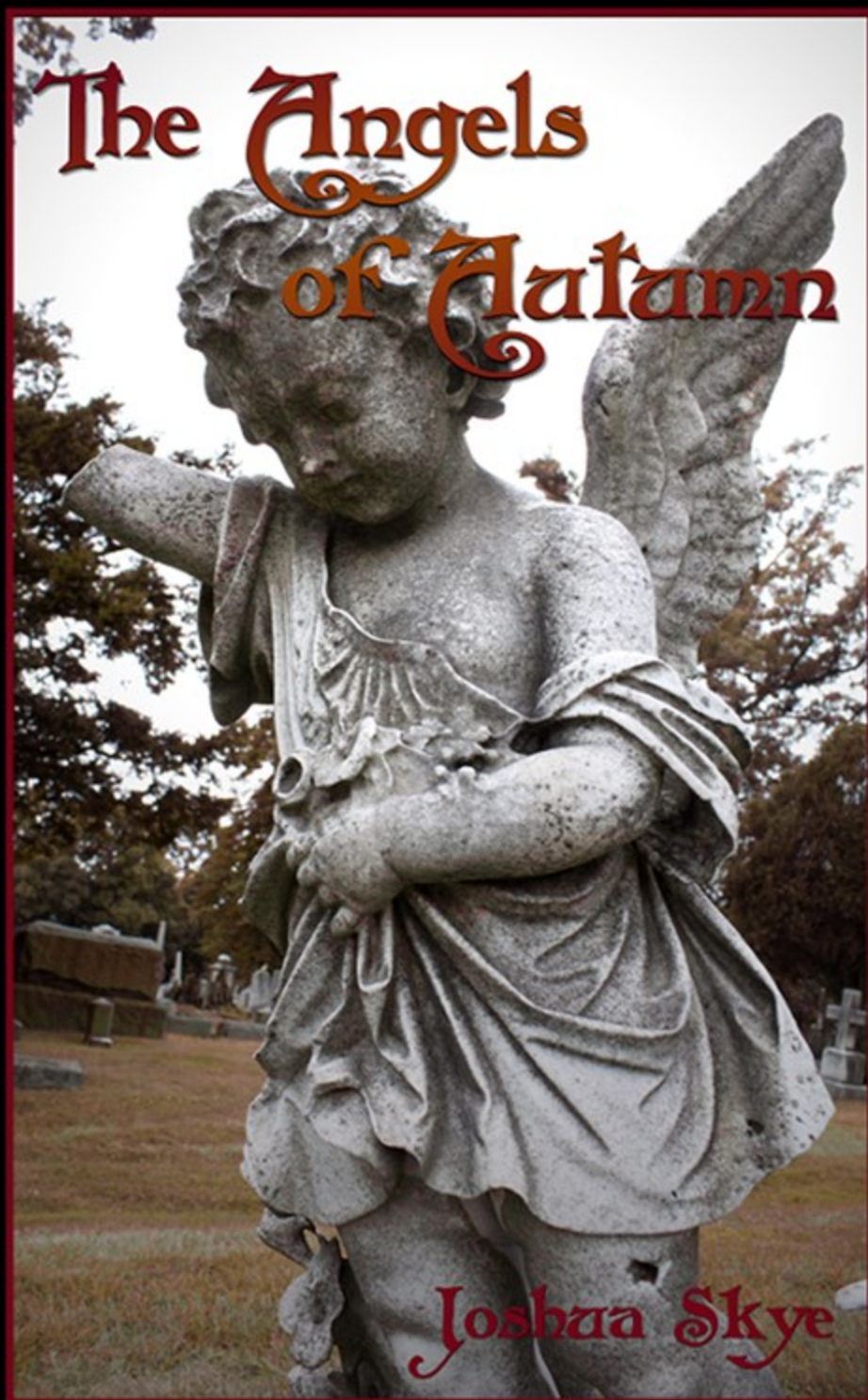
Screaming in horror, Ken dropped the implement he carried and attempted to rush off in the opposite direction. The creature let out an exuberant hiss and sprung into the air on its broken but intact legs ransacked from the remains of a rabbit. It hurled itself several meters until it landed directly on the fleeing man's back, the impact knocking Ken to the ground.

The last sounds to be heard in this area for the next three minutes were the combined cacophony of Ken howling and begging for his life with intense ripping and sucking noises.

It should be no surprise to anyone that the last coherent thought to pass through Ken's mind during that time was, *Damn, how I hate this fucking job...*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Christofer Nigro is a life-long fan of the horror, sci-fi, fantasy, and pulp fiction genres, as well as the comic book medium and super-hero sub-genre of sci-fi. He is a freelance editor and website administrator in addition to a full-time writer. He has past and upcoming publishing credits in the form of short stories in anthologies by the following presses Pulp Empire, Black Coat Press, Sirens Call Publications, Angelic Knights Press, and Scarlett River Press. He is currently working on three novels; two for Metahuman Press, and one planned for Black Coat Press, and is hoping to start some self-publishing ventures soon.

My blog: <http://thenorseking.wordpress.com>



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, & Smashwords

Urban Outdoorsman *Jeffrey Hollar*

In the harsh lighting of his work room, the hooks were shining jewels of cold-steel perfection laid in line for his final inspection. He marveled at their cruel barbs and smiled, envisioning the captive prey that would thrash and fight their inescapable embrace to no avail. His reverent awe was curtailed by the insistent beeping of the alarm on his wristwatch. Silencing it, he realized he must conclude his preparations and be on his way very soon if he were to test his lures as planned.

He reached to the side of the table, retrieving the nylon case and opening it. One by one, each of the hooks were inserted into small slots within the case, leaving only their tops visible. Into another pocket, he placed a selection of heavy leaden weights of various sizes. The final addition to the case's contents were two flat spools of fishing line, each rated for a weight of 500 pounds. He suspected the line far exceeded his needs but was reluctant to permit the possibility of losing whatever he might hook.

Zippering the case closed, he left his work room, locking the door securely behind him. Donning a shapeless, gray trench coat and a wide-brimmed felt hat, he was satisfied the ensemble concealed enough of his face and altered his body form sufficiently to ensure he was, for all intents and purposes, nondescript and unmemorable. He ensured the additional pockets he'd sewn into the lining of the coat contained the required items for his outing. When he had no doubts all was prepared, he left the house, walking at a slow but purposeful pace to the central train station.

It was a beautiful fall morning and though clouds threatened rain at some point, the day was still pleasantly cool and the breeze slight. In short, the conditions were perfect for his purposes. Arriving at the station, he was rewarded with a view of a nearly-deserted platform. The hour was not especially early, but it was the weekend and so the usual crowd of working-class commuters was otherwise occupied today.

He consulted the schedule board, checked the time and then waited the short interval for his desired train to arrive. For this outing, he'd chosen the North Line Express. It offered nine stops from beginning to end and he felt confident that would be several stops longer than he anticipated spending aboard. With an unexpected efficiency, the train pulled into the station exactly on schedule and as he looked through the train's windows, he was pleased that he would have few other passengers to contend with.

As the train departed, he walked through the cars, casually making his way towards the next-to-last compartment. The door hissed closed behind him as he entered the compartment. He immediately drew the shade down over the window set in the door and, using a screwdriver, quickly disabled the door mechanism. Concentration was essential to his success today and no interruptions from other travelers could be allowed.

He knew the next stop was seven minutes away and set to making his final preparations. He had no guarantees of suitable prospects at any particular point on the train's course, but he was a methodical fellow and so, preferred to always be prepared to seize opportunities as they appeared.

Sitting, he opened the case and set to work. Considering his options and the specific conditions of the day, he opted for four of the hooks. Securing each to a short lead line, he then attached each lead to the main length of fishing line. At carefully calculated points he secured the lead weights to the line. For best results, he chose to go with heavier sizes. He checked and re-checked the security of his knots and the weights before proceeding.

Having used a laser rangefinder, he'd long since computed the distance from the steel window rail to the center of the platform at each stop. He had averaged the distance and arrived at a median he felt comfortable with. He began to unwind the fishing line, stopping periodically to confirm his measurements with a digital ruler. When he reached the desired length, he snipped the line and returned the unused line to its spot within the case.

Tying the far end of the line securely to the window rail, he pulled on it with all of his body weight to test its hold. Not surprisingly, it held him effortlessly in place. Perfect, he smiled. Donning a pair of heavy leather work gloves from his pocket, he coiled the remaining line around his left hand. He stopped with several feet of the line hanging by his side, careful to not snag himself with any of the hooks or to, in any manner, foul the leads with each other, he stood by the window and waited patiently for his opportunity to present itself.

Looking out of the begrimed window, he chided himself for neglecting one detail. He grasped the release and slid the compartment's wide window open. He estimated the three foot by five foot span was more than adequate. The window in the kitchen of his home was considerably smaller and had proven effective in practice. It would suit his needs nicely.

The train slowed as it approached the next stop and he willed himself to remain calm and not tense up. Scanning the platform as they approached, he was mildly disconcerted to find not a single individual waiting. The stop was, of necessity, short and the train resumed its appointed course. He was disappointed initially, but reminded himself with calm reassurances there were plenty more stops to come.

Over the next half hour he viewed and rejected two more stops as unsuitable. Though he tried to remain unperturbed, it was impossible for him to completely banish the small doubts intruding on his sense of purpose. He reflected that no endeavor was without a risk of failure but refused to admit of such at this juncture.

At the fourth stop, his senses were stunned as if some entity was privy to his designs and was providing its divine approval to him. Shaking off the mental assault, he focused his gaze on the upcoming platform and spotted...her. She was a shapely woman, early 20's in age, of medium height with her blonde hair drawn back in a ponytail. She wore a tight Lycra workout top, silk running shorts and running shoes. Her attention was focused on whatever music her ear bud headphones were delivering to her.

Dropping the coiled line from his left hand, he took a firm hold on the line in his right and began to slowly twirl it about. The practiced motion of his wrist snapped it around again and again increasing velocity with each rotation. As the train lurched to a stop and before the woman could change position, he shot his right hand forward, launching the hook-laden line directly toward her.

He sensed before it struck that his aim was true and so felt no anxiety as the action unfolded. Too far away to hear her, he nevertheless imagined he could as her mouth dropped open in shocked surprise. Slowly-spreading red stains on her torso indicated no less than three of the barbed hooks had found purchase in her torso. As her hands fluttered up to grab at the jagged intrusions, he shifted his weight backwards into the compartment, holding the line firmly with both hands and dropped to his knees. The tugging motion served to set the hooks so firmly into her she stood little chance of extracting them without assistance. As there were no other people on the platform, her chances for help were non-existent.

Standing again, he slowly took up the slack in the line until it was stretched taut. He watched as she sank to her knees, shock and blood loss combining to rob her of her ability to stand. He was ecstatic to realize she had not cried out loudly and there appeared no indications his actions or her plight had drawn the attention of anyone aboard the train.

As the train departed, he allowed more slack in the line, finally dropping it as the distance between the woman and the rail car lengthened. He felt his manhood stiffening as her bloody, heaving body twitched and she was suddenly jerked off of the platform and onto the unyielding track bed. Craning his neck to look out behind him, he watched with glazed eyes as the woman was dragged helplessly down

the tracks with more and more blood streaming from her as the train gained speed.

Feeling his arousal build, he fumbled in his pocket for the switchblade knife contained within. In perfect synchronization with his release, he severed the line close to the window rail and the woman was lost from sight.

Regaining his composure, he retrieved all remaining evidence of his presence in the compartment, closed the window, and wiped down any and all surfaces he might have contacted during his ride. Having restored the door controls and raised the shade, he left the train at the next stop and walked back to his home.

He stowed all of his gear, took a long, hot relaxing shower and retired to his living room with a steaming mug of coffee and the extravagance of fresh strudel he'd purchased on his walk home. He turned on his small television and switched to the local channel in time for regular programming to be interrupted. Though such footage should not have been allowed on air, he glimpsed the lifeless, bloody mass that had so recently been a vibrant young woman sprawled on the crimson-soaked rails. The reporter on scene seemed a bit put off and stammered visibly as she spoke of mysteries and lack of evidence of how such a thing could occur.

He abandoned all thoughts of coffee and pastry as he again felt his arousal building. Having satisfied such, he returned to his work room to unpack his nylon pack and put each item back into its proper place. He made a mental note to himself he would need to order more hooks from the Internet sporting supply store before contemplating another urban fishing expedition.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jeffrey Hollar describes himself as an author/poet, husband, father, veteran and Klingon/Ferengi hybrid. He is a writer without genre and considers himself to be a specialist in short fiction. Jeffrey may be found on Twitter: @klingorengi, Facebook: <http://on.fb.me/10OiS3D> or on his blog, The Latinum Vault at www.jeffreyhollar.com.



Carnage: After the End – Volume 2

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Wolf Song *Thomas Brown*

The babies are coming. They're coming and Friedrich is not there. After everything they have been through; the heartache, the treatments, he is not going to miss this moment. He puts his foot down on the accelerator. The sigh of warm air from the heater blows against his face. He drives fast through the snow-flecked night.

The road seems endless. A stretch of black tarmac and black ice and black night. Eventually he sees lights. Not the moon, which is full, swollen in the sky, but other lights. City lights. He navigates the icy side-streets as only an expectant father can. Two minutes now and he'll be home and everything will be all right. He has waited for this day for so long. He has wept at the thought of this day coming, and at the thought of it not coming, when it seemed that way. Her blood, his tears. They said she was barren. But now the day is here. One minute, if that. He brings the car round the corner, faster than he should –

A figure lopez across the road, running towards him, beside him.

There is a dull thud as it hits the driver's side of the car. He catches it with the front wheels. Then a bump; violent, horrible, to match the feeling in his stomach, as it vanishes beneath the chassis. It might have been a dog. He only half-glimpsed it, before it was drawn under the vehicle, flailing then gone. He knew dogs didn't flail; that helpless, human gesture, but then he had not seen it properly and a car's wheels could do terrible things to an animal's shape. Broken apart by wheels, a dog could flail. A dog could die –

He takes the turn and pulls into his drive. The car grows quiet beneath him. He tumbles out into the cold night, which hits him with a force; stings his face and brings sharp tears to his eyes. He moves towards the house.

It doesn't strike him as odd that the front door is open. It saves seconds in unlocking it himself. He steps into the hallway with its long, lavender walls and family pictures: their wedding, that holiday in Morocco, Christmas with her parents last year. The hallway is cold. It is filled with night air. Why *was* the door open? Friedrich wonders briefly. He calls out to his wife.

Screams reach his ears. Infantile and distressed, they are the most beautiful things he thinks he's ever heard. Almost slipping, he follows them to the front room.

His steps falter. He is unsure quite what he's seeing. Two figures roll on the sheepskin rug. They are baby-sized with four limbs each but malformed mouths, like battered snouts. Their eyes, thin, unseeing slits, are his wife's pale blue and each is covered in growths of matted hair, black and slick with birthing fluid. On hearing a presence they scream and mew and roll a little faster on their backs. Short, angular limbs peddle the air.

His stomach heaves and he turns from the things to vomit. His sick splashes the expensive curtains his wife and he bought when moving in together. He is wiping his eyes when he sees the spots of red across the carpet – a heavy flow, petering out as he pursues it through the hallway, a bloody breadcrumb trail leading back into the cold dark of outside. He follows the trail; the movements of his wife, he guesses, as she sought to reach him, to escape the wolfish things that have crawled out of her.

He reaches the street. The night seems vast, as though he could drown in its depths. Struggling for breath, he follows the blood spots to the misshapen figure in the road. He realises that they would always lead here. He studies the shape, which is heaving and moaning. It rolls over, hand-paws slapping the pavement, and he stares into the face of his wife.

Lights flicker on down the street. Figures appear in their doorways, drawn, he supposes, by the sounds. His wife is crying, her jowls quivering, a whimper slipping from her throat. He begins crying too. He kneels beside his lady, taking her matted fur in his hands. He thinks of the first time they met, in a queue at the bank. Their first date on the seafront, the salty breeze in their faces. The first time he cooked for her. He tells her their babies are beautiful, and that their curtains are ruined.

He smells salt now, but it is coppery and rank. A crowd is forming, shapes drawing closer. The vastness of the sky is replaced by a pressing constriction, formed by the figures around them.

He smells other things too. His wife's blood, the stench of exhaust fumes, the hot wetness of animal breaths. He hears panting and the slop of tongues against teeth. Under the light of the moon he sees his neighbours, his friends, their snouts long, eyes shining in the moonlight.

Kneeling over his wife he takes her in his arms, to cover her, to protect her from the circling beasts, before realising his hands are also paws. His flesh is covered with hair, his teeth long and sharp in his mouth.

He hears a mewling again. His ears twitch, rising to attention. He turns, smelling blood and urine, and finds their neighbour walking towards them. She moves upright as a person and is fully clothed, but sloped eyes bridge her face, her muzzle glistening in the moonlight. In her arms she carries their two children, struggling in that way all new-born babies do, when first faced with the enormity of the world. As she approaches him, one of his neighbours howls. Another joins it, then another, until the city fills with the haunting sounds.

The pups are deposited against his flanks. Beneath him, his wolf-wife turns her face and smiles. Then she shudders and expires. The wolves continue to howl, their cry at once celebratory and mournful. They sing of life and death, blood and heat, the earth and the sky, and the night sings back at them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Thomas Brown is a postgraduate student at the University of Southampton, where he is studying for an MA in Creative Writing. Literary influences include Friedrich Nietzsche, S. T. Joshi, Thomas Ligotti and Russian novelist Andrei Makine. His first traditionally-published novel, *LYNNWOOD*, is set for release through Sparkling Books 17/06/13. He writes dark, surreal fiction.

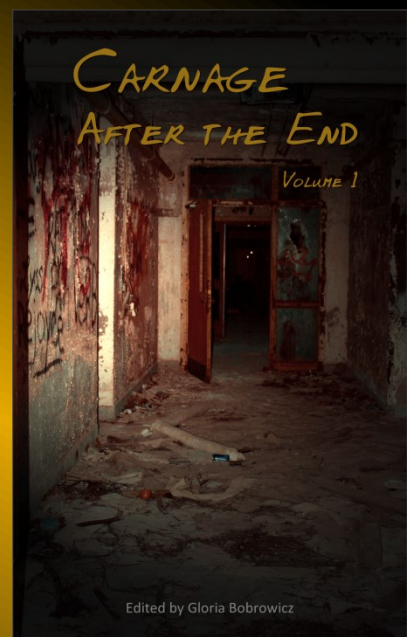
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Carnage: After the End – Volume 1

**Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, &
Smashwords**



The Predator *Timothy C. Hobbs*

The African landscape was covered in twilight. The baby rhinoceros nuzzled its mother unnerved by the quick shadows surrounding them. A smell of danger permeated the air. The mother rhino pawed at the dusty earth.

The first hyena moved in quickly from the female rhino's blind side. It snapped at the baby then ran for cover in the dry bush where its pack waited. The mother rhino tensed for the next attack. When they came, the hyenas rushed from different directions, using short delays to confuse and imbalance the adult rhino. But the mother was up for the challenge and met each attempt to capture her baby with charges of her own.

The hyenas were patient. Time was on their side. There were five of them and only one adult rhino. Eventually, the mother charged erratically at the swift figures, losing her sense of direction as the hyenas snatched the squealing baby away. They tore their capture apart with powerful jaws as the mother roared, charging at shadows.

Mr. Simmons raised the projection screen. Sunlight flooded his fifth period High School Biology class. "Most people believe hyenas to be scavengers," Mr. Simmons addressed his students. "But, as you witnessed in the film, they can be cunning predators as well."

Mr. Simmons' voice faded as Ron stared across the room at the new girl. Simmons had announced that Sandra was a transfer from some state, Ron couldn't remember where, at the beginning of the fall term. Ron was one of the 'bloodhounds' perpetually sniffing around the halls after girls. This new girl fit his criteria nicely: shocking red hair bundled in a knot on her head, fair skin dotted with beyond-cute freckles, and a body, what a body, with firm breasts riding high on a short compact curvy assed frame. Ron's goal was to taste this sweet apple before Christmas break rolled around. But, he would take it slow. Get to know her. Just like the hyenas, time was on his side.

It started with impromptu sittings at lunch: "Would she mind?" "Could he join her?"

Sandra never sent him away, even when her budding friendships with other girls were threatened by their dislike for Ron. "He's nothing but a 'dog'" they warned her. "All he wants is to get in your pants. Just ask Becky or Susan or Mary or . . ."

Ron's conversation was general, his questions typical: "Where you from?" "How do you like it here in Paducah, Kentucky?" "Pretty small berg for a girl like you I bet."

And Sandra answered. She had relocated from Abilene, Texas. She came ahead of her parents because they had six months left on the contract at their jobs and did not want her to miss the beginning of the school year. Her father had accepted an offer from the hospital in Paducah. Both of her parents were registered nurses, so her mother had been hired as a stipulation to her father's accepting the job in charge of Pediatric critical care at Paducah General. She was staying in an apartment building, The Pomegranate Tree, and rode the bus to school each day.

"No need to ride a bus when I've got a car. Why not let me pick you up in the morning? I can even take you home after school if you want me to." Ron grinned an easy smile, confident and aware of the trust building between them.

It wasn't long until they went on dates, sometimes driving to Mayfield—a larger city with different activities to appreciate like a shopping mall, dance clubs, multiplex cinemas, or rock concerts. But mostly they hung around Paducah. There was no indoor movie theater there, but a Drive-In still hustled enough business to stay open. It was there they finally kissed and petted, and there, after a few dates, they started to steam up the windows as cold weather approached.

Then, the moment finally arrived. Ron had Sandra flat on the back seat while the soundtrack from the drive-in speaker became a meaningless jumble of words and music. His hands unhooked her bra; he

kneaded her rigid breasts while fumbling to unzip Sandra's jeans.

Sandra grabbed his hand. "Not here," she said breathlessly. "Not in your car."

"Your place?"

"No. Someone might see and it will get back to my parents. Don't you know somewhere else?"

Ron was frustrated, impatient, but smart enough not to destroy his chances by forcing her. He sat up. He ran his hands through his sandy sweat-slicked hair. "Yeah, sure," he said. "There's a motel about two miles out on I 62. We'll go there."

"Just hurry," Sandra said almost panting, the heat rising from her body, ready and wanting. "Just hurry."

The temperature was in a steady fall. It was late November, a time for cold weather in Kentucky. The sky clouded and threatened snow. Ron pulled in to the Wildcat Motel's parking lot. It was Thursday night and the place was almost void of other cars. The neon sign fought the cold—the **W I L C A** burned steadily but the **D T** flashed like a strobe light and crackled against the damp, cold, night air. The night manager at the motel, a burned out alcoholic in his late fifties named Jesse, wasn't surprised to see Ron walk in; Ron was one of their steady customers.

"Hey, Ron," Jesse said casually as he ground out a cigarette burned down to the filter in an overflowing ashtray. "Need one for a few hours or the whole night?"

Ron laid a twenty dollar bill on the counter. "As long as it takes," he said and grabbed the key from Jesse. It was for No.11, Ron's lucky number, the room located in the back away from the highway.

Jesse smiled, the wrinkles and dirt-lined creases on his worn face dancing.

The room was cold when they stepped in, the air heavy with the smell of cheap rug and bathroom cleaners. But the two didn't notice the cold or the odor. They were too busy pulling off each other's clothes on their way to bed.

Ron and Sandra fell on the marshmallow mattress in a tangle of arms and legs, each groping and kissing the other in heated foreplay.

And then, Ron was inside her. At first their sex was animal and brutal, but it slowed down as the night wore on and became a ballet of rhythm, a mutual gliding of insatiable partners.

"Don't stop," Sandra whispered as Ron lay exhausted on top of her. Their bodies were held together by a line of sweat that stretched with any movement.

Ron raised himself in a pushup motion. "My, God," he said with a slight laugh. "Don't you ever get enough?"

"Never," she said and then used her groin muscles to squeeze his penis, which was lying flaccid inside her.

"I felt that, you little devil," Ron remarked with a grin.

Sandra did it again, this time a little harder.

As Ron opened his mouth to laugh, two thin streams of liquid were expelled from the corners of Sandra's mouth. They landed on Ron's tongue. It was so sudden he swallowed some of the sweet, acid-tasting fluid instinctively before spitting out the rest. The liquid coagulated with his saliva and landed with an audible plop on Sandra's stomach.

Ron was livid. He grabbed Sandra roughly by her shoulders. "What the Hell's wrong with you? Why'd you spit at me?" In the middle of his yelling, another two streams of fluid were dispensed into his mouth. Unable to control his reflexes, he swallowed all of the stuff this time. His hands went to his lips. He reached inside his mouth and tried to pull the sticky material out. The fluid was stinging the soft

tissue lining his mouth; the inside of his cheeks and his tongue went numb. Ron tried to speak but his larynx was anesthetized and would allow only a choked, airy moan to escape. He tried to push himself away from Sandra but her tightening vaginal muscles locked him in place.

Ron panicked and made a strong effort to free himself. An enormous pulling pressure moved him forward. His upper torso snapped in a curving motion. The strain on his spine was agonizing. His genitals were alive with pain as if being injected with battery acid.

Sandra's abdomen convulsed in short, rhythmic waves. Her mouth gaped; her arms spread out and twisted behind her head. She looked like she was in labor, only she was pulling in, not pushing out.

Ron flailed his arms uselessly like a bird whose feet were stuck in cement denying it takeoff. He could not grab Sandra's upper body due to his awkward, bent position, so he locked on to her thighs; he pinched into the flesh as hard as he could, but it had no affect as Sandra's leg muscles tensed and easily repelled his fingers.

Before Ron could try and re-grip her thighs, Sandra's internal muscles made an enormous inward convulsion. Ron was pulled deeper inside her. He was being shaped into a 'v' when a terrible crack split the silence in the room. As his brain exploded in agony when the splintering vertebral column severed his spinal cord, Ron's spine fractured at the pelvic connection.

The pain then quickly abated and the pressure relieved when Ron lost all sensation to his lower trunk and legs. He wanted to both laugh and wail as his head slipped between two feet he recognized as his own.

The fiery acid sensation continued to spread into Ron's belly and chest, flowing slowly toward his neck. "She's eating me," Ron's silent cry burned in his fevered brain. "She's swallowing me like some monster snake."

Sandra's stomach moved in pulsing waves as it shifted the living prey into her enlarging pelvic cavity. Her abdomen bulged to the point of bursting. Ron's face was a purple mask as the pre-digestive fluid entered his head and brain. What uncontaminated blood was left there pooled in his occipital lobe, causing a temporary, elevated sense of sight. The last thing he focused on was a large water mark on the ceiling above him.

"Jesse better fix that," Ron mused insanely to himself, "or the rain's gonna pour in one day."

Sandra's eyes rolled back and exposed their whites. With one final tug, Ron's head and feet were pulled inside her. She had digested about one half of his body.

By the time she left the motel, the organic material in Sandra's womb was reduced to the size of a softball. One would only see a slight bulge in her abdomen if they noticed at all. Digestion took longer on this planet, most likely caused by the food's composition as well as the different gravitational pull on Sandra's fluids.

Sandra had folded Ron's clothes and placed them in his car, which she left parked outside the room. She could not drive and would not take the chance of calling a cab as she might be identified as the girl leaving the motel. Ron's disappearance would instigate an investigation, but it took the authorities here awhile to get the ball rolling. She would be long gone by then.

Sandra stayed off the highway. She made good time through the fields and was soon back at her apartment in Paducah. It was early morning now. The sun had not yet risen. She gathered a few clothes and walked away in the opposite direction of her apartment building. She would hitch-hike until she felt far enough away and safe enough to catch a bus to another city. Farther north, she thought. Maybe the east coast this time.

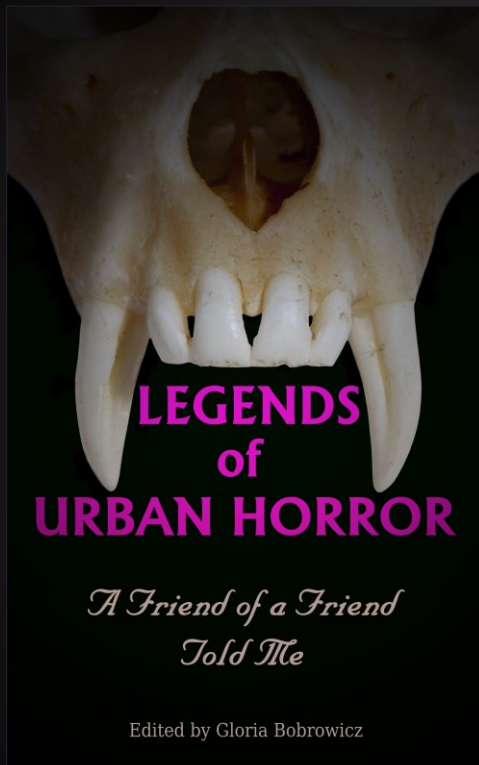
The first car to stop for her was on its way to Louisville, which is a good number of miles from

Paducah. The driver was a woman who looked to be middle-aged. She was a pharmacy representative who covered a number of counties in Kentucky. She was on her way to Louisville to attend an area meeting of the surrounding hospitals. She was quiet and kind and offered Sandra some coffee from a thermos and half a Bear Claw pastry which Sandra declined.

As the car moved smoothly through the early morning, a light snow started falling. Sandra leaned her head against the passenger window. It would not be long, she assured herself, until the detention period on her planet was lifted and she could return to her home so far away.

Sandra sighed, drifted into a comfortable doze and then dreamed of home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Timothy Hobbs is a retired Medical Technologist living in Robinson, Texas. He has had short stories and poems published in New Texas (an annual literary collection of Texas writers) in 1999, 2000, and 2002, a short story and flash fiction piece in Dark Tales, a U.K. publication, and a short story in *spinetinglermag.com*, an on-line Canadian magazine. He has also published a short story collection, *Mothertrucker and Other Stories* and a novel *Veils* through Publish America in 2008. His novels *The Pumpkin Seed* and *Music Box Sonata*, and a novella *The Smell of Ginger*, were published by Vamplit Publishing in the United Kingdom and recently republished by Visionary Press. His new novel *Maiden Fair* was published by Netherworld Books in the United Kingdom in 2013. Tim's author page can be viewed at Amazon.com.



Legends of Urban Horror: A Friend of a Friend Told Me

Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, &
Smashwords

Confession of an Ordinary Man *Ben McElroy*

With a sustained roar, George swept his place setting onto the floor. His mother gasped. His father glared at him. The rest of the Walker family sat around the lengthy dining room table, various expressions of shock smeared across their faces. The bountiful ham dinner set before them steamed, releasing appetizing scents.

George said, "Well, what do you know? You're all focused on me now. Listen while I tell you about how I killed my girlfriend yesterday."

Smirking, he looked around at his silent relatives and then said, "Sure. Yes. Sure. I'd *love* to tell you about that. *Because I had every goddamn right.* She was part of a growing problem. Maybe even the originator of it."

"Get out of my house, George," his father said. "You're not welcome here anymore."

"Please, let's not ruin supper, Stanley," George's mother said. "We haven't had the entire family together like this in months."

"And we probably won't again on account of this worthless son of ours, Grace," Stan said, his gray eyes empty of emotion as usual.

"What I did to Stacey will save us all, Dad," George said. "Now shut your mouth and listen."

Growling, Stan lunged across the table at George. The plate of buttermilk biscuits slid onto the carpet. A bowl of peas tipped over; its contents rolled across the tabletop.

George remained still and smiled. Stan grabbed the back of his son's neck with one hand and slapped him across the face with the other hand. Then again.

Although nobody tried to break up this one-sided fight, George's sister and her husband backed away from the table; his nephews just sat there and stared at the spectacle.

"Stop that, Stanley," Grace said, standing up. "Let the boy talk."

Stan stopped hitting George, but he refused to release his white-knuckled grip on his son's neck. George continued to grin as best he could. Judging by his father's reaction... Well, if Dad was one of them, George could begin his search and destroy mission right here at home. How convenient.

Grace finally pulled her husband away from their son; she then guided Stan back to his seat at the head of the table. He didn't protest, but his sneer stayed put.

While whispering something into Stan's ear, Grace glanced at her daughter Nancy.

Once she finished soothing Stan, Grace said, "Nancy, why don't you and I clean this mess and then bring out dessert."

"Sure, Mom. At least we'll be able to salvage *something* of our family get-together," Nancy said.

As the two women scooped spilled food back into bowls and onto serving platters, George peered at his father. Stan kept glancing at Tom--Nancy's husband--and their two teenage boys. George couldn't remember a more festive gathering.

"Now I'm ready. To tell my story. The one about how Stacey died because of me. I killed her. Me me me me me *me*," George said. "*Death.* That's what she planned to bring to all of us who refused to convert. So she deserved to die."

"Enough of this bullshit," Stan said.

In order to remove it from the table, Grace grasped the edges of the glass tray on which the ham rested. George laid his hand over his mother's fingers.

"I'll get that for you, Mom," he said. "Why don't you and Nancy sit and relax?"

They did. After getting up from his chair, George lifted the tray, which weighed a good five pounds on its own--never mind the twelve-pound ham added to that. He made as if to walk toward the kitchen.

As he passed his father, however, George swung the tray at the side of Stan's head. A muted thud followed. Upon impact, Stan grunted and slumped forward. The ham dropped to the floor. Grace and

Nancy screamed. Tom jumped out of his chair and stepped toward George.

"Sit back down, Tom. This has got nothing to do with you," George said.

"It sure as hell does," Tom said as he moved closer to his brother-in-law.

George brandished the heavy tray at Tom, who sat back down after a moment of tense and silent stillness. When he was sure that Tom wouldn't intervene again, George proceeded to bash his father's head with the tray.

Stan's arms flailed. His feet kicked out with such force that the empty chair across from him toppled over. The glass tray soon shattered.

Flinging away the pieces of broken tray in his hands, George bent over his father and said, "Let's show everyone what you really are, *Dad*."

He scraped the ruined flesh away from Stan's head. When George finished his task, a large sphere that looked like a huge, rotten apple lolled between Stan's shoulders. A massive, hairy orifice had replaced the mouth. All five of George's family members seated at the table expressed varying degrees of shock and dismay.

"Dad tried to shut me up to keep his secret safe," George said. "He isn't one of us. Not anymore."

"George, how did you know?" Grace asked.

"His eyes were so much like my girlfriend's," George said. "Stacey, my counterpart, my mirror. Of identity, of activity, of self. However, we each harbored a deep denial of the hell of our heaven. She and I couldn't accept the fact that our previously sweet relationship had soured. So this past weekend, I fulfilled Stacey's destiny and my own by murdering her."

Yesterday morning, George and Stacey sat on the floor in his living room. She polished her toenails a gaudy shade of orange. He flipped through some old photos of the two of them. False images, as the pictures were mere impressions of a long gone truth. Sad, really. Really sad.

Why had George stuck with this bitch for so long?

Had he asked that question aloud or just thought it?

"You said it, George," Stacey said, grimacing. "What's your issue?"

"Nothing."

"Something's going on."

"Who could that be?"

"Don't mess with me."

"I'm not."

"So what is it?"

"It?"

"Yes. It."

"What's it?"

"Don't mess with me."

"I'm not. You're confusing me."

Silence. It was welcome. Nothing like an altercation, an alteration, an annihilation of emotion with Stacey. Fuck you, Stacey. Did George think that or--

"You said it," Stacey said. "I'm getting pretty damn pissed at you, George. Now. Tell. Me. The. Truth."

"What? Tell you what?"

"Why are you acting this way?"

"You're convoluted accusations are maddening."

Stacey began to weep. Yet her blank gray eyes didn't reflect the tumultuous emotions apparent on the rest of her face; in fact, her eyes had always been rather vacant like that.

After a moment, George put his arms around her. She leaned into him. Soon, her sobs shifted to sniffles. George started to pull away, but Stacey stiffened and shook her head.

Speaking into George's shoulder, she said, "It's time to shower."

George knew what that meant. He smirked. Maybe there was still some hope for their relationship after all.

They undressed each other with determination and delicacy and then walked into the bathroom hand in hand. Stacey turned the water on and stepped into the cool spray while it warmed up. George joined her in the tub.

He watched while she shampooed her hair. After she rinsed the suds away from her head, George stepped toward her and slipped on the used shampoo. He fell into Stacey, and they both went down.

The back of her head slammed against the faucet. She yelped. The torrent of hot water from the shower nozzle splattered her bleeding wound.

"Are you okay?" George asked as he helped her into a kneeling position.

Concerned, he probed the back of her scalp to determine how serious a gash she had; while he did so, her hair came off in clumps. The newly bald skin split open wider and then slid down her skull.

Something like a moldy, purple apple looked up at George.

"It is time to become what I am," Stacey said through a strange, circular hole toward the bottom of her new head. "We are many and number more each day. Either join us or die."

She curled into a tightly coiled crouch. George shoved her away from him before she could attack. Her neck connected with the faucet. She slumped, dazed. He jumped out of the tub and Stacey moved as if to follow him.

Face flushed, George pushed her before she could stand. She slapped at his chest. The smacking sounds reverberated in the small bathroom. He backed away. His calves bumped into the toilet.

Stacey approached him. When she was near enough, George grabbed her by the throat. Her new skin--her real skin--appeared moist but scratched like whiskers against his palms. Grimacing, he squeezed her neck.

Her hands reached up and tugged weakly at his rigid wrists. Then her movements slowed. George released his tenacious grip. She fell to the floor. Her body jerked once. Twice. Was still.

George stared at her remains. A fresh purpose in life occurred to him. Stacey had mentioned that she wasn't the only one of these creatures, so he'd seek out the others and kill them all.

But first, he had to attend his family's Sunday dinner tomorrow afternoon. How mundane that would be compared to his newfound duty to eradicate those like his dead girlfriend.

"That's why I had to kill Stacey," George said to his family. "And now we know that Dad was one, too. Good thing I took care of that danger. It wasn't easy, but he never really loved me. Not in any obvious way."

"I'm so sorry, dear," Grace said.

"Well, I'm thankful that you're here, George," said Tom. "And even more grateful for your confession."

"Though what a vicious beast you turned out to be," Grace said. "That's not how I raised you, young man. You'll have to be punished."

Winking at George, she lifted her wine glass as if to make a toast. Instead of an impassioned speech, however, she crushed the glass against her forehead. The other Walker kinfolk followed suit. Using the

shards, they all then sliced the skin away from their heads, uncovering five rotten apple facades.

Knowing he couldn't take on all of them and feeling the need to escape for now, he grabbed the gravy boat and threw it at his mother. She ducked but not in time. The container's light brown contents oozed from her chest onto her lap.

Using this momentary distraction, George turned to flee. After two steps, he bumped into his nephews, who tackled him. He landed on his back.

His brother-in-law and sister each grabbed one of his wrists while his nephews took hold of his ankles. Grace held George's head steady.

"You can become one of us," she said. "Or perish."

George worked up some saliva in his mouth and spat it into his mother's true face. A thin, green filament slithered out of her puckered mouth and licked at the spit.

"There's an outcast in every family," Grace said. "Such a shame."

She nodded. George's family pulled on his limbs. He clenched his teeth against the pain as his joints stretched to their limit and beyond. He'd rather die an ordinary man than to join their hideous ranks, yet he chose not to struggle.

When the agony verged on overtaking his mind, those tugging on George relaxed. They didn't drop him; instead, they carried him to his old bedroom. His parents had cleaned out his personal effects a while ago, but the original furniture and layout remained the same.

After crossing the threshold, George's captors released him. He fell forward onto the deep pile carpet. His throbbing shoulders robbed his arms of the ability to stop himself, so he experienced a fresh round of aches when he landed on his face.

With a weak groan, George rolled onto his back. A woman's legs dangled over the edge of his bed; her feet didn't quite reach the floor. He recognized the painted toenails that pointed his way.

"Stacey?" he asked.

"Yes, George," she said in a raspy voice.

"I thought I killed you."

"We're much more resilient than we used to be. I can stay your execution if only you'll join us."

"I won't become one of you filthy monsters."

"But, George, we're the new version of humanity."

He sat up. His transformed family huddled on either side of the doorway. George glared at them but received no reaction. A few seconds later, they drifted backward out of the bedroom and disappeared from sight.

Turning back to the thing that used to be Stacey, George said, "You're not human. You disgust me, and I'm going to destroy all of you."

"We're too numerous for one person to eradicate. In fact, there are now more of us than those who are still like you," Stacey said. "Most people prefer this new state. We dispatch the detractors."

"Why does it have to be that way? Did you ever consider co-existing?"

"That isn't an option."

"I don't understand."

"Nobody ever realizes the truth until it's too late."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean, George, is that your family and I--like so many others before us--have evolved."

"You're not making any sense, Stacey."

"We can finally see ourselves for what we were always meant to be."

"But look what they did to you. You're loathsome."

"You're wrong. Besides, we'd already done this to ourselves. It just never showed before now."

"Can't it be reversed?"

Stacey shook her head and said, "You have to accept it and move forward with us."

"So this is it? Either *evolve* or die?"

"Yes."

"Nothing can be done? By me or by many like me?"

"No."

George paused. He contemplated his options. Neither path offered much for incentives.

Transformation or oblivion?

After several minutes had elapsed, George made his decision; he shrugged and said, "At least we'll be together."

"Yes, George, there is that."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ben McElroy is a full-time admissions representative for a Massachusetts state university and a part-time writer of horror fiction. Though his day job can be terrifying at times, his creative inspiration stems from far more bizarre and eclectic sources than that. Ben's more than half a dozen published stories can be found in various print and online venues. If you're patient enough, you should be able to read more of his written works in the near future. Please feel free to contact him at ben.mcelroy1978@gmail.com in order to share with him any comments regarding his written output.

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Eight Scared Women

Jérôme Poirier

She is twenty-three years old
Rosemary is shaking
The baby
In the cradle

She is twenty-four years old
Sarah is shaking
The crawlers
In the cave

She is twenty-eight years old
Suzy is shaking
The witch
Behind the curtain

She is thirty-one years old
Wendy is shaking
The husband
Within the door

She is thirty-one years old
Ellen is shaking
The vampire
At the window

She is thirty-two years old
Ángela is shaking
The ghoul
Through the apartment

She is thirty-three years old
Melanie is shaking
The birds
On the wire

She is forty-three years old
Ellen is shaking
The alien
Across the ceiling

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jérôme Poirier is a musician using mainly the electric bass guitar, strings instruments, his voice and electronics. He explores improvisation and acousmatic music. He works the idea of repetition in poetry and composes also visual art. He is the founder and curator of the netlabel Three Legs Duck. Jérôme Poirier is born in 1978 in Paris, France where he's lives.

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Hourly Rates *Douglas Rinaldi*

"What's the password?"

A voice grunted from behind the big wooden gate as a sinister set of eyeballs appeared from behind a sliding peephole door.

"Nevermore," Tony answered back, without hesitation. Wood rubbed on wood. The beady eyes disappeared as the peephole closed. Locks popped open on the entrance; the heavy door creaked on its old hinges.

A burly, yet questionable looking, man, dressed neatly in khaki and blue, nodded absently to Tony. Following his gesturing hand, Tony entered the building.

"Thanks, boss," he said as casually as his nerves would allow. He looked around the room, taking in all the sterile details of the place. Against the back wall of this main room, he noticed a counter similar in style to that of a front desk in a hotel. Behind the counter, a single sickly looking man stood nodding to Tony. In his late forties with a head of soft silver hair, his suit hung from his meek and food deprived frame.

Incense wafted throughout the chamber, the smell of sandalwood pleasant to Tony's nose. Torch lamps placed at each corner of the space, set at their lowest levels, offered little light. A comfortable hazy dimness floated in the room.

"Have a seat. Someone will be with you soon," the burly man said without a trace of interest.

Walking across the pale blue carpet, Tony took a seat on one of the two chairs that lined the wall. Above the chairs, a piece of framed art, *Monet's Houses of Parliament*, hung from the wall. He checked the time on his watch. Eleven o'clock pm.

The quiet was unsettling. He looked around apprehensively. Across the room another man, half masked by shadow, shifted uncomfortably in the corner. He seemed extremely anxious, almost nervous. Trapped in his own anxiety, Tony hadn't noticed the man when he entered. Now, as he waited, he fought to calm himself and examine his surroundings.

Avoiding eye contact, Tony fidgeted with his fingers, folding them and bending them in odd positions like he did when he was a kid. It took a maximum effort to convince himself to even show up. Throughout the day, he gave thought to canceling the entire thing, forgetting the whole idea. However, his good friend had recommended this place and that made him feel a little more relaxed about giving it a chance. Sitting there, though, waiting still gave him mixed feelings on the subject.

"The place is great. It's clean. It's quiet. No names or questions asked," his friend had told him.

"Just pay the hourly rate, behave and follow their one rule: don't tell anyone unless asked to."

Tony told his buddy that maybe he would give it a try. His friend just laughed at his skepticism. "Try it Ton', you'll love it."

Three weeks have passed since. He realized that he didn't want to be a wimp all his life. And it wasn't like the normal conventional methods had been working in his favor. So, he swayed himself, finally, into giving it a try. Now he sat and waited. Waited to be next in line for a good time.

It's been a long time, bud.

Time ticked away. Minutes floated by as Tony grew tired of sitting still. He almost got up to leave, pins and needles stabbing his legs from sitting still for so long, when the old deskman called the nervous man to the desk.

"Hello, sir," was all Tony could hear before their words became hushed whispers. Cash only. The nervous man handed over the money, the hourly rate, before the deskman led him down the hall. Down the hall. Exactly where Tony wished he could be instead of the waiting room. But he knew his waiting would be over soon; the butterflies in his stomach attested to that.

Flipping through a copy of *Guns & Ammo*, the burly doorman became Tony's only company.

Breathing in sharply, he could smell the sterility in the air mixed with the doorman's aftershave. Not a particle, not a speck of dirt or grime would be found if he chose to search one out.

Looking about the room, he struggled to settle down his flowing emotions. On one hand, was he a big greasy pervert that should feel dirty and ashamed for being there? Or, on the other hand, should the excitement and familiar strain of release combat those feelings of fear and shame balancing it all out? Once again, he wondered if he, not only could, but should go through with it.

Tick tock.

He checked his watch. Eleven-twenty. Hurry up. Stifling a yawn, exhaustion from so many hours of extra overtime took its toll.

I need this. I deserve this.

Over and over, his mind repeated the mantra until an abrupt knock on the door pulled him from his thoughts. Burly doorman grunted, rising to his feet. Annoyance scrawled onto his face. Sliding the panel in the door open, he asked for the password.

"Nevermind?" the voice replied, almost asking.

Chuckling, the doorman answered back. "Sorry, buddy. Nice try." Without another word, he slid the panel shut.

That's it! What the fuck is taking so long? All I want to do is score, blow my wad and go to bed. Simple. This is getting ridiculous.

"Excuse me?"

Burly man looked lazily up from his intellectual reading material; his eyes nothing more than slits canopied by fuzzy caterpillar eyebrows. He grunted, "Yeah?"

"How much longer is the wait?"

"Soon. Maybe longer."

Thanks for all the helpful insight, asshole.

"Been a busy night," he said, before going back to his magazine.

Tony, about to let loose some expletives foaming at the back of his throat, caught the deskman coming back from down the hall. With a wave of his hand, he motioned Tony to the front desk. Like a flash, he darted to the counter.

"Hello, sir," the man repeated the greeting. "This is your first time here, I assume, Mr.—?"

"Smith. It's Smith," Tony lied.

"Ah, okay. Popular name in here tonight," he added with just a hint of sarcasm. "Very good, Mr. Smith. Please, follow me."

As Tony handed over his hard earned overtime money, the deskman started down the hall. The walls, lined with framed pictures of mountains and meadows, were just as sterile white as the rest of the place. On both sides were doors that led to other areas of the building, but Tony did not want to dwell on what went on in those rooms. He came here for one reason and one reason only.

Almost time, bud.

Just the thought made him break into a slight sheen of sweat. He felt his heart's pumping pick up the pace and a light tingle in his groin. Ahead of them, a solitary door occupied the wall. Its frame made of solid oak, same as the door. No window to see beyond. No sign attached, just a doorknob right where it should be.

With a sly grin fixed to his face, the deskman opened the door. Faint yellow light, relaxing in its dullness, escaped into the hallway. Stepping inside, the door closed tight behind him as the deskman's last words reminded him of how long he had.

The sight made Tony's heart flutter. She looked gorgeous. Lying there naked, half covered by a thin

sheet that only turned him on more, she beckoned to him without saying a word. Candlelight danced in the room, flickering about the walls. Little yellow bulbs lined the wall where she lay, yet did nothing to warm the slight chill in the room. A shiver tickled his spine as he absently rubbed his erection through his jeans.

What do you got for me, baby?

Her voice seemed so sweet, almost musical in his mind. He ventured closer and the outline of her form became more noticeable. Slim legs and neck, tight tummy, generous breasts.

Come over here, honey. Don't keep me waiting.

Tony, not wanting to waste a single precious moment, tore off his clothes, dumping them in a pile on the floor. His hard-on slapped his belly like a spring-loaded diving board. Standing over her, he smiled, taking in every fine detail. Pulling the sheet from her, he tossed it away without care. Shadows avoided her and clung to the walls. Now in stark nakedness, he could completely admire her perfection. Throbbing like mad, his erection pushed against her as he cupped her breasts in his hands.

Oh, that feels great, baby. I need that cock inside me.

Hopping back to his discarded jeans, he fished through the pockets. Turning back to her, he grinned. In his teeth a condom wrapper shone in the pale light as he tore it open. His urge couldn't be contained any longer. He imagined all the things he hoped to do with her, to her; he grew light-headed. This may be the best hour of his life . . . ever.

With the condom in place, there was only one thing left to do. Climbing on top of her, he felt the pressure of penetration, his hands caressing her body and breasts. Slowly building up to a moderate pace, he became overcome by another wave of sweat. He could not feel the chill in the air any longer.

Baby, it's so hard. I love it!

Thrust after thrust, his aching urge burned. The feeling—tremendous. Well worth the money. Light headed, he grew dizzy from all the excitement. More sweat dripped from his pores. His vision filled with light as he clenched his eyelids tight. Deeper he plunged, his head buried between her bosom, kissing and sucking, locked in a lovers' embrace. Oblivious to everything. And as his lust grew, he couldn't escape the sudden feverish heat.

She walked the same path every night, her and Mr. Piddles. The canine only liked to do his business at midnight, a habit the woman grew tired of. Every night, the same routine. Except tonight of course. Turning down Mallard Street, a faint burning odor met her nose.

"You smell that Mr. Piddles?" she asked in baby-tone, "That's silly, it's the middle of May. No one lights a fireplace this late in spring."

She turned the corner onto Atkins. Crackling sounds filled the air as the street grew foggy with smoke. Confused, she didn't understand just what was happening when, in the middle of her conundrum, flames flew high from the building on the corner. Orange and red tongues of fire prominently projected against the night sky lashed out and licked up oxygen to stay alive. She watched awestruck, wondering how long it would take the fire department to arrive on the scene. Mr. Piddles barked and snarled at the inferno.

Hoping for everyone's safety, she carefully ventured closer, dragging with her the barking dog. Less than a hundred yards away, the smoldering building cast the smoke filled street around it aglow. Making the sign of the cross, she quickly realized which building she was watching burn. Concern turned to slight relief as she sighed and smiled in spite of herself.

She scooped up the dog in her arms and kissed him lovingly on his snout. In her cutesy baby voice she said, "Thank goodness, Mr. Piddles. Good thing there's no one alive in there at this hour, huh? That's just the Blessed Rest Funeral Home. Now hurry up and pee already."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Doug Rinaldi, born in Connecticut, attended college in 1993 and received a degree in Industrial Design for stage and screen. Yet, writing dark fiction had always been his passion. At the turn of the millennium, he relocated to Boston where he has been honing his writing skills ever since. Currently, thirteen short stories and some poetry have been published or are pending publication in various anthologies. Also currently available through Amazon and Smashwords are two e-book anthologies titled "Manuscript of Deviated Truths, Volume I & II." Next on his agenda, he is putting the finishing touches on two horror screenplays to get them out in the market.

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Even now, safely tucked away in a bed at Dhaka's Central Hospital, the sound of running water reaching my ears is enough to throw me into a frenzied fit.

My body thrashes about as horrific images assault my mind, and within seconds, I am entangled in the crisp, white sheets. Machines monitoring my vitals beep loudly in protest as my hands fly protectively towards my throat, clawing at my windpipe in search of air.

I notice my left arm isn't working.

Then I remember. I no longer have a left arm, something horrible happened and I lost it.

Tears stream down my face as visions too far outside the realm of reality to be true rush at me, and I find myself yelling for her; calling her name even though I know she's dead.

"*Lyla! Oh, my God, Lyla!*" I choke back a guttural sob as the image of that abomination stripping away her flesh as one would peel a banana refuses to leave my mind's eye. The twisted nightmares from our excursion to Bangladesh are etched into my memories forever. There is no escape. I will eternally relive my liquid nightmare whenever I hear the trickling of water, so I do the only thing I can do.

I scream...

Shouting erupts around me as nurse rushes into my room, followed by a bulky orderly. The man forces me back down on the bed, restraining me, and my eyes widen fearfully at the sight of the syringe.

"No, no more!" I croak hoarsely. I know that if I close my eyes, I will see the hideous creature's milky eyes staring at me through the darkness while it's long, black tongue traces the features of Lyla's mangled face, just before wrapping around her eyeball. It siphons it right out of the socket, and chews on it like a child would chew on a jelly bean.

"Mr. Johnson." The nurse's voice soothes, trying to reassure me. "You have suffered a terrible ordeal. You are quite safe now at the Dhaka Hospital."

Safe? Ha! I'm certain I'll never be safe again. My molten prison awaits, and hysteria grips me as she taps the syringe for air bubbles just before sticking the needle into my remaining arm. They don't understand. The monster will always be waiting for me.

Always lurking just beneath the surface.

I pour every ounce of energy I can muster into staying awake, even as I feel the wave of warmth penetrate my veins, leaving the heavy burden of euphoria in its wake. I catch a glimpse of their exchanged looks of pity as my eyelids grow heavy. I struggle to stay lucid, desperate to differentiate my present reality with the abhorrent visions tormenting me, but it is useless, and soon I am dragged back under.

The problem, you see, is that those visions are memories.

Guilt consumes me, as I had invited Lyla to partner with me. I was eager to explore Bholat Dweep, the Island that had disappeared from the Bay of Bengal over 150 years ago, then resurfaced suddenly as if it had never been gone. Locals would not go near it, which I chalked up to superstition.

"He's lucky he did not bleed to death," I hear the nurse say in a hushed tone.

"What happened to his arm, anyway?" The orderly, who sounded American, asks.

The woman's voice seems to come from far away, and the last thing I hear before darkness welcomes me into its icy embrace is the nurse's somber response.

"He cut it off, Rick. It was self-amputation..."

I find myself back on the small island, everything replaying like a terrifying movie. I see Lyla, but am unable to warn her of what awaits. All I'm able to do is watch.

"How does something like this *happen*, Evan?" Lyla is looking around in amazement as we stop to take more soil samples near the center of the island that had unexpectedly reappeared, baffling even the

most respected scientists.

I shrug as I gather the sandy dirt with my trowel. Palm trees line our path, along with a variety of flora; over 200 plant species existing, impossibly untouched. Beauty surrounds us, and while not the least bit superstitious, a wave of unease has settled over me.

If only we had known, but we didn't. We were not aware that we were intruding on something *else's* home...

Lyla is walking slightly ahead of me across a piece of driftwood, using it as a makeshift bridge, when suddenly it cracks under her weight, and she falls into the clutches of the murky water beneath. Her head bobs above the surface, and I see her laughing. Even as I am baffled by the state of the water, relief fills me at the sight of her unharmed.

"Well that stinks." She chuckles, grinning widely.

I smile back, but it quickly dissolves. I'm disturbed to see a black leech tethered to her cheek, and then, without warning, she's pulled under by an unseen force.

Immediately, I dive in after her. As soon as I hit the water, I feel leeches attach themselves to my skin, draining my blood like parasites.

I struggle to resurface but something painfully sharp clamps onto my shoulder, and then, as I'm pulled under and swallowed up by water, everything dims and my world goes dark.

An overwhelming stench of foulness, along with a rushing noise of what must be a waterfall, awakens me from my state of unconsciousness. Nauseous, I vomit what must be a gallon of disgusting brown fluid.

I find myself suspended slightly off the ground inside a damp cavern. My wrists are pinned above me, held in place by large rocks. To my dismay, my left arm seems broken, judging by its awkward angle, but for some reason I am numb, I feel no physical pain. Even though my vision is blurred, I can just make out the slick, rough walls of my surroundings.

Above me I hear a drip, drip, drip that must be runoff.

As I come around further, my gaze wanders to the ground beneath me, where I spot Lyla's mangled remains. My body heaves and convulses in distress though nothing comes up.

Some instinct from deep within cautions me to be silent, even though I want to scream and cry in distress. It is self-preservation.

I notice a cream-colored mound standing out against the dark walls. At first, I wonder if it's some sort of undiscovered mineral or perhaps an unusual boulder, but as my eyes adjust I realize it is something far more disturbing.

They are bones; a monstrous pile of bones in various sizes and shapes; some belonging to creatures of an amphibious nature.

I realize with a shudder, others are human remains.

The stench lingering in the air reeks of death.

Further away, there is movement. I watch in horror as the shadowy image draws nearer. The outline is eerily humanoid, but as it turns sideways to discard a carcass of some dead sea animal, I notice a powerful-looking, fin-like tail protruding from its backside. A sliver of light cuts through the darkness, and I catch a glimpse of smooth scale-like skin. The color is an iridescent shade of algae green.

Scientifically, I am fascinated. We know less about the oceans than we do about our own solar system. I speculate that the monster before me originated where the island itself disappeared to all those years ago.

Sensation slowly returns, my head is throbbing and it's hard to form a solid thought. How the hell am

I going to make it out of here alive? The creature slithers over to poor Lyla's body and begins to devour what's left of her corpse.

Blood and guts stain the cavern floor, I can no longer hold back as panic overwhelms me. I scream and curse, and struggle to get free. The monstrosity turns to look at me with soulless white eyes. It opens its mouth and let's out something between a shriek and a growl, revealing rows of razor-sharp teeth, with a yellowish substance oozing out from between them. I conclude it must hold some anesthetic-like quality, which would account for the numbing effect.

Upon hearing the slurping noises, a tightly clenched knot forms in my gullet as I try not to watch as it devours my dear friend.

I am, unfortunately, unable to divert my eyes, which is when I notice an even more disturbing feature. The creature before me is carrying two offspring, floating aloft in semi-translucent sacs filled with a murky green and yellow substance.

I'm certain I'm next.

The idea of a mother bird feeding its chicks comes unexpectedly to mind. I realize that I'm not here as food for the mother. I'm here to be substance for her offspring.

As if on cue, to synchronize with my terrifying train of thought, I hear bursts that sound like water balloons hitting the ground and exploding. The carnivorous sea demon wails as she stretches out on the ground, in apparent discomfort as her newborns slide out of their sacks and latch onto their mother. I'm revolted to see that the little mutants already have teeth, and they greedily ingest the afterbirth. They are surprisingly large; already the size of a small child. They open their eyes and sniff at the air, using small slits where a human's nostrils would be.

The newborns open their silvery eyes and begin edging toward me in harmonious rhythm.

Knowing my moment of escape was now or never, I am grateful the numbness in my limbs is ebbing, but the pain that replaces it is far from welcome. I flail wildly, attempting to free myself as the offspring close the distance.

The dripping in the cave seems to intensify, daring me to escape, so I thrash and scream madly, stopping only when I hear an ominous crack. My good arm pulls free, but the other is badly broken, dangling limply from the ledge above. White bone juts out of the skin, sending a shiver up my spine.

They are closer now, ever so close, and that damned dripping noise won't relinquish. My good arm drops to my side, and that's when I feel it. How could I have forgotten? I still have my Espada sheathed against my leg. I decide right then and there that I'm not going to die here. I have to live, for Lyla, and so the world will know about these sea demons.

That is, if anyone believes me.

I grab the knife, and do the unthinkable.

Barely flinching, I saw off my own appendage; cutting through muscle, tendons and bone. There must have been severe nerve damage because all I feel is mild pressure. Blood splatters my face as it spurts forth from my severed arm, and I quickly rip off the sleeve of my shirt, where my arm had been, and wrap it tightly around the stump. I turn just in time to stab the first little beast right through the eye, puncturing the slimy flesh and digging savagely through to the brain tissue.

A shrill roar echoes through the cavern. Ignoring it. I kick the second creature hard as it nips at me, eager to sink its teeth into my flesh.

I leap at it, plunging my knife into its grotesque belly. It mews as green slime and dark crimson blood pours from its stomach, innards falling out as its body spasms in the wake of death.

An agonized shriek reaches my ears, and I feel a tinge of sorrow, just for a moment. The mother mourns her offspring even as she lay recovering.

A second wave of fear overcomes me as I wonder how I can finish off this fully grown specimen, who is larger than a man, with my small knife. As I make my way toward her, supporting myself against the cool cavern wall, I see the rage etched on her face.

Pure adrenaline courses through me as I rush the adult female. Before she can raise herself from the damp stone floor, I slice the knife across where I think her throat should be. Slimy blood gushes out like a geyser, and I am hoping I hit a main artery. I see a light some distance away, behind the dripping of the waterfall

I run frantically through the watery threshold.

The cave opens onto a sandy beach, where the small boat that brought us to the island awaits amidst the rocky shoreline. My memory fails me for what happened after that, but one thing remains.

The infernal dripping.

My eyes pop open at the sound of running water. Across the room, the sink is overflowing.

As the room fills, objects begin floating around me. I'm paralyzed with fear. It feels as if the walls are closing in on me.

"Nurse..." I manage to croak.

My right hand feels for the buzzer, and I press the button again and again. No one answers my pleas as the water continues rising.

A sliver of moonlight cuts through the window.

"Oh, dear God, no! It can't be, not here... no." Webbed talons dance beneath the surface, reaching for me.

All hope is lost; the menacing claw beckons me towards my watery grave.

So I do the only thing I can.

I scream...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Bruce Lockhart had his first story published in Dark Eclipse, issue #7, entitled *Afflicted. Signed, Sealed and Delivered* was featured in Dark Lore and upcoming *Death's Final Request* will be featured in an August anthology entitled *Tales of the Undead-Suffer Eternal: Volume2*.

Joint efforts with Bruce's professional writing partner, Suzie Lockhart, have produced short stories such as *Through the Looking Glass* in Dionne's Anthology, *Arctic Weaver* in Sirens Call December eZine, and upcoming *Of Shadow & Substance* in Sirens Call '*Mental Ward: Stories from the Asylum*'.

As of late, two more stories have been cited for publication. *Ten to Midnight* will be featured in an anthology from Horrified Press, and *The Sköll and the Swine* will appear in Barnyard Horror.

A Serial Killer Soap Opera



Available in Print and Digital versions on Amazon

The Passing

Mathias Jansson

We were lost souls
crowded on a fragile wooden raft
on the dark water of Styx
when our journey halted
in the middle of the evil river
the surface lay as a blank stone
in silence we stood afraid - waiting

When suddenly, who know what
kind of monstrous of creature
lifted our raft as a leaf up in the air
and crushed it against the surface

Desperately we were struggling
in the cold water of Styx
when thousands of hell's piranhas
put their teeth in our flesh and meat
and freed our soul from the body

As naked souls we crawled ashore
on hell's beach – saved we thought
only to meet the eternal pain
the endless suffering of hell

The House

Mathias Jansson

I woke in the middle of the night
when my bed shook
and started to sink
through the floor
into an endless black hole
filled with bugs, maggots and rats

They crawled over my face and body
and my mouth was filled with mud
I realized that this place
would be my grave
and I regretted that I had dismissed
all the warning
not to buy
the house of Freeling Family

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, SNM Horror Magazine and The Poetry Box. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press as Just One More Step, Suffer Eternal anthology Volume 1-3, Hell Whore Anthology Volume 1-3.

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31 Flavors of Love *L.E. White*

As another one walked by his eyes followed her. Slender and a natural blonde, she walked with practiced ease on tall thin heels that clicked like the ticking of his old grandfather clock. Her eyes moved around the bar as she made her way through the press of bodies. She was prowling, the definition of the urban cougar, and he could appreciate the way she sized up both the competition and the prey.

February thirteenth was always an interesting day to go people watching and Mark was enjoying himself, despite the impending deadline. Single men and women were here looking for short term solutions to spending Valentine's Day alone and it made him smile as he watched the mating dance and plumage displays that should have been in a documentary from PBS.

If this were a normal evening he would have went for the blonde. The little black dress that she had painted onto her body would have looked wonderful on his floor in the morning, but tonight he had something specific in mind and she wasn't it. He made a mental note to come back some other day before turning and beginning to weave his way through the mass of dancers.

When he found what he wanted, she was leaning against a wall swirling a tall glass of electric blue inhibition remover to hide her nervousness from the boy she was talking with. The boy leaned in close to be sure he was heard while uttering one stupid line after another in an attempt to convince her that she wasn't going to be disappointed with what would probably be his vain, three minute attempt to offer her satisfaction for the evening.

When the boy turned to hail the waitress for more liquid courage Mark leaned near the girl and said, "You are so out of his league."

She turned to look at this new suitor and forgot the boy the moment she met his amber eyes. She was exactly what he was wanting this evening and now he just needed to collect her. As the boy turned back to resume his now failed hunt for companionship the tall man looked at him and said, "She isn't interested anymore. Try the blonde in the little black dress by the bar."

Mark turned back to the young woman he had selected and extended his hand. "My name is Mark. May I have yours?"

She giggled, a light and bubbling noise that made him smile, and put her hand in his. "I'm Katie."

Mark leaned forward, holding her with his eyes. She would have sworn that the gold flecks in his eyes were spinning in lazy circles as the edges of the room faded out.

"This place is not the place for a lady like you."

Katie nodded, and her head felt as if it were filled with lead.

Mark guided her out by the elbow as the young man took his drink and headed off to be cougar bait. They were out of the bar and into his car before Katie realized that she had left her coat inside. The cold air kissed her skin and she shivered. "I need my coat."

"Don't worry; I plan to keep you warm."

Katie giggled again and thought of soft kisses and teasing touches as he drove her away from the city. She was aroused and impatient as he parked the car and led her through his home and into the basement. He removed her clothing and she felt surprised that she wasn't self conscious about being naked in front of him. As lethargic thoughts made their way through her mind she wondered just how drunk she was because she would have never taken her clothes off for a man she didn't know before. She was also sure that she would have never allowed him tie her hands to a rope hanging from the ceiling but that was just what she was now doing. Whatever had been in that drink had been worth every penny because she wasn't afraid of what was to come. All her normal concerns had flown away until the only thing going through her head was that she was sad at losing the opportunity to taste him when he slipped the gag into her mouth. Katie's world floated along on a hypnotic tide of unconcern as Mark stared into her eyes again before turning off the lights and leaving the room.

A few minutes later, the door opened and his silhouette came back in along with the shape of a tall woman with an unruly mane of hair.

"Don't peek." Mark said as he removed his hands from over her eyes to reach back and turn on the lights.

Katie heard the click of a switch and then the humming of electricity as soft lights came to life. She could see the thin, beautiful woman with a mass of brown hair standing just inside the door with her eyes closed. Mark stepped around so that he could look at her face and Katie was sad to see the love in his eyes. If he wanted them both she would do it, she hadn't done it before but all she could think of was making him happy so that she could look into those spinning eyes again.

"Now?" The woman asked. A wry, thin lipped smile on her face.

Mark looked around the room, at Katie but also past her before saying, "Now."

The woman opened her eyes and they widened with surprise. She looked around the room with her mouth hanging open. "What is all this?"

"What time is it my love?"

"Just after midnight." She said.

"That's right; just after midnight on the fourteenth of February."

"These are all for me?" She bounced a bit as she swept her eyes around the room again.

"Yes," Mark said. "I realized that I couldn't give you a box of chocolates so I decided to give you an assortment of sweets that I knew you could enjoy. I will love you forever my dearest."

When the woman kissed him, Katie shook her head in an effort to clear some of the fog from her mind, then she looked behind her. The room was filled with naked men and women of all races, ages and sizes. Each one was bound to the ceiling as she was, with a large red bow above their wrists.

"May I have one now?"

"Of course you can my love." Mark stepped over beside the door so that he could watch her enjoy her gift. "It is Valentine's Day after all."

"Well don't you look sweet?" She said as she stepped towards Katie.

Katie watched with drunken fascination as the woman opened her mouth to reveal long, sharp fangs extending down from her gums.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - L. E. White is a happily married father of four living on a farm in southern Indiana. He has published stories in "A Quick Bite of Flesh, An Anthology of Zombie Flash Fiction" from Hazardous Press, "Once Upon a Time, A Collection of Unexpected Fairy Tales" from editor Anna Mead, and "Carnage: After the End Volume 2" from Sirens Call Publications. He also publishes weekly fiction on his blog.

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HOME

A Sleazebag Out of Time's Grasp *Michael Shimek*

Rory Wilkins walked into the club with one thing on his mind: sex.

It was a busy night. Lights were flashing and the bass was bumping loud. The dance floor was filled with cliques of women and girls—those young, tender, barely legal ones were so fine—trying to have a fun night in the big city. Horny men weaved through the crowd, looking for easy tail to pick up and bring home for a one-night stand. Everyone was drunk, and everyone was buzzing with energy.

It was time for Rory to join the fun.

He bobbed around the place until finding a bar far enough away that he could finally hear himself think. His right index finger and thumb twisted the gold band around his left middle finger. He scanned the area, found an open spot at the bar next to a gorgeous blonde—he would pinch that sweet ass—and strut toward his goal. Signaling the bartender for two beers, he glanced at the woman's tits and made his move.

"Hey there, you sexy young thing. My name's Rory."

The woman turned and looked him up and down before turning back to her friend.

"Oh, come on. Can't I at least get a hello? I'll give you one of my beers."

She turned back to him: "Make it both."

"Deal."

As the bartender returned with two bottles, the blonde took the bottles and gave one to her friend while she took a few swigs from the other.

"Hello," she said, again turning her back to him.

Oh, you are going to regret that you bitch.

Rory held his left hand in his right. He traced his right index finger around the gold ring and found the diamond-shaped hole in the hoop. He applied pressure and felt the emerald encrusted ridges tingle beneath his fingertip. The oh-so familiar tingling turned into a slight burning before it abruptly stopped.

Everything stopped. *Time* stopped.

Sudden and complete silence slammed into the club like a runaway truck. The interior was a frozen picture, a three-dimensional still image placed around Rory. Men and women stood motionless on the dance floor, caught in absurd and comical moves. Lights shone down on people like those of UFOs beaming people aboard their ships.

Rory looked at his target. The blonde was stuck in mid-drink, the nose of the bottle stuck to her luscious lips. He moved her hand and drink away from her face for easier access. When both of her arms were at her side, he reached for her skirt.

Jane Brandet's night out with her friend had been great. *Had* been great.

So, of course, it had to be ruined when that ass-of-a-man had come over and rudely hit on her. She ignored him, though, and even took his beers because she knew the man would never apologize. She thought that would be the end of it. Sometimes men could be persistent, but she was a tough girl and they always backed off when she stood her ground.

Then her night spiraled into a nightmare.

The drink she had only just been gulping down disappeared from her mouth and reappeared on the bar. Her arms were suddenly at her sides, her clothes felt out of place—was her bra unhooked?—and a small spot on her left butt-cheek flared with pain. She felt dirty, violated. Confusion and fear gave her the shakes and she started to sweat.

"You got lucky. I found someone hotter."

Jane looked at the man who had hit on her. A large grin enveloped his face, and he winked at her before turning and walking toward the dance floor.

Stomach bile churned in her gut. She turned to her friend and said, “Barb, I’ve got to head to the restroom. I’ll be right back.” She rushed off to the crowded bathroom, entered the only empty stall, and vomited into the porcelain bowl. After she was sure there was nothing left to expel, she stood up and leaned against the stall wall.

Not sure what had come over her, Jane’s mind raced with questions and ideas. Then it struck her: that man.

She had been feeling fine until that gross man had interacted with her. It was quite possible he had slipped her something—it wouldn’t be the first time she had been slipped something. Back in her college years, while attending a fraternity party, an unknown partygoer had drugged her. Thankfully, a good friend had found her before anyone had the chance to do anything. She woke up the next morning in her friend’s bed feeling completely out of it. The incident had left her feeling ashamed, and she promised to be more careful in the future. But she apparently hadn’t adhered to her promise, because there was no other explanation for her sudden sickness. Although it didn’t explain why she felt like someone had groped her entire body with nasty hands.

Jane stormed out of the stall and out of the women’s restroom. She scanned the entire club before sighting the stranger who had poisoned her. He was dancing and grinding against a big-chested blonde woman on the dance floor. A woman on a mission of revenge, she weaved through the crowd. She was directly behind the man when someone carelessly bumped into her. She brushed against the man before sprawling onto the floor.

Suddenly, everything went still.

The music and chatter cut to silence, an eeriness on par with an instantaneous apocalypse rendering all life nonexistent. Looking around, Jane saw that legs, arms, and bodies of those surrounding her were as motionless as statues at a wax museum. Only one pair of legs moved, the limbs connected to the man she suspected of drugging her drink.

Still on the ground, she watched in confusion as he moved around the stationary blonde who had been moving only a second ago. The pervert reached under the woman’s shirt and fondled her breasts. He dry humped her several times before his excited face frowned into disappointment. A whispered grunt about fake implants escaped his lips, and he disregarded the woman. He looked over the dance floor before his eyes widened in giddiness. His hands came together and then the man became as frozen as everyone else.

Jane stood up with furrowed brows. She walked around the man, observing his blank stare. She waved her hand in front of his eyes, but he showed no sign of acknowledging her. With that, she punched him as hard as she could in the face. The man tilted back, but stopped falling a quarter of the way down; an invisible force held him up.

It hit her.

Time had stopped. She was beyond the grasp of time, stuck in a plane of space where the concept had no meaning. She watched TV, and she read comics as a child; what she observed could only mean one thing.

And like the last few pieces of a puzzle all falling perfectly into place, Jane realized what had happened. Her fists were a blur of fury as they pummeled the man to the ground; with no time, the son-of-a-bitch fell like he was being pushed down under mud. She frantically searched him for the device—god, she hoped there was a device and it wasn’t something his mind could do—that allowed the power to pause time. Her eyes zeroed in on a small glow emanating from his hands. She wrenched his hands apart and saw the ring.

A gold ring was wrapped around his middle finger. Something on top radiated a white light with the

slightest hint of green. She knelt down and pried the ring from his finger showing no mercy. The finger bent and twisted at odd angles, but she got it off. Cut through the front of the ring was a diamond-shaped hole. The glowing came from little emerald rocks that peppered the ridges, reminding Jane of the rock candy she used to eat as a kid that looked like crystals on a stick. It slipped on with ease. As her finger traced the piece of jewelry, the tip tingled as it passed over the hole and emeralds. The sensation turned into a burning and she jerked her hand away.

The club burst into reanimation. Music rumbled, lights flashed back and forth, and patrons continued with their grooving.

Jane whipped around to see the man's shocked expression. She winked at him before pressing her fingertip back against the ring.

Everything froze.

With utter hate and despise in her eyes, Jane figured out the perfect punishment for someone who found it acceptable to assault a person against their will.

Rory knew he was in trouble.

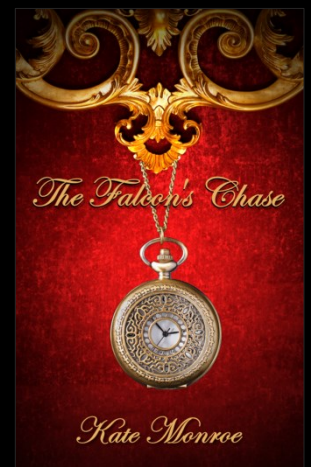
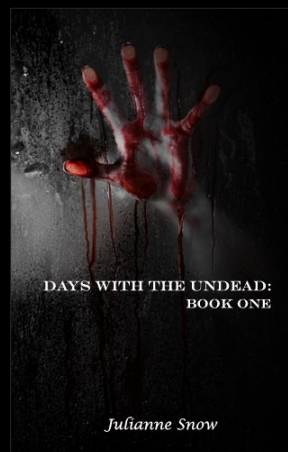
Somehow, that bitch from the bar had stolen his ring. *His* ring. One moment he was on his way to the next target, and the next he was in tremendous pain on the floor, his middle finger broken beyond hell. When he looked up, the blonde woman vanished before his eyes. Before he could react, an even worse pain stabbed at his groin. A dark, red spot splotched his jeans and quickly spread across the fabric.

Everyone on the dance floor ignored Rory as he squirmed and squealed in agony. Within an arm's length away, he witnessed his own, precious member flatten and explode under the boot of someone dancing to the music, a squished bug ready to be scraped from the ground and tossed into the garbage.

Jane stood at the entrance to the club. She couldn't stop grinning as that *bastard* thrashed and wailed on the ground. She would later have to tell her friend she went home sick, but first she wanted to get accustomed to her newly acquired treasure. There was a whole new realm for her to explore, and she had all the time in the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Michael Shimek lives in Minneapolis, MN. He has stories that appear in the anthologies *Grave Robbers* and *ZOMBIE: Lockdown*, along with more on the way. Many of his stories can be found on his website: michaeshimek.blogspot.com

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Fifteen Minutes *James Everington*

That was how she phrased it to herself, after a crap day and too many drinks: something she wanted. But she wanted lots of things (those jeans; that holiday; a pay increase) and she was the kind of person who, if she merely wanted something, planned how to get it. She had no plans for becoming famous. Instead she wished she *was* famous, already. That like something from a fairy tale it would just happen. Something granted, with no more effort on her part than watching a falling star.

Every week she bought magazines in which she saw evidence of other people having such a wish granted - people no more beautiful than she, no more talented, held up for public consumption. They hadn't done anything more than thousands of others to get where they were. "I always *wanted* this so much," they said when interviewed, making the same verbal mistake as she: they had in fact wished for this, all their lives.

And she'd close the magazine with a sigh and turn on the TV, but the famous people were on that too, and she'd turn it off angrily. And she'd go to bed and lie awake and think of those jeans she wanted, that pay increase she wanted, and of all the shitty steps to take and minor humiliations to suffer to get those; just to get *those*. And she'd try not to think of the people from the magazines and how they'd arrived somewhere she longed to be, without even knowing where that was.

One evening, thinking such thoughts, she looked up and saw herself on TV.

She was evidently at some kind of premier for she was smiling on the red carpet, and wearing a dress that looked like a wish itself, glittering as it did in all the camera flashes. Watching herself, she wondered when this had happened, when it had been filmed. Nothing suggested she was actually *in* the film being premiered, she was just present and evidently deserving of being photographed just because of who she was.

Watching, she felt a light, fluttery feeling in her chest, a feeling of expectation she hadn't had since being a child. She remembered when: blowing out candles. But whereas that had been a momentary feeling that anything was possible, this feeling persisted as she stared into the glow of the TV screen. But then the news moved on to other events: landmark civil rights legislation introduced; world records broken.

Bored, she switched off, but that night she still couldn't sleep.

The next morning it was as if she was still dazed from all the camera flashes, and she was insulated from all the petty annoyances of the day: the late bus; the split nail; the disappointing lack of news on that pay increase. These barely registered or affected the giddy breathlessness that she felt. On the way home she stopped in the newsagents, and sure enough some of the magazines had her face in them - not many, and she wasn't front-cover, but she had no doubt that would change in the future.

She invited some of her girlfriends to her flat that evening, but already their attitude towards her seemed to have changed. She showed them the pictures of herself and they looked at her oddly. They tried to turn the conversation back to her job, or the jeans that they all wanted - *jealous bitches*, she thought. Her friends left earlier than they normally did, left her with more of the wine. She drank the rest of it, not concerned about the next day, and flicked through magazines looking at the pictures of herself again and again. In her favourite she was wearing a red bikini on a beach so golden it defied belief. She touched her fingers to the sand, to the pure blue sky. To think, she had been there!

The next morning her alarm clock interrupted her glossy dreams and she dressed for work in a daze of happiness; the cold floorboards under her bare feet like hot sand she could ripple her toes in.

Gradually she lost touch with her friends, who were all jealous despite what they might claim. She stopped dating and apart from work she could go days without speaking to anyone. She still had her job

but knew a lack of commitment had been noted; all talk of that pay increase had been quietly dropped. But wanting things was no longer enough of a spur to plan how to get them; she was annoyed but did nothing. And were *any* of the things she wanted really that important anymore, considering what she read about herself in the magazines that were filling her house? She couldn't throw out any of them that had a picture of her in, even the ones where the picture was accompanied by spiteful words: "bulimia"; "gold-digger"; "drug addict". She supposed such words shouldn't matter to her, for didn't such stories show she was getting *more* famous? What was missing a few meals to that?

And then there was the young man.

For she often saw herself in the same photographs as some swanky young man with white teeth, conspicuous tattoos, and his own brand of aftershave. (He was good at some sport, she wasn't sure which one.) The magazines printed a lot of bitchy stuff about him, too. About how he treated her. She didn't believe it - makeup couldn't cover up tears and bruises like they claimed it could. She preferred to read (again and again) the story of how they had met, how he had picked *her* from a whole nightclub of girls, all looking for a prince-charming. They'd all recognised him from the magazines, his good looks appearing two-dimensional under the strobe lights... And the shoe had fit *her* foot, and they were to be married once they'd worked out which magazine would pay the most for an exclusive.

One weekend she had to leave her flat in order to go to a hen-do that had been arranged by her old girlfriends months before, when they'd still talked. She'd almost not gone but they'd been insistent and she supposed she should rebuild bridges - the magazines didn't like it when famous people 'forgot their roots'. She had to share a hotel room with another girl called Faye, which she wasn't happy about, and she locked the bathroom door just to avoid her. She rubbed steam from the mirror (Faye had showered before her) and peered at her reflection, wondering why her nostrils were so red. She was losing weight though, and her cheekbones were more pronounced than before.

As she looked at herself in the mirror she felt a doubling sensation, a weird certainty that the girl she was looking at in the glass wasn't the girl doing the looking. She thought for a moment the girl in the mirror was about to speak, but it was her own lips that were pursing.

"C'mon!" said Faye, banging on the locked door and making her jump. "You've been *ages*!" She hadn't realised, and she sniffed and wiped her nose with her hand, and hurried to get ready.

She and Faye went downstairs and the bride-to-be was already there, wearing a dress which was a high-street knock-off of one *she* had worn in one of the magazine pictures months ago. She decided it wasn't deliberate and took a glass of champagne, but she still felt annoyed about it.

Drinking on an empty stomach made her giddy and she decided to get some air - the cool night was without wind, and the statues and topiary in the grounds of the hotel were edged with moonlight and didn't look real. She had taken off her heels because they pinched, and the frosted grass crunched under her bare feet.

She was looking up to the sky to see if any stars were falling, and she almost walked into an old stone well in the hotel grounds. She peered down into it and could see the coins other people had thrown in, their wishes sparkling even under dark water. She felt a savage triumph and took a coin from her own purse and flicked it down the well...

"Nothing," she said as it fell. "*Nothing*."

She felt a sudden anger, although she wasn't sure at what, and her hands shook with it as she emptied all the change from her purse down the well in one go. What did it matter how much she threw into the stupid fucking thing? A cloud had covered the moon and she couldn't even see the coins at the bottom, anymore.

She turned away from the well and she could see the lights of the room her friends were in, hear the

music and laughter, and she stood still and shivering, not knowing how she could rejoin them.

The people at her office asked her what had happened to her eye, as if they didn't know - she was certain they secretly read the latest gossip about her in those magazines, although they never let on. So they'd read, like she had, that *he'd* hit her - he'd had an affair with some slag of a lads' mag model, and when she'd confronted him about it he'd hit her.

She gingerly touched her eye in the mirror in the Ladies at work - the bruise was livid and too garish to successfully hide with makeup. Which might be a good thing - she had to gain public sympathy because he would no doubt tell lies about her in the press. She had been wrong at the well - becoming famous didn't stop you wishing, she knew now, you just continuously wished to be *more* famous (or simply not to lose the fame you had). But she didn't like to remember that night, and not because she was bothered by what that cow in the fake dress had said when she'd gone back inside. She didn't like to think of that weirdly objective feeling she'd had when she'd looked into the hotel mirror, as if seeing herself from the outside... But it haunted her thoughts every time she saw her reflection.

She took a step back to look at herself: fashionably pale skin making the black-eye stand out all the more; a skinnier frame than she'd used to have. Her work top looked too loose and her jeans were too low on her hips, but she couldn't be bothered to buy new ones.

Someone came out of one of the cubicles behind her and caught her eye in the mirror. "*Christ*," the other girl said when she looked at her. She turned and serenely pushed past and went into the vacated cubicle. She shut the door and waited until the other girl had left before she threw up.

That next day she went through all the pile of dusty magazines she'd hoarded, every one, and when she found a photograph of that lads' mag model, she carefully and methodically cut her head out of it.

It took her hours and she didn't eat or answer the phone calls from her office the whole time

Gradually the feeling of excitement she had every time she saw a photograph of herself in the magazines turned to one of disquiet, a faint nausea. Her vision blurred often now, her hands shook, but despite how hazy her flat might seem around her the pictures she saw of herself were always clear, as were the accompanying words, mimicking concern about her weight only to draw attention to it. She was always scurrying in the pictures now, head-down, looking like just *anyone*... Why was she so reluctant to be photographed; what was she playing at? In her light-headedness she had brief moments when she forgot the pictures were of her and she judged herself harshly, until her hands shook the picture into clarity again...

But despite this disquiet, and despite the fact that in each photograph she looked paler and skinnier than the last, she still felt a feeling of relief on seeing herself at all, because she was appearing in the magazines less and less (she counted). She hadn't been on the TV for months.

I wish, I wish..., she thought, but the words turned to spent candle-smoke before she could finish.

Gradually everything from her previous life fell away, became hazy with distance: her girlfriends never called, her job let her go. She supposed her flat would go soon too, the cheaply wallpapered walls melting away to reveal her real, spacious life behind them. Sometimes, looking into her bathroom mirror, it was if they already had, for the pale, red-eyed face that met her gaze was so close to the one she saw in the magazines.

She knew enough of the rhythms of fame to know that the negative, sneering press she was receiving at the moment didn't have to be forever. They wanted nothing more than a story, and a

comeback could be a story, if done right. A fling with her ex, perhaps.

But despite half-expecting it that didn't stop her feeling of excitement one day when she went into the newsagent and saw her face on the front-cover of *all* the magazines, and even some of the national papers. Her hands were shaking as she carried them all up to the counter (the shop owner as always pretending not to recognise her) and the daylight that hit her as she hurried back to her flat was like flashlights, too hot and close and making her throat feel too tight.

Back in her flat she wildly opened magazine after magazine, and it was like it had been at the start: she saw pictures of herself in a dazzling dress on the red-carpet, in a red bikini on a golden stretch of beach...

She looked again at that last picture, and realised she recognised it. It was the same beach, the same bikini - the same picture as they'd printed all those months ago. Or had it been years? She touched it softly, as if to feel the warm sand...

She turned back to the first magazine, and read it and the rest of them more carefully this time. Her hands were steady as she closed the last one.

So.

She'd choked to death on her own vomit, in the toilets of a VIP party she'd desperately gate-crashed in order to try and get back together with her ex. That was how all the magazines described it, "desperately". She'd "tearfully confronted" him, then fled to the toilets when he'd publically turned her down. None of the guests had really known who she was or cared enough to go and see if she was all right. So it had been too late when the bouncers had finally realised something was wrong and broken down the cubicle door. She'd been dead when the paramedics and paparazzi had arrived.

She put the final magazine onto the pile of them besides her, and maybe her hands were still shaking because she accidentally toppled the whole lot over. Their fall threw up a cloud of dust and she started coughing.

And once she started she couldn't stop coughing and it was like she had something solid lodged in her throat, not dust, for she was suddenly choking, breathless.

She tried to remember how long it had been between reading that she'd been hit and the bruise forming on her face.

No this isn't right, she thought, and stood on trembling legs. She remembered the girl in the mirror and the girl watching and how she hadn't been sure which she was. *I just wanted...*, she thought. She hurried towards the bathroom, almost falling as she slipped on the glossy pages of the magazines scattered on the floor. She could barely breathe through her congested throat; *no this isn't right at all*, she thought as she clutched at the sink to keep herself upright as she looked at her face in the mirror...

She wondered if the fact that it looked so different was due to the final blurriness of asphyxiation, or due to the fact that she was seeing it clearly for the first time in years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - James Everington mainly writes dark, supernatural fiction, although he occasionally takes a break and writes dark, non-supernatural fiction. His first collection, *The Other Room*, contains both. A second collection, *Falling Over*, is forthcoming from Infinity Plus. He drinks Guinness, if anyone is offering.

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Blog: <http://jameseverington.blogspot.co.uk/>

Interview with Lane Kareska, Author of *North Dark*

In this issue we feature an interview with Lane Kareska, author of the upcoming novella *North Dark*, soon to be released via Sirens Call Publications. To whet your appetite for the dystopian journey that is *North Dark*, let's take a moment and consider its synopsis...

Set in a lonesome and barbarous failed state, North Dark is the story of a lone man traveling by dogsled across a frozen wasteland in pursuit of the fugitive who destroyed his family.

Haunted by predators both physical and spectral, the musher's journey takes him across a deadened tundra, tortured cities and the remains of civilizations long-lapsed into madness. All the while, his enemy slides in and out of striking distance, always one step ahead, always one act of violence away.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Lane, why don't you take a few moments to introduce yourself to the readers of *The Sirens Call*.

Lane Kareska: Dog person. 90's alternative rock. Heineken. Comic book conventions.

I was born in Texas and grew up in the Chicago suburbs. My fiction tends to focus on place: Midwestern American cities, European landscapes, frontier towns, places I know or places I've worked hard to learn about from a distance. While writing, I spend way too much time trying to nail the precise look of a certain hotel lobby in Galway, Ireland or the geography of a street corner in Murphysboro, Illinois, or whatever. *North Dark* is a deliberate reaction against that desire to be perfectly accurate. It's my first effort writing about an entirely fictional place. Does *North Dark* occur in the near future? An alternate reality? I don't know. It takes place "somewhere else" - an arctic landscape in the grips of a new Iron Age. I tried to embrace the mystery while, simultaneously, asking a lot of questions of this world. Many of the answers - happily - turned out to be pretty savage.



SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

LK: I remember driving around my neighborhood, a day or two after I got my driver's license at 16, and all of a sudden just *deciding* I was going to be a writer. That would be what I'd spend my life doing. It really was that simple and clear. I'd always been very drawn to story - my earliest memories are of being read to as a child; I wrote stories, comic books and novels throughout grade school. Figuring out what I ultimately wanted to do has just never been a problem. It's kind of always been really obvious to me that I should try to contribute in this way. Some people talk about writing (and all art) like it's something that you do when you're young and then you give it up as you mature. I just loathe that idea; it's such a failure of personality.

SCP: What is *North Dark* about?

LK: *North Dark* is a dark, arctic adventure. It sluices through horror, post-apocalyptic thriller, and fantasy. But arctic adventure is probably the most succinct way of putting it. I'd love to think of it as *The Road* written by Jack London.

It's about a man who has spent his whole life living with his family and clan in a windswept, northern village. One day, a passing fugitive upsets all of that, violently. *North Dark* is the story of this man's single-minded quest for revenge. It takes him through new and rough terrain, a world stricken by plague, prisons, and madness. But ultimately, he gets the confrontation he's pursuing.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about North Dark before they read it?

LK: It's short. It can be read in one uneasy night. Or one fucked up day at the beach.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

LK: I wish I could say that I just flat-out wing it. But no, I actually outline pretty thoroughly. Gratefully, only about 30% of what I plan makes it to the final draft. The rest is a surprise to me.

SCP: If you could cast North Dark, who would you choose to play your main characters of Two Crows and Thrall?

LK: Well, the main character starts out a pretty complete, red-blooded individual, but towards the end he basically looks like Jack Skellington, so an actor with physical range.

Thrall also undergoes serious changes. He would need to be played by someone who could portray determined and secretive, with a predator animal's physicality and the eyes of Superman. So, whoever that is.

SCP: How would you like readers to see Two Crows? Thrall?

LK: They're very much the hero and the villain. But doesn't everyone see themselves as the hero?

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

LK: Learning how to write. I've spent the last 13+ years working on the exact same goal. Nothing else. It's not easy. I subscribe to Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hour rule. That's probably how long it takes to master or, at least, become functionally competent in any field. 10,000 hours tends to shake out to about 10 years. That's at least how long one should probably plan to invest in an art form like this. It's not like "I have a great idea for a book" and then you take up your laptop, longboard over to Starbucks, and – boom – you did it. Or at least, that's not how it's been for me. It is a long haul. It requires diligence, patience and intense study. So it's like stalking.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets North Dark apart from other books of the same genre?

LK: To prepare for this I read a lot of fantasy: Ursula K. LeGuin, Tolkien, Herbert, George R.R. Martin, and others. I think what I tried to recreate from those books was a sense of a living, pre-existing world where the rules are perfectly clear and the setting utterly vivid. What distinguishes *North Dark*, I believe, is the nature of the hero's quest. The protagonist is not seeking to become some people's messiah. Quite the opposite. He's pursuing a singular, entirely selfish goal. Consequences, and everyone else, be damned.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

LK: I'm researching the next thing right now, so I'm reading a lot of nonfiction: American history, biographies, books about technology 200 years ago. The idea is: What if Lewis and Clark's adventure was not the first of its kind? What if there had been an overland expedition to the Pacific previous to theirs? What happened to that crew? And what were they really after?

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

LK: My writing hero is a genius named Charles McCarry. He's a literary and espionage novelist whose most notable work came out in the seventies and eighties. Google him. His work makes most everything else read like an utter waste of time.

Also, I'm completely obsessed with Cormac McCarthy, Hemingway, Ursula K. LeGuin, Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, Karen Russell, Denis Johnson. I also read a lot of comic books; my favorite writers of the moment are Grant Morrison, Tony S. Daniel, Mark Waid, and Kyle Higgins. I run an X-Men blog on my website. There we review X-Men books (starting at the beginning in 1963) issue by issue. If you want to see how drastically an art form can change in a lifetime, read an issue of X-Men today and one of Kirby's books from the 60's. It's a blast. Those books (then and now) simply hum with life.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

LK: I like the way Stephen King frames it (and I'm paraphrasing here): If you wrote something, someone paid you for it, and you paid the light bill with that money, then you're successful. So by that measure, sure, I'm successful. One 40 watt light bulb from Wal-Mart successful, but whatever, I do what I love and I don't have to fake it in meetings.

SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are starting out?

LK: Consider an MFA. I went to Southern Illinois University Carbondale for mine and it was one of the greatest experiences of my life. You get paid to write, to think, to study, and if you're really lucky, travel. All I want to do - all I've ever wanted to do - is read, write and travel. An MFA enabled me to do each of those for three very pleasant and instructive years. It's far and away the best writing decision I've ever made.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your books knowing? How should they feel?

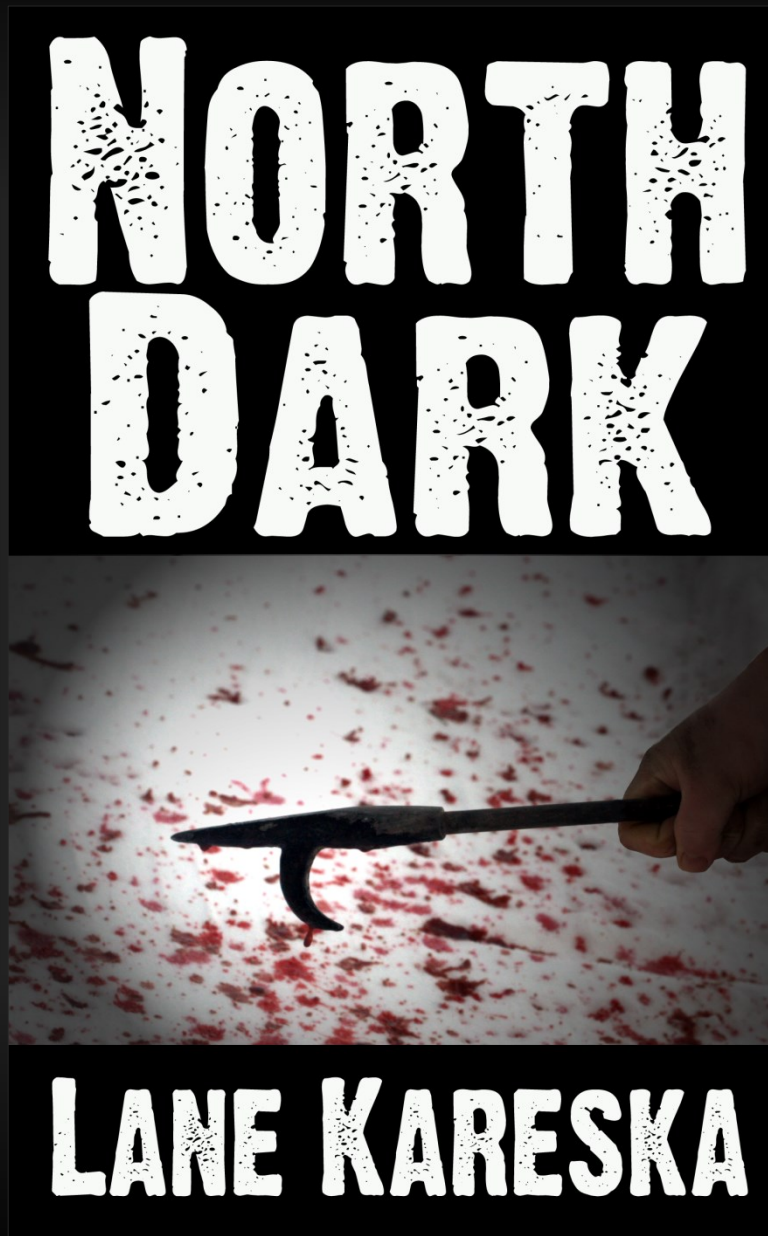
LK: I am very curious about that myself. Anyone who wants to read it and tell me what they think can get ahold of me at Lane.Kareska@gmail.com or the website: NorthDark.com. I'll respond. Or reach out to me on twitter (@LaneKareska) and let's grab a beer. Not kidding.

The message I found at the end of *North Dark* was deeply surprising. Not at all what I expected. The book was written in a dark place, during a Chicago winter, when I didn't really want to be there, while my

dog was slowly dying of kidney disease. So the book wasn't written in the sunniest of circumstances. Most of the book is a dark, cold pursuit. And that's how writing it felt. I won't spoil the surprises (there are a few) but I think in the end, the darkness, the isolation, the violence, all reveal something unexpected about the characters, the nature of the chase, and the world in which this all occurs. It certainly surprised me.

Thank you Lane for taking the time to answer our questions. For those readers interested in reading *North Dark*, it will be released soon. If you're interested in reviewing a copy for your blog or website please send an email to Julianne@SirensCallPublications.com.

Coming Soon from Sirens Call Publications



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