

April 2014 issue #14

Old-School Horror

Poetry, Short Stories, A Flash Fiction

400 Word Comparative Flash Fiction Contest Winners announced!

> Photography by Tanja Jurkovic

Interview with
Daniel Durrant,
Author of
'Climate Change'

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Old School Horror: An Editorial Gloria Bobrowicz

Old School Horror, in my opinion, is spine-tingling, hair-raising, and scary as hell horror.

I recently asked my friends on Facebook what first book or film scared them as a child? For me, the movie was *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. I can remember as a child leaping from the doorway to my bed, convinced there was a 'pod' under it, waiting to take my place. This went on for years, way past any reasonably sane person would let it. To this day when someone is not acting as I think they normally would, I ask, "Where did they hide the pod?" my family knows exactly what I mean by this.

Thank you to my horror writer friends for replying and providing their first scariest film and book. Some of those old horror movies are: *The Haunting*; *Psycho* – the shower scene and its music is crazy scary; *Phantasm* – when the Tall Man said "Boy", still sends shivers down my spine; *Trilogy of Terror*; *Jaws* – again the music was very scary. I stayed out of the ocean for a very long time; *Exorcist* – this one caused me many a nightmare, kept seeing her head spinning around, and finally; *Halloween* – my favorite holiday, but that music creeps me out to this day. It didn't help that it was my husband's choice of movie to fall asleep to EVERY night.

Those were the early horror films, so well made, and they stayed with each of us. The writers would be proud.

Some of the books mentioned were: *The Scary Stories* for kids; *The Exorcist*; *Amityville Horror*; *Thing on the Doorstep* and *Pickman's Model* from a collection of HP Lovecraft's short stories; Roald Dahl's *The Witches*; *The Wolf's Hour* by Robert R. McCammon; Steven King's *It*.

Since more movies than books were listed, I think most of us saw a scary movie before we read a scary book. The technology for movies has come a very long way. I guess we won't be seeing remakes of movies of giant ants like in *Them*; or the lizard wanting the girl in *Creature from the Black Lagoon* in the near future. I have to admit, I still enjoy indulging in my guilty pleasure of watching some of these during an afternoon or late night.

Movies are great, but there is nothing, in my opinion, like a scary book or story that lets you form the pictures in your mind. Our imaginations can, and do, conjure things much scarier than films are able to. Read the stories in this eZine and you'll know exactly what I mean.

So here's to popping in a favorite old horror film. Grab your favorite drink, be it wine, beer, soda or whatever and your favorite snack. For me, it's white wine and popcorn.

I might curl up on the futon, wrapped in an afghan that I made, in my office with a favorite old horror book. Either way, I'll be thinking of you.

Cheers!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Gloria Bobrowicz has been a huge horror fan since early childhood. She loves books related to true crime — particularly the serial killer variety. Watching the movie 'Night of the Living Dead' or some of the older horror movies such as, 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', 'The Thing from Another World', or 'War of the Worlds' with a bowl of popcorn is her idea of relaxing. Gloria is a co-owner and the Editor-In-Chief of Sirens Call Publications.

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Sound — An Essential Element in Horror: An Editorial Julianne Snow

What is horror without its scare? Nothing. It would simply stop being horror and morph into just another story. Oftentimes, it's what accompanies the actual reveal that gives it the punch that's needed. That element is sound and it's an important part of horror films.

Directors often utilize music as another character in their movies. Consider Hitchcock's *Psycho* without the string music—would the shower scene have the same biting tension and palpable feel without the crisscrossing pluck of those strings? They mimicked the slash of the knife and drove each one of them home to the viewer.

What about the organ music in *Carnival of Souls*? Without it, the atmosphere of what can only be adequately described as otherworldly would have been lost. And *Jaws*? What would the movie be without the build-up? Sure there was a giant shark attacking people without warning, but the soundtrack helped to reinforce the fear in our amygdalae. The music in both of these films was integral in helping the plot hit the right notes with the viewer.

Even Dawn of the Dead used music to help create a specific mood. The polka-ish melody that plays through the mall is at direct odds with the subject matter. It throws you off balance with something familiar and then tosses you into a world that was so foreign you feel instantly at odds. How else would you feel as Zombie shenanigans played out around you—at odds is likely the best descriptor. And that's why the soundtrack was so effective.

Other types of sound effected help to punctuate the elements of fear and tension that are present in horror movies. *Eraserhead* would be flat without its moments of white noise. And who could forget the song *In Heaven*? Creepy!! And in *Suspiria*, all of the sound effects—ack, remember the witches screams?—meld into the drum and organ music to continually creep the audience out.

Then you come to the theme song of a movie... What would *The Lost Boys* be without *Cry Little Sister*? Even the Echo and the Bunnymen cover of *People Are Strange* helped to create the right atmosphere for the film. Paul Zaza and John McDermott hit one out of the park with *The Ballad of Henry Warden* for *My Bloody Valentine*. Sure it was a little folksy in terms of lore, but it set the stage for what was to come.

And I'll leave you with this one last point which I think helps to reinforce the role music plays in a film. John Carpenter screened a copy of *Halloween* to movie executives, only the movie he showed them that first time lacked the soundtrack. At the time, they laughed, stating the movie wasn't scary at all. When they were shown the film a second time, with the chilling soundtrack laid over it, they all agreed that *Halloween* was a horror masterpiece. If that doesn't convince you that sound effects and music are an important characters in any movie, I don't know what else will...



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the Days with the Undead series and Glimpses of the Undead. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist at Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves. Be sure to check out *The Carnival 13*, a collaborative round-robin novella for charity which she contributed to and helped to spearhead which was released in October 2013.

Twitter: <u>Occupations</u>. <u>Days with the Undead</u>.

100 STORIES WRITTEN IN 100 WORDS



Available on Amazon and Lulu.com

The Tombs of Terrace Leigh Maynard Blackoak

A sickly green miasma descended from the heavens, and hovered menacingly for several moments over the tombs of Terrace Leigh Cemetery, before slowly seeping into the ground. Each minuscule droplet of moisture carried with it, a singular ghastly intent to disrupt the cycle of life and death. Through sod, dirt and rock, it invaded the worm-rotted coffins, pervading the eternal sleep of the dead with its monstrous design to create perverse abominations from the peaceful slumber of death.

Gradually, the decayed remains of the long dead cadavers began to stir inside the cozy confines of their interment, feeling an awakening to a life that seemed strange and foreign to their limited capacity to produce rational thought. Nothing remained of the humanity that once existed in their being, except for an all-consuming desire to satisfy a hunger, to feed upon the warm-blooded flesh of the living. Unto that need, they dug and clawed their way out of their tombs, reaching through the dirt of the grave to touch upon the outer world of the living once more. The first hand emerged from the ground, followed quickly by the other. At length, more hands and arms arose from their earthen rest, and the tombs of Terrace Leigh shook, as the ground gave up its dead.

Asher sat in his parlor, endeavoring to understand the intense feeling of dread hanging over him like a caliginous pall of impending doom. The night, peaceful yet eerily silent, offered nary a trace of evidence to support the apprehensive specter that held him in an inexplicable grip of fear, yet there existed a sense of something vile and reprehensible lurking unseen under the darkened canopy of the night. An opened bottle of laudanum and the scent of freshly smoked peyote suggested his feeling nothing more than paranoia inspired by the consumption of substances whose purpose was to create a mind-altered state. Still, the feeling ran deeper than the effects of any intoxicant, causing the very marrow of his bones to quiver with fright.

In an instant, the specter of the night turned from its eerie silence, falling into the grasp of an unwonted ill wind that blew with a ferocity that shook his log cabin to its very foundation. Ghastly, distorted shadows lumbered about in a shambling gait outside his window, filling his mind with thoughts of the spectral dead taking part in a dance of death, possessing both macabre and elegant qualities that adorned his fright with a sense of beauty. Closer and closer the shadows ambled in awkward movements neared his house, casting silhouettes on the wall resembling something less monstrous and more of people in dire need of assistance. Casting off the restraints of fear, Asher resolved to do the neighborly thing, and venture outside to render aid to those in apparent need.

Opening the door to his home with a guarded deportment, his studious gaze examined the situation outside with a hesitant scan. A thick and pale green fog engulfed his vision, its density preventing him from being able to distinguish much more than the outlines of seemingly disfigured forms clumsily milling about his grounds. The dark figures uttered unintelligible grunts and groans, but nothing that even remotely resembled lucid speech. Curiosity led his feet to carry him toward the mysterious beings outside, as a loud and frantic voice inside his head pleaded for him to tarry inside the safety of his home.

"Are you in need of assistance?" his disquieted voice penetrated the profuse and sickly hued miasma. "Come inside and find warmth and sustenance, neighbors."

A solitary figure froze in mid step, and then raised its head, as if harkening to the sound of his voice. Slobbering, incoherent sounds emanated from its mouth, and it began to advance on him in unwieldy footfalls. The cautionary voice resounded in his brain in a fretful tone, yet he offered it no heed, standing his ground awaiting the form to approach through the sickly green mists, which obscured the figure's true appearance. Gradually, the creature's repugnant features began to show through the dense fog that pervaded the air, filling Asher with aghast, for the image that began to materialize was something that should not be, something wretched and putrid, an abomination resurrected from the bowels of Hell. Shock and revulsion held his feet frozen to the spot where he stood, unable to heed the fear screaming in his thoughts, and flee into the protection of his house.

With its mouth agape and displaying its gray stained teeth and its rotted breath permeating the air with a foul stench, it lunged at him with ravenous intent. Fear released him from its paralyzing daze, as the desiccated mouth neared his shoulder, granting him the freedom to sidestep the assault, and shove the putrefied corpse to the ground. Drawing a Colt pistol from its holster, he emptied the chamber into the spirited cadaver's chest. Shriveled flesh exploded in a fine dust and bones shattered, yet the wretched abomination remained animated, struggling to return to its feet.

"What manner of wicked creation of Lucifer are you?" Asher posed in disgust, casting a stare of loathing toward the squirming being.

His attention fixated on the decrepit wretchedness writhing on the ground, he neglected to notice the figures approaching him from the cover of the thick miasma. A skeletal hand comprised of mostly denuded bone touched his arm, immediately turning his eyes to gape upon the desiccated eyes of emptiness and ravenous intent, desirous of nothing more than feasting upon his flesh. Shoving his way past the latest assault, his focus set deeper into the mist, he observed several more dark figures shuffling toward him with an awkward gait. In the distance, he spotted many more converging upon the home of his neighbor and frequent paramour, Sadie.

The voice of self-preservation fell into silence, realizing the dire peril that neared her stoop. Resolve sent him in a frantic sprint through the walking corpse laden miasma toward Sadie's house. Pushing and shoving his way through the feeble and boney arms, covered with patches of rotted skin, that wished to grasp him and the repugnant decayed teeth longing to taste of his warm and living flesh, he quickly made his way to defend the woman of his affections.

Standing at her door and observing the gathering mass of corpses, he struck it repeatedly with an anxious fist. "Sadie! Open the door...For God's sake hurry."

"Asher?" she queried in a bewildered tone, through the closed door, "What brings you here at this indecent hour?"

"By all that is holy, open the door and I shall explain it to you...Just please. Grant me entry to your home before it is too late."

As soon as he heard the sound of the bar being removed, he barged inside, slamming the door shut behind him, and secured it. "There are vile abominations outside...Depraved corpses released from the pits of Hell with a hunger for human flesh."

She cast a harsh glare upon his countenance, scrutinizing his demeanor in minute detail. "Have you fallen into the designs of laudanum and peyote once again?"

"Yes, but no. These things are not born of inebriation. They are terrible and very real," he insisted through a trembling mien.

Sadie opened her mouth to discount his claim, but fell silent, interrupted by the sound of broken glass, as a pair of decomposed arms reached through a window. Turning a horrified visage toward Asher, her lips trembled to speak. "What manner of evil have you brought to my home?"

"I brought nothing, save for myself to defend you from these wretched things. With God as my witness, I give you my word; these foul creatures had already placed their designs upon you before I had decided to intervene," he avowed, gazing upon her with a solemn expression.

The sound of shattered glass returned, sending both their stares toward another window. A pair of skeletal arms of mostly denuded bones had reached through the pane of glass, and struggled to pull the remainder of its desiccated body through the opening. There arose a disturbance at the door, as a horde of the creatures began pushing against it. Asher and Sadie looked on in horror, as it began to pull free from its hinges and buckle inward around the bar that secured it. A thud was heard near the first window that had been compromised, whereupon they noticed a wriggling corpse with both its femurs snapped like broken twigs, scooting along the floor toward them. Then the entire wood structure began shaking, as the undead corpses began pressing their combined might against its outer walls. Dust rained down from overhead and the rafters began creaking and groaning under the intense strain being placed on the house. A grim realization struck them with bone chilling terror; the house could not endure much more force placed against it before it crumbled under the duress of the pressing escapees of the grave.

Setting a horrified façade upon her, Asher knew that their only chance to extricate themselves from a certain death in the decrepit jaws of the hungry dead was to flee the house into the woods where their agility and quickness would serve them well against the limited dexterity and slow feet of the army of corpses.

"No, Asher!" she refused in an adamant mien. "There are too many for us to fight."

"Your house is near to collapsing, Sadie. If we tarry here much longer, we will be overrun by those monstrous things," he reasoned with her in an unyielding intonation. "Outside, we will at least have a fighting chance. In here, we will have no chance at all."

One of the beams supporting a section of her roof broke loose and fell, striking the floor behind them with a loud thump, sending her flying into his arms. "How do you propose we flee the house?"

"There appears to be much fewer of them on the backside of your house. If we use the back door, we should be able to escape into the woods, and make our way to town for help."

Asher and Sadie stood at the back door, listening with great interest to the sounds on the other side. Having no means by which to know with any certainty, he estimated the number of hungry corpses awaiting them upon exiting to be one or two. Releasing a deep breath and grasping her hand tightly, he opened the door with a sudden and violent push, and stepped outside, pulling her with him. To his dismay, the assessment of the danger had been underestimated. Though only one of the vile beings had been pushing against the door, four others milled about a few feet behind it. No sooner had the pair set foot outside the door; they were beset by assaulting hands and snapping teeth of the ravenous dead. Pushing the clumsy assailants aside, one by one, he made his way toward the woods where speed and agility would be to their advantage, dragging a frightened Sadie along with him.

Entering the tree line, he noted the darkened forms of several creatures through the thick and green miasma, meandering among the tall native elms that populated the densely wooded area. Though each of the foul corpses presented a dangerous obstacle that must be overcome before they could reach safety, having them scattered throughout the tall brush and trees was preferable to having to fight their way through a horde of them, especially with a terrified Sadie in tow. Avoiding one or even two of them at a time was much less daunting than having to deal with many of them assaulting from every conceivable angle.

Weaving their way through the trees, moving as quickly as their legs could carry them, they were set upon by three putrid corpses, who happened to appear unexpectedly from behind the massive trunk of a mighty elm. During the assault, Asher lost his grip of Sadie's hand, and then lost track of her whereabouts, fending off two of the creatures that held his arms in their desiccated grip. Pulling away from one of his two rotted assailants, his feet became entangled with a fallen limb, and he fell to the ground, pulling the other hungry corpse on top of him. Lying on the ground with snapping jaws mere inches from his flesh, he desperately held it at bay, as his free hand sifted through the high grass and broken branches, seeking anything he could wield as a weapon.

A cry of terror rang out through the woods; he reasoned could have only originated from Sadie, created a sense of urgency to extricate himself from his dire situation. Though not the weapon for which he had hoped, he grasped a smallish limb, near to the length and girth of a rifle barrel, and began striking his assailant's head. Unfazed, the corpse continued pressing its attack.

Another scream, of a more desperate inflection than the previous, added to his desperation. Employing a new tactic, he began stabbing at the partially denuded skull with the limb. A well-placed stab in its dehydrated eye penetrated deep inside its cranium. It froze for a few brief moments, and fell off him, lying on the ground motionless. Springing to his feet, he raced to Sadie's aid. One of the creatures had her pinned to the ground, its snapping teeth poised to sink into the soft flesh of her throat. Retrieving a thick limb from the ground, he smashed the corpse's skull with a mighty blow.

"Are you hurt, Sadie?" he queried, extending a helping hand toward her.

"Not especially, Asher. At least, I do not believe I suffered any serious harm. I'm more frightened than anything," she responded, as he pulled her to her feet.

"The barn is only a short distance away. I'm going to hitch the horse to the wagon, and get us away from these things," he stated, pulling her into a protective embrace, as his eyes anxiously scanned the area between them and the barn.

The horse pulled the wagon down the beaten trail at a full gallop, as they sped toward the safety of the town. Asher held Sadie close to him, sheltering her from the chill in the air. Her skin was cold to the touch and there existed a clamminess about her, giving his thoughts a start. Bringing the horse to a halt, he observed her ashen and expressionless countenance and the distant stare in her eyes. His trembling fingers felt her neck for a pulse, discovering it to be weak and intermittent. In a panic, he instructed the horse to return to a full gallop.

Nearing the town, he felt Sadie jerk and convulse. Then she fell limp for several moments before, to his relief, she began to stir. Glancing toward her, he noticed the pallid hue of her face had deepened and her eyes

held a wicked darkness. Her mouth opened, releasing a snarling growl, and before he could move to resist, she sank her teeth into the tender flesh of his throat.

The wagon pulled into the unsuspecting town with its undead passenger and another, dead, but awaiting the infection to run the course of his body, and instill it with a depraved lust for the taste of living flesh. From that one small town in the west, a plague would grow and spread throughout the land.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Maynard Blackoak is a freelance writer living in the backwoods of Pawnee County, Oklahoma. He draws upon the sights of neglect and unusual sounds around him for inspiration. A bit of a recluse, he can often be found strolling through an old, forgotten cemetery or in the woods among the twisted black oaks and native elms under the light of the moon.

Facebook: https://m.facebook.com/? rdr#!/maynard.blackoak

Out of Phase: Tales of Sci-Fi Horror is Now Accepting Submissions!



Very simply, for this collection of short stories, we are looking for Science Fiction Horror. We don't care if that means mutation, creation, invention, machinery gone awry, or space and or time travel. But it must be Science Fiction, and it must be Horror Fiction. What we specifically do not want are Other World/Fantasy stories - these will be rejected.

If you choose to take a factual approach to your Sci-Fi Horror, we ask that you exercise constraint and not bore us or the reader with unneeded details. By all means, include necessary details, but delivering a slew of facts in order will not translate to an intriguing read. Most likely, these stories will be rejected as well. Our review team is highly scientifically minded, so vet your facts, and make sure they are accurate. False data based

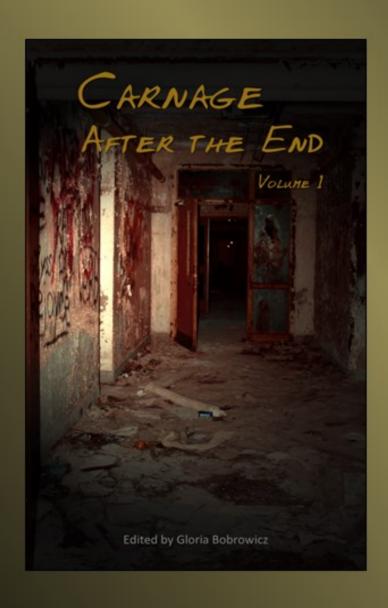
too closely on truth that lacks an imaginary spin will also earn you a rejection.

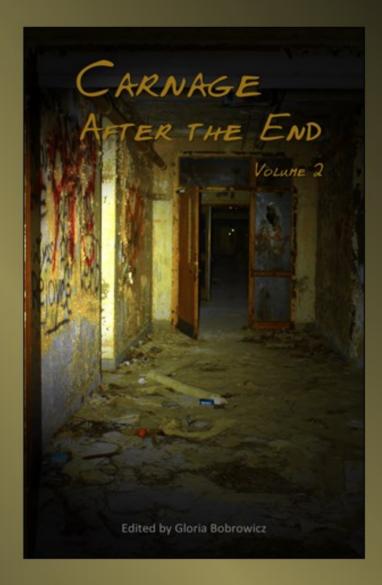
Be creative, imaginative, and dead-on-the-money accurate on this one. It's our first venture into the Sci-Fi realm, and we won't be accepting anything that lacks genuine kick!

Submission Deadline: May 31, 2014 Word Count minimum: 4,000 words

Full guidelines on www.SirensCallPublications.com

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





Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble,
Kobo, Smashwords, and the iStore

Death Closes In Heather Roulo

Death is close.

She's seen him stalking the hallways.

Had it always hurt this much to breathe?

No, it hadn't. This was new. It made it hard to think. Impossible to remember. A single burning idea fought the black oblivion of pain: I can't die.

Footsteps, mere whispers on the floor, approached. She clutched her bedding in twisted hands. A face, half-covered, appeared at her side in the gloom.

She swallowed a scream and whispered, "No!"

The pitiless face turned toward her, as if surprised that she could still protest. "No?"

"Don't touch me!"

The figure crouched over her, one gloved hand raised above her chest. Ready to descend and rip her from her earthly body. Her skin shivered at the near touch.

"It is my job."

She parted her teeth to answer, drawing another painful breath. "Does Death have pity?"

The hand slowly, very slowly, withdrew from her wavering sight and merged into the darkness disguised figure. "I do not see how Death can have pity. It is the natural order. Death takes from every age, every circumstance, it is the rare unifying and equal thing in an unequal world."

"Death doesn't have to," she whispered.

"I know what I have seen in my work. It is best this way. Sometimes it is something to fear, sometimes it is a release. Death doesn't decide which is which."

She cried out as new pain clenched her organs.

The figure breathed deeply, a sucking sound, as if a huge sigh shook air from a real frame. "Let me help you. Let me touch you."

"No!" She shied away under the covers, sending pangs throughout her back. Sweetness clung to her breath, like lilacs. Her hands would not open from the blankets they clutched.

"I understand," the figure said. The soft voice seemed sad, or resigned. "You have had a full life. It's your right to choose."

Insidiously, it kept speaking. "Some people cannot accept when it is time. They think they can stave it off. As if those few hours more will make a difference in what comes next. But death is inevitable. People who don't accept that during their lives haven't really lived. They haven't really seen the world around them and when death comes, they are still ignorant."

The shivering grew worse. Had she just been called ignorant for resisting? She set her teeth over a groan.

"Would you like me to keep you company? Or call someone?"

"What?" A cataract-blur hides what the darkness doesn't. "I want you to go away. For good."

"You're very brave."

Clucking softly, the figure turned and invisible feet whispered across the floor.

The rush of victory nearly drowned the agony gnawing at her bones. Death had approached, but she lived still. She could go on like this, would resist as long as humanly possible. Maybe even longer.

Whispers threaded through the darkness.

"She wouldn't let me touch her. I could have at least made the pain less."

"Tough lady. That's how I plan to go. I'm surprised she gave up now. She's been a fighter for so long. I thought she might even beat it, if she held out."

"She was sure. We talked about death. I tried to reassure her. It's coming for all of us."

"God you're morbid, Millie."

"Once you've been a hospice worker for a while, you'll get the same way. Death is a release. She must be so peaceful."

She gasped for air. Her clutching hands rose from the blankets to her throat.

The voice of her nurse said, gloomily, for the last time, "Death is always close."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Heather Roulo is a Pacific Northwest author of horror, fantasy, and science-fiction. Her short stories have appeared in more than a dozen anthologies, podcasts, and magazines including *Nature* and *Flagship*. In 2009 her science-fiction podcast novel *Fractured Horizon* was a Parsec Award Finalist and she received the Wicked Women Writers award from HorrorAddicts.net.

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Blog: www.heroulo.com

First Impressions Ray Daley

From the edge of the darkening forest the wolf had a clear view down the path leading off into the distance towards the village. And he could see his next meal winding her merry way towards him.

She looked about five foot tall, long brown hair, wearing a long red cloak that looked very warm against the currently encroaching night and carrying a basket that smelt unusual but looked very full of something that might end up being afters.

He hoped.

The moon was hidden behind the clouds but the night wasn't very dark. Yet.

But it was late enough that someone somewhere might be concerned if this young thing went missing. *Perhaps.*

He hoped not.

The girl wasn't exactly dragging her heels either, she was really making good time down the track at the edge of the forest from the village.

'Where could she be going at this time of night?' the wolf wondered to himself. "Never mind, that's not important. She's here, I'm here and I'm hungry. And she's here." The wolf decided that was important enough to merit saying twice.

As the figure in red approached the trees where the wolf was secreted, he stepped out onto the path.

"Evening Miss!" he said, noting the long hair, the dress and assumed femaleness on her part.

"Evening." she said.

'Ah, good. Definitely female. They taste better, because they wash more often.' the wolf thought to himself. "Out late, aren't we?!" he said to her.

"I am. You are. So I guess yes, "we" are out late. That would be an accurate observation." she replied.

'Great,' thought the wolf, 'I've got myself a right little smart-arse here. Well the world can always use one less of those, I'm practically doing the planet a favour by eating her!' The wolf smiled, baring his sharp teeth and started mentally preparing his friendliest patter. "Ha ha! Very good. And where are you off to, this late at night?" the wolf asked her.

"I'm taking this food to my Grandma who is sick at the moment. What about you?" she said.

"Just wandering around the forest, as a wolf is wont to do at this time," the wolf replied.

"So not hunting, or anything like that then?" the girl asked.

"Ah, bless your heart. No. Totally not hunting or anything remotely like that," the wolf said.

"So, is this just a Q&A thing you do with all passing travellers on this route or was I singled out for special attention for some reason?" she asked him.

"Well, it's late. You look young, maybe scared. I wanted to check and make sure you weren't lost," the wolf said.

"It is late, yes. We just established that a few moments ago. I look young? *Flattering*. I'm actually twenty three, it's a genetic condition that only effects the women in my family. Maybe scared? I pass this way at least four times a week and have done since I was thirteen so I don't think there's much that I haven't been taught to expect, so I'm not scared but again thanks for the concern. And I'm definitely not lost," she replied.

"Well that's good then," the wolf said, a bit taken aback.

"So wolfie, you really don't want to eat me then?" she smiled at him as she asked this.

"Eat you? Heavens no! I'm a vegetarian young lady!" the wolf raised his paws, attempting to pull off an innocent "who, me?" gesture that fell far short of the mark. Smiling at the exact same moment with those big white razor sharp teeth wasn't helping his cause much either.

"Well, it's only a shame that I haven't got any vegetables in the basket. Sorry about that, wolfie,"she said.

"Not a bother Miss. Do you have need of an escort for the rest of your journey? I'm not keeping you from anything with this discussion I hope?" the wolf asked.

"An escort? How gallant! I'm not in any hurry to reach my destination, why not take a walk with me through the forest, down to the river perhaps?" she suggested.

The wolf felt strangely unnerved at this young woman's bravery. Most meals were scared, they screamed, they ran. They angered the stomach afterwards by upsetting their body chemicals so much. This one was suggesting going deeper in the darker part of the forest. Still, a nice drink of the cool river water before or after this rather delicious looking snack might calm his mind.

He hoped.

The light faded away more and more as they walked through the ever thickening trees together. At no time was the young lady in the red cloak any further than a paws length away from the wolf.

"This part of the forest is really rather beautiful, isn't it?" she said to him.

"Mmm" replied the wolf out loud, thinking to himself '*Is it? I hadn't ever bothered to take any notice before.*' He was suddenly wishing he *had* taken a bit more notice for some reason that was now *really* starting to bother him.

The trees thinned out a little as they approached the bank of the river. The wolf put his nose down to the water and lapped a few mouthfuls up.

He contemplated his reflection. Then it hit him.

Or rather, she did.

Lightning fast, teeth snapping at his neck, ripping, tearing, biting, drinking the very life blood from him.

"What... are... you?" he managed to say as the life ebbed from his furry body.

"Come on wolfie! No reflection? I'm a vampire. Obviously. And you're supper. I bet you thought the exact same thing about me," she smiled an evil fanged grin as the mists of death passed over the wolf's rapidly dying body.

The clouds had cleared in the hour it took to reach the cottage in the middle of the forest. The young lady in the cloak knocked hard on the wooden front door of the thatched cottage.

"Who is it?" asked an aged female voice from inside.

"It's me Granny, it's Red! Is it all clear?" she asked.

"Sure Red, come on in," replied the voice from inside.

Red had to kick open the door, on account of having one hand carrying her basket and the other carrying the still warm body of her most recent kill. The wolf.

Inside, Granny was preparing a carcass which Red noted to herself with interest.

"What's in the basket?" Granny asked.

"Woodcutter! Met him on the way here. Nice bonus meal, eh?" Red explained. "Granny, did you get a wolf too?" Red asked her.

"Sure did sweetie! Those idiots never learn. You don't try and eat a vampire! Stupid wolves! We eat well tonight!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ray Daley was born in Coventry & still lives there. He served 6 yrs in the RAF as a clerk & spent most of his time in a Hobbit hole in High Wycombe. He is a published poet & has been writing stories since he was 10. His current dream is to eventually finish the Hitch Hikers fanfic novel he's been writing since 1986.

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Seasons of Fear: A Quartet Donald Jacob Uitvlugt

Late Freeze

The gardener cursed as the weatherman said it again, but there was no denying what was up there on the map. There would be a hard freeze tonight. He hadn't expected one this late in April. He was going to have to hurry if he wanted to save the garden he had just planted.

His mind raced. He could deal with this. He didn't like improvising, but it wasn't the first time he had had to take drastic steps to save his plants. The gardener headed out to the garage and hooked up the trailer to his ATV. Starting up the vehicle, he drove around to the storage shed in his back yard. He unlocked the shed and loaded his gardening tools into the trailer. The sun was already low in the sky, so he added some kerosene lanterns, just in case.

The trail to his far field was rough with the spring rains. At one point he almost got stuck in the mud. The wheels of the ATV spun and spun, and finally caught. What should have been a thirty minute trip took almost two hours. The entire way he worried about how many of his plants he would lose tonight and he planned each step he would take to preserve as many as he could.

The sun had set by the time he parked the ATV. The gardener set up his lanterns by the headlight of the vehicle and then lit them. He laid out his tools. Insects droned softly, not knowing that they sang their own death songs.

He started on the left side of the field with a pair of shears. Maybe if he cut his plants back he could shock them into thinking it was still winter.

He studied carefully and with a surgeon's precision he began to cut limbs. He worked up a sweat as it grew steadily colder. He wept as he saw sluggish sap flow from the cuts. The insects no longer sang.

It was his fault. He had brought them up from the basement too soon. He had been too eager to turn over the rich soil and plant them deep into the earth. He shook off such useless regrets and began to work faster.

When he finished with one plant, he gave it a long drink of water. Then he packed the base tight with a heavy load of mulch. He composted the mulch himself from the remains of last year's planting. Only the best for his garden.

The eyes of one of his plants flickered open. She looked down to see herself buried waist deep in the earth, she looked at the other plants and screamed. The gardener went over and soothed the plant's hair. "I know, I know. I planted you all too soon. Don't worry. I'll save what I can." The plant whimpered until the nutrients in the water quieted it.

Prune, water, mulch. The gardener worked late into the night, fighting to save his garden from the late freeze.

Summer Games

Somewhere above Heather, a phone was ringing.

The sun shone bright though the air was cool. The blue of the sky reminded her of the color of her daughter's eyes. She forced herself to look at nothing but the rock in front of her. She thanked God the phone was still ringing, rubbed her right hand on her pants to dry it and reached up for her next handhold. She brushed gravel out of the small indentation and pulled herself another foot up the cliff face.

Each stage of her journey played in her mind played as she climbed. The run from her office to her home. The car ride out to this distant state park. The long hike back to the base of this cliff. She had to keep moving forward. She had to find the phone. She had to answer the phone or her mind would snap.

Something cracked beneath her and her left foot slipped. Her weight slammed her hard into the rock and she lost her footing entirely. The tendons of her arms strained as she fought to hold on. The edges of her vision grew dark. With a grunt of effort, she steadied herself. Her toes danced as they searched for a ledge, a hole, a crack. Something.

Keep ringing. Just keep ringing, damn it.

She found a couple toeholds at last. She allowed herself a few seconds to pant against the rock. Her arms and legs burned. Grit from the climb had rubbed her fingers raw.

She took a deep breath and continued her climb. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot. Her world

shrank to the challenge of the rock and the ringing of the phone.

The phone stopped. Heather's bowels turned to water. She felt her limbs grow weak and she clung to the rock. Sweat dripped into her eyes. *Shit. Shit. Shitshitshitshitshit*. She contemplated just letting go. Then the ringing started up again. A new strength surged into her. She let out a loud cry and forced her aching body up the side of the cliff.

She reached ledge so narrow that her prone body barely fit. She wanted to collapse. Instead she snatched up the ringing black phone and flipped it open.

"Hello!"

She could almost hear the son of a bitch's twisted smile. "That was a close one, Heather. You almost ran out of time."

"I want to talk to my daughter."

A pause. "I think you've earned that much."

A muffled, echoing sound. And then a voice that made Heather's heart leap.

"Mommy?" She could hear the tears her baby girl was holding back.

" Madison, it's going to be okay. Mommy's coming to get you."

She didn't get a reply. Instead the kidnapper spoke again.

"I think that's enough of a rest. You see the stream below you?"

Heather looked down at the ribbon of water. "You wouldn't..."

"I want you to dive in. You'll find the next phone somewhere a half mile upstream. But remember, the clock is ticking."

The line went dead. Heather cursed and threw the phone in her hand off the cliff. She stretched her taxed muscles. Then she took a deep breath and dove...

Trick or Treat

"Okay guys, this isn't funny anymore!"

Nate tried the door on his right. It was locked, but the door on his left opened. He counted to three. Nothing jumped out at him. He went through.

The emergency lights cast red shadows over a long hallway with doors on either side. Nate stepped along, conscious of every sound his shoes made on the floor. It had seemed such a great idea. The place billed itself as the largest haunted house attraction in the state. But thirty bucks was way too much to pay to have some winos in rubber masks jump out at you. Why not break in after midnight and have a little fun scaring each other silly instead?

"Jim? Alex? Anybody?"

Alex had gone in search of the main power switch. Jim and Nate had messed around in the torture chamber, dry humping the iron maiden, pretending to nap on the rack. Jim knelt in the guillotine while Nate took pictures with his phone. Then they switched places. While Nate knelt there was a bright flash. When he looked up, Jim was gone.

He tried the hallway doors one by one. The third on his left opened. He waited again for one of his friends to jump out at him. When no one did, he walked into the room.

Row on row of chains hung from the ceiling, like S&M party streamers. Nate brushed past them, setting them rattling like bones. Something sticky coated the chains and smeared against him as he walked. The room stank of piss and shit. Something lukewarm dripped onto his face. Nate cursed and pulled out his phone, shining its light upward.

Webbed onto the ceiling by lengths of chain were pieces of Alex's body. Feet here, arms there, hunks of torso scattered above. Blood drooled from the severed neck while Alex stared down at Nate with glassy eyes.

His phone screen dimmed, returning the carnage to the shadows. Nate swallowed his bile and ran out of the room, the swinging chains chasing him with their chittering laughter.

The door at the end of the chain room opened onto the torture chamber he had been in with Jim. Jim. It had been his idea to come here, mostly. This had to be some twisted revenge scheme. But now Nate knew what was going on. He pulled an iron poker from a mannequin. He was ready for Jim to come at him.

Something hummed and the hairs on the back of Nate's neck stood on end. A blinding blue spark strobed in the darkness. In its flash, he saw Jim strapped to an electric chair, duct tape over his mouth.

The electricity sparked again, but this time it didn't cut off. Jim screamed into the tape and convulsed. Nate smelled burnt hair and roasted meat. This time he did vomit.

He started running before the electric chair switched off. The smell followed him. He wound up in the hall of doors again. Every door he tried was locked except the last door on the right. As he turned the handle, a voice boomed out over a tinny PA system.

"Trick or treat, Nathan!"

Nate paused, gripped the handle of the poker and stepped through the doorway into darkness.

Tracks in the Snow

The wind blew, swirling around Anthony. He swallowed a curse and tightened his grip on the pistol. He would have to find the bastard before the snow covered the tracks. He pressed a hand over the stitch in his side and forced himself to slog on.

Julia and he had loved the outdoors. Anthony had proposed to her in the very cabin they were staying now. He knew that things had been rough lately. That's why they had come back here. To try to fix things. To try to save their marriage.

That wouldn't happen now. Anthony paused and crouched down. The boot tracks were cleaner now, less snow in them. He was getting close. Even better were the bright red drops on the surface of the snow. He had winged him. Good. He chambered a round into the pistol, flexed gloved fingers over the grip.

The first few hours had been hard. Julia had bitched the whole way up here, had complained until he got a fire roaring in the fireplace. The flames and a bottle and a half of good red had done wonders. They talked about things they hadn't talked about in a long time. Talked about anything but money and Anthony's business. They made love in front of the fire.

Anthony brushed snowflakes from his eyelashes. He was going to make the killer pay. He was going to put him down like the animal he was. The trail circled to the right. Back toward the cabin. The bastard was going back to the scene of the crime. The sick freak.

Anthony had woken to the sound of Julia on the telephone. Something about canceling something. He had planned this weekend for the two of them, and she couldn't leave her lovers alone for even a day. He saw red. He didn't know what he would have done if the killer hadn't interrupted them.

There. A big red spot where the killer had rested for a long while. Anthony was close enough now that he could taste the blood. He let out a low growl and stalked after the injured man.

The front door of the cabin stood open, just as he had left it. When the gunfire had settled, he had grabbed his coat and gloves and raced out after the bastard. He was so close now. He studied the snow again.

Two sets of tracks stood in the snow. Even though the snow drifted into the first set, he could tell that the tracks matched. He had circled the cabin. Anthony's head throbbed. He pressed his hand against the stitch in his side. His palm came away red.

The man let out a bestial howl and started to run. The last moments of his wife's life flashed in his memory like bullets from a gun. The click of a pistol chambering a round. The look on his wife's face. Three quick shots. The ricochet brushing past his side. His wife's cell phone, the number of her lawyer flashing up at him.

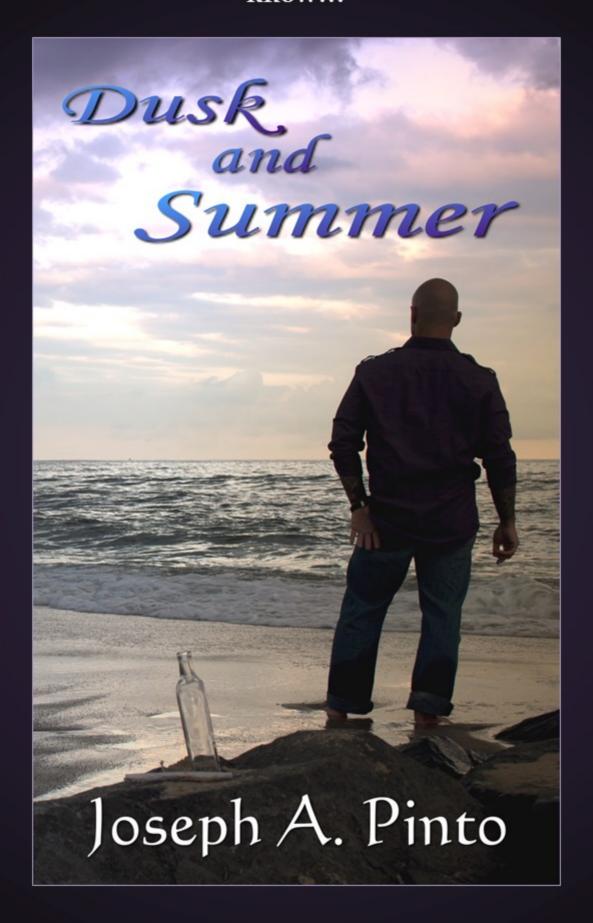
The wind howled and cut like a knife. He kept running. If he kept running, he might catch the bastard. Catch the bastard that killed his wife. The tracks in the snow circled the cabin again and again and again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Donald Jacob Uitvlugt lives on neither coast of the United States, but mostly in a haunted memory palace of his own design. His short fiction has appeared in numerous print and online venues, including Necrotic Tissue and the Wily Writers podcast, as well as the anthologies A Fistful of Horrors and Wolfsongs 2. He strives to write what he calls 'haiku fiction,' stories that are small in scope but big in impact. If you enjoyed "Seasons of Fear," let him know through his blog or via Twitter.

Twitter: @haikufictiondju

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Does Heaven await beneath the waves? One man needs to know...



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

Red Fog E. A. Irwin

Vivian's world tilted uncontrollably. Her blurred vision narrowing until all she saw with her decreasing pinpoint sight was disjointed shards of confusion. Jagged prisms of brilliant white light shoved through her retinas, accelerating along her optic nerve until the glowing prisms fractured in her brain.

The explosion inside Vivian's brain barely registered while she hummed her own internal melody and tottered to the tune. She moved through the cluttered room methodically. Each step awkward while attempting balance in the fun house she had for a head ... touching furniture in the room, hoping for a tactile sensory, anything that would lend itself to the knowledge she thought she needed. Maybe all she needed was here. Her fingers played along the piano keys as she sang and swayed to the discordant sound weaving additional madness through her mind.

Vivian batted her fists violently against her head, hoping to stop the noise from the nest of angry hornets lodged in her ear. The decibel of the buzzing had grown distracting, winging through her auditory canal until it coalesced with the shattered prisms shredding her brain into disarranged chaos. The unrelenting hum began tearing through the barriers of calm still existing, allowing a schism of insanity to begin its subtle destruction.

As she lifted her hand, Vivian honed in on the blood running in sticky rivulets down her arm. Staring through telescoping eyesight, she witnessed her skewed world decorated in a variance of red—some were crimson while other hues rapidly represented rings of rust. She laughed as she looked at her feet standing in a pool of carmine, remembering the movie *The Red Shoes* and began her dance anew, teetering on feet as unsteady as her mind. Vivian called it—ballet du rouge.

She instinctively lifted her other arm, the incremental movement making her aware her arm was inordinately heavy. She stared, finding her hand clasping a bloody cleaver covered with bits of flesh and hair clinging in abstract patterns against the shiny steel of the blade. Running her finger along the edge, Vivian yearned for the feel of the vermillion infusing her head and pulled away her bloody fingers, sucking them until the warmth and taste filled her mouth with a bounty of tantalizing elements. There was so much red she could fill her body and mind with in the hope of releasing this strange, building anxiety.

Again, she looked to the tilting room. Wrapping her arms around her body, Vivian began rocking in an effort to comfort herself from the unknown, realizing as she stood she had no memory of the catastrophe that had caused the carnage throughout the room. Slowly, the prisms and the hornets allowed a scent to emerge. The pungency of death mingled with the blood permeating the room in a torrent of stench. She walked through the carnage without recognition. Without the ties that bound her to the landscape of mortal extinction.

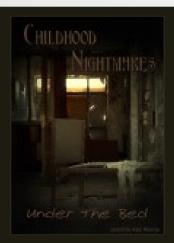
As Vivian's mind dissolved and splintered, she would never comprehend she walked through the remnants of decay known as her family.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - E. A. Irwin resides in California and crosses genre boundaries to keep life interesting as a dark fiction bender. Author of the short story series, *Myth to Life: The Rise of Riley McCabe*, she's currently writing the series' first full-length novel along with the Shamrock series. Her work appears in various anthologies, along with print and online magazines infiltrating the World Wide Web.

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Eating Crow Ken MacGregor

Bumble Jackson waited. Ten minutes had passed since the squirrel had gotten hit by the Camaro that blew by way too fast. Nice car. Bumble wondered who was driving and what the hell they were doing in this shithole. Passing through, most likely. Nobody with any sense stayed in Oak Woods. Hell, even the six hundred permanent residents all wanted to be somewhere else. That went double for James 'Bumble' Jackson. He hated it here. Hated the nickname, too, plastered on him when he was three and terrified of bees. Daddy was a James, too, so it was only a matter of time before Junior got a nickname. He wished it could have something cool, though.

Bumble heard the wings first, then he saw the big, black bird glide in and land on the road. It was a few feet from the flattened squirrel, so it hopped closer, looking around, wary of cars and predators. Five hops took the bird to the carcass, and it plucked a bit of meat, tossing its head back to swallow. Slowly, Bumble lifted the rifle to his shoulder. He pulled back the hammer as easy as can be. Still, the click was damn loud next to his ear. The crow stopped eating, whipped its head around and stared at Bumble. Man and bird were perfectly still for a moment. Bumble could feel his pulse throbbing in his neck. He took deep breaths and watched the crow; neither blinked. Finally, the bird looked away, pecking out another tidbit. As the crow tilted its head back to swallow, Bumble fired, the .22 caliber bullet blowing a neat hole through the bird's chest.

"Gotcha." Bumble grinned, unbothered by the stink of rotten teeth rising from his own mouth. He *snuffed* that motherfucker. Bumble may be a sixteen-year-old virgin with no prospects, but just then, he felt like a god.

It was another fifteen minutes before the next crow showed up. Bumble wondered if it would eat the squirrel or the fresher meat of its brother crow. This bird did that same land a few feet away and hop toward the kill routine. Bumble figured all crows probably did that. Some kind of race memory thing maybe. He learned about that at school, not long before he gave up going to class. Last year, the teacher was all right, so Bumble was interested enough to show up most days; this year's teacher made going to class about as much fun as cleaning the toilet. Of course, every time Bumble had to do that particular chore, the older James always told him at least you have indoor plumbing. That when he was a boy, he had to clean the damn outhouse. Bumble was supposed to be thankful for small favors.

Turns out this bird was after the squirrel, too. Maybe crows wouldn't eat each other.

He shot the second crow. Got this one in the neck and blew the head clean off. The bird's head landed a few inches away. Its beak opened like it was being pulled by invisible strings and stayed that way.

"Sweet," Bumble mumbled. That afternoon, Bumble shot five crows. When the thrill of taking lives got stale, and Bumble's stomach growled, he set the rifle on its wall mount. He planned to head to Murray's, get a sandwich, maybe a beer if Murray is feeling generous enough to forget Bumble's age. He'd strip and clean the .22 when he got back. The old man would have his hide if he found out James had used the rifle without taking care of it after.

The sun was dipping westward, and the temp had already dropped a few degrees. Bumble grabbed his denim jacket off the antler mounted by the door and pulled it on. He whistled as he walked toward what passed for town; it was a tune he'd heard his dad whistle many times, but he didn't know what it was from. Bumble plodded along the road, looking mostly at the ground. One time, he had found a ten dollar bill, and he always hoped it would happen again. The sound of wings made him look up.

Crows. Seven or maybe eight of them, circling overhead. Huh, Bumble thought. Maybe they're pissed about their friends. He smiled at the thought of vengeful crows.

"Screw you," Bumble said to the crows. He kept walking. Every so often though, he'd glance up. When he did, there were more of them. A dozen, then twenty, then fifty. Jesus. Bumble picked up the pace. Murray's was only another mile, mile and a half, tops.

It was getting dark fast. Bumble looked up to check the sun, but the sky was black with crows. A piece of black detached itself from the sky and swooped down on Bumble, missing him by inches. He ran.

Bumble wasn't exactly fit. His breath got ragged fast. His feet hammered the road, the damn crows screamed at him with their harsh cries and his chest felt like it would burst. Still, he ran. If I can just make it to Murray's, he thought.

Sudden pain exploded in Bumble's legs and lower back and he was airborne. Time slowed to a crawl as Bumble flipped in midair over a Camaro. That same electric blue car that had hit the squirrel in front of his house. It had to be. Bumble could read the license plate, and he tried to memorize it so he could tell the Sheriff. The impact spun him, and he landed on his back. The Camaro's brake lights flashed for half a second, then the engine roared and the car disappeared.

Bumble hurt over his whole body. He tried to get up, still hoping to make it to Murray's. He could only move his left hand and his eyes. Nothing else worked. The crows circled lower and lower until they were on the ground, the closest a few feet away. Bumble could hear them settle on the ground, hundreds of tiny talons clicking on the blacktop. Bumble knew what was next. The hopping. He screamed. Turns out his voice was working at least. Bumble cried for help. He wept. The black birds looked a lot bigger on the ground. One was right above him now. Bumble locked eyes with the crow, saw cunning there, and recognition maybe, though he might be imagining that. The bird dipped its head toward him and Bumble's left eye never saw anything again.

Bumble screamed in agony and another crow latched onto his tongue, severing the end. He could feel the beaks tearing into him all over. They ate him alive, and they took their time about it.

Murray, roughly 500 yards away, heard the screams and came outside of his bar. He saw the murder of crows on the road, but couldn't see through the cloud of black wings. Murray had never seen birds behave like that before, and he stood out front, watching. If he'd known it was a person in there, he told himself later, he would have done something. Finally, the birds flew off, moving as one great cloud. Murray, curious, walked down the road.

A human skeleton lay there, the bones picked nearly clean. Murray had seen bodies before, in Afghanistan. His cheek twitched with the memory of dead kids. Murray noticed a strip of leather near the middle of the corpse and nudged it with his boot. He flipped over the belt buckle with his toe; it was a U.S. Cavalry buckle from WWII. Old Vinny Jackson had handed it down to James Junior when he passed on five years ago. This was Bumble. Christ, Murray thought. His stomach lurched and he puked, managing to turn away and hit the empty road behind him instead of the bones. When he recovered, he saw a crow sitting on a branch looking at him.

"Ain't got no quarrel with you," he said. The bird dipped its head. It sure as hell seemed like a nod. Murray backed away, heading to his shop. He didn't take his eyes off that crow until he was inside with the door closed.

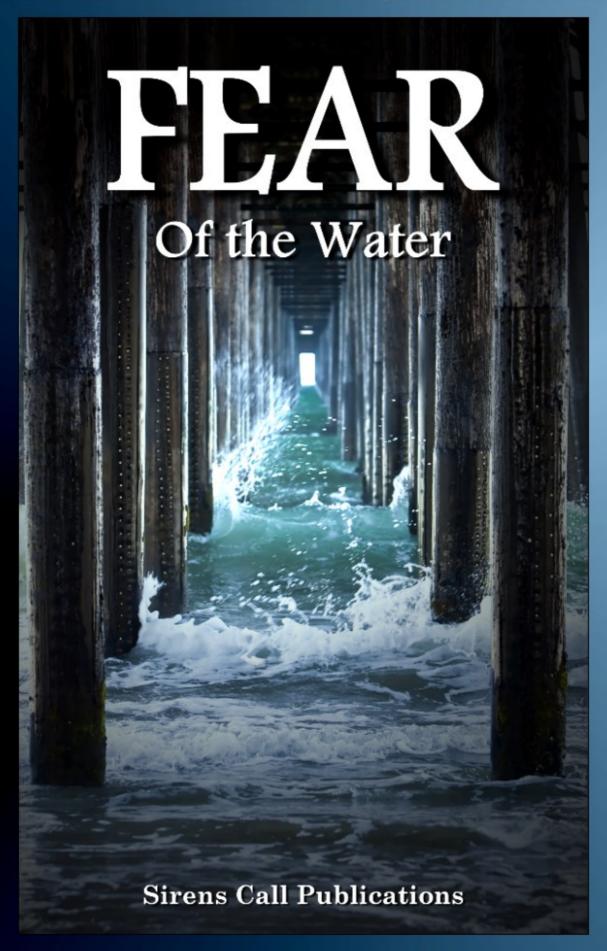
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken MacGregor's work has appeared in over fifty anthologies, magazines and podcasts. Ken is a member of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers and an Affiliate member of HWA. Ken's the kind of guy that, if he found himself stranded somewhere with you, would probably eat you to survive. Ken lives in Michigan with his family and two unstable cats.

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Not afraid of the water? Perhaps you should be...



AVAILABLE IN PRINT & EBOOK ON AMAZON!

The Shed Alex Woolf

Stella was cooking in her kitchen, when Robbie, her eight-year-old son, came running to her from the garden.

"There's something nasty livin' in the shed," he told her, looking breathless and scared.

Stella smiled indulgently and put down her chopping knife. Robbie had always suffered from an overactive imagination. The two of them went out to the shed – a small weatherboarded lean-to with a squeaky door that stood in the rear corner of the garden. Stella's husband Jack had built it after having drained an old stagnant pond and concreted it over. Stella and Robbie both had a good poke around among the bags of multipurpose compost, the cans of old paint, and the pile of cobwebbed folding chairs.

"It was here," Robbie insisted.

"Well, it's gone now," said Stella.

Later, at supper, Robbie kept on about the thing that had scared him in the shed. "What did it look like?" his father asked finally.

Robbie frowned. "It's quite small, like a boy. I thought he wanted to play at first. But he looked and smelled so bad. I was frightened."

"There's no boy living in our shed," declared Jack, and he turned back to his potatoes.

"Yes there is," insisted Robbie.

Father and son stared at each other for a while, then Jack smiled and put down his knife and fork. "In that case I'll go and check up on him. Maybe he'd like to come in and have something to eat."

Robbie turned pale. "No daddy, don't go out there. He's not like a normal boy at all."

Jack looked knowingly at Stella. "I won't be long," he said as he stepped through the French windows and into the dark garden.

Perhaps it was the silence that reigned in the house that made the five or six minutes of his absence seem more like fifteen. The boy waited tensely for his father's return, his eyes never moving from the French windows, even though there was nothing to see in the darkness beyond.

Eventually, they discerned Jack's figure looming out of the night. But it was a different Jack that returned. His eyes had changed. The humour had left them. A tick had begun in the left one. Stella saw how his hand shook as he closed the glass door.

"What happened?" pleaded Robbie. "Did you see him?"

Jack didn't meet their gaze. "I – I'm going to bed. Don't feel so good."

"But darling, you haven't finished your supper."

Jack shambled from the room without another word.

The next morning, Jack did not get out of bed. He refused to tell Stella what had happened, or what he had seen, in the shed. She did not pester him about it, but took him some breakfast, and then busied herself getting Robbie off to school. Jack's condition did not improve during the day. He lapsed into a virtual vegetative state, only moving from his bed to eat or go to the toilet. Stella moved the TV into the bedroom, but Jack showed little interest in the screen. His eyes would slide restlessly around the room, glancing fearfully into every shadowy corner.

The doctor visited. Jack, it appeared, was suffering from nervous stress. He needed to take an extended break from work. An appointment was booked with a specialist. The company healthplan would take care of the expenses. His boss was very understanding. Jack had been overdoing it lately on the Lacuna Steel project. These were tough clients, and it was a punishing schedule. And Jack, as we know, is such a perfectionist. Stella nodded and smiled. How relieved she felt to know that the blame for Jack's condition could be laid at the door of something called Lacuna Steel.

The days followed each other. The stormy weather kept her from the garden, with its great drifts of Autumn leaves. The constant movement of the dark trees reminded her of Jack's haunted eyes. The specialist visited on Saturday morning. He said Jack needed to come into the hospital for some tests. Could he come today? Stella noticed the look of relief on Jack's face as she packed his overnight bag. That afternoon, after delivering Jack to the hospital, she ventured for the first time that week into the garden. The latest storm had blown itself out. The

garden was a mess. Tentatively, she picked up a rake, half hidden in the long grass, and began sweeping up the leaves. Behind her, Robbie was playing with a ball, bouncing it rhythmically against the shed. Bang... Bang...

The sound disturbed her, breaking the beautiful stillness of the autumn afternoon. After a week of howling winds, she wanted to enjoy a period of tranquility and birdsong. She tugged at the leaves caught in the wet grass.

Bang... Bang... Bang...

Why did he not get bored of that repetitive action? She wanted to tell him to stop, but for some reason she hesitated. The natural thing would have been to turn round and confront him, but she did not do that either. Instead, she quietly put down the rake and walked indoors, closing the glass door on the dreadful sound of that banging, and shutting the curtain.

Lying in her bed late that night, Stella tried and failed to fall asleep. After a week of storms, the night beyond her window was restful and full of stars. Moonlight lay in soft pools in the hollows of her bedspread. Yet she could not compose herself. She wondered why she had not turned round this afternoon in the garden, as she had meant to do, and told Robbie to stop making such a racket. Was it an uneasiness that perhaps it hadn't been Robbie who was making the noise, but something else? Ridiculous! Jack's breakdown had obviously unhinged her, and made her start to think all sorts of things. But Jack's illness had been diagnosed as a simple case of Lacuna Steel. Of course it had been Robbie this afternoon in the garden. The fact that she saw him ten minutes later playing quietly in his room proved nothing. The boy was always roaming from garden to bedroom, bedroom to garden – lost in his own little world.

Bang... Bang... Bang...

Stella jumped at the return of that sound, coming so suddenly out of the peaceful night. She got out of bed, heart pounding, and walked over to the window. Despite the moonlight, the corner of the garden where the shed was located was barely discernible in the shadows cast by the big trees. Yet she knew that the sound emanated from there. Something down there was making a sound like the one she had heard this afternoon – but it couldn't be Robbie this time.

She put on her dressing gown and slippers, switched the corridor light on, and walked to the head of the stairs. She looked into Robbie's room. The boy's head, facing away from her, could just be seen on the pillow. She gripped the banister rail and began to descend the staircase. In the dining room, she pushed open the French windows, and was confronted again with the awful noise. There had to be some simple explanation. Perhaps an animal had got stuck inside the shed. But she knew no animal was capable of that rhythmic tattoo.

Standing at the edge of the patio, scarcely daring to venture further, she tried to call out, "Who is it?" but her voice, thin at the best of times, failed her completely. Then, as abruptly as it had started, the banging ceased. Silence returned. Relieved, she prepared to turn back to the house, but in the act of turning, something caught the edge of her vision that made her insides ice over. She completed the turn and began walking as slowly as she could back across the patio, trying to cast out of her mind the sight of the small, dark figure limping up the garden towards her.

As she walked, conscious of that thing behind her, she began to know the smell and feel of real fear: a sour reek that trickled through her insides like the sweat that was rising from her skin, soaking the T-shirt beneath her gown. Once she was in the house, she closed and locked the French windows, then closed the curtain to obscure the view of the garden. Opening the curtain again a fraction, she peeped out. The garden was empty. Then had she imagined the thing? Slowly her breath returned in soft whimpering sobs, and she allowed her hot forehead to cool itself against the glass door.

Making her way back up the stairs, Stella smiled at how her own irrational fears had almost turned her into a basket case to rival Jack. In the clear light of day, everything would be explicable, she was sure. There had been no 'thing' in the garden. Just shadows and shifting piles of leaves.

From downstairs came the noise of smashing glass. The French windows. She stood paralysed in mid-step, hand gripping the banister rail. Into her numbed consciousness crept the sound of slow, uneven footsteps on the downstairs parquet. Light-heavy, light-heavy: the gait of someone with a limp. The sound grew in volume, as the footsteps reached the hallway below where she stood.

Stella mounted the remaining steps in one bound. She ran along the corridor and into her bedroom. Only there did she remember Robbie. Her heart screamed at her to run back and get him. But the fear of what lay out there drowned out everything, even her deepest maternal instincts. Listening breathlessly at the door, she heard the horrid unsteadiness of its progress up the stairs; the creak on the landing, and another which she knew to be the third stair from the top. Then she heard nothing for a while, and that was when she began to cry. "Go away. Please go away," she sobbed. There was a little slide and a stumble in the corridor. A shadow appeared in the crack of light under her door. She knew the thing was there. It could probably see the door vibrating with her sobs. Slowly, quietly she tiptoed to her bed, then slipped beneath the covers so that nothing of herself was visible. She curled up into a tight fetal position, wishing at that moment that she could be swallowed up by the moonlight, or be carried away by the wind.

She heard the squeak of the door handle as it turned, and then muffled footsteps on the carpet approaching the bed. She squeezed her eyes shut, and tensed every muscle in her body. She tried to press herself more deeply into the mattress, knowing the futility of trying to hide when the involuntary shaking of her body had already given her presence away.

"Mummy, mummy." It was Robbie's voice, close to her, just by her head. "I had a nightmare mummy. Let me in, I want to get in with you."

Stella almost cried in relief. It was Robbie, Robbie all along. It had been Robbie in the garden. Robbie on the stairs! She was about to throw back the covers and welcome her son, when she remembered something: on her way downstairs, she had seen Robbie in his bed.

"Let me in, let me in!" cried the boy. "I'm frightened, mummy. I think there's something nasty in this house."

Stella's fear-hardened heart was melted by this plea, which could have been spoken by no one other than her son. "Come to me," she said. "Come to mummy."

Still too petrified to come out from the safe cocoon of her bedclothes, she opened the cover just a few inches so that her boy could climb in. He slithered in beside her and put his thin arms around her. Dark as it was, she couldn't make him out, but she could feel his cool damp little body pressing itself against her for warmth and comfort.

The boy had a strange odour. It reminded her of a stagnant pond, and Stella wondered where he had been playing today. And the dim light beneath the bedclothes was deceiving, for his eyes were a pearly white, lacking irises and pupils, and his big grinning mouth was full of nothing but black and broken teeth. She pushed this distorting vision from her mind, and pressed him closer to her. "It's okay my dearest," she said. "Whatever that nasty thing is, it can't get to us in here."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Woolf is a writer of fiction and non-fiction, with over sixty titles published. His recent fiction includes *Soul Shadows*, a horror novel about cannabalistic shadows, *Whispers from Behind the Cellar Door*, a collection of horror tales, and *Aldo Moon*, featuring a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter. 2014 sees the release of *Iron Sky: Dread Eagle*, his first foray into the world of steampunk.

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Ocular Tea Christopher J. Starr

There I sat, upon my bed, amidst the flickering shadows that danced upon the walls, changing their step to the tune of the burning candle flames. One candle was upon the nightstand, and two sconces upon each opposing wall, that were parallel to the bed. A feeling of calmness washed over me, as dreariness crept in, at peace, with no sense of dread.

There I sat, sitting upright, with cushions behind my spine, sipping tea before my embrace with a winter slumber. Each sip, just a little bit, I recalled the events of the day. Once those thoughts dissipated, new and old thoughts emerged, the thoughts of the forthcoming day, and what events may occur, and how my night may eventually endure, much like tonight, or the night just before.

There I sat, my tea almost gone, peering into my cup, my own eyes reflection, staring right back at me. That got me thinking again, as I raised the cup to my lips, again I noticed, yet this was not my eye. I noticed the stare, which pierced through my soul, as the shimmering disfigurement seemed to study my own face. "Was this a creature that too was having tea? Was this a creature from another realm?" I sat the cup down, and rubbed my own eyes, thinking it a mirage, tired with hallucinogenic attributes. Waving it off, I snickered to myself, "Time for the last drop from my cup, and greet the Sandman in faraway places, for in my cup, there aren't any faces". I raised the cup, one last time. Again, I realize that the reflection at the bottom was not my own. The eye looked back at me, and then turned slightly, to look with the other.

There I sat, as the creature came from within the cup, placing cushions upon my face, in hopes that it would smother. A struggle did ensue, flailing my arms, and kicking about. I could not breathe. I could not see. I could not open my mouth, to let out a shout. Darkness enveloped the darkness; silence rang out more deafening silence; conscious and lucid, yet not awake, no prayers that answered "...my soul to take".

There I sat, I could see a dim light, and a shadow form within the center, then descend into the vanishing point. It appeared that *I was* in a dream, yet too real to be so. Something did in fact take my soul, and then it slithered away, towards the faint glow.

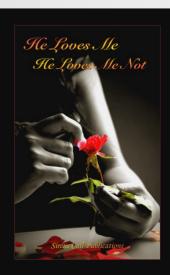
There I sat, alone, staring into the hazy glow. Soon, I noticed an image, as it came into focus, an eye that I seemed to know. The eye was vacant, and unmoving, yet appeared to just stare. All too familiar, the eye, it was mine, staring back at me, unblinking, yet no life to shine. "This just can't be! I was there! That was me! I was there just moments ago in bed sipping tea!"

There I sat, with the Sandman, in faraway places, in thoughts ever deep. I dream forever, in death, and to never again sleep.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Project engineer by day, Chris spends his time in the darkness of his dungeon, doing anything from watching horror movies, illustrating, and tinkering with music. He also enjoys reading anything from Poe to Brian Keene. Spending years submersed in the horror realm, he has recently taken up writing, and became a Supporting Member of the Horror Writers Association, in the hopes of advancing in membership.

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The Restaurant Gloria Bobrowicz

I've dreamed of becoming an actress for as long as I can remember. I still recall the first film my mother took me to see. I was awestruck by the images flickering across the giant screen, and knew from that day on what I was going to do with my life. As children, my cousin and I would concoct elaborate performances to dazzle our relatives at each family gathering. On my eighteenth birthday, I left home with three-hundred dollars in my pocket and a one-way bus ticket to New York City in my hand.

Between my morning drama classes at the university, and my night shift as a waitress, I had precious little time for auditions in the afternoon, but everyone had to pay their dues, right? I'd been living in the city for a little over a year and a half by that point and had managed to get by. The job wasn't so bad; I earned enough to survive while I pursued my career. Plus, one of the perks of waitressing was the owner, Mr. Winters who let all the girls eat for free when they were working. He also let us take home the throw-away leftovers he couldn't serve as 'fresh' the next day. It was hard work being on my feet all night, and having to carry those heavy trays was a bitch, but most of the customers were pleasant and tipped well. After a short amount of time working there, I developed a loyal group of regulars that always asked to be seated in my section.

After a busier than usual night at the restaurant, I walked to the bus stop to catch the #27 Express. It was pouring, really coming down, but all I could think of was the nice hot soak I'd have in the bath when I got home. I yawned as I waited for the bus to splash to a halt in front of me. The doors opened, and I smiled up at the driver. Juggling my umbrella, goodie-bag from work, purse, and bus pass all at once, I managed to punch my ticket and then drop into the first available seat. Snug in my seat, I was asleep before the bus began to move. Ted, the bus driver, knew my stop and woke me when we reached it. I thanked him, rubbed the sleep from my eyes, gathered up my belongings and stumbled down the bus steps. I wasn't home yet, my one room studio was still a fifteen minute walk away but at least it had stopped raining. Thank god for small favors, I thought as I started out.

Before too long, I heard footsteps behind me. I fumbled in my purse for the switchblade the other girls insisted I carry. My heart raced as I realized whoever was behind me was taking great care to match my pace. Knife in hand, I crossed the street, hoping it was just my imagination. They crossed as well. By now, my veins were flushed with adrenaline and I started to run; so did they. After a half-block or so, I thought I heard my name over the pounding of my feet on the pavement and the thunderous sound of blood in my ears. I heard it again, it was my name. I slowed just enough to look behind me as I began to round a corner. It was Ben, one of my regulars from work. He'd started coming in about seven months ago and we'd quickly become friends. He was one of my best tippers. Slowing to a stop, I turned around, pulled air into my lungs to slow my breathing, and managed to gasp out, "Ben, you scared the living crap out of me. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry. I was worried about you taking the bus so late in this weather. I thought the least I could do was make sure you were safe. I got on the bus just after you did, but you were asleep by the time I paid the fare, I didn't want to wake you."

Annoyed and relieved at the same time, I managed a smile, "That's sweet of you, and I appreciate it, but you shouldn't have bothered. I'm used to making my way in bad weather. And you certainly didn't need to creep up on me like that."

We shared a brief, if not tense chuckle when he noticed the blade in my hand. "What's that for? Skinning cats?"

I felt a bit foolish as I closed it and returned it to my purse. I shrugged, "It's at least some protection, in case I need it."

"Well, if you're going to brandish a weapon, I hope someone at least taught you how to use it. Come on, I'll walk you the rest of the way home to save the neighborhood cats any undo harm." He smiled disarmingly, and I allowed him to accompany me to my apartment building. I thanked him once again, wished him a goodnight, and went inside still feeling a bit shaken.

The next night while at work, Ben invited me out on a date. I politely declined and explained that Mr. Winters had a strict policy against the waitresses dating customers. I could see he was disappointed, but he said he understood. When I cleared his dishes away, I saw that he'd left an unusually generous tip and I hoped it wasn't because he felt uncomfortable. Still, I was very grateful none-the-less.

That night, after my shift ended, I again followed my normal route home. After I dropped my belongings on the only counter in the flat, I put away my portion of the evenings leftovers. I changed into my pajamas, grabbed my trusty little switchblade from my bag and sat it on the night stand. Then I hit the sack; I was beat and fell asleep almost immediately.

At 4:05 a.m. I woke thinking I had heard a sound, but all seemed still. One of the down sides of being in the service industry is how much coffee you consume to keep such late hours, maybe it was my aching bladder that had woken me. I didn't bother with the light as I made my way to the bathroom knowing that if I did, there would be no chance of further sleep. As I turned to head back to bed, I thought I caught a glimpse of movement behind the shower curtain. Scared out of my mind, I ran into the other room desperate to reach my cell phone. Someone grabbed my pajama top and pulled me backward against them. I began to scream just as the intruder covered my mouth with a gloved hand.

"Don't make a sound and you won't get hurt," a male voice whispered into my ear. He guided me to the daybed with my own switchblade held tight against my throat. The intruder kissed the back of my head, and told me to count to one-hundred before opening my eyes. Scared senseless, I did as I was told.

When I finally opened my eyes, I was alone. I immediately called 911. The police responded to my call quicker than I anticipated. They searched the studio, but found nothing out of the ordinary. When the time came to question me, the police asked that I describe my assailant. The only detail I could provide was that it was a man wearing a glove. I had nothing more to offer as I hadn't seen him.

Frightened by the experience, I took the next two evenings off. By the time the third arrived, I realized I couldn't afford to lose another night's worth of tips or I wouldn't be able to pay my rent that month. Most of my regular customers had heard about what happened and were very concerned, Ben among them. I thanked them all, and did my best to smile and put them at ease. Ben seemed more concerned than the others, and asked if I would like him to wait and escort me home after work. He was very sincere, and for a moment I considered it, then I realized I could jeopardize my job if Mr. Winters found out. Besides, if I was going to continue working nights, and I was, then I was going to have to face my fear and get on with my normal routine. I thanked him but politely declined, perhaps a bit cooler than I'd intended to.

He smiled and asked for his check, I hoped I hadn't upset him and said as much. He assured me he wasn't offended and that he understood. Ten minutes later, when I cleared his dishes away, I again found a very generous tip along with a note scribbled on a napkin tucked under the bills. Pocketing the cash, I leaned over and read the note. It said 'Look under the napkin, I left you a little something extra.' I reached for the napkin, and as I lifted it, my own switchblade tumbled onto the table. There was a bow tied around it. I dropped the dishes in my other hand; they shattered as they struck the floor. I could hear the startled gasps of the other patrons, and waitresses, but I was transfixed by the blade. I reached a shaking hand toward it, lifted it, there was something written on the ribbon.

I untied it and read, 'Lovely décor, I'll be seeing you soon.' I started to scream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Gloria Bobrowicz has been a huge horror fan since early childhood. She loves books related to true crime – particularly the serial killer variety. Watching the movie 'Night of the Living Dead' or some of the older horror movies such as, 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers', 'The Thing from Another World', or 'War of the Worlds' with a bowl of popcorn is her idea of relaxing. Gloria is a coowner and the Editor-In-Chief of Sirens Call Publications.

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Surrender Richard Thomas

In the process of losing my mind, the rest of the world has fallen away. A cloud hangs over the monotone house, the grass growing longer, the litter outside caught in the wild blades of fading green, as the shadows inside play games with me. I used to resist them, tried to shine a light into the corners of the living room, the drapes—the long hallways that never seemed to end. I used to scream at them, crying as I fell to my knees, begging to be left alone. When I walk by the bedroom now, the door closed, a cold wave pushing out from under the gaps, nipping at my ankles, I moan quietly under my breath as a shadow flickers at the doorframe. I do not open it, not now.

I grew up around this house, with its curving banister, the old grandfather clock that sat in the foyer, the secret passageways between bedrooms hundreds of years old. I loved to spend time here, to open the glass candy dish and see what Grandma had put out that day, to hide in the bedroom closets and wait for my brother to find me. Now, I only see death.

When my grandmother passed away I was sad, of course, the memories of so many holidays spent here, Christmas trees crowded by presents, the whole family gathered around the Thanksgiving table. That all changed. It changed so fast that I never saw it coming. I couldn't fathom what lurked in the darkness, what waited for me to come home.

For a long time now I've stared at the ceiling, sleeping on the antique couch, covered in dust, afraid to go upstairs, but afraid to leave it as well. I know how it summons—I know how it pulls the light to it and snuffs it out. So I stay and ask myself what I did to bring this spirit to me, what actions and crimes I committed to lure the demon out. In the dark, no amount of blankets are able to stop my shivering, I hear it upstairs, heavy footsteps, the weight of lead boots, the mass of flesh a horrible density, the shadows always fading to cold air. I remember the abortion, the way my girlfriend cried—this selfish act that we hid from the world, drowned in our sorrows and a river of amber liquid. I remember the anxiety of a thump in the road, the radio blaring, the shape left behind as I drove on, turned away, vomiting in the bushes later, pretending that nothing had happened. I remember the heroin, the needles and the glossy cold skin she wore, the way we would pour into each other, our mouths hot for slick tongues, our fingers eager to grab, to clench, to slide inside. She deserved better—I know that now. The only sound left from that night, from the dense woods, from the dull panic that washed over me is the sound of the shovel blade piercing the earth, over and over again.

Nobody thought anything of the gray cat, the Maine Coon we called Quixotic, passing away in the middle of the night. He was fifteen years old, moving slow already, doomed to die in this house—we all knew that. And yet, as I fell asleep that night, his cries came to me from the basement, wrapped in an urgency that made me queasy, that made me hesitate, pull back the covers and sit up on the edge of the bed. I heard him make his way up the stairs, and heard him slump to the floor in the guest room, and assumed he was fine, when he finally went quiet.

Guest room. Yes, that's accurate. Our guest.

We buried him in the back yard, the acre of old oaks a canopy arcing over our heads, the brick fireplace where we would barbeque and gather, the chipped fountain of a forlorn boy spouting water into its cracked base. I have a hard time saying their names now, my son, my wife—they have turned to smoke and drifted away. My son, Robert, he took the sticks, wound round with yarn, the simple placard reading Quicky, as we called the cat, and pushed into the earth with a sigh. That night as we fell asleep, my sadness a heavy weight on my chest, the place the cat used to sit and purr, a series of doors slammed shut, a groaning from the pipes in the basement, and we clung to each other, my Linda disappearing in my arms, tears and darkness and heavy sighs luring us to sleep. We were not afraid, not yet. We were sad, and tired, and ready to move on. Our guest was not.

I didn't know much about electricity, so my brother William helped me with the ceiling fan. It seemed a simple task, the guest room always hot, except when it was cold, needing a false breeze to keep the stillness from growing. The circuit breakers, they were flipped. The light from the windows was barely enough, clouds drifting over the yard, but we did not hesitate. A ladder, the wires, screws and a drill, it was nothing to us, an easy job, a task to be done. There were cold beers and a back porch waiting for us later, the inevitability of it unquestioned. I slapped him on the back, and we hoisted the fan. And then he grabbed the wires.

There were no lights on in the room, the circuit had been flipped, and yet I stared at him as his body shook, as his eyes bulged and a darkness swept across the room, the ladder shaking, no voice in my chest, no words in my mouth, the smell of charred flesh, the urine pooling beneath the ladder, his body falling to the ground, the fan crashing down on us, as I muttered his name over and over, smoke drifting as tendrils to the ceiling where it pooled. The room now held an anxious weight.

There never would be a fan in that room, the broken blades and glass carted out to the garbage cans in the quiet of the next day, the wires sticking out of the hole, always pointing, always reaching out for more. And in the corners of the room, the shadows grew, the air thick with the stench of burnt flesh.

The house had changed for us now, and we stayed away from the guest room, closing the door, which always reopened, stayed on the north side of the house, leaving that hallway alone. And yet, we went on. It was still weeks before I'd start killing myself, there was still an air of hope.

Still in a daze, we snapped at each other, my wife and I, over every small thing, over every task not done a certain way. We spit our angry words at each other over garbage cans and their liners, over bills that had not been paid, over loose handrails and crooked pictures and dinners that we brought home in greasy paper bags. Maybe we could have run then, maybe it was still forming, still weak. I don't know.

The sounds that came to us as we fought in the kitchen, they did not make any sense, they had no context in our memories. We stomped and pointed, we clenched our fists and spewed obscenities, faces flushed, as the house around us creaked and moaned, the doors opening and closing, the boy running from room to room, a game he was playing, certainly, a laugh on his lips as he amused himself, certainly not terrified, not running from something, not trying to escape, just playing as boys are known to do. My fist banged on the table, a tall thin water glass breaking in the kitchen sink as Linda turned her back to me, cursing into the hot water that flowed over the dirty dishes. Our heads turned with a snap at the pounding, the dull thuds as they repeated down the curving staircase, over and over until we were met with the eventual silence of the boy hitting the hardwood floor. No words, just a gasp, eyes widening, and we ran out of the room, muttering to our absent God, and found him bent and broken, lying still on the floor.

There was not much left after that, I think. There was no color, or light, only darkness. People came and left, the house was full and then empty, things were done, paperwork, I imagine, nothing that stays with me, nothing that matters. I often found myself wandering the hallways, cold and yet sweating, standing in the guest room, arms at my side, a cloak of black wrapping around me, as I cursed the shadows, begged it to take me, I was done. A dirty teddy bear sat in the corner, a long line of Matchbox cards leading from it to the edge of my shoes, and my head filled with swarming bees, my eyes rolled up into the back of my head, and I collapsed.

Linda is at our bed side, her hands on my wrist, her voice a whisper, and she's telling me something, that we have to leave, that she's leaving, that it's all gone now, nothing left—I can't decipher what she's saying. I cannot move. She tells me it is too much and I can barely nod. Go, I tell her, there's nothing here for you. I have nothing left to offer. Run. I close my eyes and she is gone.

I open them and there is a pounding at the front door, lights flashing and I cannot speak to the men in uniform, as they pour past me into the house, as the smell of something burning fills the hallway and my mouth. They are in the kitchen shouting and there is a wave of smoke, the sound of water, the cursing and grunting of men. They ask for my wife, they mention the boy, my brother—they have been here before. I am mute. There is water on the floor, a puddle in which I stand, and as I look above my head there is an irregular shape on the ceiling above, the guest bathroom, the drip, drip, dripping filling the air with a metronome, a repetition, that wants to add up to something.

There is more noise upstairs, men yelling and I still cannot move. I am pushed out of the way, as a stretcher flies past me, the man in charge, his hand on my arm, yelling at me from underwater, pushing me into a chair a flashlight in my eyes, and there are doctors, paramedics, policemen, firemen, a flurry of action, and I am slipping into a comatose skin, my flesh gone alabaster, my heart freezing into stone. The last thing I remember is the slashes of red on the white, white sheet—and she is gone from me forever.

I told her to run. He didn't let her get away.

Time has abandoned me, I am no longer alive—I am no longer human. I get in the car and drive and drive, out onto the highway into the darkness, the world around me lacking clarity, and I find myself back in the driveway, the engine running—the car door open wide. I pick up the telephone and call anybody who will answer, beg them to come get me, to get me away from this unholy presence, and then I wait downstairs for the doorbell to ring, but they never show up.

There is a vague memory of a hammer and nails, of boards. There is the smell of gasoline leaking from under the door and the matches in my hand will not strike. There is a pinching at my wrists and a feeling of great release and I awake in my bed, naked, claw marks up and down my skin, bite marks on my shoulders and the torn flesh on my arms is stitched together with long pieces of dark, sinewy hair.

When there is nothing left, when I have finally surrendered, no longer seeking absolution, no longer praying to any God, anywhere, no longer ignoring the price I now must pay, not at my hands, but at his, I take the hammer and I claw at the wood, I pull away the barrier to the closed off room, this abyss, this dark sanctuary, and I place my hands on the cold metal knob—I turn it slowly and breathe frost into the air, I give myself over to the darkness inside, and finally, he swallows me whole.

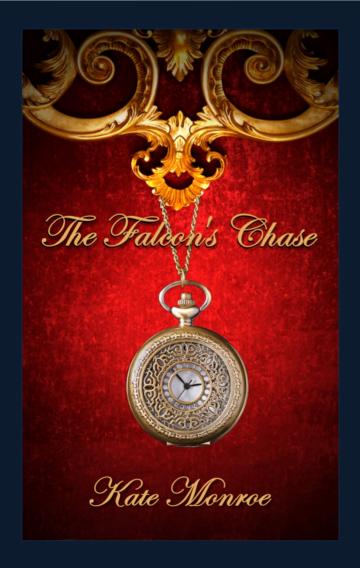
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Richard Thomas is the author of three books—

Transubstantiate, Herniated Roots and Staring Into the Abyss. His over 100 stories in print include Cemetery Dance, PANK, Gargoyle, Weird Fiction Review, Midwestern Gothic, Arcadia, Pear Noir, Chiral Mad 2, and Shivers VI. He is also the editor of three anthologies out in 2014: The New Black (Dark House Press), The Lineup: 25 Provocative Women Writers (Black Lawrence Press) and Burnt Tongues (Medallion Press) with Chuck Palahniuk. In his spare time he writes for The Nervous Breakdown, LitReactor, and is Editor-in-Chief at Dark House Press. For more information visit www.whatdoesnotkillme.com or contact Paula Munier at Talcott Notch.

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The Falcon's Chase By Kate Monroe

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Smashwords, and the iStore

Bleeders Mik Dietlin

I sat on a bench at Rose Hill and Preston. There's a stoplight there so I'm five feet from any car stopped for a red. Plenty of time. It's hot so I have my flowered dress on. It's light and pretty, good for humid days, like today. I'm trying to get happy, but there's not much to get happy about. I've got an ice pick. All I need is a little time and soon someone will roll up I know I can take.

The twins are almost one and still having problems eating... they're burning me out. The only way I can get formula down their choking throats is if I snake tubes down their noses to their stomachs and then pour the formula down a connecting tube. It works like the doctor said it would, and they've maintained their weight, but what he didn't tell me is how badly they'll want to rip off the tape securing the tubes. Two pieces to the left of the nose and two to the right, then one in back of the ear where the feeding pouch connects. If they tear the tape off they grab the tubes and it only takes a second for them to pull it out of their stomachs and out of their noses.

Trust me mothers everywhere... you have not heard your baby really squeal unless you've snaked a fucking tube down their nose. The whole experience feels like I'm torturing them. I have to cover my ears sometimes. Other times I squeal right with them.

My three year-old screams when he can't have my attention, which is quite a bit. We have to keep a security fence in front of the stairway to the basement, or he'll fall down them and kill himself. He's so hyperactive he tries to scale the wall. It seems at times he wants to hurt himself. I have to watch him constantly which is impossible with the twins. Occasionally the thought of leaving the gate unlocked enters my mind. I would never do it... I... just would never do it.

You might be wondering where my husband is during all this pleasure. Golfing.

She finally rolled up and stopped at the light, a skinny older woman that couldn't hurt a fly. Her face looked sad, probably as sad as mine, but not nearly as desperate. The door was unlocked. I didn't waste time. I walked down the sidewalk a bit, then toward the back of the car to get in her blind spot. I bolted for the door and before she could say "What the hell are you doing?" I was seated with the ice pick at her throat. Just under her cheekbone.

"Turn right now!" I blurted with an authority I didn't know I had. "Just drive." God was she petrified, shaking like a leaf. I tried to reassure her. "I'm not going to hurt you," She got more at ease after that, but not much.

I told her if she just listened, she would be fine. I told her my husband was golfing, that he's incessantly whacking his club. That he's never around the house much, except to eat, shit, and sleep, much like my three kids who I was attempting to raise into adults. I told her of course I was better off without him, we all were, but I needed his money. The kids needed his money. I told her I could do without the sex, but that I was a human being and needed to be touched. Have my hand held. A peck on the lips, something. I told her all those things.

She kept staring at my crotch area so I pressed the tip up against her throat a little harder. But the stupid broad kept staring. "What are you looking at?" I yelled. My intensity forced the ice pick a little deeper into her than I'd intended. I cut her. First there was nothing, then a trickle, then a thin stream of red liquid moving slowly down her neck. I wasn't about to apologize.

"You're bleeding," she gasped, still looking at my crotch.

Sure enough, blood was all over the seat, all over my pretty dress. "Keep driving," I said, ice pick still firmly against her skin. "There's a lot more to tell."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mik Dietlin calls his particular style of writing "psychoactive" because his characters eventually discover the reality they thought they knew is only a glimpse of the actual mind-bending nature of reality being revealed to them. His stories contain elements of horror, absurdism, and mystery in various convolutions. He lives with his wife Susan in the Shenandoah Valley.

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Pen of the Namned



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Little Sister Chantal Boudreau

I'm glad it's morning. It's starting to get cold once the sun goes down and I really wanted to crawl into the car last night, even with the bad smell there. It doesn't stink as much when it's cold, but Dad's still there in the driver's seat and I don't like to look at him. It scares me and gives me bad dreams - when I can fall asleep. The only time I can make myself climb in is when it's raining, or it's time to take care of Jill. Otherwise, I stay outside, here in the woods with Mom.

It's not so bad when the sun comes up. It's early September, so most of the chill is at night, even though yesterday morning I could see my breath in little puffs of steam.

They'll come for us soon though, when school starts and we're not there, and I guess that's what really matters. They might not miss me right away, and Jill's still too little for school, but they'll miss Mom and Dad. I stopped calling them Mommy and Daddy after my first year in school. The other kids said only babies do that.

Anyway, they'll be missed when they don't show up when school starts, because they are school teachers. That's also why they probably aren't looking for us yet. People know we went away somewhere else for the end of summer vacation. I don't know if my mom and dad actually told anybody that we would be back this soon. We were coming back with more than a week to go before the first day of class. Mom wanted to be sure that we had time to do things like go school shopping for clothes and supplies. I guess that doesn't matter much now, and I'll have to pick out my own things when they find us.

Today seems to be warming so that it's more summery than fall. It hasn't rained in a couple of days, so the ground is dry. I like those days best. I can avoid the car almost completely while I pick berries and refill Jill's cup from the river. When I'm done my chores for the day, I usually hang out with Mom.

Maybe it's because she's in the open air rather than stuck inside the car. Maybe it's because she's pretty cold from being frosted over for a couple of mornings and doesn't give off as much stink like stuff in the fridge. Anyway, she doesn't smell as bad as Dad, and I don't mind getting closer. I try not to look at her when I do. Going through the windshield smashed up her face pretty good, and so her cheeks, mouth and forehead are all bloody, and her eyes are open and staring. She had taken her seatbelt off to reach for something that Jill had dropped when the accident happened. I don't blame Jill though. She's mostly still just a baby and she fusses without thinking. She didn't mean for things to happen the way that they did. Just like Dad didn't mean to go off of the road and roll the car down the hill.

When the sunshine has been really nice, I lie down in the grass a few feet away from Mom, and I pretend we're lying in our backyard, watching the clouds like we've done a million times before. We'd peek through the branches into the big blue sky and call out what we saw. It always made me giggle.

"Bunny!" I call and point. Mom doesn't answer the way she would have, but I feel a little better just having her around. That will change when they find us, but for now I'll keep on pretending and it won't bother her.

I get up again after a few more clouds, starting to get tired of this game. Some of the leaves have fallen to the ground around her. Just a few, but I like the way they crunch under my feet, so I dance around her. She would have laughed if she could have. She liked crunching the leaves too. She would smile with all of her teeth too, a big grin, white and shiny. I can see her teeth now if I look, but that's because the skin is ripped away in places, and some of her teeth are broken. It's not the same.

I flop back down on the grass once I'm out of breath from skipping and jumping, and I look at the berries that I picked for me and Jill. I pop a few in my mouth and enjoy their juicy sweetness. My tummy would have grumbled when I did this a couple of days ago. That was when the snack bag had run out and now we just have the berries. They usually leave my belly pretty empty. My stomach hurt and growled a lot at first, but then it got used to having only the few berries and it got quiet again. It's kind of like my insides went to sleep. I'm sure that they'll find us before we starve, but we'll be pretty hungry until then.

I figure out how many of the berries is about half, because I need to share with Jill. Mom and Dad would have told me to, if they still could, and I don't want to be a bad girl. I have to take care of my little sister, since they can't.

Pushing the berries to one side, I get Jill's cup. I know the water from the river isn't tap water, but it is running water and there's a better chance that it's good because of that. I wish I could boil it, but I'm not allowed to play with fire, and I don't have any matches. Dad taught me a lot about surviving in the woods, when he used to take me camping. I loved camping, and this is a little bit like camping, but without the tent. He knew a lot about nature because he was a science teacher. Sometimes he would tease Mom that she wasn't a real teacher

because she taught art instead. She would get mad at him and smack him in the arm, but she wasn't that mad because they usually ended up laughing.

I like science, and I liked it when Dad talked about science stuff – especially the animals. I love animals. He told me all about Pavlov's dogs and Schrodinger's cat and Ham the chimp astronaut. Mom didn't like it when he talked about those things and said that he better stop before he got to rats and rabbits. She said science could be cruel to animals. Dad would point out that Schrodinger's cat was only a theory, that they didn't do anything to a real cat, and then he would ask Mom if he needed to remind her of some of the things that had been done to animals in the name of art. Mom's face turned bright red and she stomped off. I hated it when they argued, but I guess they won't be arguing anymore.

Once the cup is full, I have to do my other chore and take care of Jill, my little sister. I put the berries in the bowl that she used to keep her dry cereal in, the one with handles, and climb into the car next to Dad. I almost forget to take a deep breath first. I made that mistake yesterday, and it was really yucky, especially with all the flies in there. It's not Dad's fault. Everything stinks when it's dead.

The car is really dark, and I can't see into the back, where Jill is strapped into her car seat. I can still see Dad in the front though. He didn't go flying through the windshield like Mom did. He still has his seat belt on and there's a big puffy airbag there too. That was supposed to help in an accident, but it didn't work. It stopped him from smashing his head and face, but it didn't stop the tree branch from coming through the window — the one sticking through the place where his eye used to be.

"I'm doing more science stuff, Dad," I tell him as I tie the handles of the sippy cup and the bowl to the shoelace. The shoelace is tied to a stick I found. I've been able to tie my own shoes since I was four. Mom said I made her proud.

The stink makes me want to throw up, but I have to finish what I'm doing. It's important. I lower the cup and bowl into the dark of the back seat, like a fishing hook. Then I rest the stick against the front seat so that it stands up, and I climb out again. That's when I finally get to take another deep breath.

I have to do this every day. I have to give Jill her share of the berries that I pick, whenever I can find them. The cup leaks a little too, so it would be empty each time I pull it back, if she drank any or not.

I sit on the grass again, and the urge is there to open the back door and peek in, since I don't know what I'll find, but I won't let myself. When the accident happened, when Dad swerved to miss a moose, my booster seat didn't work properly. It was too loose I think, and I woke up outside of the car after the accident, just like Mom. But I wasn't dead – not like Mom and Dad. I could see them, and knew that for a fact. I couldn't say they might be alive because I was sure that they weren't. But I couldn't see Jill. There was still a chance with her.

I suppose in some ways it might be easier if I tried climbing up the steep hill to the road and go looking for help, or if I just opened that back door, instead of waiting for them to find us, and see for myself. If she's dead and I find that out for sure, I could keep all the berries instead of sharing, or I could make that climb and find someone who'll take care of me. But I have a problem with that.

You see, as long as I wait, as long as I make this last, I can keep lying in the grass and staring at the clouds with Mom, and I can keep talking about science stuff with Dad and no one can take those things away from me. And as long as I wait, and I don't look in that back seat, there is just as much of a chance that my little sister, Jill, is alive back there in the dark where I can't see her. Mom and Dad are gone for sure, and she's all that I have left.

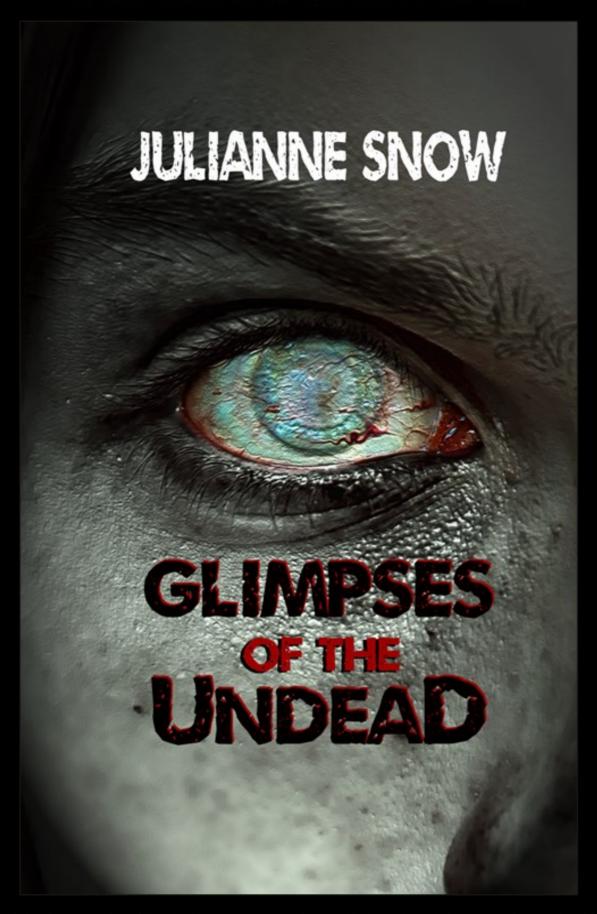
As long as I don't look, she's still my little sister. As long as I don't look, she's both dead and alive, just like Shrodinger's cat...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Chantal Boudreau, an accountant/author/illustrator, lives with her family in Nova Scotia, Canada. A Horror Writers Association member, she writes horror and fantasy, with several short stories published to date. Fervor, her debut dystopian novel, was released by May December Publications in March 2011 followed by sequels Elevation, Transcendence and Providence, as well as three novels in her Masters & Renegades fantasy series.

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A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION...



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The Boards Nina D'Arcangela

"Come on Kar, we're heading to the next ride – it's a fun house... This one looks spoooo-ky!"

He's always frigging rushing me. "Alright, you guys start heading over and I'll be there as soon as I down this last stupid clown pin." That gargoyle is going home with me, it's mine – I can feel it in my bones.

"Shit! Oh, man, you've got to be kidding me! Is this thing rigged? Really, my aim was dead on. That pin's got to be weighted – can I see it please?" I ask with my hand held out, waiting for the barker to hand it to me. Like complaining to this guy is getting me anywhere. He's one freaky asshole. He's been eyeballing me the whole time I've been playing, even with Denny standing right next to me. This toss has got to be rigged! Fuck it, another thirty bucks wasted on these useless games – I could have just bought the damn thing by now.

"Denny?" Where the hell did he go. "Hey, Mr. Smiles, yeah you behind the counter. Did you see where my friends went?" Silence... Okay, he's obviously not going to be much help, he just keeps staring at me like I have three heads.

Just as I'm about to turn away, he says, "The Fun House, lady."

"Pardon me?" Well what do you know, it actually speaks!

"You asked where your friends went. They went into the Fun House – the one back there," he answers with a tilt of his head toward a darker patch on the boards. Geez, would it kill this guy to smile?

"Thanks Chuckles, I appreciate it." I toss back sarcastically. "Oh, and by the way, your game sucks!" He just keeps staring at me as I walk away; a quick glance over my shoulder confirms it. Yup, creepo is still watching me. Damn he's freaky. I get the whole boardwalk barker mystic-thing, but this guy is taking it a little too far. He's moving into the 'time to grab my mace' zone.

Noticing my friends are nowhere in sight, I make my way toward the eerily dark entrance to the Fun House. Set slightly further back than the other attractions, this one really has an aura about it. It's spooky alright, Den wasn't kidding about that. Kudos to the set designers.

"Guys?" I call out as I walk up the somewhat derelict entrance ramp. Another nice touch. Between the darkness, the creaky ramp, and the abandoned feel, they really did a good job on this one. With no line out front, they must have gone inside without me.

As I pass through the entranceway, I pause long enough to read the sign hanging slightly askew above my head:

Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here? Think Not To Abandon What You Have Already Lost!

Great sign, I bet it scares the crap out of the kids who can read it. Who am I kidding? This is Jersey, they have to read it AND understand it to be scared. Where is the ticket-taker? "Hello?" No answer. Well, I guess this one's on the house!

Pushing the curtain aside, I step into a dark, dank, and narrow hallway that has the faint odor of char to it. Putting my right hand against the wall so as not to stumble in what is quickly becoming a pitch black corridor, I start walking forward, calling out to my friends as I go.

"Guys? Come on, you can't have gotten that far ahead. I swear Den, if you are around the corner waiting to mess with me—" As the automatic doors slam open in front of me, I scream my freakin' head off and nearly leap out of my skin. Just inside the doors, I can make out an empty row of train cars waiting for passengers. I step through the opening. They must have gone on foot without me, or taken the set of cars before this one. Crap! Should I turn back and just wait outside for them?

The abrupt crash of the doors shutting and trapping me inside, followed by a laugh-track cackle, makes up my mind for me. Okay, forward it is I guess. Well Kar, you wanted a treat for your birthday, no turning back now. I chide myself for my own fear and stupidity as I climb inside the lead car. Why do I always have to be so stubborn? I should have just given up on the dumb gargoyle when—

"Ouch!" My thoughts are interrupted as the train lurches into motion, nearly snapping my head from my neck.

As the car passes through the first set of swinging curtains, the smell of smoke is more cloying. These places always overdo it on the smell-o-rama factor. Creepy sounds start going off at a deafening level, lights start to strobe on and off — Christ! Den could be walking right alongside me and I'd never even know it. Oh goodie, now the animatronics are starting: screeching bats whizzing overhead, coffins popping up with their lids slowly

opening, mummies with glowing eyes, the goofy clowns with shining faces and spinning heads...

Wait – did that one just stop and look at me? Keep it together Kar, it's a timed ride, it's supposed to freak you out. But are all the clowns supposed to be looking at me? Where did everything else go? The soundtrack is still running, but it's muted like it's in another room all of a sudden. It's your imagination dumbass – stop buying into the hype!

My car rocks to a stop, the one behind me making a squealing sound in protest. Okay... the ride's not starting up again, I wonder if it's broken. You have got to be kidding me, now what? The damn ride breaks down in the first room. "Hello? Hey, is anybody running this thing or what?" I shout out, but get no reply.

After a few minutes of indecision and the car not moving, I finally decide to get out and walk. Something's got to be seriously wrong with this ride. Maybe that's why it was so dark out front, maybe this one was supposed to be closed. Grabbing my purse, I step out of the car and as soon as my feet hit the ground, the train takes off on its track again.

"Oh, fuck me, really?" Pissed off and sounding a little more than whiney even to my own ears, I start to follow the track as it winds its way through another black curtain and out of sight.

The clown heads are still watching me; they didn't follow the train when it left me stranded. *Okay, rationalize*. They must be motion activated and since I'm walking and taller than the train cars, they are turning at the same pace I'm moving. That makes sense, let's go with that.

Reaching the curtain, I push my way through it and nearly gag on the stench of burnt something coming from this part of the fun house. Ahhhh, it's disgusting! Did Den and the rest of them go through here too? He's not touching me tonight smelling like this crap. Hell, I don't even think I wanna touch me if this stench gets into my clothes and hair. As I continue to walk forward, I notice the floor is getting sticky — no, that's not it exactly. Sticky is the wrong word, it's getting... spongy, with a tar-like substance covering it. It looks like resin of some sort sticking to my boots. Oh — the stink is making me want to puke!

I gag one more time, "Guys, come on, this isn't funny anymore. Where the fuck are you? Something is wrong with this place."

Staying close to the track not to get lost in the semi-darkness or slip on the goo covering the floor, I see another bend coming up. Thank God! Another curtain must be right around the corner, hopefully the next room won't smell as revolting.

Rounding the bend and pushing through the next curtain, I start to get a little more freaked out. Now it's dead silent. I can hear the squish, slop of my feet slowly moving forward, but there is a dead hum to the air. Do you know what I mean? That quiet of a silence so loud that it screams like a high pitched whine.

"Guys?" I mewl quietly as my mind finally registers what my eyes are seeing in the orange glow. Up ahead, just a little ways, the track is bent and twisted, the metal rusted and... torn? Maybe melted? Metal doesn't just melt... Oh God, it fuses together under high heat and forms misshapen lumps just like when...

"Dude, she was right here throwing those damned softballs at the frigging clown faces when we left her. You're telling me you don't remember my girlfriend Karen mouthing off to you about your pins being rigged?" Righteous indignation lends Denny's cheeks a deep flush. "Come on man, I'm just looking for my fucking girl, she was here last time I saw her. Did you see where she went?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Been quiet tonight, ain't no girl been mouthing off to me." The tattooed barker replies as he crosses his arms across his chest and stares down at him. The rest of the group watches while Denny tries to regain his composure. Yelling at this guy is just aggravating him and making him less cooperative.

"Okay, look. No one is saying you did anything wrong," Denny continues in a pleading voice. "I just need to figure out where she went."

The barker stares at him, brows furrowed as if to imply Denny was nuts. "I already told you—"

"God Damn It! Please! Please, just listen to me for a moment. My girlfriend, her name is Karen, was standing right here – right where I'm standing now – pitching balls at the pins trying to win a... doll—"

"Gargoyle."

"What?"

"Gargoyle. They aren't dolls, these are gargoyles. If you want a doll, you gotta go about five stands down on

the right to win one."

Denny stares at the barker in utter confusion.

"No, I don't want a doll! I just want to know where my frigging girlfriend went when we left her to go into that Fun House over there!"

"Over where?" The barker growls back at Denny.

"There, right over there! On the left, that dark-"

Pointing furiously, Denny turns his head and sees nothing. No fun house, no darkened ride, no entrance to a pretend hell. Just nothing. Nothing but a charred area on that portion of the boards.

"Look kid. I don't know what your deal is, or what you and your friends have been drinking, but what you're looking at is where the old Haunted House ride that burned down three years ago used to be. You fucking locals probably think it's pretty funny to come around and mess with us on the anniversary of when it burned, the night twenty-six people died in that building because they couldn't get out. But we don't think it's funny at all. We all lost friends, some of us lost relatives when some jerk-wad teen set off a pack of firecrackers in there that burned the place to the ground." Steaming with fury, the barker leaned over the counter like a predator ready to rip Denny to pieces. "I was working here that night. By the time any of us could get over there, those damned doors had sealed shut and nothing was getting in or out. I had to stand there and listen to the screams of those twenty-six people inside as they burned to death. I don't know what your damage is, but I suggest you and your friends get the hell off the boards before me and some of my friends get upset about you being here!"

With that, Denny started to back away, still staring at the place where they had just ridden a fun house ride that wasn't there. Nothing was there – it was just a darker spot on the boards.

Stunned into silence, the group stumbled away not understanding what had just happened. Maybe it was a dream Denny was having? Maybe he would wake up and realize it was Karen's birthday all over again, and suggest they go somewhere else?

If he had bothered to look back one more time at the barker, he might have seen the slight curve to the man's mouth; the malice contorting his expression; the glint of satisfaction in his eyes...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx explorer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay and old grave yards. Nina is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a member of the writing group Pen of the Damned, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.

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Purgatory A. Lopez Jr.

"Do not fear death; only fear not beginning to live."

Imagine your plight. You wake up to complete darkness. Unable to move, trying desperately to comprehend what is happening. Then you hear the sound of something being dropped on the surface above you, dirt and rocks. You realize where you are, but you have no idea how or why? Your mind is racing at the speed of... darkness. You scream out and begin to panic. You shake your body trying to free yourself of your grave. Then, claustrophobia sets in. You've always been afraid of tight, closed-in places, afraid of being trapped inside of anything. Now, you are totally confined and helpless to do anything about it but... die. Soon your breathing will get harder as the dirt blocks out the oxygen, the thing you take for granted in your everyday life. You scream again as your heart beats faster. Your lungs heave up and down as your body is soaked in sweat. The dirt that seeps through the planks of wood sticks to your wet skin. You cough, and then it sinks in, the air has almost expired. More panic sets in, you begin to cry.

You no longer hear the sound of gravel and dirt covering your death bed. You listen, but hear nothing. Now you and the darkness have a companion; complete silence. Your breathing has even slowed, but more fear sets in. The only one who could help you; no matter, if he has put you there, has gone. The more you think about your dilemma, the more your mind instills terror and uncontrollable fear. You try again to press your body against the walls of your tomb, trying in desperation to free yourself. It is useless. The shortness of breath is becoming more real now, reality is setting in. The only light that is left is the light in your mind. All your memories, all the good times that you have had in your life. The things you should have done! Even that light begins to fade. The air, combined with the dust and dirt, has made breathing almost impossible now. You decide to give one last scream, to waive your last breath in an effort to save yourself, one last time. Your scream is loud and it vibrates your crypt. Still, there is nothing. The light inside you grows darker, and your life's memories flood your mind again. No more air, no more life.

As your light goes black and your memories turn dark, you hear a miracle.

"It's down here! I heard something! It's down here!" Suddenly the light in your mind glows, if only softly, but it glows. Hope! The power of hope. You are able to catch a breath or two, one last time.

"Start digging! Hurry, there can't be much air left down there. Hey down there, can you hear me!?""

You try to cry out, but the lack of oxygen and the dirt have rendered your voice dry and useless. The digging begins, shovel after shovel. You try to hold on as long as you can. They are getting closer; you can feel the box vibrating. The men's voices are getting louder, but your voice carries no sound. You gasp once more as you breathe in dirt-filled air. Your lungs try to expel it with a cough, but even that is out of the question now.

The sound of a shovel hitting the top of the box is next. You hear boots trampling above.

"There it is!" they holler. "Quick, give me the crowbar." You hear the sound of a board being ripped apart. You hear it, but you don't feel or see it. You try to take another breath, gasping. Nails creak as the coffin is opened.

"There's no one in it!"

"But he said they were buried right here!"

Now you realize that they are not opening your coffin, they are not saving you. They are close; they are right next to you. There must be two bodies buried here. Your lungs burn, the air is gone.

"He lied to us! Let's go get him, the lying bastard!"

You hear the men climbing up and walking off. You scream with your last breath.

"Noooo... please help me," your voice barely audible, even to you.

Your plea falls on deaf ears. They can't hear you.

You open your mouth and take your last breath. Your mind's light, which was rekindled just a moment ago, fades and darkens... for the last time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Born and raised in Texas and now residing in Arizona, I published my first work "Purgatory - 13 Tales of the Macabre" in 2011, followed by the horror novella, "Floor Four". I am currently writing the "Night Dreams" series. Enjoy everything about the horror genre, but have a passion for reading in all genres. My column, "Ask AJ", appears in the bi-monthly, 'All Authors Magazine'.

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Horrors from Ambrosia Mansion (a gothic pastiche) Mathias Jansson

Exterior

Through the rusty gates the misty silhouettes of an abandoned mansion deer eating rotten apples fallen from the crow's nest in the garden of delight

A glimpse in a distant window a shadow or a ghost a bone white finger writing on a frosty pane the ancient sign of the Seven Goats

Behind a pair of wings the shadow disappears was it an angel from heaven or a demon from hell? I cannot really tell in this misty morning light

The black Pandora's box I hold in my frozen hands is filled with yellowed letters telling the perverted horrors of Ambrosia mansion about jealousy, murder and forbidden love

The Nursery

The ghostly mistress wander mourning around seeking her lost child

Finds the children room empty on the mantelpiece a soiled ballerina slowly turning around playing a crackle lullaby

The cradle in the dusk filled with scratch marks and memories all that remains is a bloody cloth and a torn Teddy Bear

The mothers cries echoes in empty corridors she passes covered mirrors draped windows stops at the open fire place picks up a silver rattle buried deep in the ashes When the rattle jingles she can once again hear the inhuman gurgle echoe in the emptiness

She smiles with pride when she hear her heir the seventh son of the Seventh Goat calling her from the darkness below

The Basement

Angels and demons lurking in the shadows above waiting for the Judgment Day

In the moist earth hidden by the basement's smell rests my unborn soul

A bloody rag
a formless blob
a furious scream
a perverted evidence
of nature's lust and greed

Unloved and expelled from my mother's bosom cursed I threw myself in my cradle filled with fear and pain my only consolation a broken ballerina playing a sad lullaby

Until my father on the seventh day extinguished my agony drown me in the fur of my beloved Teddy Bear

The Bedroom

Behind closed door
I hear the sweet joy
of forbidden love
in my own wedding bed
I find myself looking in the mirror

In despair I escape down the stairs with salt frozen on my cheek determined to abandon my husband my brother, my sister everything dear to me

From the dark he rises my beloved betrayed with his warm hand tries to soothes my cry In the struggle I slip trip and fall down the hall to the sound of broken bone

Dead and cold in our wedding bed I rest once again as sister and brother husband and wife

The Attic

From the old oak beam my dried guts hangs around my shameful life

Burnt onto my retina the pictures of desire my deceptive sister burning with fire under my body

A scene repeating in slow-motion in my head my wife falling blood from a broken skull spreading over the floor

In a desperate attempt
to kill the pain in my soul
I tore out the eels of excrements
from the bloody bowl of life
wrapped them around my neck
dangling from the beam
I rest in peace

The Saloon

You were my twin soul my mirror sister you were me and I was you but in death, it was only you

All you loved
I took from you
my brother - your brother
your husband - your soul
I caressed your loved one
with my dirty hand

kissed his lips with yours opened my red gates of damnation let him plant the falling fruit in the garden of delight

Thirteen months I wore as the devils whore the abomination of life the damned heir of yours

I swear I will finally find a way to put out the flame to close the circle of life break the curse from hell on the Ambrosia family

The Seventh Grave

I find the open fireplace cold and covered with cobweb a track of faded stains reveals the hidden passage leading to the underground

Stairs screaming of despair through tunnels dripping with fear in a cave covered with horror six tombs stands in a circle with the inbred mutated bodies mutilated and dismembered all that remains of the Ambrosia family

In the middle a seventh tomb
a perverted abomination of life
I cannot tell if it's a human or a beast
a creature with stolen limbs
sealed with stitches and ropes
blessed with the secret signs of the Seven goats

Suddenly the monster sigh my body shakes with fright I start to run towards the light leaving forever the horror of the Ambrosias mansion and the terrible sight of my dear son behind

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call, Apehlion and Trembles Horror Magazine. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press and other publishers.

Homepage: http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/

After the Funeral Faith Dincolo

After the funeral

The urn is buried
The linens washed

The house sits empty

He lived alone

Years had passed since Doris died

Refrigerator's all cleaned out, turned off
The neighbors did all they could
For the seldom seen old man

Without a family

No one will ever come home here again Windows closed and doors locked tight

The cat Meows

Inside the empty house

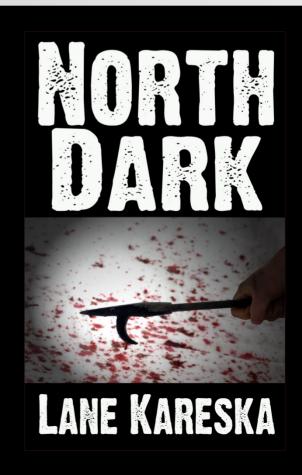
The cat...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Faith Dincolo writes historical nonfiction, poetry and horror stories. Her work has appeared in literary magazines and journals. Her book, 'Images of America, Saline County, Kansas' from Arcadia Publishing will be released In July, 2014. Her poetry collection, 'Me and Him Married,' will be released in May, 2014. She is currently working on a YA horror series 'Rules of the Dead.'

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North Dark By Lane Kareska

Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace,
Barnes & Noble, Kobo,
Smashwords, and the iStore



A Razor's Kiss

Sarah Peterson

a razor's kiss begets

a trickle,

a plip plip plop

of

ruby-deep hue.

a razor's kiss begets a

stream, opening a patchwork

of scars anew.

a razor's kiss begets

a river,

a slippery crimson

rush of grue.

a razor's kiss

begets a

flood, the fatal tide of

a wound gushing thru.

a razor's kiss

begets

а

tear,

a sticky garnet

just for

you.

Poison Bottle Moon

Sarah Peterson

drip drip veins dark as

ink

from the lip

of a cobalt

moon, into the mouth of a blood soaked mermaid

writhing in the blue. her eyes blink

once.

once, twice

sapphires so dark no light can shine

thru

the glassy sheen

of
an indigo
sea,
under a
poison bottle
moon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Sarah A. Peterson is a tattooed library assistant and freelance writer residing in California. She holds a lifelong interest in the paranormal and the macabre.

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Website: http://www.cleansheets.com

Clay Pigeons Lori R. Lopez

They set their sights on moving objects
Barrels high for that thrill of release
A laughing group of manic shooters
As bangs disturbed the sounds of peace

Their fun did not amuse the wildlife Cowering in thickets round an empty field Where disks lobbed to sky were shattered Like the trembling hearts these woods concealed

And the spirits of birds once used for training Would teem with ghastly hunted flocks
To fill gray heavens that moodily hovered
And mark smooth faces like Chicken Pox

It was not so sporting to flush birds out Or blast them while passing overhead A tranquil flight turned bleak and tragic By the careless aims that wished them dead

Even less to liberate them from a trap Setting free the caged for a joyous surge Ending with a mournful drop to the ground Overkilled by a shotgun's dirge

Whether target practice or a bloody 'game' It was cruel, inhuman, a savage pleasure And the birds have gathered to take revenge On a band of men in symbolic measure

An eye for an eye could not be collected Upon this day, in one fevered attack Of wings and beaks, keen talons and cries A hollow-boned avian fury most black

But the fowl rampage of a tufted mob Would rain on these tokens of humankind Too swift for bullets, delivering justice With vicious claws and views gone blind

Throwing hands in the air to swat and flail Guns surrendered or waved like sticks above The assaulted men ran shrieking for safety While birds spared the pawns no mercy or love A horror of bites and raked toes unfolded In a flurry of quills and unbeating breasts A mad frenzy of slashes and strident hurtles Commotion and screams over empty nests

Food of the ungodly worms that turned Hitching and twitching this rout would soar As if to fling themselves at windows Already deceased, ruffled plumes keeping score

Trading muzzle bursts for dissident sweeps
A grim fusillade of scratches and rips
Of raptor plunges and harsh peckadillos
Nips and tucks by mouths lacking teeth or lips

Ravenous screeches, conniptious dovetailing The swoops and clashes of angelic pinions Bobolink choirs in barn-swallowing storms A legion of swandiving air-striking minions

Cold and putrid from beyond the grave Perished hearts bound by thorns and ire A ragged squadron of kamikazes Pursuing the men, fueled by sulfur and fire

Before the targets had crossed a threshold Amid trunks and branches, the shelter of leaves Divebombers had stripped off every last pinch Of skin from bone like aerial thieves

And the skeletons halted their flight in shock With fleshless steps as drunkards sway Clothing in tatters, eye-sockets vacant Reduced to scarecrows on a Hitchcock day

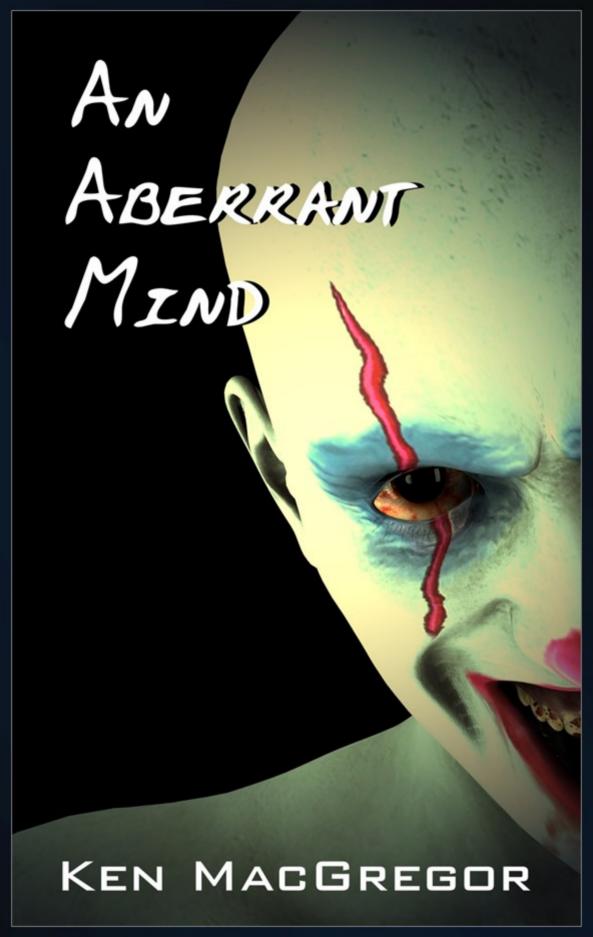
Then the dead birds wheeled in eccentric circles Like buzzards and hawks born again out of strife Declaring a victory for their feathered friends The clay pigeons had come to life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lori R. Lopez is the author of CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, DANCE OF THE CHUPACABRAS, OUT-OF-MIND EXPERIENCES, THE FAIRY FLY, MONSTROSITIES, JUGULAR and more. A resident of Southern California, she pens a column of dark verse and is also an artist, designing her own book covers and illustrations.

Twitter: @LoriRLopez

Website: www.fairyflyentertainment.com

ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

Bewitched Olfa Drid

I'm one of the witch's soldiers
I'm the invisible jinn
I made a pact with her
To make your head spin
I watch you everywhere,
While you're stupidly unaware
I have only one mission
To speed up your demolition...

I'm sent to disfigure you to eclipse your sun to cloud your vision to steal your smile to fade your glittering eyes to 'deflate' your cheeks I'm the best 'diet' to make you thin to get under your skin to make you lose your hair and fall in love with despair...

I'm sent to crash every new car you buy to smash your life and make you die to leave you with neither money nor possessions to make you work and work in vain then reap nothing but loss and pain to make you go bankrupt and opt for choices abrupt...

I'm the jinn to haunt your place to deny you peace and solace to chase you from house to house to make you hate your walls feel like to commit suicide and yourself from others hide to make you ache and ache your heart to squeeze and break...

I'm the jinn, to make you lose appetite and desire and aspire to burn like fire all your senses to freeze to never feel at ease to kill all your fetuses to cut your progeny to kill you vein by vein to reduce you to dust your own self hate and disgust...

I' m the witch's employee to haunt you in your sleep

to keep you awake and weep... to fill your mind with hallucinations and nightmares and your existence no longer bear...

I'm the omnipotent jinn to paralyze your mind to exterminate your kind to push you to the backstage your feelings to inflame and enrage to deactivate your magnetic power to be your haunting vampire...

I'm the devil, sent for your sake to tempt you to sin to drag you to hell to whisper in your ears to make you live in fear to possess your body and soul to bury you in a hole...

I'm the determined devil, to make you divorce to exterminate your force to break your bones to make you perish alone...

I'm the vicious jinn, to taint your reputation to steal your photos, your identity, your past to make you hate your face your dreams to deface...

I'm the damned jinn who did it all to make you fall but failed to kill you your strength made me chill your patience is beyond compare your wisdom made me stare I expected you to blaspheme to curse the Lord to perish by the sword but your perseverance made me wonder about the goddesses in you, the ones giving you power the ones making you tower then I saw it was your faith your God's healing words gave you wings like birds

saved your from captivity filled you with serenity made you touch divinity...

Your God's melodic words made me shrivel, shrink sink then remember and think that you've always been a worrier a spiker a fierce fighter a biter ...

Me, the defeated jinn
I strived in vain for a decade
to put you in the shade
to make you sink in sadness
to kiss and hug madness...

But at last,
I had pity for you
could no longer hurt you
fell in love with you
I'll no longer obey the witch,

You're the one all devils to bewitch
I'm disobeying my master
I wanna be your slave
Your life I shall save
from all other witches and evildoers
from all enviers and malicious viewers...

At your service I'll be
Your soul I'm setting free
Your scattered pieces
shall collect and make whole
Your faith I'll embrace
Your past wounds efface
You killed Death in person
nothing and no one will ever
make your life
worsen...

I'm down on bended knees before you, everything shall freeze I'm no longer the devil from heaven to make you fall I'm now your ball...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Olfa Drid Derouiche, known as Olfa Philo is a Tunisian English teacher, a Ph.D scholar and a seed of a writer / poetess who has just ripened and flowered along the seasons of life... A committed writer whose passion is meditation at the ailments and aches of the human race and whose utmost target of writing is to touch the readers' hearts and souls, to stimulate previously-silenced thoughts and question given- for-granted facts. Some of her poems were published in The Poet Sanctuary: Patchwork Musings (2009) and The Voices Project.org (March 2014).

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Available on Amazon,
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Smashwords, and the iStore

The Sirens Call Flash Contest

Authors were tasked with writing a 400 word story, no more, no less using the picture below as inspiration.

All submissions were read and they were very good.

3 winners were chosen to receive a \$10 Amazon gift card.



Please flip to the next page to read the winning entries in no particular order...

The Edifice D.S. Ullery

The edifice stood before her. Rows of windows occupying the expanse of each of the four floors stared back at her like remorseless, judgmental eyes. At street level, beneath a triangular canopy supported by twin columns, a length of plywood had been mounted over the entrance.

She regarded the child snuggled in her arms, wrapped in a cocoon of dark, blue cloth, eyes closed in slumber. Her heart grew heavy at the sight, a sadness which seemed to weigh her very soul with chains forged of the deepest despair.

She drank in the bright blue sky stretching infinitely beyond the structure. A coldness settled into her at the sight despite the superficial beauty of the day, leaving her with an overpowering sense of isolation. It was as if she and the building were all that existed.

Something sinister beckoned to her from within, compelling her to approach. She took a first, cautious step, her heels clicking on the pavement. Then another. Soon , without understanding why, she was almost racing toward the door.

Upon reaching the canopy , she saw that the plywood was gone and the door opened wide, revealing an interior realm of shadow. She did not question why this was, nor did she even care. The compulsion was too strong to turn back now. She stepped into the gloom.

A short walk revealed an elevator car waiting. With a brief tremor it began to ascend, her anxiety growing with each floor it passed. When the bell signaled that she had reached the uppermost level, an involuntary sigh of grief escaped her.

She stepped out. The sun gleamed across the rails of the observation deck and painful recognition flared through her. Images of her beloved , holding in his arms the mistress he had taken. She moved, clutching the infant closer, causing it to stir, protesting the disturbance.

She stepped onto the deck and crossed to the rails. She stared out across the city, the place where she had given all of herself to a man, delivered him a son and been betrayed.

Holding their child to her bosom, she threw herself forward, closing her eyes as she fell, her lips twisting into a cruel smile at the thought of the pain this would cause him.

There was a terrible pressure at impact. Then nothing. Light penetrated the gloom. Her eyes flickered open. The edifice stood before her.

Unfurl Doug Rinaldi

I've forever known that escaping would solve a lifetime of despair. Here, standing on the ledge of the third floor window to this Gothic edifice I've called home for more years than I can remember, I bathe in the setting sun's fading warmth. Its magical rays highlight the lines of scornful sadness carved in my face from an existence of suffering, yet I hear its siren's call beckoning me to be as one with it. I can hear the eternity in its majesty... feel the comfort in that eternity.

As I gaze down upon the magnificent facade of stonework and craftsmanship, I'm well aware that no one outside of its hallowed halls and impenetrable walls will ever know of the evil and pain held within them. If I'm truly the first to break free from this seemingly inescapable fortress of corruption, no one will ever hear my tale--learn of my horrid existence. Even if someone were privy to my story, I fully believe that they'd find it absurd, and, in a twisted sense of irony, recommend I be put right back inside.

I brace my arms between the window frame, pushing on the cold structure with my hands as if trying to widen the expanse of my escape route. I look up as twilight engulfs the fleeting hints of light. Shadows twist and dance across the polished architecture, creating visual murmurs calling me to join them, spurring me on to commit to my plan.

Below, I can sense others staring out their windows, noses to the cold glass, wishing that they, too, could break free. But their fate isn't their own--perhaps never was. They have succumbed to the inevitable, unable or unwilling to challenge the providence of their keepers.

The time has come. The vestiges of sunlight vanish beyond the horizon as the dark's icy tendrils claim the night sky. I look behind me one last time at the clandestine horror that's taken everything from me, that's wrung almost every drop of will I have left. My toes curl over the windowpane's edge and the cool air soothes my mind. The time is now.

Creeping towards freedom, I lean forward, letting the shadows embrace me. Air rushes by my face in my free fall and I smile. From my back, wings unfurl, catching the wind's current, lifting me high above this terrible place.

Sun, I am coming home.

A Room With No View Rose Blackthorn

Lilia has been here for so long, she remembers nothing else. On bright days, light comes through the upper arched window sash. Because it faces north, no sunlight ever slips inside. The bottom pane has been painted black so she cannot see anything outside except the high curved slice of unreachable sky. By mutual exclusion, no one outside can see her, either.

She has a secret though, for even with her crippled limbs she can climb. When she is left alone, she scales the tiled sill and pulls herself above the obscured glass to perch on the narrow rail. For long hours Lilia crouches there, her thin arms wrapped around her knees. She hums softly, but cannot sing the words. Long ago in the time known as *before* a woman had held her, kept her warm, and sang in a sweet voice. Now, Lilia hums the tune and traces the map of her scars. She looks out upon a world that does not know she exists.

When the key clatters in the lock, she scurries down like a spider with half its limbs removed. Dr. Heidrich comes in, unannounced as always. "Come now, Lilia. It is time."

There is no place to run, nowhere to hide. The lock on the bathroom door was removed long ago, for Lilia has no privacy. She cowers in the corner beneath the distant arch of summer sky.

The orderlies bring her back to where Nurse Absinthe waits with the needle. There is a sting, and the cobwebbed ceiling fades along with the scent of licorice.

She wakes to darkness in the echoing silence of her room. Touches her face, where bandages obscure the contours of brow and orbit. It will hurt, it always does; but she has to know.

The tape and gauze come off with little effort, for she has become dexterous despite the missing digits. Stitches sew her lids together over nothing, and now she cannot even cry.

Lilia turns to the window she cannot see. Dr. Heidrich has taken her one piece at a time—fingers, bones, bits and pieces of her healthy organs—and now she is a patchwork horror. The climb up the sash is terrifying, but less so than the alternative.

She crouches on the rail, mutilated hands and eyeless face against the glass. When it breaks she will fly, and be seen by the world at last.

Interview with artist Tanja Jurković

This issue of *The Sirens Call* features artist Tanja Jurković whose work you've been seeing throughout the eZine. We sat down with her to ask a few questions about what she does and this is what she shared with us...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Tanja, thank you for agreeing to share your work and your time for this issue. Why don't you tell readers a little bit about yourself?

Tanja Jurković: Well, my name is Tanja Jurković, I was born in a beautiful country called Croatia and have lived there until a month ago, when I moved to Scotland to continue my education at the University of Stirling. I am a PhD candidate in Film, Media and Journalism and I am doing research into the European horror film, and the identity of the monstrous, but my further interests involve the French horror theatre and conceptual, horror, dark and emotive photography and illustration. I was a Feature Artist for January 2012 in The Horror Zine, which was such a beautiful experience for me.

I am also an aspiring writer, or at least I am trying to be, and I just got my first short horror story published this month in the anthology *Tales of the Undead: Undead in Pictures*, by Horrified Press, with amazing drawings by Stephen Cooney, and an essay on Sherlock Holmes in a *Project Two, To One, Be* book, by MX Publishing, which is due May 2014, and I am also a guest blogger at *The Gothic Imagination Blog*, where you can read my academic "ranting" about my field of research, and many other interesting academic readings of the horror genre. I am also an ambassador for the *Undershaw Preservation Trust* for Croatia, and I am an organizer of *The Sherlock Holmes Week: Traces of Sherlock Holmes*, also in Croatia.

Since I am a freelance event photographer, I offer services in photographing academic and non-academic conferences, projects and exhibitions. I do promotional work as well, I've done sessions for theatres, writers, and some book covers and cover art for an online academic journal SIC, only in Croatia so far, but hopefully that will change in the future.

SCP: 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?

Tanja: I mostly work in photography, but I am trying to broaden my area of creativity toward crafts (I make handmade bookmarks, toys and accessories), film and illustration. I would like to gain some more experience in filmmaking, though.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

Tanja: Apart from my love and interest in everything horror, which would be my main influence definitely, I draw other influences from artist such as Luis Royo, H.R.Giger, Jason Chan, Peter Lindbergh, Joshua Hoffine, April A. Taylor, Benjamin Lacombe, John Kenn Mortensen (I am a great supporter of new artists in every media)... as well as many literary works from Ray Bradbury, Stephen King and some of the classics of Gothic literature in general.

SCP: Is there an artist you would love to work with?

Tanja: I would love to work with all of the above mentioned, because I admire their work which continues to inspire me and make me go beyond the limits in my own work, and lately I have found out about a lot of talented ladies through WiHM, especially in photography, that I would love to cooperate with.

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

Tanja: I stop, clear my head and do things that relax me, like reading books and watching movies. And revisiting all my favorite artists' work helps a lot to get me on the right track.

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?

Tanja: That is a tough one, because I experienced both of the "blocks" that you mentioned, and there really is no specific routine to deal with it, apart from the procedure I mentioned in the previous question... but the main thing is, in my opinion, that you must not allow yourself to give up, ever!

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

Tanja: Everywhere around me! In the places I visit, in long walks around the city I live in, exploring secret places, because I am also an active urban explorer and I adore stories that old, abandoned buildings and spaces have to tell us, if you know how to listen, that is... in my reading, my research and the ongoing support from people I love in everything I do.

SCP: What influences your composition? Props, setting, costume, subject?

Tanja: That would most definitely be the idea of it all. Depending on the idea I want to perform and show through my work, I use settings, costumes and props, especially when it is a thematic type of thing, but mostly rely on my own vision of the world.

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

Tanja: I really don't have a favorite, because I am usually very critical when it comes to my work, whether we are talking about photography or writing. I am really enjoying the process of creating, as well as the fulfilment and the excitement that comes with it, and the creativity of people I work with as well.

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

Tanja: Illustrations by Luis Royo. He portrays the female body in an exquisite and erotic way, which made me fall in love with the study of the body in general.

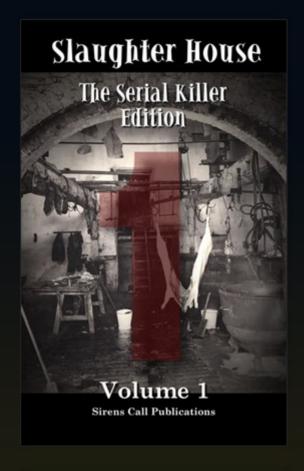
SCP: Thank you Tanja! Is there anything you'd like to leave readers with?

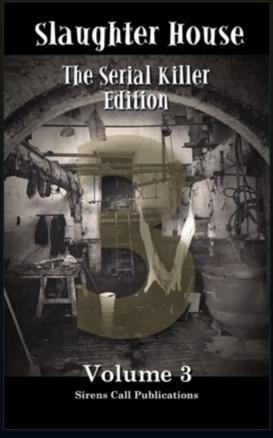
Tanja: I would also like to invite artists from Croatia who are interested in horror genre to step up and join me in a relentless battle of promoting horror artists in our country, especially women. That's why I find WiHM such an extraordinary and beautiful project and I hope it will make a difference in my country as well.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to speak up and I hope it will encourage other people to continue trying and pursuing their own goals, like it encouraged me to express my creativity and to show the world that there is a different, beautiful, although somewhat dark side to life which needs to be explored in order to understand ourselves completely, because we all have a dark side of our own and demons to keep us company on this journey into the unknown.

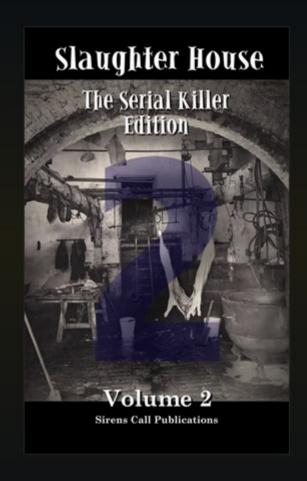
If you're interested in learning more about Tanja and her artwork, you can find her on her <u>blog</u>, or the <u>Undershaw Preservation Trust</u>. If you'd like to see more of her work, visit her portfolio at: https://tanjajurkovic.allyou.net/1386600

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Something Forgotten D Ceder

Not knowing what to expect, Mark hesitated at the door to the doctor's office. He felt faint, swoony. Turning to Dr. Blair, he felt comforted by his smiling eyes, the gentle grip on his shoulder.

"Go on," he nodded, voice tinkling like crystal. "She's expecting you."

Entering, the sight of her flooded his senses. The gentle blondness of her, the kindness of her green eyes, seeing him for the first time. He could smell lavender on her skin. He went to her.

She stood, unsure at first. Taking him all in. The tallness, the funny scraggly beard, the gentle slope of his shoulders, those knowing eyes. Then she smiled, cutting away the tension. They hugged, man and wife, and kissed, and the world became a distant whisper around them.

"Oh, Mark, I can't even use a knife and fork properly, yet alone chopsticks!"

"It's easy; look." He slid the first stick between middle and forefinger, balanced the other between forefinger and thumb, and snapped them in front of her widening eyes like a paper dragon. It snipped her nose.

That did it. She threw her head back lightly, silent laughter erupting into the air. Her throat rippled softly. Mark gripped her small hands, raising them to his mouth, kissing them, like a magician breathing life into a trapped dove. He felt her laughter shimmering in her fingers.

"Thank Christ you're back," he whispered.

Her moist eyes held his. "Pancake rolls?" she offered, and it was his turn to laugh.

That night, he held her, guiding her slowly. She was tense at first, not knowing how, but soon the learning was easy, and she could wonder at him as he moved above her. She licked his damp shoulder, drinking the dew deeply, tasting him like a salty wine.

Afterward, she coiled like a child on her side, and he lapped the nape of her exposed neck, remembering all that had been lost to him for the past five years.

He had opened the window so that she could see the stars. Mark kissed her ear and whispered, "That's the Great Bear. And over there, Orion. You see those three stars, diagonal, like a belt." He saw her eye, the one nearest him, gaze softly, but there was no recognition.

"Just stars," she said, turning to him. "Just stars," and they began the night again.

"Remembering's the hardest part," Jane said. "I don't know if I ever will." Mark held her hand tight in his.

Dr. Blair sat before a map - a map of the human body, bisected down the middle, veins and arteries forming a sinuous tracery, like 'A' and 'B' roads in a strange parallel world. Jane wondered at it, not really understanding any of it. Dr. Blair's face swam into her focus, and she snapped to attention.

"Try not to remember too hard." His soft Irish voice floated like down, and she wanted to capture that voice forever, inside a jar or a musical box. All voices were like music to her; old distant music. "The brain is a funny thing, by God it is, but its healing powers are remarkable, no one can ever fully understand its potential. You see, the clot caused a pressure here -" He leaned his thin jockey's frame across the desk and clutched her left temple with one hand, making her giggle, "and shut off the signals here," placing his other hand adjacent to the first. He was now leaning fully over the desk, pelvis acting as a pivot. Jane was in helpless laughter. He began moving his hands over her scalp as if searching through a crystal ball.

"Please... no more," she giggled. "At least I remember what it is to laugh."

"Now that's a funny thing," Blair remarked, retracting himself into his previous position. "You know, you were quite a serious soul before the coma. When you were knocked down by the van, the force of the collision was excessive enough to dislocate your patterns of *behaviour*. To put it simply, not only have you lost your old memory, but also your old personality."

Astonished, Jane turned to Mark, eyes wide. "Am I that different?"

"Yes," he said, grinning, "but you're still beautiful, thank God."

Walking round the house, she wondered at the sheer size of it, the *grandness*, the *austerity* of its design. The house was set back from the road, reached by a private driveway. Apparently, Mark was a structural engineer, and had spent many years extending the house into what it was now. The conservatory intrigued her the most.

It had a summery feel about it. Plant pots descended from the ceiling, and the doors could be opened out onto a trellised patio, where an oak-beamed framework was gripped within the veiny clutch of a forest of crawling ivy. The lawn, green and smooth like baize, yawned outward toward the copse beyond, murky and indistinct beneath the summer haze. Bees looped and droned like mono-planes. She could hear birdsong floating in the air; and then she heard the voices.

Tinkling, high voices, like breaking glass. She sat down on one of the ornate iron chairs, brushing a hand to her left eye. What was it she should remember? Something about this spot. She glanced up, gazing at the lawn. To its left stretched another part of the house; she had noticed it before, a long white corridor, and then a domed room at its end.

Something forgotten...

"Jane, there you are." Mark had approached silently. He had watched her as she sat, and now he sat with her, taking both her hands in his. "You remember?"

She shook her head. "Something about this place. That building. No. It's gone." She said it tersely, with finality. She looked at him, smiling brightly. "I heard voices. Like children. Do we have children?" Her eyes were an intense green, and her hands balled into fists within Mark's gentle grip. "Do we?" There was a soft wonder in her voice.

"No," he laughed. "But we could have, if we wanted."

And she tucked her head into his shoulder and felt the sun on her face through the conservatory doors and, in that instant, decided she would have a child, a child all her own.

They sat, picnic forgotten between them, watching the families by the pond. Jane gazed at the girl and boy, one from each family, she presumed. The boy had the look - the bone structure - of one father, the girl - the auburn hair of the other. They were feeding the ducks, and the boy had aimed a good solid crust at one of the shiny heads. It shook its bill briefly and sailed serenely by. When the boy did it again, his mother shouted, "Stop that at once, Jon, and come back from the edge."

Jon did as he was told. He turned back at that instant and looked over his shoulder. He saw Mark and Jane, smiling at him. Jane thought he was probably nine or ten, and she fell in love with him instantly.

"Oh Mark," she said, "it would be nice to start a family. It would be like starting something from the beginning, something that's a part of us. Something..."

Something forgotten.

She placed her hand to her head.

"Jane? Here." He massaged her head in slow, careful circles. "Hurt here?"

Through the bars of his fingers, she could see the boy who was Jon looking at them.

Just staring.

Then he turned back, heading toward the other girl by the pond. The two families were collecting things together, putting blankets, hampers and other knick-knacks into the boots of their cars. Soon, they were driving off, back down the gravel road leading to the park's entrance. She watched as Jon looked at her, through the back window, and then disappeared as the vehicle turned left and away, out of sight.

The weeks passed.

Jane learnt that she was once an artist of note. Mark had taken her into one room, fashioned as a gallery. She saw her work, emblazoned on each wall. Narrow strips of window at the tops of the walls fashioned sunbeams in the day, strips of moonlight by dark, and she gazed entranced at her images, echoes of a distant life.

And that night Mark came to her, as if in a dream, and held her tight.

"Something forgotten," he whispered, "you will remember what you forgot. The time has come."

He slipped off her blouse, eased down her skirt. The moonlight caressed her through the window. She could almost feel it, sliding languidly over her skin. She shivered. He drew the gauze nightgown around her, like a gentle matador, securing it at the front. Then he traced his fingers down her back, along the length of her spine, arousing her. She felt herself moistening. She took his arm, put his hand to her own breast, but he took it away, resuming curlicue motions round the small of her back. Soon, she felt as if her nerve-endings were on fire.

They walked down the hall. The carpet was soft and lush beneath her feet. Mark held her hand in his as they descended the huge staircase. They came to the conservatory.

Moonlight had replaced sunlight. The shadowed plants hung like midnight flowers. He took her to the spot, where she had heard the voices inside her head, and opened the door set into the wall.

They entered what was a long corridor. Closing the secret door behind them, Jane knew this led to the domed room. The throat of the corridor was lined with mirrors framed in gold. She saw slivers of themselves rush by; Mark, dark and intense in brown suede jacket, grey trousers; herself, pale and sensual, wrapped in her frosty gown.

They came to a door. Mark opened it, and they both entered the small room. In one corner, a tiny bath; on the wall, the instruments. Breathing hard, Mark placed something in her hand.

"Now you remember," he said.

A movement in the bath. Her other paintings on the wall.

"Now you remember what you were." His eyes gleamed. "I brought him here for you." With a practised movement, she gripped the gutting knife, her teeth bared toward the bath. "Jon?" she whispered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - My name is D Ceder. I live and work in London as a software engineer. I have had approximately 20 stories published and broadcast on London radio in the mid-90s. These stories are now collected in my anthology, available on Amazon: http://www.amazon.co.uk/One-Hundred-Other-Stories-Ceder-ebook/dp/B00CEFF4QE. Three stories received Honorary Mentions in Ellen Datlow's and Terri Windling's Years Best Fantasy and Horror 1994-5. I can be contacted at deceder-906@gmail.com.

Love 'n Lies By Aspen deLainey

Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace,
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The Stray Dog at Tarot Trails Michael Faun

We should've stopped at Stephen's Gap and just headed back, Joan and I. Instead, mainly because we were both horny and slightly drunk – and since it was prom night – we decided to continue North on 259 in some wide-eyed hope we'd end up at Carson Lake. Too bad I took the wrong turn somewhere on the way.

Things were shaping up badly. Joan fell asleep after only twenty minutes as I pushed my '74 Gremlin through the dark forest road we'd ended up on. An hour later, with all the joy of having a sawmill for company, a backwoods town showed its nondescript face, and according to its beat up wooden sign, we'd arrived at a place called Tarot Trails.

It was bad. Waiting to get a hell of a lot worse...

"Hey, wake up." Ace shook Joan's bare knee and killed the engine. The humming motor was replaced by rain, tapping the hood and windscreen.

Joan slowly woke and yawned drowsily. Disoriented at first, her eyes soon locked in on Ace's. "Hi, good looking..." she said with a warm smile and worked up some saliva in her parched mouth. A hint of stale beer exuded from her tattooed skin. "We there yet?"

Ace loved to hear Joan's sandpapery voice. On some strange level it excited him. He stole a glance down the ever so slightly camel toe that sculptured the fabric of her blue puffy jeans-shorts.

"Uhm, no, I missed the damn turn. We're in some shit-hole called Tarot Trails." Ace pointed at the crude sign and shot Joan a sardonic smile. "Think we'll find a motel?"

"What?" Joan frowned. She sounded pissed. "You're joking, right?"

"Actually no, I-"

A strong green light flashed up not ten yards ahead and cut Ace off mid-sentence. The glaring neon sign stated that the hovel offered Tarot Readings for \$10.

Baffled, Ace and Joan stared at the sign and then at each other.

"Whoa. That's creepy." Ace shut off the overhead light and hummed the signature tune to Hitchcock's Psycho.

"Cut it off!" Joan slapped his shoulder, "This is one of your pranks, right? You know I hate pranks!" Her wide eyes shone like emerald gems in the dimness of the snuggly compartment.

"Ouch!" Ace chuckled. "No, I'm innocent. I swear to God!"

"This place creeps me out. Let's get the hell outta here. And take the *right* exit this time. I want to swim in that lake." Joan crossed her arms, pouting her lips. "What kind of shitty place opens their shop — just like that — in the middle of the night anyway?"

"Oh, come on, Joan! There's nothing to be afraid of, it's just a tourist trap. Besides, I'm too tired to drive all the way back." Ace stroked Joan's long raven hair and she relaxed a bit. "I say we check it out. Plus, if we're nice, maybe they'll let us rent a bed for the night." His face twisted into a temptatious smirk.

Joan smiled a little. "You'd better be right!"

Ace grabbed his backpack of beers from the backseat, then they left the car and ran in the thick drizzle toward the house of Tarot. Tiny bells rang as they entered the cramped and dim-lit establishment that reeked of musk and juniper incense. In the centre of the room was a small simple table on which a greenish globular lamp stood and bathed the room in mysterious shimmer. A large deck of arcane-looking cards lay next to it.

Ace and Joan's eyes suddenly shot across the room as a sudden rustle was heard.

Through a curtain of beads that hung over the door-gap emerged a tiny dark-skinned woman covered in golden shawls and a black satin hat with a pearly stone attached on the front. "Welcome to Madame Zolfina's house of Tarot. I am Zolfina." Grave-faced, she eyed the two carefully.

Ace cleared his throat and tried his best not to laugh. "Hello there."

Joan stepped on his foot. "Hi... um... I'd like a tarot reading, please."

Zolfina grinned sheepishly and made a sweeping gesture at a chair by the table. "Please, sit and let us see what the cards will tell."

Joan sat down. She removed a strand of wet hair from her face and fished out a crumpled ten-dollar bill from her shorts, which she laid on the velvet cloth.

"I am now going to present to you, a triplet from my deck."

Joan's eyes were locked on the dark-skinned woman's spidery fingers as she began to flip up the cards.

First, the Ace of Swords. Second, Death.

Joan frowned at the grim card, picturing a leering skeleton dressed in a dirt-yellow cloak with a rusty scythe resting over his bony shoulder. "These cards can be interpreted in any way I want, right?" She stifled an unsettled spicker

Deadpan, Madame Zolfina quietly answered with her shrill raspy voice, "There is still one card left. Two cards alone mean nothing. They do not possess any powers in a triplet."

"Oh, ok." Joan nodded and picked up Ace's faint chortle behind her.

Zolfina gave him the evil eye and then resumed the reading by slowly laying the final card on the purple cloth.

"Oh," the woman gasped and stared at the card, on which a crumbling tower was in flames.

"Was that... bad?" Joan noticed that the woman's hand trembled as she hurriedly removed the cards from the cloth and shuffled them back into the worn deck.

"I am sorry, but you should leave now." Zolfina shuffled the scrunched sawbuck back to Joan, who arched her brows. "Huh?"

Ace's chortle was now obnoxiously loud.

"You are not safe, please listen, you must leave Tarot Trails immediately." Zolfina whispered to Joan, giving her a warning eye as she rose from her chair and simply left.

Half an hour later, Joan flicked off an insect that scuttled along her thigh as she peed by a mossy clearing in the woods. It wasn't until she sat up and pulled up her shorts that she realized how silent it was around her. Not even a single cricket, only her breath. Even darkness seemed to have fortified.

She circled and tried to spot Ace who, just a minute before, had been urinating against a tall pine tree not three yards away from where she had squatted.

A vapor of panic chilled her brain.

"Ace...?" Her voice trembled. "Come on... it's not funny! Ace...?" Her fingers were sticky as she fished out her phone from her shorts' pocket, pushed speed dial and pressed the phone hard against her warm ear. After what felt like an eternity, the monotone signal came through, then—

-"IT'S IN THE TREES! IT'S COMING!"

Joan felt a freezing nail scrape her spine as Ace's ring tone, Kate Bush's 'Hounds of Love' suddenly blared right behind her. She spun around, pissed off at the stupid scare, when she noticed that it wasn't Ace who stood there, but a figure dressed in slim black rags and a bloodhound mask. A sword that glinted in the dark was held in its paw. She noticed the green glow of Ace's cell phone on the ground several yards away.

Joan dropped her phone and staggered backwards—her eyes felt like two fireballs, her spine like a frosty gutter.

"Run!" the figure snarled with a voice like rustling leaves.

In a split second, Joan's brain pondered the possibility of this being a sick joke. A prank? Then the masked figure raised the sword in mid-air, and Joan stopped wondering, turned and ran.

A rapid metallic whistle came and she shrieked as the blade raked her back. Chilled wet blood trickled down between her shoulders and ass-crack but she ignored it. Using the continuous adrenaline spikes as anesthesia, she kept running.

She craned her neck and saw that the masked figure behind her had halted. It was on its knees with a lowered head, sniffing her trail of blood. Joan took advantage of the momentary break and sped aimlessly forward. Deeper into the dark forest.

Soon, a beastly growl echoed through the endless rows of trees and Joan ran faster.

**

Hiding in a run-down abandoned woodshed, Joan was catching her breath. Raw fright tumbled inside her body and mind. For three hours, she had been running non-stop and her inner voice still kept screaming a single word to her: *survive*! She feared she had been moving in circles. Otherwise, this was the largest damn forest she'd ever set foot in her whole life.

She had only slowed down once, when her heart had punched her chest so hard it felt like it would burst through the plate. She had then ripped her t-shirt and tied it around herself, in a desperate hope that it would cut

off the constant dripping of blood which left a trail.

Joan could see the cabins-for-rent further ahead through the trees. Just another rush and she might reach them and hopefully get help. She closed her eyes and prayed that Ace was still alive. That he, too, had escaped and was safe and sound somewhere near. She dispelled the wish and steeled herself.

Survive. Get help. Survive. Get help...

Breathing heavily, she grabbed a hefty log of wood and kicked up the door, then bolted out the shed like a scared kitten. The moment her boot touched ground, she heard a sudden excited sniffling emanating from the side of the shed, right behind her.

Pivoting, Joan screamed as she saw the flapping bloodhound-mask pop up behind a pile of logs, next came a silvery flash of steel swooping an inch from her neck in a low-to-high arc, nearly lopping her head clean off.

Joan flinched and gritted her teeth. She tightened her muscles and threw the log against its rubbery snout and hitting its face with a dull *crack*.

The masked figure yelped and toppled backward, landing against the stack of logs that tumbled over the ground.

"Better run, bitch!" it snorted.

Joan obeyed.

It set after her, barking and howling.

I can make it! Joan thought as she propelled forward, closing the distance between her and the straight outlines of cabins not twenty yards away. But just as quickly as she arrived at the site, she realized she was fucked. The glaring pink neon-signs on each cabin reading *Vacant*, delivered the bad news. Not a single soul there who could help her. Only a dark forest and lifeless wooden lodges. A bad month for business apparently.

Close on her heels, the dog-man snorted madly like a bloodhound inches from its prey.

Drained physically, Joan couldn't run an inch further, but she was determined to survive. A faint spark of energy jolted through her and she saw a primitive phone pole three cabins away. With her last physical strength, she faltered toward it with tears welling in her eyes. As she was close, she took one last run and jumped it, clawing herself up like the spooked feline she was. An ear-numbing sound came as her nails chipped when she pressed them into the wet wood. Her back stung with each tug and she slowly but steadily came to grips with the fact that this was her last moment in life. She was going to be killed by a phone pole at a tourist cabin site.

The figure in the bloodhound mask came darting by the time she had climbed quite high. It stopped and stared at her, tilting its head. "Every dog has his day," it gnarled sarcastically with a mocking chortle that oozed behind the mask. The sword it was gripping then came hacking at the pole. Mechanically. Splinters showered all around as it worked the blade like a lumber jack felling a tree, when—

"Stop right there!" A southern-accented voice cracked through the moist summer's air. A shifty white light then bathed the masked figure who dropped the sword and spun from the sudden start, then took off like a scalded dog into the shadowy thicket.

Sobbing, Joan saw how an overweight sheriff shambled closer. She desperately waved her bloodied fingers at him. She tried to speak but couldn't form a word or even trigger her voice.

The flashlight feebly beamed in her flustered face.

"Ma'am, hold tight!"

Joan nodded shakily. Her fear mixed strangely with relief, and became overpowering.

A loud gunshot suddenly shredded the eerie silence.

"Shit, I thought I caught a glimpse of the sonnova bitch right over by that bush," the sheriff muttered under his breath as he came huffing to the foot of the pole. Doubling over, he grinned upward at Joan. "Just relax, ma'am. You're safe now. That S.O.B. won't get far in these parts, I'll get him for sure, there's only one way outta' Tarot Trails. Here, lemme' help ya' down."

Joan slowly inched down the pole and the sheriff helped her last bit. On the way to his cruiser, she picked up a faint mocking laughter. First it sounded like Ace's, but then it twisted to a rabid barking before it faded away completely.

"You should consider yourself lucky I even came out here tonight. I would've been fast asleep by now if it wasn't for Zolfina over at the Tarot House." The sheriff revved his cruiser and slowly began to drive on the dark desolate country road, gravel crackling under the wheels. "She told me there was a guy with ya', too. Reckon

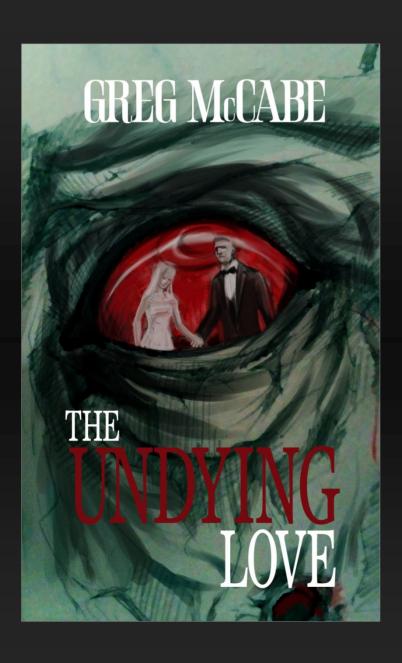
where he might be?"

Joan wondered the exact same thing as she fell asleep on the cold leather of the cruiser's backseat. She dreamed of their first date, when Ace brought her to the dog pound to look at cute lost puppies...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Michael Faun is a weird fiction author. His recent works includes the books Six Pack o' Strange Tales (*Sigil Press*), Black Heart Metal Monster, and Deep Invaders #3 (*Dynatox Ministries*). His short fiction appears in publications such as *Witches!*, *Feet!*, *Ugly Babies Vol. 1, Indiana Horror 2013 & Axes of Evil*. He lives in Sweden and enjoys a diet of dead trees and B-movies.

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The Undying Love By Greg McCabe

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and the iStore

The Artist Laura Jamez

She had visited the museum every day for the past two weeks, he knew because he watched her. She would arrive as the doors opened and make her way to the Rue Morgue exhibit where she'd set up her easel and drawing materials.

She was unaware of his existence yet he knew her intimately. Every chance he got he would walk through the exhibit, as close to her as he dared, so he could inhale her scent.

Passing by her work area he realised that this would be the last day she would visit, her picture of Madame L'Espanaye was almost complete. He shuddered at the way she had captured the last moments of the Madams life; it was like looking at a photograph. He had to speak to her now, today before he lost his nerve. Waiting until they were alone he moved behind her and coughed. "The museum will be closing soon."

She turned, "Oh really. I don't suppose there is any chance I could stay a little longer is there?" She offered a smile and reached out her hand touching his arm. "I've just got a little more to do then it will be finished."

Trying to ignore the pressure of her soft hand he concentrated on the picture. "You're very good. It looks almost like a photograph."

Turning back to the picture she shook her head. "Thanks, but I don't think it does the exhibit justice. I've tried so hard with the eyes but..." she shrugged, "they're not as life-like as your waxworks."

He glanced at his watch. "I'll let you stay a little longer." He moved away allowing his fingers to brush her hair like the wind. He smiled when she didn't react; she was already back at work, the pencil creating magic on the paper.

Once the museum was empty and the doors secured he made tea for himself and his guest. Walking into the exhibit he noticed she had packed all her work away and was putting on her coat.

"Thanks so much for the extra time." She picked up her bags and easel. "I'll get out of your hair now."

"But - but I made tea." He stuttered. "I thought we could talk."

"Oh that's sweet, but really I must be going. Thanks again." She brushed passed him, dismissing him like all the others.

He placed the mugs on the floor and turned to follow her. By the time he caught up to her, she was waiting by the door. He smiled. "You can't leave quite yet, I want to show you why the eyes look so life-like."

Reaching out his hands he wrapped them round her throat slowly squeezing until she lost consciousness.

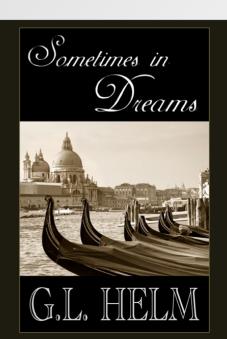
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura Jamez, a mother of two from Dunfermline in Scotland, has been obsessed with horror from an early age. She is currently writing a new horror story collection which will be released spring 2014, exploring the world of Vampires and Werewolves. One of Laura's aims for 2014 is to appear in every issue of The Sirens Call: 2 down, 4 to go.

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Sometimes in Dreams By G.L. Helm

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Tipping Point Rivka Jacobs

"We're lost," Petra said, gripping the edge of her seat. She watched the clumps of spring trees zip by, glimpsed the muddy glint of a creek between tangles of brambles and honeysuckle vines.

Chet half snorted, half laughed and glanced in his rearview mirror. "I know where we're going, Pets. I don't get lost."

They were driving along Eaton Road, just north of Chesapeake, Ohio, on the look-out for the turnoff to County Road 104.

"You're going over the speed limit," Petra said. "The Ohio police are totally fascist about out-of-state cars." She paused, then, "104 should be coming up, be careful don't miss it. Are you sure you know where this place is? Did you call the client first? Why did the Ohio Paranormal Research Society give us this gig? They usually don't want us anywhere near their territory...."

Chet stretched his mouth, keeping it sealed so he wouldn't laugh. He reached for the DVD changer controls.

"No music, not now," Petra spurted. She began tapping her right foot. She lowered the sun-visor to look in the attached mirror.

"You look good enough for a haunting," Chet teased.

"Shut up, just shut up," she said. "Wait, look, there's the sign, 'Booth Eaton Road/104."

Chet slowed and said "Yay!" mostly to keep Petra amused, then made the turn.

"So where do we go now? Township Road, right? How far is this place?"

"Another few miles," he answered.

Chet had known Petra Browning since high school; they'd been best friends but not romantically involved. They shared a love of the supernatural, of ghost stories real and fictional. They attended Marshall University in Huntington, but drifted apart after graduation. Petra stayed to get a master's in business administration, Chet deployed with his National Guard unit to Afghanistan. A few months after he returned from his tour, Chet decided it was time to do the things he'd always wanted to, which included founding his own ghost-hunting organization, "River Cities Paranormal Investigations." The first person he contacted to join him, was Petra. So far, they were the only members of the group. They'd been trying to gain public attention alongside established, more famous teams in the region, but competition for jobs was fierce.

"Are we there yet," Petra asked lightly, poking fun at her own nervousness.

He reached over and patted her shoulder. "You'll do fine. Don't worry."

"I'm amazed that the Ohio PRS forwarded this case to us, though. They're usually such dicks about us taking clients away from them."

They passed thickets of saplings and brush, cows grazing in meadows, plowed fields. There were fewer and fewer buildings. The air was crisp and scented by fresh cut grass and blossoms but this mingled with, enfolded, something acrid and foul.

"Man, what is that smell?" Chet asked rhetorically. "Reminds me of a backed-up sewer. Or a make-shift dump out here somewhere. Might be a coal slurry pond."

"We're in southern Ohio. It could be anything. We're in 'Little Anthony' land."

Chet smiled at the *Twilight Zone* reference. "We should be there soon. Who builds a housing complex in the middle of nowhere, anyway? Tell me what you can about the site again...." He knew it was time to focus Petra on the case, so she would be alert and ready when they arrived.

"Okay," she said, and sighed, and pulled out the binder from her carryall bag stuck between the seat and the door on her right. "It's a three-building complex. White siding, plain front. No architectural flourishes. Saltbox, square, three stories each, apartments are stacked one on top of the other. The land underneath is limestone with possible quartz and quartzite intrusions...."

"Ah, good...."

"A lot of underground springs, too. Local wells. But more importantly, there might have been Indian mounds from the Adena and Hopewell periods around here, but no one preserved them, and it's rumored that local construction companies bulldozed them flat to avoid costly legal injunctions."

"And the history of the place?" He braked gradually as he saw a series of charcoal gray roofs in the distance. "We have arrived, I think," he said.

Petra raised her chin and squinted as the plain, massive structures came into clear view. They drove another few minutes, turned into a large, blacktop parking area that was scored with ruts and potholes. There

were about six or seven cars and pick-up trucks scattered about. None of these were models more recent than 2005. "Lots of police calls for stuff like drugs, domestic violence in the last ten years. Some reported suicides...." She stuck her face out the window a few inches to better see, then returned to Chet. "Which building are we going to?"

"Middle one, I believe," he answered. "Rosemary Evans said 'Unit B." He drove the Ford Escape in a wide circle, then pulled into a slot marked by fading yellow lines. "Reminds me of military barracks," he said as he shut off the ignition. "Kind of isolated and depressing, living out here." He gripped Petra's upper arm and shifted in his seat to more fully face her. "You'll be fine. Don't worry. Get your gear together. Think about each piece of equipment, where it is, what it does. Let me do most of the talking, okay?"

Petra smiled thinly in return. "I'll do my best," she said.

They exited the SUV, and slammed their doors in unison. Petra glanced up and thought she saw someone peeking out between the drawn curtains of a white-framed window on an upper floor. She patted her shoulder-slung carryall, then touched her belt-pack. "Do you think there's cell reception out here?" she asked.

They reached the cement stoop, walked up five steps to a bright red double-door. "It looks like a mouth," Petra whispered to Chet, "like a giant mouth with red lipstick."

He chuckled and tugged a handful of her shoulder-length brown hair. "You know, Pets, in the universe of *Scooby-Doo*, which character are you?"

"Just shut up, Mr. Wise." She extracted her phone and studied it, shaking it a little. "No bars," she announced. She slipped it back.

They pushed open one side of the double-door, walked in. An exit marked "STAIRS" was on their left. An elevator was straight ahead. The interior smelled of cigarette smoke, mold, and too many layers of cheap paint. The carpet in the lobby looked dirty and worn.

The stairs exit abruptly swung wide. Petra jumped, Chet tensed and raised his head. A plump, yellow-haired woman emerged. She waved her hand. "Are you Mr. Wise? Are you here to help me?" she asked. She was dressed in tight jeans and a loose pin-tucked blouse. She was large but she moved quickly. She approached them with her hand extended. "I'm Rosemary, I called the Ohio Paranormal team a couple of days ago."

Chet recovered first and grinned, his expression open and pleasant. He took her hand, shook it. "Hi! I'm Chet Miller Wise and this is my partner, Petra Browning. The OPRS guys forwarded the call to us, River Cities Paranormal Investigations."

"Oh, okay," Rosemary muttered, her face contorting for a moment, turning red. She couldn't hide her disappointment. She stuck her hand in Petra's direction. "Hello, thank you for your time," she intoned, trying to sound like she expected them.

"Hi there," Petra answered, taking the woman's fingers and giving them a little tug.

Rosemary gripped her hands together, fingers laced at her breasts. "I wouldn't take the elevator, if I were you," she said, as she noted they were trying to advance in that direction. "The steps are safer. Sorry for the climb. I'm on the third floor."

They followed her into the stairwell, Chet holding the door for Petra who came last. The area was cold, made entirely of concrete, and poorly lighted. The railing was a peeling steel tube that had once been painted green. As they climbed--Chet trying not to stare at her bulging rear just above him--Rosemary talked, her voice echoing loudly. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to think. I'm usually a rational person. I don't believe in this shit. I need someone to look at it besides the landlord and the cops."

"Well, you called the right people," Chet said confidently. "Can you give us a little background about....?"

"No," she said. She paused and turned her head to the side. "No, I want you to see it." She huffed a little and her breath sounded ragged as they reached the landing of her floor. She yanked open the self-closing door and held it for her guests. "I don't have no other people around here. My ex-husband's in Kentucky, and my kids'r with my mom in Gallipolis."

She trundled down the hallway. Chet and Petra trailed her. They passed at least a dozen blue doorways, each one exactly the same as the next. The carpet was a ruby color. She stopped at the apartment second from the end. "Okay," she said, "we're here."

Petra glanced at Chet. He gave her a stiff-lipped, positive nod of encouragement.

Rosemary shoved open her front door; it squeaked. "Come on in," she said, standing aside so they could enter first.

67

Petra was surprised; the place smelled flowery and clean. The walls were a comforting pale yellow color, the carpet fluffy and recently vacuumed. The sunlight glowed through beige drapes; mini-blinds were pulled into tight flats at the tops of the window frames. It looked all remarkably--conventional. "So, what kind of activity have you been experiencing?" she asked. She exchanged a look with Chet.

Chet had already taken out his combination EMF meter and temperature gauge. He turned it on. Three of the bulbs immediately flared and flickered. "Hmmm," he said.

Petra found her full-spectrum digital camera with one hand, and her little Olympus voice recorder with the other.

"I don't know that you'll need all that," Rosemary said. "Come on...." She gestured for them to follow, and led them past the kitchen on the right, and around the corner of the dining room wall, to a large space in front of the bedroom.

Petra was observing the fixtures and the furniture, thinking about how peculiar she felt, when she ran into the back of Chet, who had stopped short. "What the...?" she said, at the exact same time that he said, "What the...?"

"Here, here it is," Rosemary said, trotting a few steps back now, so that she was behind the two investigators. She began breathing heavily, almost panting.

Chet tilted his head to the left, then the right. In his dangling hand all the EMF lights danced but he didn't notice.

Petra came from around him, and drew back without thinking, too confused to be scared. "What is that?" she finally said.

"It's a chair," came Rosemary's voice. She sidled another step away, towards the living room. "Because of the window in here, I set up a little reading room, with a comfortable place to sit and a couple of tables. Three days ago, I woke up, came out of my bedroom to get some breakfast before work, and there it was, just like you see it now."

Chet squatted down on his haunches to get a better look.

The ample wing-chair with the gold-velveteen cushions was standing at an angle, balanced with the precision of a ballerina on a corner of the tip of one leg, the edge of the seat pointing up towards the ceiling, the entire weight of the chair held in stasis a few feet from the floor.

Chet rose, took a step closer. He noticed his EMF meter for the first time--it was illuminated like a Christmas tree. "Wow," he said. "Temperature is dropping, too. Four, five degrees...."

Petra circled the chair. "Have you touched it? Did you try to make it move? Maybe it was going to fall and it found a gravitational center in this position...."

Rosemary hunched her shoulders. Her face was blotchy under a film of perspiration. Her hands curled into tight fists hanging at her sides. "Of course I tried," she muttered, her head bowed. "Go ahead, see for yourself. That's why you're here."

Petra was on the opposite side of the chair from Chet, her back to a wall. Chet bent and studied the bottom; it was draped in a glossy black fabric. He straightened, then reached out his first two fingers and pressed against the downward tilting side. As nothing happened, he pushed as hard as he could, his palm flat on the top of the chair-back. He quickly withdrew his arm, grunting slightly. "That's electrical," he said. "It felt like an electric current." His EMF meter was flashing and the chair hadn't budged. "Petra, get some pictures," he ordered.

Petra, who had been frozen, roused and lifted her camera. "What happened?" she asked while clicking. "What happened when you pushed against it, I mean. Did it move any at all?"

"Not a bit. Like it's a single piece of metal, like it's sculpted from marble." He pulled a flashlight from his pack and crept close once more. He illuminated the upholstery, the wood, the seams, the seat. "I see details like fraying on the lower portions of the armrests," he said.

"That's from my cat. She used to scratch her claws there," Rosemary said from a distance. "My cat, Porridge's been gone for three days, too. I've searched and called her and looked everywhere, but she's gone." The last words were twisted together and high-pitched, and Rosemary began to sob.

Petra and Chet looked at one another then simultaneously glanced up to speak to Rosemary, but she had disappeared from view. "Rosemary, Mrs. Evans...?" Chet called.

"Yes?" replied a small voice from around the corner in the living room.

"Don't leave just yet. We need to talk to you, to ask questions."

There was no answer.

Petra returned to Chet's side and started talking to her recorder. "If there's anybody here, could you talk to us," she said. "Why are you doing this? What happened to Rosemary's cat?" They waited for a moment ... there was silence. "Uh, Chet, this is weird," she said in a low voice. "Do you think it's some kind of hoax?"

Chet shook his head. "Not that I can see. It's a real chair and there is nothing holding it up. Could be some anomalous electric charge, maybe something electromagnetic."

Petra felt the hairs stand up along her spine, and saw them rise along her arms. She started shaking. "Hey, let's get away from here and go talk to Rosemary," she suggested.

"Yeah...." Chet extended his bare forearm next to hers and showed her his own goose bumps. "Crazy huh?" They quickly replaced their equipment and backed away, then turned. They walked rapidly into the living room. There was no one there. They looked in the kitchen, in the dining area, even in the closets, all the while calling Rosemary's name. She didn't answer. Petra popped out into the access hall and yelled "Rosemary, Mrs. Evans," loudly, repeatedly, for several minutes. There wasn't a sound. Chet joined her and pulled the apartment door closed. He heard it lock and his chest tightened.

"She probably went down the steps," Chet suggested. It was an excuse he knew, to get the heck out of there. "Let's go find her," he said.

They climbed down the three flights, pausing to call "Rosemary," and then emerged into the lobby, the 'STAIRS' entrance hissing as it slowly shut behind them.

Chet strode out to the front stoop, Petra doubling her pace to keep up with him. He cupped his hands on either side of his mouth and shouted, "Rosemary, Rosemary Evans, we need to talk to you. Where are you?"

They stayed perfectly still, listening for any reaction. Even some angry retort by another tenant telling them to be quiet. The world was silent—no dogs barked, no bird sang, there was no rumble of distant traffic.

"Okay...." Petra said. She descended from the stoop, stood on the blacktop. "Why don't we go review our evidence now? Okay? Chet?"

He remained in front of the red double-door, sniffing the air, shading his eyes from the afternoon glare as he peered at the landscape around him. "I don't like this," he said. "What happened to her? Where did she disappear to?"

"Come on, Chet, let's get out of here, please?" She started walking towards their SUV.

He followed, caught up with her. "I think we should call the police."

"Yeah, sure, and what are we going to say, we were here when she disappeared? Let's just go home."

"So much for the River Cities Paranormal Investigations first case in Ohio," he said as he clicked open the vehicle.

They slid into their seats, pulled shut their doors. Chet started the engine, idled for a moment, then put foot to the accelerator and sped out of the lot, back to the Township road. They remained quiet for several minutes, each leaning on an elbow against the opposite side of the car, looking in different directions, their jaws clenched as they put distance between themselves at the apartment complex.

"What was that all about?" Petra finally said, sitting up and looking straight ahead. She still felt cold, the hairs still prickling her arms. "How did we lose control in there so quickly?" she asked.

Chet bounced his eyes from the road to the side of her face. "You're pale and your skin looks funny," he said. "I don't feel so well myself. Don't like this at all. We don't have to review the data we collected, if you don't want to," he added after a slight pause.

"Damn it, Wise, this sucks. This was our first Ohio case. What the fuck happened?" She started and shot a glance to her right as she heard a noise. "Uh ... Chet ... is something wrong with the car?" she asked, flinching towards the driver's side.

He heard it as well. He slowed the Ford; they were on Rockwood Avenue along the Ohio River, and there were various businesses and homes around. He pulled into an empty church lot, put the SUV in park. They both spun their heads around as a rattling and clicking came from the area between the seat and car on Petra's right.

"What the fuck?" Petra said as she watched her carryall bag writhe and shake and lift up. Its top flipped open and various items rose into the air as if severed from the laws of gravity. "Oh my god, oh my god," she said and heaved herself away, into Chet's lap.

Chet fumbled for the handle with one hand, and grabbed Petra by the waist with the other as her Olympus recorder hovered above the glove-compartment, pencils and a pen hung next to the window, and her cell phone stood on end in the middle of her seat. He got his door open, and pulled both of them out. They tumbled onto the cement. Chet hopped up and was on his feet in seconds, yanking Petra after him. They stood for a few minutes, pressed against one another, observing the interior of the Ford Escape.

"Well..." Petra said, picking a string of hair out of her face and mouth.

"Hmmm ... I guess I'll call my brother to come pick us up," Chet said. He watched his keys shake and jingle as they repeatedly hit the inside of the driver's side window.

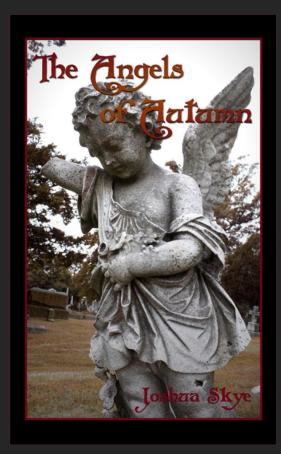
"What about my ... stuff?" Petra's eyebrows knotted in the middle of her forehead; she slowly bent and peered into the SUV. She jumped backwards and stumbled as her phone began to float towards her, its LCD screen flickering as it smacked against the glass. "Okay, that's it. Let's get out of here."

"Yup," Chet agreed as she bundled into him, forcing him to turn around. "You think if we leave the Ford and everything here, whatever it is will leave us alone?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - I grew up in Miami, Florida, and have lived in West Virginia for thirty-five years. I have a master's degree in sociology and another in mental health counseling. I went back to school in my fifties to earn my BSN. I'm currently an RN specializing in psychiatric nursing. I have one grown son, who lives in Philadelphia. I published several stories in the 1980s, then stopped writing for a number of years. I resumed writing in 2009. Recently my stories have appeared in The Sirens Call 2013 and 2014 "Women in Horror" issues, as well as The Sirens Call August and October 2013 eZines.

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The Angels of Autumn
By Joshua Skye

Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace,
Barnes & Noble, Kobo,
Smashwords, and the iStore

The Soul is Only So Deep Kevin Holton

"Oh God, please, help me," Samantha whispered, thumbing through her sister's grimoire. Helena always had a flair for the dark, for the magical, but it had never been like *this*.

The house creaked around her, groaning as the walls seemed to pull inward and the floor sagged. She would have tried to run, but that wasn't any use. When *it* happened, Sam had flung the door open and shoved her mother out; beyond the threshold yawned a mile-long gap between themselves and the rest of the world, the lights of their small town of River's End so distant that they might as well have been stars. Her mother didn't scream as she fell, and Sam only glimpsed a fraction of the darkness into which she'd fallen. That half-second glance was enough to choke the air from her lungs and burst the blood vessels in her eyes. Tearing herself away from the abyss, she sprinted as far away from the basement as she could.

The basement was where Helena had fallen, and now... now Sam had just a few minutes to stop her.

"Sam," echoed a deep voice that rumbled like loose gravel beneath a truck's tires. "Come." Each word carried such force that her body instinctively obeyed, jerking her to her feet and walking toward the door. Mustering her will, she slammed herself into the door frame, the grimoire dropping from her hand and falling open to the page Helena must have used.

The spell in question, the title of which was obscured long ago, described opening a portal through which other realms could be accessed, and through which untold power could be obtained, at the risk of letting creatures from the other side enter the human world. It didn't explain how, but now it seemed Sam's house was being dragged into that ether, and the world around her sinking slowly into the depths of Hell.

She could clearly read the words 'Requires a human sacrifice.'

"Sam," it said again, and she stumbled forward a few feet as the floor boards collapsed, sending her hurtling down to the basement. When the dust cleared and Sam stopped coughing, she opened her eyes to see Helena's body embedded in the brick wall, as if it had formed around her. Her clothing lay in tatters around her, her torso flayed open; a circular hole had been carved in the flesh, but stretched back into darkness.

"Helena." Despite her misgivings, she reached a shaking hand toward her sister, whose pale gray eyes stared longingly at oblivion.

Head lolling toward Sam, Helena's mouth dropped open, and from it issue the deep voice from earlier. "Enter," it growled as the beams above cracked; a thunderous crash signaled the second floor falling down on the first.

"Helana," Sam called, hoping she could still hear. "I... I forgive you."

An arm of mottled green-and-yellow flesh stretched out from the depths of Helena, wrapped its hand around Sam's throat, and dragged her into the darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kevin is a New Jersey-based horror writer who has published 17 short stories, several dozen newspaper articles, and has a book review coming in the June issue of Pleiades. As a prose and poetry writer, there is little he enjoys more than crafting a good story. He aims to one day write professionally and teach English in a university.

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Sirens Call Publications





Train Stop Sandwich Shop Krista Amigone

"I'm gonna kill you. I'm gonna fuckin' kill you."

Manny jokes like this all the time, but today he's playin' with a knife. It scares me.

"I'm gonna kill you, you fat fuck. You hear me?"

I just keep staring out the front window like I always do. He'll stop soon.

This really is a great job. My boyfriend Ralph loves my sandwiches at home so it seemed smart to go get paid to make 'em. Bills don't pay themselves. Babies don't come with supplies. Me and Ralph gonna need all the money we can get. And since he can't work now, what with his shoulder bad like it is, here I am.

"Fattie-fattie-fuckhead. Can you hear me in that fat head of yours?"

Manny's mom yells from the back, "Manny! We got customers comin'! You shut your trap and leave Louisa alone!"

"Mom, I know!"

Manny's mom is the manager. She pretty much stays in the back and rests. She told me once, "After enough time slaving on your feet, people pay you more just to sit on your ass." Doesn't make much sense, but I like the idea.

I think I'd make a great Train Stop Manager someday. When the baby comes I'll need a little time off, but after that, who knows? I mean, Ralph's shoulder ain't getting better. And I really like working. I really do.

Two customers come in and Manny puts the knife on the counter.

"Welcome to Train Stop! I am your sandwich artisan, Manny! What masterpiece can I sculpt for you today?" Manny always turns on the charm for the customers. Says I'm too stupid to greet them. But what does he know? Even if I was dumb, which I'm not, it doesn't take smarts to be friendly.

Take Ralph. He has a hard time saying how he feels, but he opens doors for me and stuff all the time. Especially now I'm carrying his baby. "That's real nice," he said when I told him the news, and he smiled. When Ralph smiles his whole face smiles with him. Not like Manny. When Manny smiles, it's just his mouth. His eyes are always mean.

"Louisa! Earth to Louisa!" Manny laughs but the customers just stare. "Back to Earth to make sandwiches!" "I'm Louisa!"

The customers smile. Our customers aren't normally from around here. Get a lot of people travelling between Phoenix and Los Angeles. Maybe after the baby comes I'll travel, too?

The woman looks so sleek. And skinny. My goodness, even before I got pregnant I was never *that* skinny. She orders the Veggie Express and I run through the ingredients as I lay them on the roll.

Mustard/Swiss cheese/bell peppers/tomatoes/lettuce/mayonnaise.

The man orders a Bacon Cheese Chicken Local and I use the microwave.

"You'll have to excuse Louisa," Manny whispers like I can't hear. "We have to employ a certain amount of 'Specials'."

"I think she's doing a great job," the woman says in a sleek voice. Sleek like her body. I bet she went to college.

"You don't know how special she is."

"I think she's doing a great job," the woman says again, and I put a chocolate chip cookie in her bag on the sly.

The microwave beeps and I slide the hot bacon and cheese onto the chicken strips.

"Let me do that!" Manny shoulders me away and I wonder what I did wrong. But instead of fixing anything, he just puts my sandwich in the bag and hands it to them.

"From my hard-working hands to your hungry bellies!"

He's always taking the credit.

While the woman pays, the gentleman notices my belly and from his pocket he takes a twenty dollar bill and puts it in the tip cup. They really are a sleek couple. But as soon as they're gone, Manny grabs the twenty and puts it in his shirt.

"Manny, that's not fair!"

Faster than fast, Manny picks up the knife from earlier and puts it to my nose. The tip pricks me. "I'm gonna fuckin' kill you. I can't stand you, fat fucks. So fuckin' lazy, and people like me gotta work twice as hard. That's not fair."

"Manny, leave her alone!"

"Mom, she almost ruined another sandwich!"

"But how?" I ask.

"But how? But how?" He looks at the empty tables as if we had an audience of customers. "You almost dropped that bacon on the floor." He pushes his face into mine. "Maybe you eat off the floor, but normal people, we don't."

His breath smells like bad milk and my pregnant stomach turns. "Manny please step back."

"Why? 'Cause the fat truth hurts?"

"Manny, please. I don't feel well." My stomach rumbles again and I hold my breath, hoping to avoid the sick that's coming.

"I'd be doing you and the world a favor if I made you throw that thing up. Believe me."

The world stops.

"What'd you say, Manny?"

"I said your baby is better off dead. It's just gonna be fat and everyone's gonna hate it. And maybe I'm gonna kill it, just like I'm gonna kill you."

A drop of blood from the tip of my nose hits my lips.

And then I made sick.

I never remember when it happens, and God as my witness, I haven't made sick in years. But when I come to, Manny is ripped apart on the floor, his stomach just tumbling outta him and his eyes staring at nothing. When I turn my head, I see I made sick on his Mama too. That's sad because she didn't do anything to deserve it.

Slowly I get to my feet.

"You okay, Baby?" I ask, and the baby kicks to answer. It makes me smile and I wipe some blood from my face.

Looking out the window, I watch a few cars pass and think of calling Ralph to help. But then I think of his shoulder. He really should rest it.

"Alright, Baby. Looks like we got work to do." And again the baby kicks.

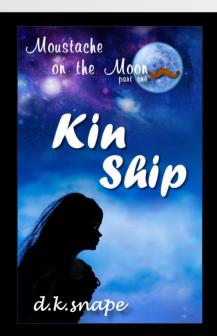
To think, in weeks, I'm gonna be a momma!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Krista Amigone is thrilled to be a part of The Sirens Call. A recurring writer for the webisode theundergroundnotes, other highlights include her horror story 'The Beast' published in Encounters Magazine, and her play 'Anna Abock' being a finalist in The Network's One Act Festival in NYC. While editing her horror novel 'Horned Heart' she is staying busy being a wife and mom.

Blog: http://theheartisanopendoor.tumblr.com/

Kin Ship: Moustache on the Moon – Part One By d.k.snape

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Smashwords, and the iStore



Cone Of Light James Crofoot

Tanya stood at the edge of the light quietly watching the scene before her with both hands stuffed in the pockets of her dark blue hoody. The cold, heavy drizzle that formed the fog where she hid caused beads of water on her face and in her hair.

As she watched, a man wearing dark clothes, screamed as two officers pushed him into the backseat of one of the four police cruisers. Blue lights from the cars flashed into the night, piercing it in its silence. Behind the wrought iron park bench that sat under the iron lamppost and beside the slick looking cobblestone path, stood three more police. Even with the lights, Tanya still could not see the object of their attention.

Tanya didn't recognize this place and really had no idea how she had gotten here. She stayed long enough to watch the cruiser holding the arrested man take off then continued on her walk.

The next morning, Tanya Overton sat at her small breakfast table drinking coffee from her favorite, oversized mug while reading the morning comics. Steam rose from her coffee and the drink was black and bitterly strong. Just the way she liked it. Only the comics interested her in the morning paper. She sometimes considered stopping the old-fashioned delivery, but couldn't bring herself to since her morning routine demanded it.

She lived alone so found no need to cover her comfortable tank top and panties.

A couple boyfriends had come and gone, the last about a year ago, and finding another really held no interest for her. Her mother and father still lived, but pursuing those bonds held no interest for her either. The last conversation with her mom, six months earlier, consisted of her mother telling her about a family Tanya didn't know anymore. As for friends, she talked to a couple online, but they couldn't show up on her doorstep as they didn't know her address.

That's the way she wanted it.

She had no deformity to hide, no special handicap. In fact, Tanya had a very pleasant personality and, by any standard, was very pleasing to look at. She simply guarded her privacy jealously, and that more and more.

She finished her coffee and comics, and then went to her small living room for her online chats with her 'safe' online friends. After that, her telecommuting work.

Tanya stood at the edge of the cone of light provided by the ornate, wrought iron lamppost that hung over the wrought iron park bench. The dense fog, actually more of a heavy drizzle, kept this light captive in this one spot. With no blue lights flashing, the place seemed even more secluded.

Thinking of the night when she came here for the first time, more than twelve months ago, she remembered the cops arresting that insanely screaming man and wondered why.

Somehow, she felt right. She felt like she belonged to this secluded world, and decided she liked this rather lonely place. Tanya felt safe in the anonymity, safe in the solitude. The oaks lining the path, three on either side that she could see, seemed planted in a very precise line, and the grass, well manicured and soft underfoot. This would be a good place for a lunch in the daytime.

However, no conscience decision on her part took place in coming here when she left her apartment for her nightly walk. In fact, she only planned a trip to the corner store for more coffee.

Pulling her hands from her hoody pockets, she wiped the film of moisture from her face and ran her fingers through her wet hair.

Then a soft mewing came from the direction of the bench. Curious, she tracked the noise further and found a poor mangled cat behind it. Almost in tears, Tanya looked at the poor mangled, grey cat and stroked its fur. When she pulled her hand away, the light shone on a black warm liquid that definitely could not be water. Horrified, she picked the cat up and held it close to her chest as its breathing ceased.

The next morning, after her coffee and comics, she went to her computer for the newest addition to her morning ritual. Her conversation with Billy. Although she never turned on the webcam, she still felt a little naughty because these chats took place with her still in her panties and tank top.

'Morning, Tanya.' Came the words on her screen. 'You there yet?'

She giggled a bit. As always she felt the urge to turn on the video just to see the look on his face. How funny would that be?

"Morning, Billy," she said as she typed. She did this a lot, talked to herself while typing. "Yeah, I'm here."

'Did you have a nice night last night?'

"Yeah, but I found a hurt cat," she said. "Someone must have hated it. I had to hold it while it died. I got blood all over me."

'There are some sick people out there,' he replied. 'You're not walking at all hours of the night still are you?' "Yeah," she typed. "Don't worry, I'm a big girl."

'You really should get someone to walk with. Too bad we can't walk together. I know you won't tell me, but what city do you live in?'

"Look, we've been over this. I enjoy my privacy a great deal. I have a lot of work today. Talk later, ok?"

Now, her giggling gone, she read his 'Have a nice day.' and 'Sorry.' She hated it when he wanted more than their mornings chatting online. Why couldn't he be happy with what they had. The metallic smell from her clothes reached her and she got up to go to her bedroom where her hoody and sweats lay in a heap on the hardwood floor.

"Man," she exclaimed as she picked up the garments with just her finger and thumb. "You really bled a lot, cat." She held them out at arms length and carried them into the bathroom. After dropping them into the tub, she ran the cold water.

Tanya stood at the edge of the circle of light cast by the single wrought iron lamp above the wrought iron and wood slat park bench. The fog was heavy and wet, causing drops of water to form on her face and in her hair. She took her hands from the pockets of the dark hoody and ran them over her face and through her hair.

Again, she couldn't remember getting here. She just started out on her usual walk and somehow her feet just brought her to this place. The solitude of the light in the fog appealed to her though. The light cutting her off from the rest of the world made her want to stay in this little island of light.

A vague fancy came over her of two lovers meeting here, of a stolen kiss in this private cone of light. Lovers from another time. The bulbous base of the lamp and the intricate vines and leaves on the bench made her think this way, she felt sure. They definitely came from a time when things were made to last.

A soft whining came from the direction of the bench and she went over to investigate. The shiny eye of a small dog looked up at her, sad and painful. Tanya bent and tried to comfort the animal by running her hand over its cold, wet fur. Then the sounds of someone clip clopping toward her. Like hard-soled shoes hitting the slick, cobblestone path.

She ran her fingers through her hair.

"Hey, Billy," Tanya said as she typed, as usual. "You there?"

'Good morning, Tanya,' appeared on the screen. 'Don't get mad at me, but I have to know what city you're in. It's very important!'

"Alright, Billy," she said. "You have to promise not to show up at my front step, ok."

'I promise'.

"I live in Seattle, why?

'Holy cow! Did you go for your walk last night?'

"Yeah," she typed. "Why? What's up?"

'You really don't pay attention to the news at all, do you?'

" No," she replied. "Told you, only the comics."

'Some one was brutally murdered in a park last night, in Seattle! It's all over the news. This is the sixth killing in the past two years and I guess there's a history of this killer. Don't you talk to anyone?'

Tanya stared wide-eyed at the words on the screen.

"Billy, go to video." Tanya enabled the webcam and donned her headpiece. She had forgotten her attire.

Billy appeared on the screen. He was slightly pudgy, wore glasses, a t-shirt with some band logo on it in red and had a baseball cap on that a swordfish arced in a battle with fishing line.

Billy put on his headpiece.

"Billy, I found another animal last night," she said into the headpiece. "It was a mess, I held it while it died. Someone killed it in the same way as the other. The one I told you about a couple months ago."

"Wow!" Billy leaned forward into the screen. "What the hell's going on up there? I don't think I'm ever coming there. Unless I have an Uzi."

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"What was the name of the park?"

"I think it was Bayberry."

"Billy, I think I was in that park last night."

"What?! Oh my god! Look, Tanya." He put his hands up in a stopping gesture. "You've got to promise me you won't go on anymore walks alone at night. Bad things are happening up there. Promise me, ok?"

"Ok, ok," she replied. "I promise, I'll be in by dark."

Billy sighed and sat back in his seat. Then a smile came to his lips.

"Hey," he said. "Is that what you wear all the time?"

Tanya looked down and turned red. "Yes, you like?"

They talked for another half hour, until Tanya had to get rid of the coffee she drank. She had to get to work, also. Therefore, with a final promise not to go on any more late night walks, they said goodbye for the morning.

Tanya had forgotten her fear; it being replaced with a sense of ease by Billy's pleasant smile. With that thought on her mind, she poured another cup of coffee. She went to the bathroom, set the cup on the edge of the sink and relieved herself. When done, she picked up the cup and went to leave, but out of the corner of her eye, she saw something that made her drop her cup to shatter on the tile floor.

Something in the mirror over the sink. She stood there frozen, a cold sweat breaking out on her back. Her breath held in her lungs for a moment until she worked up enough courage to turn to look it full in the face. It was just her reflection looking back at her. The memory faded.

"My favorite cup, too. People wonder why I don't look at the news."

Bending down she cleaned up the pieces of the cup and wiped up the spilled coffee.

**

Tanya stood at the edge of the light provided by the lamp on its wrought iron lamppost over the wrought iron park bench. This was her world, this cone of white light in the heavy mist, the drizzle.

This time though it was not her world, she was seeing through the eyes of something else. This time she had no memory of leaving her apartment.

Tanya hadn't been going for her walks for about three months, instead she talked with Billy online. Where was Billy with his comforting smile, she needed him, but he was in Miami.

Then there came the inevitable sound of someone, joggers approaching from the sight blocking fog. Anger seethed, a hunger awakened making the only part of her mind she controlled scream in terror.

All went black

Tanya awoke to blue lights piercing the night, piercing the heavy mist. She was kneeling over the body of a man in a yellow jogging suit and there was a strange taste in her mouth. Her hands were buried in the intestines of this same man. A thick, warm liquid covered her face.

Now she screamed aloud. Jerking her hands from the stomach, she fell back on her rear, screamed again and started kicking at the body as if it were attacking her, kicking herself away from the insanity. She vomited at the thought of what she had just been doing.

Then the cops were on her, turning her over and handcuffing her tightly.

Memories came rushing from a part of her mind the terror blocked off. There had been no murdered cats, no bloody, injured feline. No hurt dog. The night of her first visit, after the police had arrested the man there, a man in a sweater and jeans came, invading her world under the lamppost. Dead. Hunger satisfied.

The next night, another intruder. They always came. They filed it with a rage and hatred of itself, intruders filled it with hunger. The second intruder had been a woman in a business suit, smart and neat in her high heels. Killed for being here, hunger satisfied.

"It wasn't me," Tanya screamed as the police picked her up off the cobblestone path. "Please, believe me, it wasn't me!"

"Why did you kill my husband? Monster!"

Tanya looked at a woman wrapped in a police blanket. The woman looked hysterical. Eyes bloodshot, face ashen.

"You're not human! What are you? I saw you! I saw you!"

The police shoved Tanya roughly into the back of a police car. She just cried repeatedly. "It wasn't me. It

wasn't me."

Then she saw a figure at the edge of the light provided by the lamp on its lamppost over the park bench. The flashes of blue showed him for instances as he ran his fingers through his damp hair.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - James J Crofoot has written forever and now he's starting to put his work out to the public for their enjoyment. Through a great deal of travelling, writing has been his love. For more of his stories, 'The Continuing Journeys of a Different Necromancer' is available on B&N and Amazon.

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Gape
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Therapeutic Murder Jovan Jones

Her bellows through the pine wood box I constructed for her peaceful rest in the grave continue to reverberate in my mind. I can hear her nails scratching on the lid through the soft soil of the woods. Her vile idiolect resounds with annoying consistency in my head. Perhaps she's still alive in the shallow grave? Her lover is awake now I am certain; because the rhythm of panic beats from the trunk of my Lincoln Town Car.

I cannot explain the angst that has invaded me as I endeavor on this spontaneous act of revenge. I must write quickly as I hear the bastard's muffled cries growing with intensity outside of my window. I must not alert the neighbors' suspicions.

For the last few months I'd driven to Chicago to see a therapist about my rapidly debilitating agoraphobia. My wife, Lidia convinced me to seek help after I'd spent the last six weeks virtually hermetically sealed in my study. My mother was a mysophobe until her death at the tender age of forty-three due to complications of pneumonia.

"Do you believe you'll share your mother's fate, William?" My silver haired Bulgarian therapist asked in her monotone voice.

"No," I lied. "I'm not afraid of germs."

"You're afraid of what?"

"Like I stated before, I'm extremely uncomfortable in public places. I feel like I'll be mugged, or I'll do something so asinine that I'll never be able to display my face in public. For God's sake, I puked on highway 88 on the way over here!" She looked at me with those dark Eastern European eyes. *He's pathetic*. My mind assumed her thoughts. That's how most sessions go, but today hosted an event that would change me forever.

I trudged through the front door of my home, and was immediately greeted by the pungent odor of sex, followed by sensuous moans from Lidia. Instantly rage inoculated its terrible motive in me. I strutted to my car and unburdened the glove compartment of my pistol. I gripped it firmly. I left the door ajar as I crept up the stairs, and surprised Lidia and her boy toy.

"William, I can explain!" Lidia pleaded. I ignored her and commenced to pistol whip Jody with furious accuracy between his eyes. He never saw me coming. I dropped the gun and delivered an overhand right directly to my wife's temple. They were knocked cold.

I tied lover boy up with some rope from the garage, and gagged him with one of my silk ties. I tossed Lidia into a pine box along with her cell phone minus the battery. I thought that was a bastardly touch. I had made the 5'x5' box weeks ago unsure of why. I simply desired to occupy my troubled mind. I guess my therapist was right. There are influences beyond our recognition occupying the dark matter of our minds. The adulterous scoundrel is dangerously loud now. I must conclude my bantering.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jovan Jones lives in North Carolina with his wife and five children. He is the author of *Tears of a Rose*, and has contributed stories to Vamptasy Publishing's *Broken Mirrors, Fractured Minds,* Sirens Call Publications' *Fear: Of the Dark,* and Laurel Highlands Publishing's *Moon Shadows* due for publication in October 2014.

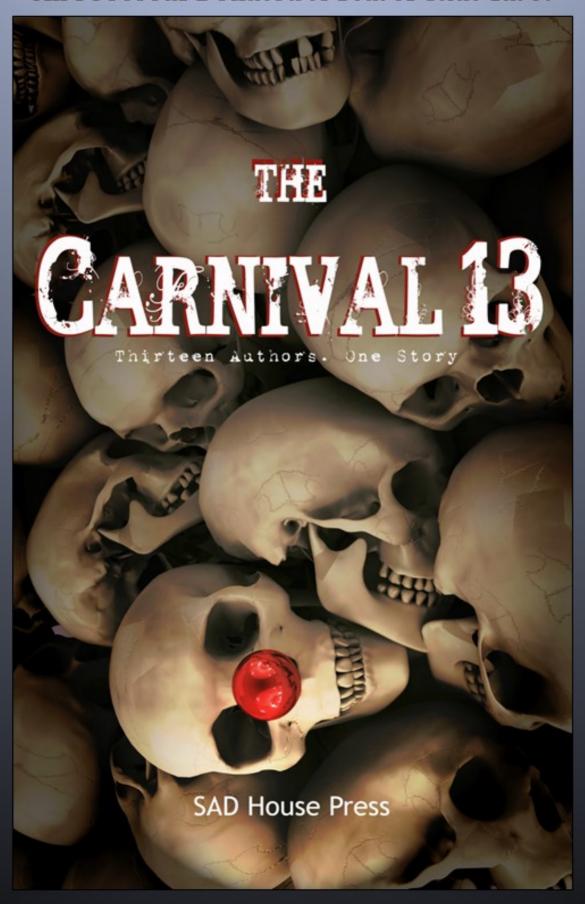
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The Dim Bulb Lori R. Lopez

It was quivering for an hour. The type of persistent flicker that could drive you up the wall, scrabbling to the ceiling, foaming at the mouth. Britches Cleary snorted at the image on his mental screen. Sometimes he wished his imagination would take a vacation and allow him to have normal thoughts. It might be nice, he reflected. Or it could be terribly dull. The introvert was quite happy in his head. He contemplated the bulb blinking on and off in the distance, far down a shadowy cement corridor. Somebody should change the thing. If it went out on his time, that would be him. He hoped it would be the day guy, Pete, or the evening shift, a chick named Marnie. Britches didn't care for having his routine disrupted. The light had been dimming for a week or longer, and a sense of rising dread had steadily increased at his core. Night after night he waited, half holding his breath, urging the thing to keep shining. *Not on my watch. You hear me?*

It wasn't that he was lazy. Or that he wasn't lazy either. He hated going to extra trouble, favoring the Status Quo. This job suited him perfectly. Except when it required going above and beyond, outside the customary tasks — which basically were to sit on his duff manning a desk and make certain everything ran smoothly. Peaceful and quiet.

His family used to ridicule Britches for being an underachiever. When he had listened. When he let them bite at him like piranhas or crawl under his skin like a tick. A couple had accused him of having a low I.Q. That wasn't true. He'd been tested in school because he didn't score very well grade-wise. It probably had a lot to do with not turning in homework or studying for exams. Who cared? What did any of that boring book stuff have to do with his job? Why couldn't his folks get off his back and let him live the way he wanted? He got by the same as anyone else, even if he rode a bike or the bus or walked instead of driving an expensive car. Big deal. He was surviving, and he wanted to be left alone. Most people obliged, giving him space. 'Friends' consisted of elevator acquaintances and the other security staff with whom he shared terse exchanges. Relatives? Nowadays just his parents, a brother who had a higher-paying job in another city, and a handful of cousins. He didn't need their opinions and stopped speaking to them.

The man's first name was Richard; he preferred Britches. The nickname had grown on him, though it was actually started by individuals who didn't like him as opposed to individuals who did. He guessed it to be appropriate since he spent the majority of his time planted on his keester. Essentially, his britches. Pete and Marnie called him Richard from the Duty Roster. He hadn't bothered introducing himself.

Stupid bulb. It was creating tension. A situation. He hated situations. They led to putting down his comic, graphic horror novel, or sketchpad where he doodled some of the weird ideas in his brain. He would have to stand up, grip a black metal flashlight, and confront the unknown. He *really* hated that. It was better to read about or watch things happen to somebody else, and so far he was lucky. There had been no incidents.

Then it occurred. The unthinkable. The light went out. He stared at it a few minutes, feeling sick to his stomach, hoping it would turn on, pulsate back to life. Okay, admit it, he told himself. It isn't just the bulb. You're afraid.

Of course he was afraid! This wasn't good! It was an emergency, that's what it was. They warned him about it in the training manual. "Right!" he mumbled. Blinking, strands of hair hanging in his eyes, he fumbled for the binder tucked on a shelf below the desktop. Hauling it onto the table, he flipped through a sheaf of transparent protectors to a page concerning the end of the hallway. NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, GO TO THE END OF THE SHAFT UNLESS THERE IS A DISTURBANCE. AND NEVER, EVER, PERMIT A LIGHT TO GO OUT. There it was, in all caps, which meant it was important.

He rolled his eyes at the ceiling. *Oh man*. He knew this job was too easy. There had to be a catch. It was only one light. Maybe that wouldn't matter so much. He read the words again. And again. It said a light, not lights. This was bad.

A fancy old-style black telephone sat on a corner of the desk. Drumming nervous digits, he regarded it. A bead of sweat descended from brow to nose, tracing his mouth, then paused on the brink of a shaved promontory and dripped to the front of a dark uniform shirt. He licked the salt taste from his lips. The taste of fear.

Do it. Make the call, a voice in his mind prodded. He was only supposed to lift the receiver in a case like this. He wouldn't have to dial. Hesitant, he reached for it, pressed cold plastic to an ear. A mind-numbing vacuum, then a bass inquiry: "Hello?" Britches panicked and hung up. They might blame him. He needed this job. Who else was gonna hire him? Make it, you idiot, make the call! the chronic voice badgered.

"Shut up!" An aggravated bellow echoed down the corridor. Great, now he was yelling at himself. Getting on his own back! He could see it in his head.

Silence. Deep breaths. Calmly, Britches debated requesting assistance or suffering the consequences, whatever that might involve. He couldn't decide. "Fine. What should I do?" The voice stubbornly ignored him. "No advice this time?" he grumbled. Maybe that was the advice. He had always taken a lack of encouragement from family members as discouragement. "You're telling me to sit here and do nothing? Like usual?"

His mental state-slash-bully failed to reply.

"I'll fix it, that's what I'll do. They'll never know." He pushed to his feet, stiff and slow as a geezer from lack of exercise. He was sorely out of condition, and overweight. "They'll never know," repeated Britches. Except . . . he had picked up the receiver. Someone answered. He stared at the phone. A chill rippled his veins; the realization seized him. "They know." A frightened whisper.

He had never met them. There was no interview. The company responded to his query with a twenty-page application containing a ton of intimate questions. A psych eval, according to them. He submitted a current photo, finally using his laptop's built-in camera. The job was posted on a community bulletin board, providing an E-mail address for Fain Enterprises. All very mysterious. Yet something about them and the whole set-up creeped him out.

No problem, thought Britches. They're private. I'm private too. He had let them ask the questions, keeping his mouth closed. But he wondered plenty. Who were they? Where were they? What was their business? Why did they print page after page of instructions on what not to do, and pay him for following the directions? What was at the end of the hall?

He wasn't paid to be curious. He was paid to be as dim as that flickering bulb. He had done his job, an obedient drone. This wasn't his fault. It was their light. If it was so critical and urgent, they should have installed the kind that lasted! Heaving a disgruntled sigh, he clutched a black steel flashlight and moved past the safety of the desk. Who even used incandescents anymore?

The guy halted after a tentative stride. "I should find a new bulb." He couldn't recollect where they kept the spares. Did it say in the hundred-and-fifty-page manual? He jerkily veered a step to return to his desk. The rulebook lay open. Searching it could take hours. It didn't have an index or list of contents. "There must be a supply closet," he reasoned. He had worked there several years, but wasn't very observant. Blinking around, it struck him there were no additional doors in sight. Just the entrance to this corridor — and that, strangely, unlocked from the outside. He couldn't leave until his relief showed up. Pretty odd, like the rest of their ordinances, but who was he to point fingers? He accepted their policies. It had been a dream job. He wasn't so sure now. The simple post had become complicated.

Thinking about it, the shaft might have a second door. The wall at the opposite side of the passage appeared blank. He never inspected it, for that would violate their precious rules, but the edges of the flat rectangular surface could outline a portal. The wall itself may slide open, he surmised. He couldn't be guarding a dead-end. That would be crazy. His questions amplified. If anything, he doubted such a door would lead to supplies.

Inhaling, the sentry switched his flashlight on and faced a sinister dark void. He had no other tool or weapon and felt naked, ill-equipped for a potentially perilous expedition.

Eyes narrow he budged forth, compressing a pudgy abdomen, straightening his curved shoulders and spine. The first light wavered like a burning candle. Shadows teased as he arrived at the second light; it shuddered. Eyelids briefly dipped. A fist tightened on the black torch. Shoes clomped, distressfully loud. The third bulb sparked. His steps faltered. A fourth light jumped like a gas-lamp. A fifth danced The Hula, while the sixth bulb surprised him by bursting, fragments showering. Britches paused and studied the blackness before him, wetting dry lips, reluctant to cross the division between what was visible and a dense murky region. The darkness had spread.

Oh boy, two bulbs were blown! How was he going to explain this? He needed a plausible excuse. It seemed iffy they would believe that both lights went kaput simultaneously. Frowning, he squinted into a black hole. It was as if a segment of the corridor had ceased to be. No way was he treading another step!

The bulb illuminating the spot he was at began to sputter. "No!" He stumbled back in terror to the previous light as Number Five sizzled and fried. The dark flowed up to the tips of lengthy shoes. He bent forward slightly

and peered down, his gorge yo-yoing. The next bulb's shimmering subsided. With a yelp, he retreated into the third bulb's glow, scarcely outrunning the oily pitch's advance.

Britches gazed up at the light he stood beneath. It wasn't very bright.

Humming, then a snap. The bulb shattered. Thick moist darkness oozed. Gasping, Britches fled to his desk and scrambled behind it. Two lights remained, wanly stemming an onslaught.

Perspiring, the guy groped inside a trouser pocket for a portable phone. He scowled at the device. It wasn't charged. Why did he carry it? The rules specifically prohibited bringing personal phones. And he remembered cancelling the service. Who would he call, anyway? There was no one. Like he wanted, he was alone. He couldn't even contact his co-workers. If one of them was too ill to sit in a chair, they informed the company who arranged a replacement. They had to cover for each other, take extra shifts if necessary. There were no days off, no holidays, and that had been fine with him. He could sit here or at home, it made little difference.

Until today.

Frantic, the sentinel pawed through explicitly detailed regulations, hunting for what to do if the lights went off. He couldn't locate the precise scenario and shoved the book from the desktop in futility, along with an issue of *Batman*. "Worthless!" Referring to the manual, not the comic. Huffing, he braced an empty palm on the table and scrutinized the inky impending field. He thought he detected motion, despite the shade being blocked. What was in there? What was he guarding?

Imagination furnished an array of monstrously bizarre beasts. Tripping over his chair, he plastered himself against the wall with the bolted door as the second light expired. A total dusk crowded onward, liquid, churning.

When the solitary bulb died, so would he . . .

The telephone on the desk rang, jarring him from a pensive trance. Britches shuffled to grab the receiver. Rather than squawk "Help!", he lamely uttered "Hullo?"

"Hello, Mister Cleary." A fathomless voice, resonant and grave.

Unprepared, Britches waited, his mind flailing . . . He focused on the dimming bulb and blurted, "Look, whoever you are, the lights are going out and I don't see anything in the book about this! Is there a procedure? Could you please send somebody down here? It's getting awfully dark!"

"Relax, Richard. That's why I'm calling."

"Oh, good, I'm glad you're aware of it." He sucked in a deep breath and forcefully exhaled, shaking. "I was freaked out. I didn't know what to do."

"There's no need for that," the voice reassured. "I'll explain everything, and then you'll understand. We're a consortium that has existed for many ages to benefit the world. Frankly, to save it from Evil. We employed you to serve as an integral part of our mission."

"You're kidding. How?" It was news to Britches.

"The darkness, Richard. You're right to fear it. Most people would if not for us. They'd be afraid to sleep each night. We keep the dark at bay, under control. The room you're in, that hallway, is a tunnel leading to one of its mouths. It has an appetite, and periodically it needs to be fed. Similar tunnels are stationed around the globe."

Britches was a horror fan. It still took a moment for him to absorb. "Awesome. So I'm one of its feeders? Like a zookeeper?"

"Richard, you are the food. You are there to be eaten. I'm sorry."

His jaw went slack. He gripped the phone, speechless, and watched a faint lightbulb flicker.

"You can feel proud. You're making a contribution. A noble sacrifice," he was told.

"No. I'm not. I didn't agree! This is illegal. I never gave my consent," he objected.

"You signed the contract. It was the final page of your application."

He fidgeted, clenching the receiver, throttling the flashlight. "I quit!" the guy protested, his face flushed. "I refuse!"

"That isn't an option. Also in the fine print. I apologize for being so blunt. There isn't a lot of time. They usually call us sooner. You didn't. We had to call you. We feel the subjects have earned the truth. And a pat on the back before their demise. It eases the transition."

"The transition? Don't you mean the torment? We aren't subjects, we're victims!"

"There are stages, Richard, as in life. The fading bulbs draw attention. They're appetizers, for the dark does consume the light as well. And part of enjoying a mouthwatering meal is the anticipation of its aroma, its physical

qualities. Originally, embers would summon the gloom. Lightbulbs are a modern convenience. The darkness is vast and greedy, older than Time. The universe is composed of it. Light, on the other hand, is an extraordinary force. We must defend it. And to do so, we have to appease the dark. You martyrs are the principal offerings. We fulfill a vital role. We prevent it from swallowing towns, families, children. This is your chance to be a hero, Richard. What have you accomplished up to now? Wasting a life is the worst action, the worst inaction. We grant you purpose."

"It's my life to waste, not yours!" he spat. They were condemning him for being a couch potato? "We all walk into the darkness one day."

"No, it isn't fair. Others walk into the light. This is wrong!"

He heard a dial tone. The company had hung up. Britches hammered his desk with the receiver, damaging plastic and wood. Upset, he flung the ruined instrument and its cradle at a wall flanking the desk. It crashed and tumbled, jangling.

A torch drooped from his grasp. Britches eyed the flash. Its weak beam gave out. He whacked it on the heel of his right hand in vain. The steel tube clattered by his feet.

As he turned to beat fists on the door and shout for help, the ultimate light fizzled. Intelligible cries dissolved to hysterics. A tide of obscurity, a somber treacherous stain would surround the man, engulf him and feast. Then linger, digesting, craving, abiding a subsequent morsel to unlock the vault. A tidbit named Pete. Hours later, Marnie would satisfy its hunger.

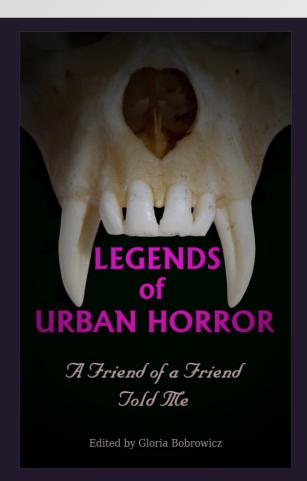
Three square meals.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lori R. Lopez is the author of CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, DANCE OF THE CHUPACABRAS, OUT-OF-MIND EXPERIENCES, THE FAIRY FLY, MONSTROSITIES, JUGULAR and more. A resident of Southern California, she pens a column of dark verse and is also an artist, designing her own book covers and illustrations.

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Wasteland J. S. Collyer

"Doug, wait. Hannah's not here yet."

"Eve, we've been waiting forever. She's not coming. Come on."

"I don't know..."

Doug rolled his eyes. "Come on. I promise it'll be worth it."

"Wait," Eve called after her brother. She threw one last glance down the shadowy track to confirm that Hannah wasn't coming before following. "This has got to be the dumbest idea you've ever head."

"That's a pretty ambitious claim," Doug grinned, examining the sign over the scrapyard gate. The letters were so faded she could only just make out *Rob & Ross Scrap*. Doug shook the rusted chain on the gate and the iron rattled.

"Be quiet, will you?"

"Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I must have left it at home with my sanity."

"Look," Doug said pacing down the wall and shining the torch beam up the crumbled masonry. "You're the journalist, right? You wanted stuff to write about."

"This wasn't really what I had in mind."

"It's local history," Doug said as he rounded the corner and Eve hurried after him, shivering in the night air. "It's vile."

"So, what? Uni's sucked all your integrity away? Look, there."

"What?"

"A door. I reckon we could break this in."

"Let's just go, Doug. I believe you, honest. I'm sure it's haunted to buggery. But Hannah will be waiting."

"Look, you can't write about humanity until you've seen its dark side. The decay. The waste," Doug said, putting his eye to a gap in the door. "This place is the perfect living metaphor. How can you...holy - " Doug reeled back, dropping his torch.

"What?" Eve said, feeling her blood drain from her face. "Doug, what is it?"

"Nothing," Doug said, shaking his head, looking pale. "It's nothing."

"Bullshit," Eve hissed, backing away from the battered door.

Doug bent and retrieved his torch. "No, this is good. Come on. We've got to see this."

"Don't make me Doug," Eve said in a small voice. The night breeze picked up and it felt like fingers down her spine. "Please."

He turned to her in the torch light and grinned. For one horrific moment his face was a ripped and bloody mess, all torn flesh exposing teeth and jaw and skull and crying tears of blood. She opened her mouth to scream but the light from his beam shifted and he was Doug again.

"What?"

Eve took a couple of deep breaths. "It's this stupid place. It's making us see things."

"Exactly. It's supposed to get your imagination going," Doug said with another grin and shouldered the door open. The wood split, the hinges whined and he tumbled into the dark. Eve hesitated for one frozen second then hurried after him, feeling cold swamp her as she did.

"Whoa," Doug said, casting his torch beam around the rusted and jumbled mass of rust and rot. "They weren't kidding. This really is creepy."

"This is horrible," Eve muttered, trying to look everywhere and nowhere all at once. "Why did those kids ever come here in the first place?"

"Because it's horrible," Doug smiled, boots crunching over twisted bits of metal and warped plastic. "Don't you see, Eve? This is everything humanity leaves behind. Seeing what people would rather live without helps you understand who you are."

"Ok, ok," Eve snapped. "It's a scrapyard, I get it. Stop belabouring the metaphor."

"See, I knew you were a writer." Doug smiled again, leaning closer to a gutted skeleton of a car. The seat leather was rotten and peeling like dead skin. "But it's not just any scrapyard, Eve. This is where those kids died. This is where they were left to rot."

"I know. I've heard the story too."

"So you do understand. This," he cast his torch around the thousands of fractured shadows and twisted

remains of cars, bikes and machinery, "is where the town threw away everything it didn't want to know about. Left it all to decay. Rob and Ross scratched their lives from this wasteland."

"I think you've thought about this too much," Eve said. "Two nosy kids came to climb a scrap pile on a dare and were buried in a slide. There's nothing to say the owners ever knew they were here."

Doug didn't look at her but crept towards the back wall. "One of the kids was gay, did you know that?" "Huh?"

"Back then it was a big no-no. You don't know how lucky you've got it, sis."

"Is this why you thought I'd be interested?" Eve said, heat flushing through her face though the rest of her stayed ice cold.

"Not directly," Doug said, taking another step further into the shadows. "I just thought it might be one of the reasons it took them so long to find them. Maybe they weren't looking all that hard."

"That's a big statement, Doug," Eve said, feeling a little sick and wishing Hannah was there more than ever. "It was somewhere over here..." Doug mumbled, turned a last corner.

"It doesn't look safe..." She took a careful step after her brother, shoes crunching over glass and wire. He slipped out of sight and she shivered.

Run...

Eve spun her torch round but there was no one there. Her heart thumped fit to burst out her chest. She skidded round the corner, nearly tripping in some decaying tarpaulin and dropped her torch. She swore, dropped to her knees, feeling about in the dark.

When she felt the cold, soft thing under her hand she couldn't even breathe, let alone pull her hand away. It was like she was somewhere in the back of her own mind with no control over her limbs. She knelt there, blind, with her hand on the thing long enough to be able to determine that it wasn't just flesh but also bone she could feel before slamming back into herself. She scrambled away, trying to scream but choking.

"Eve?" Doug's hand was warm and alive and she let it pull her up, the dry heaves giving way to sobs. "Eve, it's ok. Look."

She lifted her face from his jacket and turned to look where he shone his torch on the ground. There was nothing there but packed earth littered with rubbish. Her breathing calmed. She turned back to her brother and screamed. His face was ripped open, one eye nothing but a bloody mess and his cheek hung from the bone, making his smile split right up to the ear. He tried to put a hand out but it was hanging from his wrist by splintered bone. Eve staggered back. She came up against a tumble of metal and turned and tried to climb.

She heard her brother's voice calling from a great distance but couldn't make out the words over the rushing in her ears and her pulse pounding through her head. She climbed and climbed, skin splitting on her hands and knees but not stopping, desperate to keep ahead of the clanking and creaking sounds of someone climbing up after her.

The metal shifted and groaned. She tried to grab onto something but her hands closed on air. She cried out, scrabbling but the scrap heaved and slid under her. There was a sickening moment of nothingness then everything was a twisted mess of pain and noise and choking and blackness.

She blinked into the dark. The silence was so complete it was like a tangible thing around her, something that pressed onto her flesh that she could taste and smell. Even the breeze didn't seem to make a noise though it brought a chill with it that went right to the marrow. She shone her torch down the dirt track back towards town, shifting from one foot to the other.

"Let's just go," Doug muttered.

"Doug, wait. Hannah's not here yet."

"Eve, we've been waiting forever. She's not coming. Come on."

"I don't know..."

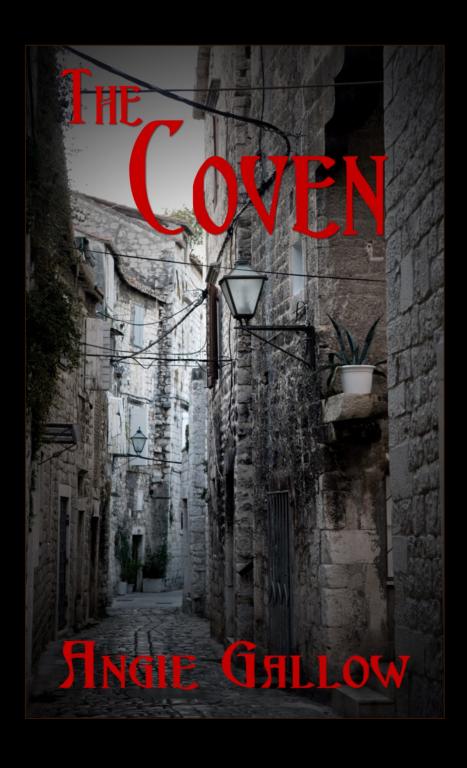
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR- J. S. Collyer lives in Lancaster, UK, where she stayed after studying Creative Writing BA and MA at Lancaster University. She enjoys reading and writing sci-fi and horror and as has always been drawn to narratives that are larger than life. Her debut sci-fi novel 'Zero' is due to be released August 2014 by Dagda Publishing.

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The Coven
By Angie Gallow

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Smashwords, and the iStore

Twisted By The Pool Ken Gordhamer

Tomorrow I will reach my eighteenth birthday, which means tomorrow you will take me to the gallows. Though you are executing me for the death of my brother, I tell you this: I did not murder him; in fact, he still lives, though in a degenerate form. I told my story once. Your blank stares, knowing smirks and outright laughter showed me how hopeless my situation was. I go now to my death, if not guilty of my brother's murder, then perhaps complicit in his - transformation.

My father's family settled early in the village of Whateley fortunately claiming a vast area of old growth forest and rolling hills that covered a wealth of coal. My great-grandmother was extremely wealthy and, since her own children had already passed and my father was without siblings, when she passed away everything went to him.

We moved to the estate when I was 12 and my older brother Edward was 14. It was the height of summer. I remember our motorcar chugging down the main (and only) street of the small village. The inhabitants must have thought it too hot to venture outdoors: the aging porches and dirt street were inhabited only by a couple of mangy hounds and dancing heat-devils.

I got my first glimpse of a local when we pulled into the drive leading to my great-grandmother's house. A man was scything the tall grass that grew along the drive but stopped to stare at us with naked suspicion as we drove past. I could not place it at the time but there was something unsettling in that stare, something that set my teeth on edge.

We drove to the house and stopped in front in a great cloud of dust which immediately coated my sweat-slick face. Entering the house was like walking into another world. It was dark and seemed as cool as an icebox compared to the oven outside. The walls were covered in dark oak paneling, the fixtures all gilt and shining.

The entire staff of the house was assembled in the foyer. They looked as if they all could have been related. Each had a certain pointedness of physiognomy, an almost canine protrusion of the jaw that lent them, to me, a frightening air. They all also had a slightly twisted posture, as if their legs did not quite carry them the same way mine did. My father later told my brother (who later told me) that the local people had been inbred for many generations, so any slight inherited malformation would have been magnified over the years. At my age I didn't entirely understand that; all I knew was that their appearance made me feel uneasy. Over the following weeks I grew used to their appearance however, and my brother and I became friendly with most of the staff, the groundskeeper in particular.

Locals aside, the landscape was breathtaking, and seemingly made for young boys. Edward and I covered miles at a time, exploring the ancient forest. Sometimes the groundskeeper, Leland Groat, would tell us of an interesting place to see and we would set out across the hills to discover it. As boys will do, we pretended to be Indians, or pirates, or soldiers as the occasion took us. By the end of summer there was not a spot within five miles of the house that we did not know intimately.

One day, while in the village with my father, I overheard two men talking. I heard one of them mention a place called 'The Mires' and the other said something about 'the thing in the pool'. The men were acting very secretive so I didn't ask my father about it, but when we returned home I immediately sought out Leland.

I found him chopping wood behind the house. He had his shirt off and sweat glistened on his broad but oddly twisted back. The axe frightened me a little so I walked wide around him and approached him where he could see me. When he noticed me he smiled and leaned on the axe, panting a bit. He wiped his brow with a dirty handkerchief and said "Whut kin ah do fuh you tuday, young suh?"

I smiled in return and said "I heard someone mention a place called The Mires today, Leland. Have you ever been there?"

Leland's mouth immediately twisted into a fearsome scowl. "Where ya'll done heard o' thet place, boy?" he growled at me.

I was truly frightened. I hadn't noticed before how he towered over me. I could feel the heat radiating off his body. I took an unconscious step backward, stammering "Well, it was, I mean, it was just, just two men talking in town."

Leland seemed to remember he was talking to a child and calmed himself down. "Well, dun't you be lisnin to them fools in the village, young suh," he said. He tried unsuccessfully to look me in the eye several times then turned his eyes to his axe. He picked it up but only heaved it onto his shoulder, staring into the forest. "Nup, ya

dun't wanna be messin' about with thet place, you or your bruthuh." He turned and managed to make his eyes meet mine. "Ya'll stay away from theah, ya heah? I mean it, ya dun't go down theah, down in thet valley. Nevah! Got it?"

"Yes - yes sir," I said, still frightened but confused from his rapid change of mood. Leland went back to chopping and I wandered slowly back to the house, alternately watching Leland and the woods, trying to see deeper into the tangled depths of either.

That night I told Edward about what I had heard and Leland's reaction. "Oh, we *must* see this place now," he exclaimed. "Where do you suppose it is? Leland said down in the valley - do you suppose it's down in Cree Valley? It makes sense. We should go tomorrow night! Father already said we could sleep in the yard, it's perfect!" I couldn't fight against Edward's enthusiasm. He could always convince me to do things I knew were probably wrong. After another half hour of excited planning, he almost had me convinced this was a good idea.

The next afternoon Edward and I were hiking the familiar trails of the forest, heading into Cree Valley. It was a bit beyond our usual haunts, and by the time we found a trail that seemed to go in the right direction the sun was already riding along the treetops.

We soon came across a well worn trail that paralleled the brackish stream in the bottom of the valley. The stream had scrubbed away at the valley for eons, but at some point in its geological life the underlying ground had been uplifted, causing the valley to be pockmarked with stagnant pools and dead end creek beds. Flies and mosquitoes were thick, their droning a backdrop to the sighing of the wind in the tops of the huge sycamores and oaks.

Our trail veered sharply into a side valley that was already bathed in shadow, though sunset was still an hour away. After about 50 yards the trail opened suddenly into a clearing, the floor of which was hard-packed dirt. Beyond the bare dirt was what to my eyes first appeared as a cave mouth set directly in the valley floor. After a moment I realized it was a pool, languid and dark, utterly still. Wordlessly Edward and I approached the edge of the pool. Moving slowly, we simultaneously realized that the forest had grown completely still. Not so much as a sigh of wind or the buzz of a fly broke the quiet that seemed to hang over the clearing. Stealing a glance at my brother, our eyes met for a moment and I read in his eyes the same senseless fear that was swiftly overcoming me.

Seen from a distance of a few feet, the pool was still entirely featureless, as if it were not water but a viscous ichor that had welled up from some subterranean abscess. Edward moved as if to touch the surface then thankfully stopped. We might have stood transfixed there forever if we hadn't heard the sound of approaching voices coming up the trail. Even so, breaking the spell of the place was difficult, and we barely managed to leap into the brush next to the clearing before four men entered the same way we had.

While coming up the trail they had been conversing happily but when they entered the clearing the conversation died a sudden death. The men fell into single file and passed once around the entire perimeter of the clearing, passing only feet from where Edward and I lay trembling. After circumnavigating the pool three times the men stopped on the far side from us and stood facing it in poses that implied quiet contemplation.

In the space of three-quarters of an hour many more men arrived at the pool, each circling the clearing three times and taking his place around the pool. By the time 30 or so men had arrived the sky was dimming toward twilight. I could see fireflies in the woods beyond the clearing but none seemed to dare to enter it.

As the sky dimmed, the air above the pool seemed to take on a glow of its own, but a glow that somehow seemed the antithesis of sunlight. It crawled over the surface of the pool like flame on a puddle of gasoline. The sky continued trading its healthy glow for the unnatural light above the pool until moonlight began to silver the tops of the trees.

"K'ya'eh!"

Edward and I jumped and I barely stifled a scream when all the men shouted the guttural word simultaneously. We looked at each other nervously as I began to search around us for a way to back out. We were deep in the underbrush, however, and there was no way we could get out without signaling our presence.

"K'ya'eh!"

We jumped again. This time I noticed a flicker pass through the glow above the pool, as if a ripple had rebounded from the circle of men and rushed back to the center. The men began repeating the nonsense word more often, and each time I saw the glow react.

Faster and faster now the men repeated the strange word and I began to notice the surface of the pool move. At first it was just a twitch in the center, but each time the word was repeated it heaved up a bit more. The men began to accompany the chanting by stamping their feet in an awkward yet compelling rhythm. I felt myself unconsciously mimicking the mysterious rhythm and forced myself to stop. Soon I was doing it again, a trance-like feeling washing over me. The word was repeated almost without a breath in between now, the foot-stamping rhythm rippling through me. The pool was heaved up to a height of about four feet, a sickly black tentacle writhing slowly in its center.

My eyes wanted to close as my breathing kept time to the awful chant that echoed off the valley walls. I didn't feel Edward brush by me as he stood and walked slowly into the clearing, moving as if he were under a spell. Seeing him broke my own lethargy and I reached out to him, too late. He joined the circle with all their fervor, stamping out that horrid tattoo and chanting those unnatural syllables. "K'ya'eh!" "K'ya'eh!"

My fear for him broke the spell over me and I tried to call out to him, but the chanting overpowered me. I cowered in the bushes, crying at my inability to stop Edward. I was afraid for him, but I was more afraid for myself. If only I had been able to overcome the fear that froze me, perhaps I could have saved him!

The black tentacle in the center of the pool rose higher, twisting and convulsing to the rhythm made by the worshipers around it. The end of the tentacle followed the circumference of the circle of men as if searching. My sudden premonition came true as I saw it hesitate in front of Edward. He stared up at it rapturously, chanting and dancing out that horrid tune.

Like a snake striking, the tentacle lunged at Edward, completely enveloping him. I saw his body within the ooze writhing, twisting, *changing*. It held him while he struggled, the chanting somehow doubling in intensity.

Suddenly, as if punctured like a balloon, the tentacle collapsed back into the pool. Edward stood hunched over, panting like an animal. His body was twisted, his legs gnarled and bent. He threw a glance over his shoulder that froze my blood. His face was a terrible caricature of the face I knew as my brother's. Feral eyes glinted above a canine snout, his lips curling in a snarl that revealed twisted fangs. I recoiled in horror as the creature that used to be my brother leaped into the forest.

That is my story. I somehow made my way back to the house after a day and a half, my clothes torn and my skin scratched and bloody. Edward was never found and it was assumed by the sheriff that I had murdered him in order to be next in line for our father's fortune. I told my story once, but I noticed that some of the men I was telling the story to had been present that night at the pool.

I go now to the gallows knowing that I, like my brother, am a victim of the pool. I deeply hope that what awaits me beyond the noose leaves me blissfully ignorant of the shadowy mysteries that lie hidden in the dark corners of the Earth!

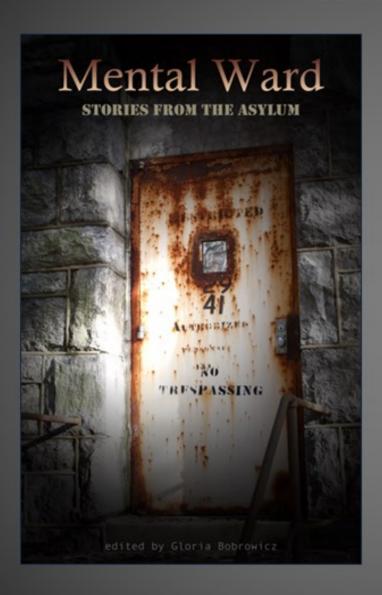
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken Gordhamer lives in Lenexa, KS with his wife and three children. At 51 he hasn't quite decided what he wants to be when he grows up; he's been a nuclear weapons technician in the Air Force, a land surveyor, and is currently the credit manager at a large hotel in suburban Kansas City. He enjoys disc golf and writing horror!

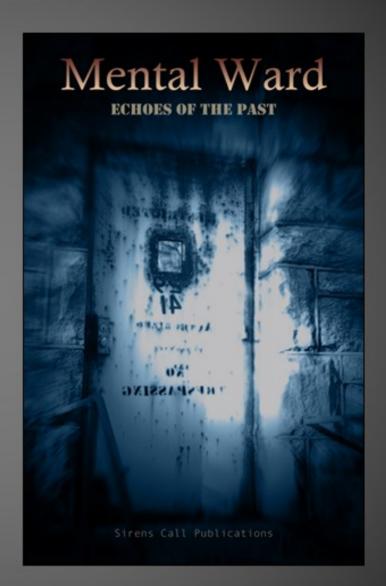






Sanatorium, mental ward, psychiatric hospital - they're all the same. Places where the infirm, the crazy, and the certifiable go for treatment... Or what passes for 'treatment'.





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The Run Julianne Snow

Buds in ears, music cranked, I start my morning run through the park.

The ground is slick; it must have rained last night. No problem, I'm not concerned—I've done the run thousands of times before without any problems. I know where all of the muddy parts will be. I just need to remember not to zone out this time or I'm likely to slip and slide again...

That was a painful day and it's hard to believe it was only a few short weeks ago. The tumble started with a slipped foot, moved onto a lopsided dance as my body was thrown off balance, ending with a trip down the nearby hill of grass. Landing at the bottom, I had been alone, wet, and covered in mud. Sore, with my ego bruised, I made my way home and vowed never to run when it was wet again.

It did seem like a bad omen to break the promise to myself, but sometimes a girl has to do what a girl has to do. I need the span of the run to work out a few problems in my mind, away from the constant demands on my attention.

My stride increases as I warm up, the muscles in my legs lengthening as I pound the concrete path. I'm oblivious to the world around, concentrating only on the placement of my feet and the issues that swirl through my brain: should I paint the kitchen red; does Harry really need braces right now; should we get a new car; should I ask my boss for the promotion I know I deserve; the scenarios are endless and they eddy in constant chaos.

The music changes, the beat gets stronger, but there's something else. I hear something below the thump of the bass. Is it footsteps?

I glance behind me, expecting to see another runner, but there's no one there. I increase my pace, just a bit panicked at the absence of an explanation. I don't hear the noise again and my heart beat slows as I do, falling back into my normal rhythm.

It's back. The sound of footfalls in my aural periphery startles me as I weigh my options over what to cook for dinner: Spaghetti Bolognese or chicken risotto? I turn my head to glance over my left shoulder, then my right, thinking someone has to be there.

Nothing. No one.

I stop, this time sure someone will come out of the trees around me, just as stunned to see me as I would be to see them. No one approaches.

I pick up the pace again, turning the volume on my iPod down, hoping it will help me to discern if someone is following me. I run down the path, trying hard not to keep craning my head around, just concentrating on getting to the exit only a few short blocks from home. With people around, safety will come. No one can attack if there are people around, right?

The ancillary hairs on my neck come to life as a warm, moist wind blows across the back of it. It feels like someone's breath has just caressed me and my arm flies up in acute panic.

I hit nothing but it doesn't stop me from whipping my body around. The trail behind me is empty.

I feel the same breeze on the flesh of my neck again, goose bumps rising on my body, cascading down its length. I whip around, expecting to see no one, but I gasp in shock.

A man stands there, his face full of menace, his body primed to strike.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist at Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves. Be sure to check out *The Carnival 13*, a collaborative round-robin novella for charity which she contributed to and helped to spearhead which was released in October 2013.

Twitter: <u>Occupations</u>. <u>Days with the Undead</u>.



The Light M. Cid D'Angelo

Come now children, huddle close. Our fire is low and the wind howls above us in the dunes...in the lonely, unseen dunes. A ghost story I'll tell while we sit in the dark. Do you hear the hungry sea? Do you hear the surf? The moon is up and the wind is blowing cold. The clock pounds a pulse of midnight. Come close and I'll whisper to you...,

...and the sea rose with the darkness.

Leaning back on the bow, Barry Sawyer cocked his head and closed his eyes. He could feel the night ocean, a clinging evil thing seeping to his bones and...,

...it was the swell. That was it. Not all the coastal ghosts from here to Chesapeake could frighten a man more than the swell. Something in the air, perhaps even within the fog and blackness, touched him with groping fingers.

There were two other men in the dory with him. One was sitting on the far edge aft, his form almost darker than the night around them - a passive shadow barely seen underneath the stars. Another man was muttering to himself between them, manning the oars.

"We-We sh-shouldn't come out here at night," advised Sawyer to the latter, stumbling over his words.

"Steady," the other man retorted. A touch of the night ocean kicked up from the side and slapped him in cold spray.

"This place is bad."

"We'll keep it steady." The other two men gave each other looks of impatience: Sawyer was extremely superstitious.

They were relief lightkeepers for the beacon out on Olyvia's Rock - a beacon now dark. It should be sending out a cleaving shaft of light over the sea, but everything was pitch. All three men wished they could be pulling duty in the other lighthouse five miles to the south, because Olyvia's Rock was barren, cold, and lifeless.

"I can't see the light on the fool Rock," the man rowing said.

"It's out again," remarked the other man aft, at the tiller. His words dropped away, and no one picked them up.

Sawyer turned to look forward, hearing the breakers of the Rock, and just barely able to make out the swirling red and white stripes of the light.

"Dammit," Sawyer muttered, crossing himself.

"Keep a look out for the jetty, Gibbons," the helmsman told the man at the oars. Gibbons stopped rowing and turned a look for the bow.

"K-keep rowing, I'll tell you when you're in," Sawyer stuttered, regretting it. Can he help it if he was uneasy? Was it superstition? Was it wisdom?

"I'm tired."

"Dammit, man your oars, we'll be dashed," the man aft said.

"Shut up, Schaefer," Gibbons spat. He rubbed his shoulders, and then applied his shoulders once again to the task.

Sawyer peered ahead into the gloom, wondering what could be wrong at the light. There were two able keepers on the Rock, men they were to relieve. The spire seemed dead, as silent as a standing stone over a cairn.

"C-come 'round tight to starboard. Careful, or you'll gut us," Sawyer ordered Schaefer at the tiller.

"S-s-s-sure, B-B-Barry," the helmsman mocked him, but did as he was told, leaning hard left to fight the strength of the growing sea, the spray wetting his face.

"I don't like this one bit," Gibbons said. The swell slammed hard into them, knocking the boat.

"Hold steady!" Sawyer shrieked. The dory slammed into the wood of the Rock's jetty, almost capsizing them. The senior jumped out of the bow and grabbed a length of wet rope to secure to the wooden cleats.

"Make it fast," Schaefer put in for good measure.

The spire watched ominously down upon them from the night.

•••

The door to the light was held against them, tight.

It took both Sawyer and Gibbons to break the stout oak portal in, after pounding on the wood hadn't yielded the keepers.

"I've seen this before," Gibbons pointed out, rubbing his shoulder after the deed was accomplished. "I was out in the Cod on ol' Karspell's Light, and the duty keepers before us had gone crazy. They just threw themselves into the sea."

"What the..." Sawyer had to use all his strength to push the door wide for them to enter. "Th-th-th-they've got this place barricaded."

"Crazy bastards," Schaefer observed.

"Well, they didn't th-th-throw th-th-themselves into the sea then. They c-couldn't get out." Sawyer was the first one in, and he looked around in the darkness. The whole place stank of the sea, and he wrinkled his nose in disgust. "We-we sh-sh get a lantern from somewhere so we can see what to make outta this mess." He hated this: his stuttering was worse when he was nervous.

"Farnsworth! McDowell! You crazy bastards!" Gibbons roared. He was making his way toward the spiral rungs of the ladder to the light.

"There's a lamp over here," Schaefer yelled from the darkness. "I think it's out of oil."

"Well, is it or isn't it?" Sawyer wanted to know, annoyed.

"It's out."

"Damn. G-Gibbons, check the I-light."

They could hear the latter's booted tread thumping on the metal of the ladder above.

Then, not long after: "Hey! I found a lamp!"

"Bring it down here then," Schaefer called up.

"Hold on," Gibbons yelled back. "Ho there - that's better."

"What?"

"This whole place is wrong."

Sawyer sighed. "What are you tuh-tuh-talking about?"

The man above began to thump his way down the rungs of the ladder.

"Wet Hell!" The assistant keeper yelled. "The whole place looks like it's been dumped in the sea!"

The glowing warmth of his lantern seemed to glide and hover over them as it descended; the darkness reluctant to disperse from beneath. When Gibbons came to the last rung, he looked up and stopped. His jaw opened, but no words came out.

"What's..." Sawyer began, but his voice faded when he turned to see what Gibbons was staring at.

In the bare glow of the lamp, the sickly red of splattered blood painted the wall behind them. Dangling just above, the dark form of a man's body was impaled to the wall by a steely pike.

Schaefer stood closest to the grisly horror, and he staggered back, his hand to his mouth in shock.

"It's McDowell," he whispered.

Sawyer stepped forward, his eyes so large they were perceptible in the near-dark. "Th-th-the buh-buh-bastard killed him! He bloody killed him!" He crossed himself before the grisly spectacle.

"Where's Farnsworth?" Gibbons stuttered.

"He murdered Ian McDowell!"

"Bastard murderer," echoed Schaefer. He suddenly buckled, unleashing the contents of his stomach on the floor.

After the sudden horror of finding their colleague, the three lightkeepers took down the body and did their best cleaning the blood from the wall and where it had pooled on the floor. The grisly pike was unceremoniously snapped in half by Gibbons and thrown out in the darkness; he didn't want anything so evil close to him.

"We've got to find F-F-Farnsworth," Sawyer said.

"Like hell," breathed Schaefer.

"Why do we want to do that? Let's get out of here." Gibbons put in.

Sawyer shook his head. "We can't let the buh-buh-astard run around loose."

"So?" Schaefer said, "It's not our responsibility."

"The sea's too heavy as it is, we can't leave until tomorrow."

Gibbons had shut the door and put his back against it. "McDowell must've barricaded himself in here to keep bloody Farnsworth from killing him."

"It didn't help worth a lick," Schaefer pointed out. "He's still deader than a post."

"What a way to die," Sawyer mumbled. He walked to where the body had been dangling, the hole in the wall stark in the glow of the lamp. There were numerous questions. For one thing, how did Farnsworth -- being the murderer -- get inside if the barricade was intact? And, how strong must a fellow be to heft a man up on the wall and spear him through with a pike? *Mother Mary*...

The three keepers agreed among themselves that there were stories that insane men could have the strength of five or six. But, if something had happened to Farnsworth, to make him snap — it was physically impossible to murder McDowell this way: the pike was at least seven feet long.

The men stood there a long time, just looking at what remained of McDowell, lost in morbid hypnosis.

After awhile, Sawyer took his colleagues in hand and they knelt at the bottom of the light, a tarp covering the hapless McDowell. "Mother Mary, pray for us sinners..." Schaefer and Gibbons weren't Catholic, but they joined as comrades of the sea will, and they listened to the devout, speech-impeded Barry Sawyer who not once stuttered during his entire prayer. But even he strayed from the Scriptures by adding before *amen*: "...and keep the light whilst you walk in the darkness of the Leviathian's eyes."

The others said nothing.

...

Sometime later, when the storm came howling out of the northeast and the beacon was relit, Sawyer climbed the ladder to the top and stared at the darkness of the sea.

They methodically applied themselves to the unsettling task of cleaning up the blood down below, grimly putting themselves through it determinedly, silently. Though covered, what remained of McDowell seemed to watch and smirk at them in the dark.

Keeping up momentum, the men cleaned as much of the neglect from the tower as they could, but the place still stank of brine, and the blinding flash of the light did little to ease the senior's nerves. They wanted to do anything to keep away the horror of McDowell's fate from their minds with anything.

Sawyer had known both McDowell and Farnsworth well enough, had toured lifesaving duty with them off Block Island and then later at Hatteras. He remembered them as stout, good men.

Sawyer remembered drinking a few rounds with them at the Kestrel's Pub, in Apple Grove, a few nights before they began their duty out here. They'd been in good spirits. The men had been out here on Olyvia's Rock before.

That had been only three weeks ago. Sawyer was resolute: One should not defy the darkness of the sea – but the Light must be kept alit. It is a saving light – a light that banishes the evil of the darkened sea. It is the light of God's Spirit – he remarked.

Both Schaefer and Gibbons had found enough dry wood for a fire down below, and they'd found a full month's stores of food in the shed outside. There was still no sight or sign of Farnsworth. Schaefer, fearing the rising stench of death from McDowell, had opted to put the body outside with the tarp covering it. At least the dead wouldn't mind being stuck out in the storm.

"He is still one of us," Gibbons muttered.

"He is dead," argued Schaefer. "Hey – Barry, what do you think? You're a good Christian, should we put the body outside in the storm?"

"We have said our ruh-rights but he must be given a buh-buh-burial..." Sawyer shouted from above intermittently between syllables, thinking. "But, Christians do not suffer the d-dead among the living. 'Let the dead bury the dead' – Book of Muh-Muh-Matthew."

It was settled – McDowell would have to weather the storm.

After awhile, Sawyer came down from the spire and joined the men for supper, and for company. They ate salt pork and stale bread, washing it down with a good dose of Gibbons' own rot-gut coffee. The meal was terrible, but it was good enough.

"This place," Sawyer mumbled, under his breath.

"What about it?" Schaefer asked casually.

"You fuh-fuh-fellows kn-kn-know what people say."

"Don't put too much into it, Barry."

"It's not a good place. It is duh-duh-arkness." Sawyer was hinting about the old stories of lightkeepers losing their minds out here on Olyvia's Rock. This jutting pinnacle of razor rock and sand had held the secrets of

vanished keepers since the turn of the Eighteenth Century - almost a hundred years before them. At least twenty keepers had been lost out here. Olyvia's Rock Lighthouse had been erected after the Civil War, but there'd been another before its place.

"When we find Farnsworth, this will be over," Schaefer said.

It was Gibbons who snorted. "As soon as it's light, I'm leaving the Rock."

"You-you can't leave the I-light."

"Like hell I can't."

Sawyer reached out and grabbed the older man roughly by the collar. "You-you try to leave, you-you won't have to worry about Fuh-Fuh-arnsworth. I'll chuck you into the sea muh-muh-myself."

The two men stared at each other for a few moments.

"Keep above it," Schaefer said. "I've served lonely duties in lighthouses for over thirty years, boys. Nothing's going to break me, and when I come out on duty, I stay until I'm relieved. That's just what we're all going to do."

They finished their meal, and Sawyer opted for the first watch.

...

Unpleasant, disturbing dreams...

Gibbons didn't know if it was his dreams or something else that had awakened him. The fire had burned low in the hearth, the coals slumbering in dull reds and oranges deep in the ashes. It was cold, and he could hear the wind blowing hard against the door.

Looking up, he saw Schaefer's body away from him, bundled up in blankets, facing the coals. It was late, and for some reason, he was sure it was his turn for duty as the watch above.

He took the kettle from the fire and touched for heat. Glad, he poured himself the last of the coffee and got up.

He rummaged about for his whaler's coat and his tattered watchcap, and then drained his cup. The beverage warmed him pleasurably. Sawyer was above – manning the light. *God loves a working man – even the ones who can't talk worth a lick*. At least Gibbons bore no more hard will against the "Stuttering Preacher."

He took the rungs of the ladder and stomped up.

"Aye, Barry. Need a time off?"

"Yeah," came the voice above. "Take the guh-glasses and keep a look on the breakers. It's a Guh-Guh-Godless sea."

"Barry - you all right?"

The Stuttering Preacher stopped on the rail, nodding with a confused look on his face. "Yeah. K-Keep to the light and you're in the arms of Christ, Tuh-Tuh-Terrence."

"Sure. Barry."

The men passed each other on the landing, Gibbons jamming his watchcap down on his balding head. They gave each other brief nods.

Gibbons took up the telescope and peered out of the double-paned glass of the tower as the light swept high above him. "Ain't a blessed ship out on the sea on a night like this," he grumbled to himself. Just as he spoke, the glass in front of him shuddered as the force of the wind howled at him.

"You want in, but you can't come in," Gibbons teased the night ocean, smiling. He loved the sea, however it moved.

The sweep of the beacon cut through the blackness and showed the pouring wall of rain and spray. Suddenly, the wall disappeared as the light moved away, and he could see a faint emerald glow on the horizon. He had seen strange luminosities at night on the sea, seemingly emanating from somewhere and nowhere. When he'd been a young seaman in the service of a clipper three decades ago, his skipper had told him -- in good humor -- that it was the *Flying Dutchman* out looking for the damned.

"Not a Christian soul," he whispered to himself.

There was a sudden glimmer of light below, down near the quay.

"Aye, what's this," he muttered, using the glass to see what was amiss.

There was nothing but blackness.

The light swept around again, exposing the storm in a blanket of rain on the tower glass.

The glimmer flickered again -- a lantern?

"Farnsworth?" He breathed.

There was a sudden blast of cold, and he dropped the telescope and looked around. The lantern light bobbed around the quay. *Somebody was friggin' with their boat*! The sight filled him with such rage he stormed down the ladder.

Sawyer was emerging from down below and he looked up.

"What's -- "

"There's somebody down on the quay," Gibbons frothed. "Looks like it's Farnsworth messing with our boat!"

"Don't go out, man! It's a wet hell out there. You won't last a minute on the quay."

A moment later and Gibbons had disappeared below.

"F-F-Fool," Sawyer breathed, debating whether to chase the man. "It's only a reflection of the light!" He called out.

Meanwhile, Gibbons had forced open the door and staggered out into the wind and rain. He paused a moment to pick up the business end of the pike that had been used on poor McDowell, the one he'd broken and tossed out. Shielding himself against the storm, he blundered his way toward the dory and the quay.

"You bastard!" He shouted, but the wind took his words away. There was a tall shadow standing there, just in front of the jetty, dark in the storm.

"Farnsworth!" Gibbons yelled at the shadow, and the figure turned to face him. They stared a moment at each other.

That was when the screams began.

...

Sawyer, fortified with his coat and nerve, opened the door to follow Gibbons. When he got to the quay, he found not a soul.

The jetty was empty, and the rough sea surged relentlessly against the rocks. Sawyer wiped the wetness from his eyes, steadying himself against the wind by holding onto a mooring stanchion.

"Terrence!" He shouted. Gibbons couldn't be far away -- Sawyer himself had just arrived seconds after his colleague.

He heard somebody stumbling from behind and he turned to look. It was Schaefer, clutching his whaler's coat tight, his long black hair whipping around in the rain and wind.

"What's going on?" The other man shouted.

"Gibbons's being a d-d-damn fool!"

"Where is he?"

Sawyer didn't answer him, just returned his attention to the rocks and the quay. It was impossible to stay out here.

"Let's get in," Schaefer yelled.

"Terrence!"

"He's about -- in the rocks."

"He may be in the sea!"

"Let's wait it out!"

It took some prodding, but Sawyer didn't want to lose himself in the storm, so he followed the other man inside.

"What a duh-duh-amned fool!" Sawyer said, cracking the door wide enough to see out.

"He'll be all right."

"He's a f-fool, that's what he is."

"Here," Schaefer nudged him with a cup of coffee.

Sawyer drank it, shaking his head. "Once he's back in, I'm going to tie him up and bind him in the corner."

"Why did he go out in the first place?"

"He thought he saw Fuh-Fuh-arnsworth messing about the boat."

The tower fluttered in light and darkness suddenly.

"What's wrong with the light?" Sawyer muttered, heading for the ladder. "If he ain't buh-buh-back in here in five minutes, check the quay again. I'm not going to have his foo-foo-oolery on my hands."

...

Schaefer didn't give a rat's ass for Terrance Gibbons in the first place, and certainly didn't want to risk his own life looking for the idiot. He watched Sawyer stomp up the ladder.

He drank his fill of black coffee and stoked up the fire. The warmth did little to cheer him up.

The door shuddered with the wind and he got up. There was an audible drop of the latch and suddenly the door blew open wide: Gibbons stood there, suddenly, where light and darkness held each other in complete balance. Schaefer didn't know where he'd come from.

"There you are..."

Something was strange about his colleague. The eyes...,

...the eyes

Pools of darkness with no iris - the lids open unnaturally wide.

Schaefer stumbled backward, in shock.

The glittering head of the pike exploded like a spark from the blackness, catching Schaefer in the throat. Gurgling, struggling, Schaefer's hands pulled on the cold metal of the gaff pike, just as the thing that was Gibbons jammed it harder, blood spraying across his dead face. Maurice Schaefer screamed – but nothing came out.

"Leviathan... Leviathan..." Gibbon's mouth moved, but there was no sound. With stunning force, He slammed Schaefer's body against the far wall...,

...and faded into the darkness as part of it.

...

Cold is the sea in the storm, furious is the sea as it rages. Feel it move as a thing alive; with its dark roaring expanse it is more terrifying than fire. Ride the swell at night when the Dragon is low in the sky and you belong to Leviathan. Even now the light cleaved the darkness of the storm, but it was but a pitiful illumination – for when it is gone, darkness reigns supreme.

After he'd finished his coffee, Barry Sawyer descended the ladder to go looking for Gibbons again. He paused once before committing – the sweep of the light rounded above his head, showing the windowpanes a ghostly white, then at once shadow again.

Each step down the ladder, the world became darker. There were over thirty rungs and he counted them off internally. When he was on fifteen, he was bathed in blackness.

Sawyer stopped and looked down into the gloom. "Maurice!" Then it occurred to him that Schaefer was probably asleep and had turned out the lamp and the fire. A rush of cold wind charged at him from below.

Thunk-thunk went his boots on the metal rungs, and he descended another seventeen before he was on the ground floor of the light. It was pitch black – he couldn't see a thing, not even the coals from the fireplace...

He stopped. The door was open, bringing in the rain. Sawyer went to it and slammed it shut, holding the bar and securing the latch. He stood back, surrounded in gloom and wetness.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehend it not.

Sawyer swallowed, crossed himself. Where was Schaefer? The place was absent – there was no one... But someone?

He looked around, feeling as though there was movement where he couldn't see movement.

I am the light of the world.

The shadows moved – somehow, shadows within shadows, alive and sentient. They moved and came together, smelling of blood and death and the endless immortal brine and the sea. Something whispered, but there was no sound – a mouthless whisper of a hundred drowned souls – white bodies drifting within red tides.

He stepped back against the barred door. Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you.

Barry...

And there was no sound, but there was the stillness of breath and a voice unheard.

Barry...

And there in the darkness moving toward him, with red coals for eyes – shadows – tattered shadows of his friends – Farnsworth, McDowell, Gibbons, and *Schaefer*.

Barry in the brine we float...

He shrieked though he knew not what came after him. He could see only the darkness and the shadows and the terror of unliving...,

Float we float with Leviathan we float and we hunger and we float in the brine

He threw himself against the ladder, pulling up and then catching his footing on the first rung...,

...we float here in the darkness of the brine in the blood of a thousand drowned souls...

Sawyer stumbled, losing his grip, the cold shadows upon his boots. He pulled up – pulled up...

The light swept by – he could see it through the gaps in the floorboards of the landing.

A thousand drowned souls drifting in the darkness of the tide and the eyes of Leviathan The Light! The Light!

Five, six, seven, eight, nine... the rungs at my feet and the shadows at my feet and...

The light swept by through the gaps of the floorboards and he felt the touch on his face that was wet with a flood of tears and pain and fear...,

...floating endlessly Barry join us...,

...fuh-fuh-fuh-loating...,

...seventeen... eighteen... nineteen... twenty...

The rungs passed without end and the darkness rose with him and at last he pulled himself onto the landing and threw himself against the sweeping stanchion of the light...,

...and there confounded the darkness.

And the sea now calm as a lake... in the shade of the light...

That's where they found him – days after the storm, clinging to the light, dry as a bone with his dehydrated face chaffed and white and peaceful in death. The gory remains of Terrence Gibbons and Maurice Schaefer mocked the relief-men from the sea-wet of the bottom, and the new relief thought: they are like drowned men... like weeks in the sea... and though they could not remove Sawyer from his death grip without taking apart the stanchion, the "Stuttering Preacher" was safe at last, in the arms of the light. Dry as a bone and...,

...dead – but safe...,

...in the arms of the light...

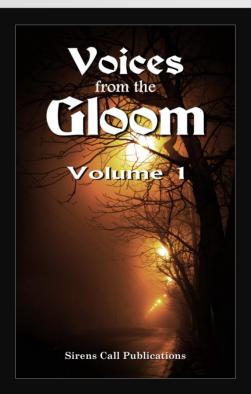
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - M Cid D'Angelo's eclectic and varied short fiction can be found in many literary journals. His works have appeared in *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *decomP magazinE*, *Midway Journal*, *Aoife's Kiss*, and others."The Light" is a creepy tale that reflects his love of the ocean and the thrill of a great seaside ghost story.

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In a world driven by steam and power-hungry Industrialists, can one man change the course of history?



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Interview with author Daniel Durrant

This month's feature author is Daniel Durrant, whose Steampunk novella *Climate Change* was released late last year by Sirens Call Publications. Daniel is 39 years old, and lives on the Norfolk coast in England. His day job is in commercial sales, but the dream is to leave that to write full-time. Although he's always thought about writing, Daniel has only devoted serious time to it over the last few years. When not working or writing, you'll often find him reading (unsurprisingly). Other hobbies include classic cars, walking his lovely Labrador, and perhaps liking beer a bit too much. Daniel is also oddly fascinated with apocalypse scenarios, probably as a result of growing up surrounded by Cold War airbases. Oh, and he is currently single, so if any nice Steampunk-loving ladies are reading this, they're certainly welcome to say hello.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Daniel. What made you decide to become a writer?

Daniel Durrant: I just adore books! I think that if you truly do, it's almost inevitable that at some stage you think "I want to try this for myself." Having said that, apparently I wasn't always so keen. I'm told that, aged 4, I politely informed my teacher that I wasn't interested in learning to read. So we all change.

SCP: In your own words, tell us what is Climate Change about?

Daniel: The Victorian era of the British Empire, but not as we know it. The discovery of a new element brings the Empire ever-greater power, and has turned technology onto a different, and very dangerous, path. This leads to an attempt to clear the frozen Northwest Passage for shipping, but some factions are desperate for the scheme to fail.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about Climate Change before they read it?

Daniel: The real British Empire achieved some amazing things, but was also responsible for some truly terrible things. I wanted that contrast to exist in the world of Climate Change. I've tried to portray the excesses I think would have been realized had things been different – both good and bad.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

Daniel: If I've done my job, they should know the twisted version of reality I've imagined, and be drawn into it. I hope they'll feel excited, even exhilarated, by the tale. It's said that good fiction takes the reader on a journey. If that's true, then Steampunk is the literary equivalent of being carjacked. It should be a wild ride, and hopefully it is.

SCP: If you could cast Climate Change, who would you choose to play your main characters?

Daniel: Edward Rankine is a classically reserved British man, and I rather think that Jack Davenport (probably best known for Pirates of the Caribbean) would be a good fit. I picture Charlotte Redpath as a very beautiful woman, but a warm one. I'd say Scarlett Johansson would be superb (I may have other motives for this choice). As for Lady Holden, I think Hermione Norris (a great British actress, best known for the BBC TV series "Spooks") could carry that part very well.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets Climate Change apart from other books of the same genre?

Daniel: For me, it's very important that a story is credible (within the relevant genre rules, of course). So, whilst *Climate Change* is definitely in the Steampunk realm, I thought very seriously about what that world would look like – not only technologically, but socially and politically, too. It should simply be enjoyable first, but hopefully it feels believable, too.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

Daniel: A bit of both, but planning does come first. I like to make sure my research is thorough, and I work best once I have a framework to plug the details in to. After that, though, I find it's best to let my imagination just run riot and fill the blanks in.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

Daniel: Making the time to be one! I say "making" as that's what I think you have to do – make time for it. My day job is quite demanding, and frankly I also enjoy the research phase a bit too much, so I have to discipline myself to stick to the schedule.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

Daniel: I've just finished *Ready Player One* by Ernest Cline. It's fantastic, very original, and very well written. Frankly, I wish I'd come up with it, which I think is the highest praise a writer can give a novel.

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

Daniel: Hmn. Loving so many books, I will have to ration myself tightly here, lest it look like a telephone directory. I love classic Sci-Fi in general, but I'll highlight Joe Haldeman - *The Forever War* is amazing; it should be on school reading lists. Stephen King for horror – he's popular for a reason. Alex Scarrow writes great thriller material. And Douglas Adams for a laugh. Everyone should read *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* once. Possibly twice.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

Daniel: Although I'm very proud to see *Climate Change* released, I certainly wouldn't say I've been successful yet. I can say it isn't just defined by wealth or profile, though. If someday I overheard someone telling a friend how much they'd loved reading my book, that would mean a massive amount to me. Books give me huge pleasure, and I rather like the idea that I could pass that on.

SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are just starting out?

Daniel: I'm not sure I'm qualified to be dispensing advice just yet! But if I had to pick one thing, it would be this: Steel yourselves, because there will be lows, and they will be tough to take. But the highs are worth it, so don't give up. The reward of seeing work accepted is marvelous.

Thank you Daniel for taking the time to answer our questions. Up next is an excerpt from *Climate Change!*

erpt from *emmate ena*



In a world driven by steam and power-hungry Industrialists, can one man change the course of history?

Edward Rankine, inventor and engineer aboard the battle-cruiser Dominator, has devised an ingenious plan to open the frozen Northwest Passage.

Believing he is performing a service for the benefit of mankind, Edward is appalled to discover there is a saboteur in his midst.

Working with a crew of 'Jacks and Jills', mechanically enhanced humans sentenced to a life of servitude, Edward is forced to battle on the icebound waters of the northern seas.

Not only does Edward have a mutiny on his hands, but he must also find a way to save the passengers aboard the Dominator, possibly abandoning his own noble ambition in the process.

Will Edward's plan succeed in the face of adversity, or in failing to clear the Northwest Passage will he stumble upon something greater?

And now an excerpt from Daniel Durrant's Climate Change...

One

"Phantom Street!" the driver bellowed, stopping the tram. "Last stop before the docks, ladies and gentlemen!"

Edward dallied whilst curiosity fought common sense. Delaying here posed a risk, but he thought a short visit would be safe enough. As a hiss of steam signaled the tram's departure, curiosity scored a knockout blow. He had to see.

He leapt down as the tram pulled away, his boots crumping into fresh snow.

"Shilling for a tour, sir?" an urchin offered, stepping into his path. "I know all the best ghosts, and you'll need no Medium to see them!"

Filthy children gathered behind the boy, forming up like a wolf pack. Although he knew far more than any guide could tell him, it seemed non-payment would buy trouble.

"I have no need of a tour," Edward said, flipping him the shilling. "But get yourself a decent meal, eh?" He moved on before they tried to repeat the tactic.

The street was fascinating. The positions of long-gone streetlamps were marked by permanent shadows on the wall. A ladder climbed a building two stories high, but existed only in silhouette. Then he saw the first phantom, unmistakably a woman. A few paces later he saw a child. They looked vaguely like life-size daguerreotypes, but each exposure was the remains of a living person, the developing agent the intense energy of the decay excursion. Vaporized in the blast, these indelible images were all that remained of them. It was as if their very souls had been burned into the masonry.

Sickened, he backed away.

"Don't move," a voice grated.

"I-" he began. The heavy *click* of a gun being cocked sounded behind him. *Those damned kids*, he thought. He felt a hand in his back pocket. "Take it," he said, unwilling to risk death over a few pounds.

"Give it back."

"Eh?" Edward turned to find a teenage boy holding his wallet in one hand, and a knife in the other. Behind him, a figure wrapped in furs held a revolver to his head.

Very slowly, the boy passed the money back.

"Go." A wave of the pistol reinforced the command.

The boy nodded, and ran. He disappeared into an alley.

"Sir, my sincere thanks." Edward ducked, trying to make eye contact under the hood, but a gas mask blocked his view. The stranger looked like a scout, perhaps in the employ of the Hudson's Bay Company. "If you had not-"

"Sir?" his savior repeated. "Do I really smell that bad?"

The stranger pulled back the hood, revealing long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. The mask came off next. Underneath was one of the most beautiful women Edward had ever seen. He opened his mouth, but closed it again without speaking.

"Are you alright?"

Her English was perfect, but laced with an odd accent. She certainly wasn't local, though; no one here was blessed with the vivid health evidenced by her flawless complexion.

"Ah – we should move on," Edward stumbled. "This is no place for a lady."

"I see chauvinism manages to flourish even in the harsh climate of the frontier."

"Chauvinism? No, you misunderstand, madam. I meant not the street, but the whole town. Badash isn't safe for ladies. The enervating remnant, you know. I'm concerned for your constitution, not female sensibilities." "You sound like a doctor."

"Indeed, although one of engineering. Doctor Edward Rankine. I should say at your service, but it seems to be the other way around." *God, she's beautiful*. As he recovered, instinct asserted itself. Try to be charming, it said. He couldn't walk away without her name, at least. "And who may I thank for my rescue?"

"I'm Charlotte. My friends call me Charlie."

"Charlotte," he repeated, reveling in the familiarity of her first name. "Well, if I may presume – Charlie, then I-"

A series of horn blasts echoed across town. Even a mile away from the docks, they were loud enough for the Royal Navy signal to be distinct.

"The Dominator," he groaned, looking at his watch. "She's preparing to leave. I have to go."

"Then perhaps you could escort me. For my safety," she added, with a sly smile.

"You have passage booked?" Edward tried not to show his surprise. How can someone of the working class afford that?

"My father arranged it," she said, setting off.

"So what brings you into town?" The question was an irrelevance; he just wanted an excuse to talk with her.

"Oh, a business venture. We can cut through here, I think," she said, leading him down a narrow alley. It delivered them into a chaotic marketplace. It contained hundreds of stalls, but there had been no discernible attempt to set them out to any kind of plan.

"This way," she yelled, heading into the labyrinth.

The array of goods was bewildering. There was food of every kind, some of it still alive. Traders hawked everything from household supplies to spare machine parts. Artisans offered repairs. The next few stalls were curtained-off, and Edward was mystified as to their function until he heard the noises that came forth. *They supply a different kind of service altogether*, he thought.

"I wouldn't touch those," he cautioned, as Charlotte eyed a vendor offering grilled sausages. "Everything is tainted."

"Still?"

"And for many years to come. Eat after you board."

"The snow is the only clean thing here," she muttered, moving on.

It was literally true. Aside from the few surviving buildings on Phantom Street, Badash was new, built on the ruins of York Factory. The town had yet to see its tenth birthday, but seemed decrepit already. Dysfunction was everywhere, extending even into the cells of plants and animals. *Including the people*, he thought, looking at a deformed child. Realizing Charlotte had pushed on, he gave chase.

Another alleyway led down to the harbor. Dockers toiled, loading boats, but none of the ship's tenders were present.

"Come on!" he shouted, running for the pulley railway. Asking for a pier number was superfluous; the battle-cruiser occupied the entire length of the harbor's main jetty.

On the ride out, Edward tried to glimpse the modifications that were his design. All space forward was taken by three quadruple turrets. They began to pass the castle, but before the stern became visible, the ship was lost in a fog bank of her own making.

"She has decay engines?" Charlotte asked, watching steam engulf the superstructure.

"Yes, four." He pointed at the cooling towers. "I can arrange a tour if you'd like," he offered, hoping to impress.

"Yes." She smiled. "I would."

After hopping off at the loading pavilion, they pushed through the crowd and showed their papers to the Royal Marine manning the embarkation point. He directed them toward the nearest elevator, but as they approached, an enormous man began to close the gate.

"Hold, if you please!" Edward called, hurrying forward.

The giant hesitated, but dropped the latch at the signal of an expensively dressed woman standing beside him. The platform began to climb, but those aboard were unprepared. Near the guardrail, two men struggling with a huge portmanteau overbalanced.

Muscles battled gravity as the platform continued skyward. Gravity won. The luggage teetered on the edge before plummeting down, dragging one of the men behind it. They landed together. Clothes, trinkets, and blood dispersed across the unforgiving stone.

"Medic!" Charlotte yelled, running forward. "We need a doctor!"

Edward knelt down and grabbed the man's wrist, but found no pulse.

"We shan't need one, I'm afraid." He shook his head.

"He's dead?"

"Don't trouble yourself, Miss," a marine said. "He's only a Jack."

"A Jack?" Edward removed the man's woolen hat. The scalp beneath was fashioned not from flesh, but metal. A bundle of wires trailed down under his collar. He stood, and looked around. Free from distraction, it was obvious; the stevedores moved with the stilted gait of the converted.

"You bloody fools!" The woman from the elevator barged past them, directing her staff to clean up. "Don't touch that!" she shouted, as a maid picked up an ornate music box. She snatched the item away, and passed it to the tall man.

"Can I be of assistance?" Edward offered.

"I very much doubt it!" His offer seemed to feed her anger, but then she calmed. "It was a gift from my father," she said, perhaps trying to justify her outburst. "Excuse us."

"Lady Holden," Charlotte murmured, as they climbed aboard another elevator. "I see she's every bit as charming as her reputation suggests."

The name seemed familiar, but Edward had no chance to enquire about it.

As they stepped aboard, a young man burst through a service door, charging toward them.

"Stop!" someone hollered, but the man paid no heed. He dashed for a loading ramp, but a gunshot ended his journey. He collapsed beside them, blood erupting from his chest.

Marines ran forward with guns drawn, but had no more targets.

"Sir? Madam? Are you alright?" An officer lowered his weapon, and stepped forward.

Edward looked at the would-be escapee. Blood spread unchecked until it hit the edge of the plank under him. Acting like a miniature dyke, the caulking carried it to the gunwale drain.

"Yes, we're fine. Thank you, Lieutenant," Charlotte replied.

A rhythmic hammering sound finally drew Edward's attention from the body. Looking up, he saw Captain Fitzjames approaching. Standing nearly seven feet tall on his pneumatic legs, he strode forward to join them.

"I must apologize," the Captain said. "Hardly an appropriate welcome, Miss Redpath." He smiled. "It's a pleasure to see you again."

"Captain." She nodded. "I was most grieved to hear of your injury at the battle of Buenos Aires."

Redpath? Charlotte Redpath? Edward tried hard to keep his face blank, but knew he'd failed. Charlie? Stunned, he shook his head.

"Chance hit from a shore battery, but the objective was achieved. The Argentine Navy was completely destroyed." Shrugging, he tapped the brass thigh tank. "The admiralty insists my uniform should be tailored to hide them, but I believe it does the men good to see that officers share the danger with them." He turned to Edward. "Doctor Rankine, I presume?"

"Yes, Captain." As a civilian, Edward had no protocol to observe, but pulled himself upright nonetheless. "It's an honor, sir."

"Hmn. Frankly, I don't care for what you've done to my ship, Doctor. The loss of the aft turret concerns me." He frowned, but then a narrow smile crossed his lips. "However, I must admit I'm curious to see the system in action."

"Sir, look at this." Kneeling beside the body, a Marine pulled the man's shirt open. A small tree was tattooed on his sternum.

"Creationist!" Fitzjames growled. Air hissed from a bleed valve as he stamped a foot. "Lieutenant, organize a search-"

"Sir, we have another one!" Two Marines exited from the nearest elevator, dragging a man between them. "Caught him in the engine room, sir. Chief Engineer said he was tampering with the vortex transducers."

"You are aboard a vessel of the Royal Navy," Fitzjames said, clipping off each word. "Sabotaging a ship-of-the-line carries a mandatory life sentence. Take him for marionisation."

"No!" The man sagged down between his captors. Only their grip prevented his collapse. "Captain, I beg you!"

"I'm sorry, son. It's too late for that." He hesitated. "Be grateful we have a good surgeon. It won't hurt." Listening to him scream as the Marines hauled him away, Edward wondered if the dead man hadn't been the luckier one. At least he couldn't suffer any more.

"Captain, chance seems an unlikely explanation for this," he said, trying to focus. "We have to consider that someone has leaked details of our mission."

"You're suggesting there's a traitor aboard the *Dominator*?" Fitzjames snarled.

Thinking himself the target of the Captain's anger, Edward took a step back.

"Damn it, you're right. Too much coincidence." He called the officers close. Through clenched teeth, he ordered an immediate departure. "We don't want a panic. Keep this quiet, but place double guards on all restricted areas." Surrounded by his entourage, he walked away, still issuing orders.

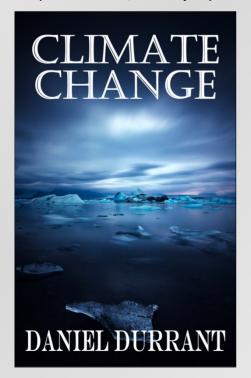
"You're Charlotte Redpath?" Edward asked.

"The last time I checked, yes." She looked down at herself.

"You might have told me." The daughter of one of the wealthiest industrialists in the world, and he'd taken her for some grubby scout. Edward shook his head, feeling dizzy. He couldn't take much more of this. As if the expedition alone wasn't terror enough, trouble had struck before the ship could even sail.

"I'm sorry, Edward." She touched his arm. "Don't sulk. It wouldn't have been nearly so much fun."

"Oh, Miss Redpath?" Fitzjames turned back. "As I said, this is a vessel of the Royal Navy." He gestured at her filthy clothes. "Sponsor or not, Her Majesty's rules dictate a dress code."



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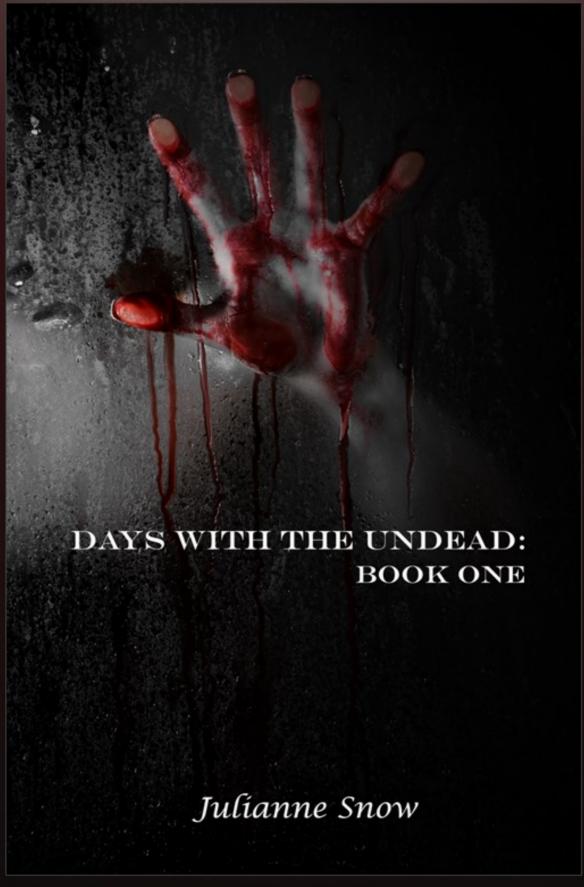
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