

April 2015 issue #20



All Men - All Horror! Screams in the Night!

Featuring
Poetry, Short Stories of
2500 words or less,
& Flash Fiction

Original Artwork and an Interview with Artist Glenn James

Interview with
Timothy C. Hobbs,
Author of
'In the Blink of a
Wicked Eye'

Contents

Fiction

4 Sous le Ciel de Paris — Michael Wombat

8 Following You Home — Matthew M. Bartlett

9 The Banshee's Cry — DJ Tyrer

11 The Song — Vincent LaManna

16 Sextet — Jon Ingoldby

17 Bad Head — Alex Woolf

21 The Outhouse — Matthew J. Barbour

23 Ms. Padfoot Settles a Debt — Ken MacGregor

36 9 Sirens — Joriah Wood

31 Red Pen — Lee A. Forman

31 Vector-7 — Michael Thomas-Knight

35 The Unknown — Otis Moore

37 Light — Greg McWhorter

39 Lost at Sea — S. B. Smith

42 Terror in Room 1698 — Shaun Avery

46 Converting Esau — E. Doyle-Gillespie

48 Mingled with Howls — DJ Tyrer

48 Predator & Prey — DJ Tyrer **48 Then, Suddenly** — DJ Tyrer

56 Route 44 — David J. Wing

59 The Ghoul — Joseph Rubas

64 The Garage — Wayne Haroutunian

69 Naked Wings — Mark Cassell

71 Silky Edge of the Night — Jon Jefferson

73 Shannon's Song — Ken Goldman

77 Prelude — T.S. Woolard

80 The Clearing — D.S. Ullery

85 Valentine — Michael Wombat

86 Jonquil — DJ Tyrer

89 Continuity and Permanence — Daniel Marc Chant

95 Nightmares — Andrew Lennon

97 Ruining the House — Michael Koenig

103 Beauty — Randy Streu

104 Lustitia — Prospero Pulma, Jr.

107 The Cries of Mimic Gulley — Maynard Blackoak

Poetry

48 Fairy Tale — DJ Tyrer

49 An Eternal Cry — DJ Tyrer

50 The Maiden Upon Tyne — T.S.Woolard

Features

52 An Interview with Artist Glenn James

112 An Interview with Author Timothy C. Hobbs

Artwork by Glenn James

3 A Victorian Werewolf in London

25 Does He Have a Name?

51 Dracula's Landfall - Whitby 1885

70 Moon Watcher

84 Sectioned Germane

106 The Green Man in Purgatory

115 Credits



Sous le Ciel de Paris Michael Wombat

Spinning, diving starlings wheel above the north-eastern end of the Pont de Bercy. As they swoop and soar they can see Paris stretch to the horizon. They see the boulevards, the estaminets, the hotels, the parks. They see the shining ribbon of the Seine that winds to the looming pile of Notre Dame, and beyond that the Eiffel Tower, majestic sentinel of the City of Light. They also see, or perhaps merely sense, the events that are about to happen. If they happen to glance downwards they will see other birds — raucous magpie and jay, tiny darting wren, chiffchaff, and the occasional treecreeper. As the starlings soar and dance to their unheard tune they may also catch sight of two tiny specks moving far below; a young couple arm-in-arming onto the bridge.

Let us descend to their level now; past the fleeting nuthatch, the blackcap, the crows and a rose-ringed parakeet that has perhaps strayed a little too far from the Jardin des Plantes. Past the red-gowned treetops, gold-glowing in the late autumn afternoon sun. Past the railway viaduct, where a Line Six train clatters along, its jaded passengers unaware of the lovers who stroll beneath their speeding feet.

The laughing girl is Margery Saunier, twenty-four, un mètre cinquante-deux, blonde hair cut in a short bob. She loves pain au chocolat, the Beatles, the color yellow and the works of Dante Gabriel Rosetti. In addition to these, she also has a new love in her life. Take a look at the man whose arm she lightly holds. He is taller than her, just; his slightly too long hair constantly gets in his eyes, and his dark beard hides a firm chin. Handsome devil, isn't he? That's me, Luke Larien, Chicago-born but devoted to France and all things French, in particular to this beguiling woman who now holds both my arm and my fragile heart in her delicately curling fingers.

Hush, listen now as we cross the bridge – Margery is speaking.

"Non, non, non. Say it again. Moi j'suis d'Paname. Run the words together more. Slur more. Goodness knows an Américain should be practiced in slurring his words."

"Mois. Je suis de Chicago. Why is Paris called Paname?"

"Your accent is atrocious. Luc, you do this on purpose!"

"I don't," I laugh, "I really do want to speak French. And you know that it's Luke, with a longer and more open vowel."

"Then I rename you Luc, for you are mine."

"And I rename you amoureuse et commandante, for you are mine."

She releases my arm and stamps her foot, mock-fury furrowing her brow and pouting her delicious lips. A fat pigeon, startled momentarily into flapping alarm, returns to pecking at the remains of a baguette dropped by an uncaring tourist. Laughing, we turn to walk along the Quai d'Austerlitz, admiring the spectrum of bronze and golden flame of the trees across the Seine. We do not notice that the starlings overhead cease their sweeping dance and arrow south away from the city.

We do not notice the fat pigeon clawed into a dark niche and devoured whole.

Beneath the vivid sun-butter cloud of Honey Locust trees on the Quai de la Tournelle we pause to listen to a declaiming philosopher who sits on the roof of a small boat moored here. Tiny yellow-green leaves drift down as the logician announces that the world has grown too complex, too diverse in thought and ambition, so that what rules in the stead of nature are a series of modern micro-narratives. He warns that the universe will not bear humanity's solipsistic impudence for much longer. We laugh at his pointy grey beard moving up and down.

The Seine lulls tramps and beggars to sleep. We saunter hand in hand through a constant fall of golden leaves, gazing across the water at the tall white buildings on the island in the Seine. Myth holds that the Parisian sky is in love with the Ile Saint-Louis; when she smiles up at him he puts on his blue suit. When he rains upon Paris, it is because he is sad, and when he is resentful of the millions who also love the city he unleashes upon them his roaring thunder. The Parisian sky does not remain cruel for long, however, and asks for forgiveness with a rainbow.

From the murk beneath a sewer grating, glowing eyes the colour of arterial blood watch as I lay my arm about Margery's shoulders and pull her close. She strokes my hip as we cross to Notre Dame.

"Je t'adore," I murmur.

"Getting better, Américain," she smiles, and pinches my ass, hard.

In the centuries-old shadow of the massive cathedral an accordion player and a guitarist commence an up-tempo rendition of 'Sous le Ciel de Paris'. A small group of onlookers, encouraged by the smiling musicians, gradually begins to sing along. Margery and I join them, my atrocious French accent joining her pure voice as we sing of a melody that is born in a young man's heart and flutters away into a Parisian sky. The dying autumn sun illumines Margery's amber eyes with a million possibilities. I kiss her deeply as the song ends, holding her close. The small gathering bursts into applause, more for our love than for the musicians, and we join in with their laughter. Contentment fills the cooling air.

High above, perched upon an out-jutting gutter of the cathedral, an ancient stone gargoyle unwinds its grotesque tail and growls softly.

"Have you had enough?" Margery asks. "Shall we go back to the apartment? We could pick up fresh pains au chocolat at the Pâtisserie."

I consider this. I very much want to undress her, and take her into the small bed in her tiny studio apartment near the Jardin du Luxembourg. A half hour walk beneath the lime trees that line the Boulevard St. Michel would take us there. I am fond of the Latin Quarter. Despite many modern additions, it still represents the Paris of an age gone by; the Paris of artists, writers and philosophers; bohemianism, counterculture and creativity. Picasso walked the streets of Montparnasse. Rimbaud, Matisse and Sartre bought vegetables in the Marche Mouffetard. Hemingway prowled the shaded alleys and bubbling fountains of the Jardin du Luxembourg.

This afternoon, however, I am not of a mind to succumb to the comforting embrace of history. I am inclined to prolong the exquisite anticipation of Margery's body. This evening I wish to look to the future, to what may become of our relationship.

"I'm enjoying the river," I say, simply. "Let's walk along it a little further?"

"Oui, okay." she agrees, smiling and taking my arm as we turn away from the Boulevard St. Michel to continue along the bank of the Seine. We will manage without our pastries.

Inside the pâtisserie that we have eschewed, a pool of thick blood creeps across the tiled floor, oozing around smashed glass and soaking into the scattered remains of croissants and baguettes.

The evening quietens as we amble along the gentle curve of the Left Bank. There is no birdsong now, and none fly across the plump disc of the setting sun. At the Pont Alexandre III we glance up at the gilt-bronze statues that top the seventeen metre counterbalancing columns of the bridge. The Fames, they are called, beautiful women restraining winged Pegasus, and ablaze with gold in the rays of the setting sun.

Mesmerised by their glory, we fail to notice one of the stone lions below extending its claws.

The gaunt skeleton of the Eiffel Tower welcomes us beneath its reassuring permanence as the world's light finally dips below the skyline. The few clouds that sail in the Parisian sky move from peach, through apricot, to a blood-red. Street lamps flicker and come on, casting an ochre glow.

A crack opens in the pavement behind us. Soft, guttural snarls emerge from the darkness beneath the earth.

"Psst! Monsieur! Monsieur!" A small man, as old as wizened time and dressed in a moth-eaten overcoat and tattered sneakers, stands close by the path that leads to the ticket booth. By his feet sits a golden box, ornately carved with flowers, and what is, perhaps, an angel. I can just make out the words 'Ultima Manet Spes'.

"Not today!" I tell the man. I do not want to allow anyone else to intrude upon our private world. I want this evening to belong to just we two. "I have no change," I lie. The ancient narrows his eyes and licks his cracked, thin lips.

"I think I have seen such a box before," Margery frowns, staring at the elaborately designed casket, no more than a foot square, that squats by the man's ragged footwear. Her grip on my arm tightens.

"Where?" I smile. "What is it?"

"I do not know. It escapes my mind."

"Shall we speak to him?" She nods, her bangs trembling. We take a step towards the gnarled, bent figure. His eyes brighten and he beckons, claw-like, eagerly and urgently.

"Le temps est venu," he hisses, revealing yellow-grey teeth. "La fin du monde est proche."

"What did he say?" I ask, although I understand perfectly.

"The end of the world is here," Margery translates.

"Oh, he's one of those," I sigh. "Come on, I'm not in the mood for lunatics. I want to kiss you at the top of the tower." I drag her away from the man, who continues to call after us.

"Non, partez pas! Sauvez-vous! Je suis psychopompe! S'il vous plaît, regardez dans la boîte - sauvezvous de la catastrophe qui approche!"

He speaks so quickly that most of it is lost on me, but I can see that Margery is shaken by the encounter with the hunched little man. In the cramped elevator that carries us to the high observation platform, she shivers. I hold her close. Her warm breath tantalises the skin of my throat.

"What is it, cherie? What's upset you?"

"I..." she whispers, "I think I know where I have previously seen a similar box to that of the old man." I look into eyes as clear as the autumn night. "There's a painting by Rosetti. He painted Jane Morris, his friend's wife, as Pandora. The box of the old man looked exactly like that held by Pandora in Rosetti's image."

"This bothers you? He was merely a beggar with an old box, trying to scam a euro or two."

"Je sais pas. No. Yes. I don't know." She is trembling in my arms. I kiss her forehead. Her skin is cold.

"Look, if it makes you feel better we'll speak to him when we come down."

"Oui. Please, could we? That will settle my mind." Her mouth curves upwards slightly, and she relaxes a little.

We step out onto the observation platform and gaze across Paris. Beautiful Paris, City of Light. The bowl of the sky is now almost completely dark, but the streets below are awash with illumination. I hold her close in front of me and nuzzle her neck as we admire the city lights that sweep iridescent to the horizon, sparkling with life, like the years I imagine unfolding in our future. Then slowly, section by section, arondissement by arondissement, the lights of Paris wink out. Even the lights of moving vehicles disappear. Margery catches her breath.

"What happens?"

"I don't know," I say, holding her close against me. My chest feels tight. "Power cut?" I suggest, although I know that cannot be, for what power cut ever affected traffic?

Below us Paris is completely dark. Now that they have no competition, the stars look down on a silent black city, waiting as they have for an eternity, as if they are holding their breath. My love turns and buries her face in my sweater. I feel her heart thumping against me. One last moment of blissful peace, a deceptive tranquility, the calm before the storm.

Far, far below us, the screaming begins. Roars and primal howls echo out of the darkness, accompanied by terrified shrieks of horror and agony. We cannot stop our ears from hearing the tortured screams of people being hunted down; men, women and children being eviscerated and torn apart. All we can do is listen to the howling, the rending snarls and the screams of the dying, and watch the darkness. Watch as the world ends, and wonder what was in that damned box.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — A Yorkshireman living in rural Lancashire, Michael Wombat is a man of beard. He has a penchant for good single-malts, inept football teams, big daft dogs and the diary of Mr. Samuel Pepys. He is an indie author of seven books, editor of two anthologies, and his short stories have appeared in several other collections. His tale "Descent" was shortlisted for the HNS Award 2014.

Twitter: @wombat37

Blog: https://cubicscats.wordpress.com/





Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes, and Kobo

Following You Home Matthew M. Bartlett

Ten minutes before the countdown began, Merrill was depleted. He had worked all day, and only begrudgingly had he let himself be persuaded to forego an evening on the recliner with a blanket and a book, an early bed. He knew only Dave, Myrta and Bellamy, not very well at that, just from work, not even in his department, and they were circulating among the smaller groups, entering and departing conversations with an enviable ease that was alien to Merrill.

The party was within walking distance of his rented house, though, and he could leave at will, at any time, and the weather was mild for the first of the year. But once there, he'd somehow managed his way into a prickly argument in which, unarmed with facts, he rapidly began losing his footing. Dispirited, aggrieved, he wondered how he might extricate himself, when the countdown began, someone shoved a champagne flute into his hand, all glasses went aloft, and Merrill ducked through the crowd and slid out the door, not before grabbing a malt beverage bottle and three nutmeg logs from a tin.

He buttoned his jacket as he bounced down the hedge-hemmed staircase and into the street, where revelers in puffed-up coats and scarves were dispersing from the city's downtown ceremonies. Shoving the bottle into his peacoat pocket, he kicked at unwound streamers and clumps of confetti dampened with snow. The flurries that had been coming down all afternoon began to turn into a steady snow that covered the city like static.

As Merrill crossed the Main Street intersection he saw, crossing opposite and parallel with him, in a throng of teenagers, what he first thought to be a man in gray carrying a stained, mottled white balloon on a thick string. Looking again, he saw that the balloon was the head of some impossibly tall thing with a deathly pallor and a slender, muscled neck. The crowd around this freakish apparition seemed to not take notice of it at all. Merrill saw nothing of the man's body, and at first thought the thing to be a prank, some kind of outsized macabre puppet surrounded by his handlers, but as the crowd reached the curb, just as Merrill reached the curb opposite, the thing broke away and shambled in his direction. As it passed under the stoplight, Merrill saw the thing's features full on, and his stomach tightened like a fist. It bore no resemblance to any earthly creature he'd ever seen. Everything was...wrong. He broke into a jog and at the next crosswalk he bolted back across the street and ducked down an alley that led to a parking lot and a side road. Then he walked between two houses to the long road that led to his house. Turning, he could see the crowds on Main Street and...there it was, that pale head bobbling just below a streetlight, swiveling, searching.

Merrill took a circuitous route home, doubling back, looking behind him frequently and with great apprehension. Across the sky like a rocket shot a keening, a terrible, echoing shriek, like some monstrous cicada, it was a desperate, searing expression of hungry desire, tinged with equal parts outrage and mournfulness. Merrill stopped still, everything inside him clenching now, his teeth pushing against each other. Across the street in a boxy raised ranch he saw two silhouettes appear in a yellow window, black countenances tilted upward toward the sky. Then the light in the room was extinguished, dropping the silhouettes into grey obscurity. The cry reached a searing pitch, then trailed off with sounds like fever-sharp knife edges sliding across one another. The silence that followed was somehow worse, for he knew the cry would sound again, and so it did, not a full minute later, louder and longer this time, causing the muscles in his throat to vibrate, his testicles to pull up into his body for protection, his body to shrink itself into a fetal crouch, his hands splayed on the sidewalk like talons.

When it stopped, he ran full-bore to his house, there it was, just ahead, low and blue, the familiar orange glow in the kitchen window. He entered, keys onto telephone table, up to the bathroom where he washed his face and regarded himself momentarily in the mirror. It's okay. It can't find him. He lost it. It was maybe just a man, a deformed man, harmless, celebrating the new year in a city known for tolerating its freaks and its oddballs. Maybe it *had* been a puppet, or...or a hologram...a New Year's prank.

He climbed into his rumpled bed and hit the light. Silence, but for the clicking of the pipes. He pictured that horrific thing, stalking the darkened streets, searching for him. The house creaked, a settling sound, normal. But Merrill's heart jumped, and then beat so hard he wondered if he might have some kind

of attack. Did the light change just a touch around the corner from the doorway to the bedroom? Was that a light footstep, tentative, cautious?

Merrill turned on his light and leapt from his bed. He strode about the rooms, chest out, brave of face, turning on all the lights, then to the front door. It looked somehow crouched, poised to burst open and admit unimaginable horror. Strangely, Merrill suddenly felt calm, settled, at a strange ease.

He remembers the bottle in his pocket. He pulls it from his jacket, tossed over the back of a chair, drinks, lemons, sweet and boozy, fizz roiling at the roof of his mouth. The cold from the outside fills the room and turns it icy blue.

He angles the recliner to face the closed door. Considers. Up and opens the door. Sits, facing the staticky rectangle of street and snow-capped hedge, lit by a streetlight. A few leaves skitter by, chasing and teasing each other, relics from a dead and buried autumn.

His eyes blink, quickly. More slowly now, more closed than open. He pictures the hideous creature emerging from the thicket like a mantis, gaping black mouth with teeth like a serpent's, dripping with mucous and venom, fingers without bones wriggling with perverse anticipation, eyes deep in fleshy caverns, kaleidoscopic with ruby and rot. Its gnarled torso and limbs are cloaked, he imagines, in blankets that once swaddled bloated and desiccated corpses, sticky with sweat and suppurations, torn and clotted.

Its smell is septic, toxic, tinged with a blasphemy of citrus.

And yet, what appears in the doorway, what steps with a long, twig-thin, gnarled white leg, over the transom, what approaches on white, serrated pincers is worse than what he saw on that snow-speckled street, worse than what he had imagined, worse than what he would have been capable of imagining. He greets it with a hoarse, rising shriek of laughter. As it deliberately disrobes him, its horrible head tilted like that of an animal, he gibbers and jabbers and weeps. It plucks his lashes and places them gently, delicately, in his eyes. The pain is unreal. He blinks, rapidly, water filling his eyes. He sees the thing swimming in salt, wavering, leering. Only then does it begin its real cruelties. And after all the monstrous ministrations, all the penetrations and the whisperings, the promises and the betrayals, the lashings, the hoarse imparting, in a nigh-impenetrable accent, of ghastly truths and ghoulish prophecies, it does the worst thing, the cruelest and most horrible act. It leaves Merrill alive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Matthew M. Bartlett is the author of *Gateways to Abomination, Anne Gare's Rare Book and Ephemera Catalogue*, and the forthcoming illustrated chapbook *The Witch-Cult in Western Massachusetts*. His short stories have appeared in *Resonator: New Lovecraftian Tales From Beyond, Faed,* and *High Strange Horror*. He lives in Northampton, Massachusetts with his wife Katie and their five cats.

Twitter: <a href="mailto:om/mailto:o

The Banshee's Cry DJ Tyrer

Donald had been raised in awe of his roots. His father had been an only child and had died when he was little, but his mother had raised him with tales of his father's clan and stories of the 'old country', as she always referred to Scotland. She was of one of those long-resident bloodlines of mixed ancestry that had lost any connection with a homeland other than America, forgotten any origin other than the states they had come from before they went west. She envied Donald his roots and made certain he didn't lose them with his father.

Knowing how much value she placed on him, he'd done his mother proud. She always imagined he would 'go home' and proudly show his kin how well he'd done for himself, and made him promise he

would visit the 'old country'. When she died, he decided finally to go, in memory of her, taking a holiday in the Highlands, but felt dissatisfied at not having the connection he sought.

So, Donald made contact with his clan. It was surprisingly simple. Thanks to the internet it was easy enough to learn it was his father's father who had crossed the Atlantic in search of a new life in the new world about a century earlier. The youngest son of the then-chief, he'd been the black sheep of the family.

His clan's society had a website and he emailed then skyped the chief who was his father's second cousin.

"Ye must come and visit," Ranald, the chief, had said, and Donald hadn't needed telling twice. Within a week, he was at the clan's castle, which sat gauntly upon the cliffs above the grey and seething sea.

The evening of his arrival, Donald and Ranald settled down for a haggis dinner and, after, his kinsman regaled him with legends of the clan over a fine malt whiskey, beside a roaring fire.

Ranald was just telling him about the banshee that shrieked to announce the death of a clansman when he paused and asked him, "Are ye alright? Ye seem flushed."

"I'm a bit warm," Donald said. "The room's a little stuffy. I think I need a spot of fresh air." He'd drunk liberally of the whiskey and wasn't too sure the haggis had agreed with him.

"A commendable idea," Ranald said, "just stay away from the cliffs; it's easy to step off them in the dark.

"I'll be careful," he said and headed outside.

The night air was cold, but didn't seem to cool Donald of the unpleasantly-clammy, flushed feeling. He walked for a short distance, then halted, having resolved not to wander too far.

Then, suddenly, there was a piercing scream, not too far away.

Donald was startled and his heart was hammering, but he looked around in an attempt to see who had made the awful sound, certain they were in terrible distress, but it was far too dark to see anything. He called out, asking if they needed help, but the night was eerily silent.

Then, the scream came again – closer now, terrifying and strange. With a shiver, Donald realised he could see a white, misty figure approaching through the darkness.

"Hello? Who are you?" he called, hoping for an answer that would dispel the fear growing within him, but none came, save another awful cry.

Donald turned and ran, a scream echoing after him. Then, he stumbled to a halt, having reached the sickening realisation that he was running towards the cliff edge. He turned and ran in what he hoped was the direction of the castle. Suddenly, he really regretted coming back to the 'old country' and wished he'd never known of his roots.

The scream came again, almost directly behind him, and he jumped in shock, stumbled, lost his footing on the uneven moorland, tumbled and fell, rolling over and over down the hillside below the castle.

With a crunch, he slammed into a boulder, his head hanging at an unnatural angle, his ears still ringing with that final scream, as his lifeblood ebbed away in the cold night air. A search would find his body and Donald would be interred in the family crypt alongside his ancestors. His mother doubtless would have been pleased to know he was at rest where he belonged and would never leave his roots behind again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published in *Amok!* (April Moon Books), *In Creeps The Night* (J.A.Mes Press), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Techno-Horror* and *Cosmic Horror* (both Dark Hall Press), and has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

Twitter: <u>@dityrer</u>

Blog: http://dityrer.blogspot.co.uk/

The Song Vincent LaManna

Dear James,

I write to you from my asylum, a place that I both treasure and abhor. It has taken me some time to collect my thoughts and gather the strength to recount to you, dear friend the tale that has put me so far from reach. I write to you as an apology for my absence in your life, as well as a plea for a friendly ear, free of prejudice and judgment, the ear of one who believes. I pray that you can be this for me, and if you cannot I beg of you not to respond to this letter. If it is too fanciful and you truly believe me to be insane burn this and we shall have no further correspondence. If however you believe me, then celebrate with me friend, for I have done mankind a great service.

It all started at the bar...

Like every other night I arrived at 5:00 p.m. to open. I set up the cracked leather chairs, rearranging them a few times, searching for a good pattern underneath the neon blue lights. I cut up my garnishes, set up my glasses, chose a song, and before long, people came tumbling in.

I made drinks, simple ones at first, but as it got later people got craftier and more specific, hoping to trip me up or to create a cocktail of their own.

All of it was pretty standard, until about 12:30 a.m.

Suddenly there was a perfume playing gently around me, tingling all of my senses at once. I glanced around the bar, attempting to locate the source of my airborne intoxication, but it was fruitless. The crowd was... bland. No jaw dropping beauties to be found... yet I felt as if someone incredible were calling me, as if there was a woman in that room who somehow, out of vision and beyond cognition managed to speak to my very soul.

Crash

I was brought rapidly back to my senses by the sound of shattering glass and the sensation of warm blood trickling down my hand. I had broken the glass that I was using to make a drink, shards of it were lodged in my hand, but the pain made me aware again; aware of the customers that I was neglecting and of the job that I so very much loved. After properly washing the minor abrasions I dove back into the crowd, making drinks and flirting my way to 3:00 a,m., without giving another thought to the sensation I had felt earlier. If only I had the sense to hold on to that clarity James. If only I had the fortitude to withstand the horrors that would come next.

But alas dear friend, I closed the bar and gave no further thought to the odd events that happened. As I switched the lights off I felt a shiver down my spine, an intangible sense of discomfort but it was nothing to me. I locked the doors and took my leave.

5:00 p.m. the next night I began my shift once more with the same routine, blissfully ignorant of the horrors that would soon transpire all around me.

I set up the chairs, turned on the harsh blue neon light and went right to work, prepping and mixing drinks for the long night to come.

Yet again at around 12:30 a.m. something odd happened, I began to hear a song of some sort, it clearly wasn't being played on the bar speakers, it lacked the static quality that spears so clearly have... No this was some kind of live humming song but by the same token, it wasn't a song really. There was no distinguishable melody. It seemed to me to sound like all the saddest things in the world. There was this heavy melancholy within it, but an undertone of serenity, like the falling rain, or howling wind. It was a song written in a primal key that our stories and legends had long since forgotten, but our bodies had not.

The rest of the shift went by in some kind of fog, I was performing my work but I was doing so to the rhythm of this intangible musician. I knew someone must be making the music, and yet I could not find it within myself to seek them out or for that matter, deviate in any way from the normal bar routine that I was in. To the unobservant eye I was the usual bartender, but to me I was trapped, stuck within a fleshy prison, dancing like a marionette to the grotesquely beautiful melody.

When I returned home that night it was as if everything had turned to ash. I was in a daze, unable to feel or taste, unenthused by life. I watched TV, but changed the channel every few moments. I grabbed a

book but found myself rereading the same page over and over again as if the literature had suddenly become incomprehensible to me. Was I mad?

Had I finally lost all my senses James? Or was this something entirely different...

I poured myself a drink and shook the terror from my mind just long enough to collapse into a fitful sleep.

That night I dreamed of frightful music and monstrous creatures too hideous for words stripping my flesh and chasing me around in circles as if I were trapped within a music box, an eternal ballerina dancing in one continuous circle to the music of my unknown tormenter. I woke with a gasp, entangled in sheets, soaked with sweat and drenched to the very core with fear.

Another night at work.

5:00 p.m.my shaky hands unlocked the doors, the key missing the lock several times. Hands sweating I sloppily rearranged the leather chairs, chose the music and with a shudder that I felt in my whole being I turned on the neon blue lights realizing for the first time the shadows they cast all around me, shadows that seemed to be swaying to some unknown melody...

No.

There was no one there, I was imagining it, this was all a product of my own mind.

Why would I have some preternatural tormenter? Me, a simple bartender. What's more, why wouldn't they face me, what pleasure could any beast derive from driving me to madness?

It was my mind twisting shadows into substance and mixing music's with memory.

Simply my mind.

Simply my mind.

Simply my mind.

I repeated it again and again until the shadows dispersed.

Simply my mind.

Simply my mind.

Simply my mind.

Until my hands steadied and the sweat stopped.

Simply my mind.

Simply my mind.

Simply my mind.

Until I was ready to let the people in.

I attacked my job with ferocity that night. Hoping that aggressive actions would allow me to stop the madness of the past week. All went well at first, I spoke to a few women, each of them cute, but none of them possessing any special flair. I made the usual drinks, purposefully making eye contact with everyone who purchased them just to prove to myself that there was no one there even mildly otherworldly.

But 12:30 a.m. dawned.

And the song began.

I worked harder, furiously throwing bottles and forcing conversation.

I made the music louder, dear friend you should have seen me as I screamed and howled to the point that even the drunkest of customers was disturbed.

The crowd cleared out early and I raced out immediately after, fear having overtaken all reason.

The last thing I remembered was the blue glow of the lights.

That night I shook beneath my covers. I did not attempt to distract my mind with arbitrary pleasures. There was no pleasure in the world but the song. The terror in me seemed to be quelled by the memory of the monstrous melody.

I knew there was a woman singing to me.

I couldn't find her, but she was there. Every cell in my body screamed to me this fundamental truth.

All I could do was sit and think. Think of her, the unknown women, that shadow in the corner of my eye unseen unheard and filled with a song that was inimitable and everything to me. I would find her tomorrow. I must. I couldn't accept this mystery any longer; I needed to find out for certain if she was real.

5:00 p.m. I hadn't slept at all the night before. Insomnia had turned me near to the brink of madness. The fearful shaking of the past nights had become so commonplace that I barely noticed it as I set up for my shift. As each hour ticked by I became firmer in my resolve. I would find her. I would prove that I was not mad. She was there.

12:30 a.m... Nothing. The shift continued as uneventfully as it had begun. The confusion was blinding. It was unfathomable. I had been so sure that I would hear it, that she would be here. This was going to be the night, the dramatic conclusion... But there was nothing, 2:30 a.m. and still nothing.

That was it then. It was madness. I had lost it; something must have pushed me over the edge.

The bar cleared out at 3:00 a.m., Instead of cleaning up I sat for a moment, my head in my hands, sweating with the realization that this was all in my head. I was going to be free from the burden of my temporary madness James...

But all at once I heard the humming again filling the empty bar, so sweet and so gentle as if the goddess of wind were humming quietly to herself. Yet somehow this inaudible tune wrapped around me like tentacles, twirling me into a love crazed madness, an unbreakable trance of stagnation. I was stone, immobile; I could only be set free by the very thing that was enslaving me. This secret goddess of wind and song, this hidden lover, she was the only one who could release me from the spell she had cast. Lo and behold, as the thoughts left my mind there she was, I faced her for the first time and all breath evacuated my body. My mind being so distorted by the fog of her song, I could barely see her, but whatever pieces of my body that still belonged to me seemed to scream with preternatural recognition. She had been in the crowd at the bar, our eyes had met, but somehow I had missed how remarkable she really was. I was blind and unprepared until at last she chose to reveal herself to me.

Her lips touched mine.

I blacked out.

The next thing I remembered I was somewhere out of time. There was a blue glow all around me, but through the haze of the spell I was under I was unsure as to whether it was the neon lights of the bar or some kind of water.

I tried to move but I was cement.

My body seemed to work against me, planted in one spot.

There was an odd smell in the air, not the sweet perfume I had smelt nights before... no this was the scent of rot and decay.

Death was all around me and yet somehow I was not alarmed.

My body was perfectly relaxed in its statuesque positioning; my senses were dull, my entire being complacent and the song. Oh God, James, the song. It was like being obliterated and pieced back together endlessly, a blissful pain that I will never be able to describe to you in a mere letter.

I drifted in and out of consciousness for several eternities.

I don't know how long I was there, it felt like a thousand years, but by the same token, all of it seemed instant.

I cannot stress the power of her song enough to you, James. It didn't just remove my will; it actively turned it against me. I could not even consider leaving; the song spoke to the melancholy chasms of my soul, weighing them down making me beg for the sweet pain of this restraint.

My fate was horrible. Trapped like a slave, unaware of my own confinement, blissful in my ignorance. But my body could not survive. I was starving, emaciated, and rotting alive all while I smiled sweetly to her dastardly tune.

Truly the gods were with me though.

As my body began to die I would drift freely in and out of consciousness. As I regained consciousness there would be one moment of kinesthetic delay, just a second, in which my full five senses were dulled, saving me from the sirens song but still allowing me to see the horrors of my prison.

I saw my rotting flesh.

I saw my falling skin.

I saw carcasses all around me.

Some were decayed to the point of death; some had simply collapsed from starvation.

And at the moment that my ears were once again filled with the evil song, I heard a guttural scream that could only have come from the most wretched of creatures, a dying man.

SIREN.

I heard the name as all will evacuated my being.

The bodies around me were men, who like me had been ensnared by the sirens song.

During my next bout of consciousness in the moment between bliss and torment I moved my arm. It was only a few inches, but my speed was severely dulled by my atrophying muscles. This wasn't enough to save me, but as my will left me once more, I knew I had a plan.

It took me twenty-nine bouts of consciousness to move my arm far enough, but on the thirtieth awakening my plan came to fruition. The Siren didn't watch her prisoners; she merely let us rot there, assuming that the thrall of her song was too great for us to break, so my movements had gone unnoticed.

As I reentered consciousness once more I thrust my now savagely long fingernails deep into my own ears, effectively deafening myself.

Blood poured down my hands and over my neck, but I was free.

I tried to move my legs, at first unsuccessfully, but my sheer will to live took over and I began to regain control of my muscles.

I gathered what little strength I had and began to walk, catching the Sirens attention.

A man had walked away from her.

Her spell was broken and in that moment the world around me shook, there was a flash of blue followed by a splatter of red.

I woke up in the bar, half dead, decaying, deaf, and covered in blood that was mine, and some that wasn't.

My strength was gone, I was on the brink of death, but someone must have found me and called an ambulance.

I awoke again, still badly damaged, but feeling stronger and nourished by several IV's.

The authorities were in the hospital room with me, they wrote down question after question on sheets of paper.

"Do you remember your name?"

"Can you tell us what happened to you?"

"Whose blood were you covered in?"

I answered all of their questions as honestly as possible. I believed that the authorities should very much be alerted to the existence of the Siren and the incredible service that I had provided by ending her reign.

However I soon noticed disbelieving glances, hurried discussions and an unexplained increase in my medications.

So there it is my friend. My story. I, the first man since Odysseus to best the mythical creature have been rewarded with disbelief and institutionalization. My story needs to be told James, even if it is only to you. Beware the sirens thrall dear friend, not all the magic has died from the world James, the things we learned of as children are alive.

And many of them are nightmarish.

With Hope,

١

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Vincent LaManna is a Long Island writer who has spent the formative years of his life traveling America. With extensive training in acting, literature and psychology Vincent wants to lend his pen to the voice of the human condition and all of its dark undersides. Vincent has also been recently featured in "The Fall of Cthulhu," Published by Horrified Press.

Tumblr: http://madnessridesthestarwind.tumblr.com



AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

A woman wakes from a deep and peaceful sleep in the warm night of an Alabama town and finds the cot by her bed empty. At first she holds back her panic and seeks rationality. Her husband has taken the baby girl downstairs because she will not sleep, and is at this very moment cradling her and whispering gentle nothings, patting and bouncing and smiling, and she is smiling back, for no crying can be heard, and any minute now they will steal back into the room, and she will pretend to be asleep so as to mask her foolish night terrors, and in the morning she will laugh at herself as she presses oranges into the squeezer to make juice for her family's breakfast.

She knows none of this can be true.

When she creeps downstairs after fifteen minutes of complete silence, both husband and child are nowhere to be found. The noise she makes then wakes both her neighbors.

Ш

When Professor Fellowes finally retired to the country after months of therapy to disabuse him of his conviction he had killed his wife, the cries of vixens in the night were so similar to those sounds he thought he had heard from the conflagration that had been their living room, the room he could not enter because the heat was too intense, and in which he believed his wife had been trapped, that he set his sheets on fire and burned, howling, in his bed. Due to his certainty as to the cause of the fire, he no longer smoked a pipe, so had made do with lighter fuel and matches. His wife came to his funeral, all the way from New Zealand, and could not shed a tear because she was old, and tired, and too sad to weep.

Ш

In a village that's a bit too much like Innsmouth that has wet fishing nets draped over rotting harbor bollards and inhabitants that prefer the shadows and won't ever look you in the eye, an old man rants and raves in a house upon the hill, with only his dog Poppy for company. The villagers feed the dog, but are deeply afraid of the man, because he has lived too long, and they do not understand why he is not what he once was. On quiet summer evenings, when the air is hot and still, the sea calm and glassy and without threat, they can hear him, his senseless sentences rising always to a shrieking pitch of incoherence. And they flinch then, and they look at the calm sea or the pinking sky, or they pet the dog, and they try to pretend that their end will not be the same.

IV

I am *Tyto alba*. I have been unfairly done by. You've called me by so many insulting names. Demon. Hobgoblin, hoddy and dobby. I am the one of the silent flight, the white, the silver, the ghost, the ashy faced. It is true, I am a nocturnal creature. I can hunt with or without the moon. I favour abandoned buildings for my home, trees and barns also being acceptable. I prey on smaller versions of you.

Then I was the ghost, now I am revered. Do not be afraid when I call across a dark field late at night: it's not a spirit or a demon, it's me: the white face, the silent killer. You're too big for me, but if you're chilled by my deep-night cry, I will sleep better in the daytime.

٧

The man is locked in. During the long nights, when they cannot tell whether he sleeps or wakes, he wants to cry out. But he cannot. He is locked in. Nothing moves, not even his eyes. His frustration and despair are so great that sometimes he believes he can see them erupting from his chest, filling the clean little room with its quietly beeping monitors with a black, oily vapor that twists itself into contorted

ribbons of unresolved anguish and seems to melt away: through unseen gaps and cracks in the walls, in the ceiling, the floor, the window frame. But he knows they do not melt anywhere: they are reabsorbed, sucked back, locked in.

Ready for tomorrow night.

VI

Jimmy loves Davy but he loves his sister Mary more, so he tells her it will soon be dark and she must hurry home (*keep to the path, shine your small torch ahead at all times*), and she smiles and obeys him without question because she loves her older brother, and unbeknownst to him, she knows his real reason for wanting her gone. So Jimmy and Davy seek out the tiny cove that is their trysting place, and they kiss and touch and whisper their doomed love for the last time. Davy is getting married in a week. He has brought the wedding ring to show Jimmy, not because he wants to hurt his friend and lover, but because Jimmy has asked to see it.

But he cannot find it. As twilight descends and a harvest moon rises, he searches all his pockets for a third time, until Jimmy says he might as well give up. He must have dropped it somewhere.

Disconsolate, both young men work their way back to the cliff-top to begin their fruitless search before the last light has gone.

On her way home Mary's torch beam catches a tiny glinting thing in the middle of the road. She peers at it through the gathering gloom. Bewitched by its glitter and sparkle, she leaves the path and runs to pick it up. Suddenly the road is lit by bright blinding light and there is a commotion of noise, a screech of tires, a wet, sickening *thump*, and silence.

When they reach that part of the road, Davy and Jimmy find the driver of the car weeping and rocking the bag of blood and bones that is Mary in his arms. He holds her tight, in the light of one working headlight, heedless of the blood seeping into his trousers and smart city shirt and pooling, viscous and black, on the tarmac around him.

The next day, when the undertakers' assistant gently uncurls Mary's right hand, which was left unsullied by the impact, there winks a ring, bright and shiny and good as new.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jon Ingoldby is an editor and writer, currently working on his second collection of short stories, provisionally entitled *Knowing the Time*. He published regularly in Flash Fiction Magazine, and his story 'The Remembered' appeared in the December 2014 issue of *The Siren's Call*. He lives in Sussex, England, with his wife and two cats. You can learn more about Jon's work, and contact him, via his website.

Website: www.joningoldby.co.uk

Bad Head Alex Woolf

"You drank too much, didn't you, darling," said Maureen. Blearily, Ian looked up at his wife from the bowels of their bed. She was sitting there, Kindle in hand, the sanctimonious halo of the teetotaller around her head. Come to think of it, everything in the room had a halo – or maybe he was just seeing double. He pressed his fingers tight to his temples, trying to stop the throbbing in his skull. It felt like a maniac had got loose with a drill in there.

"It's not doing you any good," said Maureen, without a trace of sympathy.

"Blame Mike," he whimpered. Then he caught sight of the time on the bedside clock – 8:45 a.m. – and let out a groan.

"You'd better get going," said Maureen, dumping him out of bed. The sudden jolt to his system brought complaints from everywhere. Feeling nauseous and dizzy, he clutched his stomach. For a moment he thought he was going to be sick and began an undignified scramble for the bathroom. But the feeling soon passed and the focus of his self-pity returned to his head, where the maniac with the drill had been joined by a psycho with a baseball bat.

Mike was in the office when Ian got there, looking as shiny and fresh as a new-minted penny. Bastard, thought Ian.

"You lightweight," Mike grinned at him.

Ian slumped into his swivel chair and kneaded his forehead. "Never again will I go out on a bender with you, sir."

"Next Saturday then?"

"I'll be on the apple juice."

Mike laughed. Then the phone rang next to lan's ear, shooting glassy needles into his brain. He yanked it from its cradle.

"Rivock and Steen Forensic Services," he muttered.

"Ian Rivock?"

"Yup."

"It's Chief Inspector Dayton of Wintershire Constabulary."

"Oh, hello Inspector. What can I do for you?"

"There's been an incident, in Manor Park Square, North Halsted. How soon can you be here?" Could be a murder, not sure.

Ian sighed. There went his hopes for a quiet morning. Luckily, Manor Park Square was close. "Give us ten minutes," he said.

Mike drove.

"So, did you get back okay last night?" Mike asked as he pulled the Ford Transit out of the car park.

"I assume so," replied Ian. "I woke up in my bed."

"Good, I was a bit worried, mate, leaving you to get yourself a cab like that. I should have seen you home."

lan pushed deep into the flab of his stomach as his colleague took a corner too fast. The pain and nausea were returning.

Manor Park Square was a brand-new plaza. It had abstract sculptures on plinths and fountains that lit up blue and pink at night. Built on the site of a toxic waste facility — a relic of Manor Park's previous history as an industrial zone, before the property developers moved in — the plaza was intended to provide a community hub for the newly built suburb. But the windswept, desolate space was hardly used. It was only a matter of time, Ian reckoned, before the first weeds would start to sprout between those pristine white paving slabs. The locals — and Ian was one of them — didn't use it because Manor Park was basically a dormitory for commuters who lived their lives elsewhere.

One corner of the deserted square was surrounded by police tape. An ambulance and a couple of patrol cars were there, blue lights flashing slowly. Mike drove onto the square and parked next to them.

Ian took his time donning his white overalls. He could taste bile in his mouth. When they were both ready, they retrieved their kitbags from a shelf in the rear of the van and headed over to the crime scene, flashing their cards at the constable on duty. Chief Inspector Dayton was standing in the middle of the taped area, together with a couple of junior detectives. He pointed at the paving slabs by his feet, which were slick with an extraordinary amount of what Ian assumed was blood. It covered about a dozen of the slabs – if it had come from one person, that person was most certainly dead.

"No body was found at the scene," said Dayton. "If this was a murder, we must assume that the body was removed. I've got men scouring the neighbourhood."

"This is all you found?" asked Mike. "Just blood, nothing else."

Dayton nodded.

"And you're sure it's blood? You did the hydrogen peroxide test?"

"Of course."

"Any witnesses?" Ian asked.

"None," said Dayton. "But we do have this." He held up an iPhone in his leather-gloved hand. "It belongs to a Mr Stephen Pritchard. He was using it to film his girlfriend in the early hours of this morning in the bedroom of his flat in Waterhouse Street." He pointed to a street of terraced houses overlooking the square. "At exactly 12:54 a.m., according to the phone's clock, he heard a scream coming from the direction of the square. He ran to his window but couldn't see anything. The square isn't lit at night, except for the fountains, and the light from them doesn't carry to this corner. Whoever did this was careful to do it in the darkest part of the square. But the scream is just about audible on the recording."

"I can run a spectogram analysis on it," said Mike, taking the phone from Dayton.

"And I'll take some samples of the blood for testing," Ian muttered, surveying the wet red expanse. He'd seen plenty of blood in his time, but not when feeling this awful, the sight of it was making his insides lurch and gurgle. His head continued to glow with pulses of pain, despite the paracetamol he'd taken. This was definitely the worst hangover he'd ever had.

Mike and the junior officers got busy erecting a white tent over the blood-soaked tiles. Ian had to excuse himself and went back to the van. He opened one of the transparent trace evidence baggies and tried to vomit. Again, the feeling passed, he couldn't even induce a retch with his finger. He shrugged off his white overalls, packed them away, then went to sit in the passenger seat. Dazed and miserable, he wondered what the hell had happened to him. Had someone spiked his drink? He remembered leaving the Dog and Anchor with Mike, but nothing after that.

Something shifted violently in his guts – something big and hard and sharp. He felt a series of small pops vibrating in his bones, like cords breaking deep inside him, and a piercing pain the like of which he'd never experienced before. His intestines seemed to be swelling up and pushing their way out of him. He screamed and stabbed his fingers deep into the fleshy folds of his belly, trying to push everything back. The fingers felt wet and sticky. For God's sake!

Pulling them away, he saw they were covered in black slime, which made him scream again. Black wetness was spreading across the stomach area of his shirt and now his scream became a breathless babble: "Oh my God! Oh my good God! What is that? What the fuck is that?" He was hyperventilating, boiling hot and on the verge of fainting. The pain was unbearable, like being stabbed in reverse, from the inside outwards. Something had ruptured. Something vital. He was dying. This was what dying felt like.

Then all at once, everything began to subside. The pain diminished, and very quickly disappeared. His breathing slowed. He relaxed. The inky stain remained – a filthy black smile across the white cotton, but it had stopped expanding. He placed a hand against his stomach. It had distended and was pushing hard at the constraints of his shirt, threatening to burst buttons. Something had partly broken out of him. He could feel its slimy, knobbly shape beneath his shirt. He knew he should probably get himself to hospital, yet strangely felt no urgency to do so. The thing was out of him and was no longer causing him pain.

Footsteps.

Ian hastily did up his jacket buttons and folded his arms over his stomach. Mike opened the rear door of the van, changed out of his overalls and placed his kit in the back before climbing into the driver's seat.

"I'll take you home," he said after a quick glance at Ian. "You should be in bed."

"I'm fine," said Ian.

It was bizarre, considering the state he'd been in just a moment ago, but he really was fine now. Some evil giant pustule had burst, and its poison had leaked out of him. He actually felt stronger than ever, and full of energy.

"Let's get to work," he said. "Did you get the blood samples?"

Mike nodded and switched on the engine.

"What exactly happened last night?" Ian asked him. "At the end I mean."

"I headed for the bus-stop. You told me you were going to hail a cab. You seemed pretty confident, though not exactly steady on your feet."

They pulled off the square, back into traffic.

"I don't remember getting a cab," said Ian.

"You probably ended up walking home. You don't live far."

"Just the other side of Manor Park Square in fact," said Ian.

Mike glanced at him, but said nothing.

lan kept a discreet hand on his stomach during the walk from the car park back to the office. It felt like a lumpy, misshapen balloon down there. Luckily, Mike was walking ahead of him and didn't notice his pregnant-woman gait.

In the lab, Mike donned his headset and connected Mr Pritchard's iPhone to his computer, while on the far side of the room Ian began the process of extracting DNA from the blood samples. Each of the four yellow-top Vacutainers contained around half a mil of blood taken from different parts of the site. Ian went to work on the first one. He felt fresh and powerful as he moved between each piece of apparatus, vortexing, inverting and centrifuging the sample.

As he examined the supernatant to check its clarity, he felt something shift again in his stomach. There was no pain this time. A shirt button popped, followed by another one. His shirt was splitting open in the stomach area. He put down the tube he was holding and placed his hand on the naked surface of his abdomen. It felt a lot bigger and was thickly covered with slime. Beneath this was something hard and shell-like, covered in lumps and nodules. There was something else there, too. Around the area where his belly button used to be was an opening, a sort of soft, wet horizontal slit. He could feel sharp things in there. Teeth.

Mike tried hard not to be distracted by the images on his computer screen – Stephen Pritchard had been busy making a porno with his girlfriend last night. Just as the camera was moving in for a close-up of her hand stimulating her genitals, a distinct sound came through the headphones, and it wasn't a moan of arousal. 12:54. Mike stopped the film. He played the faint sound again several times, closing his eyes to hear it better and avoid looking at the motion of the girl's fingers. He began applying filters, equalizers and compressors to isolate and amplify the sound, cutting out the unwanted frequencies and boosting the one he wanted. The sound began to emerge as a scream, most probably male. He ran it through the spectrograph and a fuzzy-edged pattern appeared on the screen: wild and frenzied at the beginning before gradually tailing off; a visual representation of the scream. He switched on his personal recorder and prepared to make some audio notes of his observations.

lan's stomach was alive. It was on the move. A powerful surge shook his midriff, and the entire greasy, shell-covered lump that had taken up residence in his belly began to force itself outwards. Instinctively, he cupped it with a restraining hand, not wanting a part of his own body to eject itself. He glanced down and saw his hand cradling something about the size and approximate shape of an adult human head. Beneath its thick enveloping layer of black mucous, the head thing was greenish-black. The nodules that had covered it were now disappearing and the surface was becoming smooth and rounded. Rudimentary ears could be seen as folds of flesh on each side, and in the front he could make out the contours of a pair of closed eyes, a thin nose, and lips that slithered against each other like worms, opening to reveal sharp white teeth.

lan was strangely unaffected by this sight. Nor was he surprised to note that the face, if one disregarded its colour, vaguely resembled his own.

It wants to leave me, I can't stand in its way.

He withdrew his hand, and with a final muscular effort, the thing erupted from his stomach in a cascade of black slime. It landed with a bounce on the white linoleum, inducing within Ian a tug of discomfort, for the thing was still attached to him. An umbilical cord of the same greenish black hue extended from the now empty cavern of his stomach to the rear of the disembodied head. *It's living off me*, he thought calmly. *Or am I to live off it?* Ian felt hungry, but it wasn't his own lips that were licking themselves. Thin white foam was dribbling from the mouth of the other head as a black tongue flickered across the lips. The eyes had opened to reveal golden irises that shimmered ravenously. They were staring

at Mike, who was sitting quite oblivious at his work station on the far side of the lab, dictating observations into his recorder.

Some of the nodules at the base of the head, beneath the jaw and ears, had not disappeared like the rest, but evolved instead into crablike fingers that now flexed. Ian watched as his other head rose up on these flimsy new limbs and tottered awkwardly forwards. Ian followed behind, his mind, his will, his very identity shrinking before an all-pervading hunger. The dark, shiny head advanced on its unheeding prey. When it came within inches of its target, the fingerlike appendages flexed once more, then sprang upwards to clamp themselves around Mike's left leg.

Startled, Mike looked down in time to see the jaws of a hideous, disembodied head opening up to gorge on his thigh. Without thinking he brought his fist down hard on the thing's forehead, knocking it to the floor. In a fit of shock and revulsion, he slammed his heel down on its cheek. Something cracked inside it, and Ian, standing nearby, screamed with pain and fell to the ground. Mike didn't notice the cord connecting Ian to the monstrosity until it was too late, and he brought his heel down again and again on the revolting slimy thing as the life ebbed from his friend.

Later, following a hunch, Mike would analyse the recording he'd inadvertantly made of lan's final scream. The spectrogram's pattern would precisely match the one currently displayed on his computer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Alex Woolf is the author of over eighty books, mostly for children and young adults. His fiction includes *Chronosphere*, a time-warping science fiction trilogy, *Aldo Moon*, about a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter, *Ship of the Dead*, about a zombie attack on a cruise ship, and *Soul Shadows*, a horror story about flesh-eating shadows, which was shortlisted for the 2014 RED Book Award.

Twitter: @RealAlexWoolf
Website: alexwoolf.co.uk

The Outhouse Matthew J. Barbour

Betty Joe felt it begin to crown. The ache in her swollen belly was now immeasurable. She excused herself from the dining room table with as much courtesy as she could muster. No one noticed or if they did, they chose not to acknowledge her situation. Betty Joe appreciated that.

She walked in as dignified a manner as possible to the back door. She was still a lady and must act like one. Betty Joe told herself. However, as soon as she was out of the house, all manner of proper decorum was abandoned.

Betty Joe raced as best she was able across the backyard towards the outhouse. All the way she clutched her stomach and clenched for all she was worth. She threw open the door and hitched up her skirts in a single fluid motion. She was on the seat of the toilet before the door had even swung closed.

The sound of the fluid escaping her body and cascading into the cesspit below was not unlike that of rapids or a mighty waterfall. She tried to focus on these picturesque scenes. It was all she could do to ignore the pain which came in waves up and down her body.

This was not the first time for Betty Joe, but it was certainly the worst. Her hands gripped the sides of the commode. She went white-knuckled as she began to push. A series of screams escaped her lips as agony consumed every inch of her being.

A great plop resonated within the outhouse as something large and solid escaped Betty Joe's body. Her cries of torment turned to dull moans. The sounds of more fluid and a second smaller plop followed.

Then all was quiet. It was over. Betty Joe sat there shaking. The adrenaline was beginning to wear off. She was exhausted and sweating profusely. It felt like the whole ordeal had taken hours, but in reality it been a matter of seconds.

She told herself she wasn't going to look at it. Yet truth be told, Betty Joe always looked. She couldn't help it. For some strange reason, she felt compelled to see what she had done.

Still sitting on the toilet, Betty Joe parted her legs and looked down into the cesspit. It was dark. Yet she could still make out the rather large peanut shape of the infant floating atop the urine and other bodily fluids. Nearby, the rubbery mess of the placenta seemed to undulate like some sort of primordial ooze.

Yet, the baby –her baby- did not move. Usually, they moved. Often they screamed. At least some did, until they drowned in the septic fluids. This one didn't.

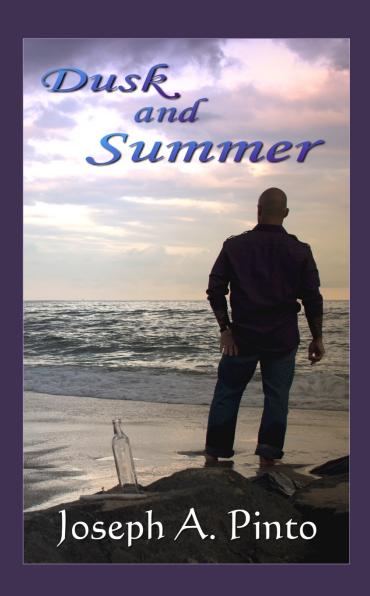
Perhaps, it had died during the ordeal? Maybe it had been dead for some time, rotting away inside her like a piece of garbage? That might explain why this one had been so hard on her.

Betty Joe sighed. It didn't matter. She found the pocketknife her mother had stashed in the outhouse for occasions such as these. Unfolding the blade, she noticed it was getting dull and specks of rust were beginning to mar its once shimmering finish.

She severed the umbilical cord which tied her to the unwanted thing. Then, Betty Joe stood on wobbly legs. Some of the embryonic fluid and blood had gotten on her skirts. She did her best to make herself presentable and returned to the dinner table.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Matthew J. Barbour is a speculative fiction author living with his wife and three children in Bernalillo, New Mexico. When he is not writing fiction, Mr. Barbour manages Jemez Historic Site and contributes to a number of regional newspapers and magazines.

Link: Matthew J Barbour on Goodreads



Dusk and SummerBy Joseph A. Pinto

Available on Amazon,
Barnes & Noble, Kobo,
and iTunes

Ms. Padfoot Settles a Debt Ken MacGregor

The whiskey slid down his throat. It wasn't Penderyn, but it wasn't half bad. Thomas had been hesitant to try American bourbon, but with some help from Nancy, the bartender he was quite happy with what was in his glass. It was called Angel's Envy and its orange zest aftertaste was strange, but pleasant. He was becoming convinced that living in the United States was going to be all right after all.

Nancy appeared to be forty-something, but she was quite striking. She could have been a fashion model in her youth. High cheekbones over an easy smile, tall and still thin, long hair and tasteful make-up. He watched her surreptitiously until she caught his eye. He signaled her with his nearly empty glass.

"Another, if you please, Nancy."

She nodded, finished washing the glass in her hand and reached to the top shelf for his whiskey. Someone sat in the stool next to him.

"I love your accent," said the woman with the flame-colored hair. "Are you Scottish?"

Thomas shook his head.

"Nope. Common mistake. Welsh."

A flush crept across her cheeks and she looked at the floor.

"Sorry."

With a finger, Thomas lifted her chin. He grinned at her. For a moment, his focus swam in her seagreen eyes. He blinked and brought back his grin. He glanced around and lowered his voice.

"I've secretly always wanted to be a Scotsman."

She offered a tight-lipped smile.

"You're humoring me."

"Oh, aye."

They laughed.

"I'm Allison Padfoot."

She offered her hand with mock seriousness and he took it with as grave a face as he could manage. It only lasted a second before he grinned and swallowed some of his whiskey.

"I'm Thomas Vaughan. That's a very interesting name you have there."

She smiled at him. Her teeth were chemically white. Her eyes widened in over-the-top innocence.

"What? 'Allison'?"

He laughed.

"No. 'Padfoot.' There's a legend by that name where I come from. It's another name for the Black Dog who takes sinners to Hell. I think, in other parts of the world, they're called 'hell hounds'."

"Those I've heard of. From Dungeons and Dragons, I think. I never knew that about my name. You learn something new every day, right?"

"Right."

"What brings you to the States, Thomas?"

He tipped back his drink. The ice rattled. He turned and looked into her eyes. Now, they looked almost blue, with gold flecks around the pupil. When he was a kid, he'd had a friend whose eyes changed color depending on what she was wearing. They were a pale blue, but reflected green or purple or whatever. But, they hadn't changed minute-to-minute. The effect was lovely and captivating. He smiled to himself. *Maybe it's magic*.

"I killed a man in Wales and I can never go home again. I'm in hiding here. Don't tell anyone."

Allison put a hand to her mouth. She gasped. But laugh lines crinkled the edges of eyes that shone with mischief. She put a hand on his knee.

"Goodness. Why'd you kill him?"

The bartender caught Thomas's eye, hefted the bottle and gestured with it. Thomas nodded. Nancy poured and took the ten. She looked at Allison.

"Can I get you anything?"

Allsion shook her head.

"I've already got what I want, thanks."

When Thomas tipped Nancy, she left. Thomas leaned close to Allison.

"Can you keep a secret?"

Allison nodded and put her head close to his. Her hair smelled sharp and rich, like freshly-turned soil. It was strange, but not unpleasant. He whispered.

"He was a sorcerer."

She leaned back and gave him a long, considering look. An eyebrow climbed incrementally toward her red hair.

"Really?"

"He was," Thomas said. He knocked back the rest of the golden liquid and dumped an ice cube into his mouth. He crushed it loudly with his teeth. Allison watched his jaw move, then met his eyes. Her eyes looked brown. He pushed the glass away and shook his head.

"What?" he asked.

Inching forward, she met his mouth with hers. The kiss was brief but intense.

"Walk me home," she said. He blinked, twice. Then stood, faltered, caught himself on the bar and pulled on his coat.

"I can do that."

She led him through a deserted park. Lampposts pooled light every fifty feet or so. Between two such spots, just past the playground, she stopped him and held up a palm.

"Stay," she said, peeling off her top. She took off her skirt and heels. Thomas smiled and undid his belt buckle. It took far more concentration than usual. When he looked up, she was naked. Her skin caught the light from a faraway streetlamp and almost glowed. He gazed at the places on her body where the shadows played hide and seek.

"That man you killed..."

Thomas's hands froze in the act of unbuttoning his pants. A distant streetlight shone on her teeth as she grinned. Her painfully white teeth seemed longer, sharper than before, especially the canines. She spoke again.

"He was a sorcerer."

"What? What did you say?"

She stared into his eyes. Coarse black fur sprouted all over her body. Her breasts collapsed, shrinking to large nipples; six more appeared below them in rows of two. Her abdomen collapsed inward, the skin above her hips thinning to a line. With an explosive snap, her knees broke and pushed backward. Pain flashed on her face and she shook her head. Opening her mouth, she howled as her nose and jaw stretched forward to form a snout. Her eyes glowed red.

Thomas ran, but his falling pants tripped him up after only a few steps. The Black Dog was on him immediately, clamping her jaws on his leg. Her teeth pierced his flesh. He tasted like justice. She sank down through the earth and pulled him with her. He screamed until dirt filled his mouth.

The grass rippled in concentric circles, then all was still.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ken MacGregor's work has appeared in dozens of anthologies, magazines and podcasts. Ken is a member of the Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers and an Affiliate member of HWA. He's done TV, radio, movies and sketch comedy. Recently, he co-wrote a novel and they are working on the sequel. Ken lives in Michigan.

Twitter: @kenmacgregor
Website: http://ken-macgregor.com



9 Sirens Joriah Wood

"The circus is in town," Pastor Elroy said. The three men surrounding him all nodded. "We're the final bastion of faith that can stand against these prophets of Satan," he continued to energetic affirmation. "Now let's get out there, and make a stand for the Lord!" The four men nearly cheered as they stepped out of the church together. Pastor Elroy locked the door behind him, and they piled into Marcus Reed's pickup truck. It backfired twice when he started it, but they were soon rumbling up the road to the outside of town, where the circus was set up.

Yzebel stood in the doorway of her tent, examining the revelers wandering through the midway. They were sheep, brought in so that the artists most skilled in separating them from their money could leave town a bit richer. A mostly-burned cigarette hung from her mouth, and she took one last puff before tossing it to the ground and stamping it out. McRite hated it when clients saw them smoking. Yzebel figured she needed to head into the tent, anyway.

She adjusted her robe and made her way to the track behind the tents and trailers where the performers slept. Because she was an 'exhibit' she could have had a trailer, but she preferred the tent. Her mother had grown up in a tent, so Yzebel was also raised in one. She was used to a home with a dirt floor. Her mother said it kept them closer to the earth, closer to their ancestors, the strong women who came before them.

Yzebel slipped into the back entrance of the sideshow tent. She was one of the first performers to arrive, and she found her way to the stall where she would ply her trade.

Her couch was set as she preferred, angled just slightly back with the raised portion for her to rest her head. This would keep her from getting too tired while she lay on her stomach for the next two hours. She slipped an old and worn pocket-sized book from the pocket of her robe, took a deep breath, and let the robe slip from her shoulders. The candlelight flickered across her painted arms, shoulders, and back.

Yzebel opened the book to a page that showed an illustration of the same tattoo she had on her back, though the color on the page was faded and the edges were worn from use. She set the book on the tiny pedestal built just to hold it, then she lowered herself to the couch. Her exposed breasts pressed into the sofa, but she wanted to allow maximum visibility of the tattoos stretched across her back, buttocks and legs, while still being able to claim some attempt at modesty.

Settled in, Yzebel began warming up. She flexed the muscles in her shoulders and back, and the tattoos there sprung to life. Her mother had begun preparing her at an early age, teaching her the exercises that would allow her to make the illustrations come to life. Then, when she was old enough, she began to regularly feel the pain of the tattoo needle.

Yzebel's mother carefully painted her body in the precise way she herself was painted, in the same way the previous seven women before her had been tattooed. It was the bond of the tattoos, the trade, and the shared pain that bound them together.

Anette, the frog girl, nodded as she walked past Yzebel to her own stall. Gerald the Gator Boy gave Yzebel a little salute as he passed as well, getting into his position in the 10-in-1. Yzebel hoped the crowd would be friendly tonight.

Pastor Elroy and his crew split up once they arrived, to better proselytize the sinners at the circus and sideshow. Elroy found it difficult to be around these miscreants, and as such, he'd brought a full flask to numb himself to the slings and arrows that the serpent was sure to throw his way. Unfortunately, the flask was nearly empty, but the sin remained.

He staggered toward the sideshow. "Truly perverse," he said, his words slurring as spittle fell from his mouth. "Abominations unto the Lord," he said as he tried to push his way through the flap of the long tent, but the Talker put his hooked-cane across the pastor's chest.

"Now now, friend," he said, giving the preacher a toothy grin. "Nobody gets in for free."

"But I'm here to save their souls," Elroy said.

"Well, letting yourself in for free would be just like stealing, wouldn't it?" The Talker's grin never faltered. "You'd hate to have your good message tainted by having those nearby witness your sin, wouldn't you?"

Elroy glanced around. Noticing eyes on him, he begrudgingly paid the fee to get in. With the same cane that stopped him in his tracks moments ago, the Talker hooked the flap of the tent and pulled it aside.

"Enjoy," he said, motioning the drunken pastor through.

Yzebel sang softly with her head turned to watch the crowd. She liked to look at their faces as they watched her, her well-practiced muscles moving and twitching in a routine that caused the painted figures to dance across her body as they acted out the story she narrated with song.

A mother approached with her young son, but immediately covered the boy's eyes at the sight of Yzebel's mostly-exposed body. She always wondered about these people; what did they think they would find underneath the flap of the sideshow tent? Still, they had paid their money, which was the most important part. No refunds were ever given.

An older man staggered over to her. He stared, dumbfounded, and with a practiced eye she tried to determine what he was feeling. She watched his eyes focus on her lips as she sang, then they moved to the tattoos, slowing as his eyes passed her breasts. She couldn't tell if his gaze was filled with lust or anger. It seemed to slip between the two as he took in her body.

"Movin' picture show," he mumbled, and she smiled through the song. *Just keep moving*, she thought.

He glanced back at the book on the pedestal.

"Old book," he mumbled again as he leaned close, trying to read the words and inspect the faded picture. "The Illustrated Body: Stories from the Female Form," he read out loud, just as Yzebel was finishing her song.

"It is old," she said, her voice soothing, like soft chimes ringing quietly in the wind. "It's been in my family for generations."

With a stupid, dazed look in his eye brought on by too much drink, he reached toward her back. "The pictures, they're so lifelike," he said.

In one fluid motion, Yzebel rolled back off the couch, wrapping herself in the robe as she stood up.

"This isn't a strong show," she said to the drunken preacher. "No touching allowed."

That proved to be the match lit to Elroy's powder-keg temper.

"You harlot!" Pastor Elroy screamed, inviting a startled and cross look from the woman who had whisked her son away a minute earlier. Yzebel saw Gerald lean out from his stall.

"Everything alright down there, Yzebel?" Gerald asked. Pastor Elroy looked at the gator boy and gasped.

"Harlots and abominations!" Pastor Elroy shouted, spit flying from his mouth. "All of you, damned to Hell! Your souls will burn in the black flames with the devil for eternity." He lunged toward Yzebel, trying to get his pudgy fingers around her arm, but she stepped back quickly and he tripped on the rope spanning the front of her stall.

Gerald rushed over as the inebriated man tried to untangle himself from the rope, something that was proving to be somewhat beyond him.

"Sir, you need to leave right now," Gerald growled. He grabbed Elroy and lifted him easily, untangling his feet from the rope and shoving him toward the exit.

The drunken pastor turned, brimstone in his eyes. He lunged one more time, past Gerald, and right toward Yzebel's book.

She shrieked as his hands closed around it. Gerald grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Put that down," the Gator Boy yelled, but Elroy knew right where it was going. With a twist and a flick of his wrist, he sent the book toward the candles.

"Book 'o the damned, burning in the fire where it belongs," Elroy shouted, shooting a murderous glare at Gerald and Yzebel as she launched herself past him, toward the book.

The old pages lit instantly. Shrieking, nearly hysterical, Yzebel grabbed the flaming book and knelt, beating it against the dusty ground. She ignored the pain in her blistering hands, her focus solely on saving the pages.

It was no use. By the time the flames were put out, the cover and a good portion of the pages burned to less than half their original size. Ashes and dust mixed with Yzebel's tears. Everything about her life was in this book; the history of her family, the secret of the story, precise measurements of where each character should be positioned and which muscles needed to be moved to animate the story.

When she looked up, Elroy had already staggered out. The Talker stuck his head in.

"What's going on in here?" He spotted Gerald out of his booth, and Yzebel crouched over the remains of her book. He opened his mouth to speak, but before any words could come out the night was pierced by a scream from the big-top. He turned and looked out of the tent, then glanced back in to address the sideshow.

"There's nobody out here right now anyway, they're all in for the main show. Take a break, pull yourselves together," he glanced back again as raucous laughter erupted from the main tent. "I need to see what's going on in there."

Yzebel sat alone in her small tent, cradling the remains of the book in her hands. All she felt was hatred. Hatred for the blundering idiot who would judge her so quickly, then destroy something so precious to her without even batting an eye.

"I wish he were dead," she said aloud, spitting the words into the dirt. She knew she would be expected back at the sideshow tent shortly, as the big-top would be emptying soon, but she didn't want to move. It felt like a part of her heart had burned away with the pages of the book.

A voice whispered in her ear, "How much do you hate him?" Startled, she whipped her head around to see who had spoken, but she saw no one.

At first.

"Who's there?" Yzebel asked, and that's when she saw...it. Not a person, but something else. A shadow, cast on the wall of the tent, no more than a silhouette. "Are you outside?" Yzebel queried, but the voice only chuckled.

"Does it matter where I am, if I can give you the power for vengeance?"

Yzebel thought of her mother, and her grandmother. Both gone now. Both of them trusting her with the welfare of the book, to someday pass down to a daughter that she would have. It had always been their way.

Their way that had been destroyed by a stupid, self-righteous fat man with a drinking problem.

"What's the cost, then?"

The silhouette bent low, getting close to her shadow.

"I just want a taste of your soul," the voice said as the silhouette brushed against her shadow.

Above her tent, a crow cawed into the night.

Yzebel stood alone in the dark, a heavy butcher's cleaver stuck in the dirt between her feet. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and pictured the man.

Yzebel screamed, a soul-piercing wail that cut through the walls of the tent and echoed across the fairgrounds.

The scream became an unnatural chorus, her voice mingling with the voices of her ancestors, twisting in the night air to become a song, a lure that could only be heard by one man.

A minute later, the flap to her tent lifted. There stood Pastor Elroy, his face twisted in terror.

"You...you witch," he said hoarsely, barely able to form words. "How are you compelling me like this?"

Yzebel remained expressionless. The object of her rage stood before her, and she would have her revenge.

Elroy's eyes grew wide when they recognized the shiny knife sticking out of the dirt. "Please, no, don't kill me," he begged, and Yzebel watched with satisfaction as a dark stain spread slowly across the crotch of his pants.

"We do not intend to kill you," she said, her voice echoing with her eight ancestors, all the women in her family who had worn the tattoos.

"Then why did you make me come here?" Elroy asked through gritted teeth, fruitlessly struggling for control of his body.

Yzebel's only answer was to open her mouth and release another scream, a scream that all could hear but only one would understand.

"No..." Elroy said as he knelt down. "No," he cried as his hands gripped the wooden handle of the butcher's cleaver. "Why are you making me do this?" Pastor Elroy pleaded as he stood, holding the knife out at arm's length.

"You took something precious from us," Yzebel's choral voice said. "Now we will simply take something from you."

Back at the pickup truck, Pastor Elroy's parishioners waited for him. It was past time to leave, and it wasn't like him to be late.

Finally, he staggered out of the exit and hobbled to the truck, his gait stiff.

"You okay, Pastor?" Marcus Reed asked, concerned at the unsteadiness with which Elroy was walking.

Elroy made a noise, a sort of whimper, and Marcus leaned in closer.

"Sorry, brother Elroy, I couldn't hear you?"

Elroy placed his left hand on the step-side of the old truck.

"What's wrong?" Marcus started to ask, but Elroy turned to face the three men. Tears streamed down his cheeks, and the look of terror in his eyes startled all three of them. He raised his right arm, and the hungry cleaver reflected the colorful circus lights behind them. They stood frozen with fear as, with a scream and a whack, Pastor Elroy severed his left hand just above the wrist.

He spun, blood from the arterial cut arcing across the back of the truck and toward the stunned men.

"Help me," he struggled to say, but the only sound the parishioners heard was a scream, the cry of nine anguished women wailing into the night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joriah Wood is a pseudonym for Christopher Smith. He started writing short stories as a way to pass his lunch hour at work, not realizing how deep the roots of this pastime would grow. He experiments with many different genres and styles, even penning the occasional comic book script. He lives in Michigan with his wife and three children.

Twitter: <a>@Reckoner67

Blog (contributor): www.ProseBeforeHoHos.com

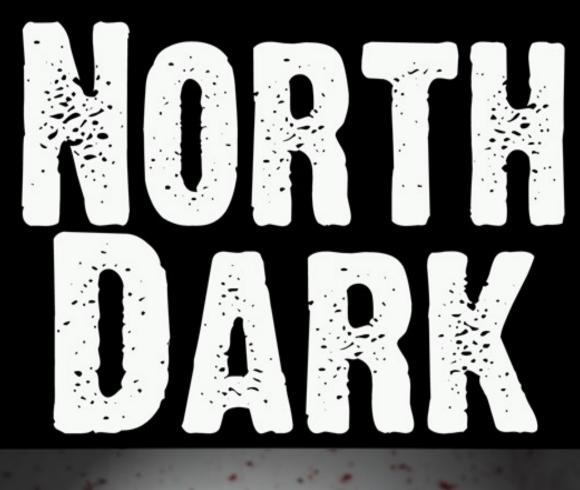


Sirens Call Publications

PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace & Smashwords





LAME KARESKA

Red Pen Lee A. Forman

As the bandages came off it became evident that something went wrong—terribly wrong. Everything appeared to be discolored, the walls a lime-green, the sheets a dirty yellow, the ceiling a moldy black. It all had a shade of ugliness that left a bad taste in Carl's mouth.

Breath came in short sips, trying to catch up with an accelerated heartbeat. The soft gray tissue of his brain thumped against the inside of his skull, and the bones in his hands rattled like a box of matches. *The surgery was supposed to fix my sight, not ruin it.*

"Something isn't right."

But it was more than that. As his blurred vision cleared he noticed the finer details of his surroundings. Cracks ran along the tile floor, hospital equipment beeped infrequently like a child's toy with dying batteries, and the halogen bulbs above his head flickered inconsistently.

"What?" The doctor asked raising his eyebrows.

"The walls are green, the sheets are yellow, nothing looks right. Did something go wrong with the surgery?"

"The walls are green and those sheets haven't been washed in years."

Carl threw the blanket from the bed, shrinking away in disgust. That's when the smell hit him. It wasn't that clean yet discomforting clinical scent, but the stench of piss, mold, and decay. "What the hell kind of hospital is this?"

The doctor laughed heartily, reaching into the pocket of his white coat and producing a syringe. Before Carl could react the needle pierced his arm, injecting whatever drug it contained into his bloodstream.

"Just relax," the doctor said, patting him on the shoulder. "Everything's fine."

His body weakened and time slowed to a crawl. The spinning, screeching blade of the bone saw sounded as distant as the futile screams he managed to release. They echoed together in the defunct hospital room, creating a symphony of death—sung only in secret places—in the pitch black night.

As he fell onto the bed he caught a glance at a chart on the wall. It featured detailed drawings of human organs, each with a dollar amount written in red pen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lee Forman has been a horror fan for decades. He spends most his time writing short fiction and watching old movies. He's currently writing an online serialized novel titled "Silence in the Willow Field." In 2015 he was a competitor in David Wellington's Fear Project. His work has also been published in Sanitarium, Morpheus Tales, The Horror Zine, and Blood Moon Rising.

Twitter: <u>@leeandrewforman</u>

Blog: www.leeandrewforman.wordpress.com

Vector 7 Michael Thomas-Knight

Chad Langerman lingered in the chat-room for almost forty minutes before he found someone interesting to chat with. He didn't know why he visited these hardcore S&M sites; he only knew that it excited him in some bizarre way. He found it interesting to hear some of the stories the freaks on these sites relayed. Occasionally, he made up some of his own weird stories of bondage, just to keep the freaks talking to him. He imagined that most of the stories were made up also, but he didn't mind. It was all to indulge in some sexual fantasy anyway, who cared if it was made-up. Besides, it's the notion that it could be true that made it arousing.

The guy he started chatting with about ten minutes ago had some really freaky tales to tell. Chad had

entered the room under the screen name, X-man. This guy had entered under the screen name, Punisher. Chad thought to himself that there was a comic book related, common thread in their name choices - though he would never bring it up in the chat. After ten minutes of chatting between the lines of dozens of other conversations going on, Punisher suggested they move to a private chat. Chad accepted his invitation, and then hoped the guy didn't think he wanted to meet in person at a later date. He clicked on Private Chat, and then scrolled the menu bar down to the screen name: Punisher. He clicked on the name and a new page came up. The cursor on his computer monitor blinked as he waited for Punisher to enter the one-on-one room.

punishr: <are you there?> xman: <yeah, i'm here>

punishr: <what were we talking about>

xman: <you were telling me how you approach perfect strangers on the street and turn them into

your sex-slaves >

punishr: <oh yeah, its quite easy IMO. i got this girl earlier today>

xman: <how do you know if a woman is into it>

punishr: <i start off with a regular pick up line. if they just ignore me, it

means they're bored with regular men and their sex-life>

xman: < :0>

punishr:<from there i'll take a big risk, i'll just slap them real hard on the ass, like when we're in an elevator or something>

xman:<OMG, you just slap them? >

punishr:<yeah, really hard>

xman: <don't they scream and make a fuss?>

punishr: <some of them yell and scream and curse. the ones that don't do anything and just stare

straight forward like nothing happened - those are the ones that are willing>

xman: <unbelievable :o >

punishr: <i got this woman today using that very method, we've been having a lot of fun so far. she's

still here>

xman: <is she hot or what?>

punishr: <would you like to see a picture?>

xman: <really? is she into that?>

punishr: <oh yeah, no problem - hold on a second>

punishr: <ok, i'm sending the picture now>

A box came up on Chad's screen reading, You have 1 message. sender: punishr.

Chad clicked on the message box and then clicked the little icon that read; whoreslave.jpeg. The picture opened up in an image preview box. It was fuzzy because there was not much light in the room but Chad could make out the general details. A naked woman was tied to a chair with thick rope. The rope was very tight, wound around her in several places and pressing into her skin. She wore, a *Dorothy* mask, like from the 'Wizard of Oz,' over her face. A man stood behind the chair, crouched down a bit and off to the left. His left hand reached around from behind cupping her left breast, his fingers pinching her nipple really hard. A purple-nurple is what Chad and his friends from high school used to call it. The guy wore one of those white masks from the movie 'Scream'. Both masks were the cheap, \$1.99, plastic masks with the rubber string that goes around the back of your head. It was a strange looking picture. *No doubt,* Chad thought to himself, the guy had downloaded it from some website and was now passing it off as part of this ongoing

xman: <that's funny :)>

punishr: <funny? it's not supposed to be funny>

xman: <no, it's funny because that woman looks like my girlfriend>

punishr: <you can't see her face, why do you think she looks like your girlfriend?>

xman: <same body type, medium sized breasts, thick legs, phat ass> punishr: <that's the way i like 'em, phat ass, ya' know. ha ha ;) >

xman: <yeah, i do know!>

punishr: <does your girlfriend like rough sex?>

xman: <no, she's so damn straight laced. missionary position only and never on Sunday>

punishr: <OMFG, you poor under-stimulated kid>

xman: <that's probably why i wind up on these extreme chat-rooms, i live vicariously thru others>

punishr: <i guess a 3some is out of the question>

xman: <forget about it>

punishr: <do you watch any S&M videos?>

xman: <i have sometimes but i don't really like 'em>

punishr: <you don't?>

xman: <nah, they always try to get every kind of fetish onto every movie, people sucking on each others toes, pissin' on each other, everything. i'm not into all that shit. they never seem to do what i want them to do>

punishr: <i know what you mean, ever watch a snuff movie? >

xman: <uh, no >

punishr: <not missing much, the girl that supposedly gets killed always goes on to star in 1,000 more porn movies. they never seem to do what i want them to do, either>

xman: <uh, yeah. whatever >

punishr: <you like to see blood? >
xman: < no, not in particular>

punishr: < yeah, sure. i'm going to make this story end just the way u like it>

xman: < how so?>

punishr: < i'm going to finish off this story. this may take me a few moments. i'll be right back>

xman: <no, wait. what are you talking about?>

punishr: < don't worry, I'm going to do just what you always wanted them to do. i'll send you a

picture. standby> xman: < no, wait> xman: <hello? >

Chad started to think that the whole conversation took a left turn into total weirdsville. The guy started putting words in his mouth and what in God's name was he talking about before he went to standby. The guy probably had to go to the bathroom or something, or he's whacking himself off - thinking about me, Chad thought to himself. Chad decided he was going to wait for the guy to come back and tell him, goodbye. He would just tell this freak he had to go and then log off.

Chad watched the screen, waiting for the guy to come back. The quiet of his bedroom loomed. Then Chad heard a shrill scream. It came from outside his apartment, perhaps down the hallway or something. He wanted to get up but didn't hear anything more. It was probably Mrs. Jorge, downstairs, found another dead mouse in her apartment. Chad started to get impatient; this was taking way too long, and debated about just logging off and forgetting about this freak. However, he did have some web etiquette and didn't want to be blasted next time he came into the chat room or even worse, banned from the room completely. He decided to wait a few moments more.

xman: <hello?>

Chad heard a soft knock at his door. "Jeez." he said aloud. He debated a moment then got up to see who it could possibly be. As he walked out of his bedroom, through the living room and towards the front

door, he noticed the time. 1:30 in the morning, why the hell is someone knocking at my door at this time of night?

"Who is it?" he shouted, as he reached the door.

No one answered. He looked through the peephole and saw his neighbor, Old Lady McIntyre, from 4b. He opened the door.

"Mrs. McIntyre, is there something wrong?"

"Yes," she whispered.

She took two steps into the apartment.

"I'm sorry to bother you Chad but..." She paused and rubbed her hands over each other in nervous circles.

"Don't think I'm an old fool, 'cause I know what I heard," she said.

She stopped again and darted her eyes over her shoulder towards the hallway.

"What? What is it?" Chad asked patiently.

"I heard a scream," McIntyre said.

"Scream? Oh yeah. I heard it too," Chad answered as he realized what she was all bothered about.

He explained: "It was probably Mrs. Jorge, ya' know she screams every time she sees a mouse. You think after all these years living in this apartment, she'd be used to it by now..."

Old Lady McIntyre interrupted his sentence.

"That's what I had thought at first, but then I heard some other noises, some banging around and thumps and bumps, like a struggle or something. And it sounded like it was coming from the apartment next door."

"The vacant apartment?" Chad asked.

He thought briefly to himself that it must be tough getting old and living alone. The old woman looked so fragile and frightened.

"Yes", she said, still whispering, "So I put on my robe and went out into the hallway to investigate. The door to the apartment, the vacant apartment, 4c, was opened a crack and I heard someone breathing heavily, like someone who had just been in a struggle."

Chad felt obligated so he asked, "Do you want me to come out and take a look?"

"Oh, would you honey, I'm sorry to bother you but I won't be able to sleep a wink if this is not resolved."

"OK, come on."

Chad walked out into the hallway and she followed timidly behind him. As they got close to the door he saw that, in fact, the door was opened a crack. It should have been locked. He slowed down several steps before the door, apprehensive about the situation.

"Ya' see..." Mrs. McIntyre began to say. Chad turned and shushed her.

"Shhhh."

He stood at the door, Ol' Lady McIntyre behind him, her hands on his back and leaning to his left side so she could see the door. Chad moved his right hand forward, planted it squarely on the door surface, and then began to push it opened. A long whining squeal was produced as it swung on its hinges. When it was fully open, Chad saw some movement in the thick darkness. He barely had time to register what was going on when he and Old Lady McIntyre were struck head-on by a man running full force at them. They both fell hard against the adjacent wall and onto the floor. Chad was not hurt but confused about the sight he had witnessed. He heard the guy continue to run down the stairs in leaps and bounds and in the distance; he heard the apartment main doors slam shut as the culprit exited the building. The guy was wearing a 'Scream' mask and running with a laptop computer clutched in his left hand like a football. Chad was dumbstruck by the fact that, sometime during the night, his fantasy, cyber-world and real life had collided, scrambled, and fused together. He stood up, absently brushing himself off with his hands. Disbelief raced through his mind as he tried to get his bearings.

"Mrs. McIntyre, are you alright?" He finally asked.

She was still sprawled out on the floor but she replied, "Yes, I think so?"

Chad helped her to her feet.

"OK, you stay right here, I have to go in and check it out."

She didn't reply.

Chad walked into the apartment going straight through the living room toward the back bedroom. He walked slowly as disjointed events of the night passed through his mind at high speed. (We've been having a lot of fun so far, she's still here... "I heard a scream,"... ever watch a snuff movie? I'm sorry to bother you... you like to see blood? 'The vacant apartment?'...make this story end just the way u like it ...)

Chad saw into the next room through the doorway. There was a table, the only piece of furniture to see in the apartment. He knew here would be another piece of furniture, a chair. Draped along the surface of the table was a plastic wire, its little plastic socket not plugged into anything. Chad recognized the plug as one used for an Internet connection. Another few steps and he saw a woman's feet and legs come into view bound to chair legs with thick rope. He continued into the room. The woman's throat was slashed, an open, gaping, gash - nearly cutting her neck in two. She wore a Dorothy mask. He walked up to the woman and stood in front of her dead naked body. He had to lift the mask to see her face because he still didn't believe it was possible. With the slightest prodding the mask sprung off the woman's face and fell to the floor. Chad fell to the floor following the mask as all the energy drained from his muscles. He fell at the feet of his dead girlfriend.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Michael Thomas-Knight haunts the local coffee shops of Long Island, NY, somewhere between a famous house in Amityville and Joel Rifkin's lovely home. Michael's style ranges from classic ghost stories with violent endings to atmospheric Eldritch tales steeped in mysticism, cynicism, and irony. He has over 50 horror short stories published in magazines, web-zines, and print anthologies.

Blog: http://parlorofhorror.wordpress.com **Amazon author page:** Michael Thomas Knight

The Unknown Otis Moore

I never even wanted to be out on this trip. A sixth sense from deep inside told me that everything about this was just wrong. The guy's though, they always had ways to persuade me into doing things that I didn't want. I should have just stayed home.

The screams of my friends being torn to pieces still haunts me to this day. None of us were even remotely prepared for what evil devoured our very existence. The pain we felt, the blood we saw, the lives we lost left me haunted with unforgettable insanity. My life will never again be the same.

The trip started with ghost stories and tales of haunted areas we had all been to and thought we would never go to again. Jake told of Waverly Hills, Chris spoke of Yahoo Falls and I told my story of Souls Chapel. Most people knew of Waverly Hills as an old sanatorium for tuberculosis. Ghosts still haunted the place and for a fee, you could spend the night. It was a seasonal thing and could have been a go for us but we were just out of season.

Yahoo Falls was the sight of a terrible Indian massacre and none of us really knew too much on how to get there. That was our number one destination but the planning would have set us back at least another week and our plan said tonight was the night to go. Stories of Satan and sacrifice warped the minds of all young people in Central Kentucky when it came to the burnt church of Souls Chapel. The fact that Satan was involved was enough to make me want to stay away. But, like I said before, the persuasion of the guys was just too much.

Amazingly enough, the most haunted and feared place I know of is only five minutes from downtown Somerset. Somerset, Kentucky was the least likely of all places to contain something as scary as Souls Chapel. Somerset was where I called home.

The short drive down the narrow road lead us to the remains of the once thriving Methodist church. The church congregation fell apart years ago and a satanic cult took up residence there. Though the building has been long since burnt to the ground, the haunted sight of the desecrated graves was enough to make you want to be somewhere else. The thrill of what might happen made you want to stay.

Before setting up our camp on the southern edge of the cemetery, we thought it would be cool to just look around for a while. The idea of taking plenty of photos crossed our minds but for some reason, none of our cameras worked for more than just a couple of pictures; even new batteries drained as quick as they were installed.

Soon after our arrival, the height of the surrounding trees blocked out the afternoon sun and darkness fell on the chapel much sooner than we expected. By the light of a small fire, we set up camp in hopes of good weather to get us through the night. In Kentucky, you can never rely on the weatherman for accuracy.

With our tents staked and our fire burning, we eased into a circle and quietly spoke of the possibilities of the area. Our conversation came to an immediate end with the shrieking howl of a mysterious unknown hidden within the darkness just outside of our sight. Fear enveloped our minds and the world beyond, just a few miles away, became a journey too far to reach. None of us dared to make a sound.

In the blink of an eye, Chris was yanked backward and disappeared from the fire light. His screams of pain and terror brought Jeff and I to our feet in a rush to the car. Right on my heels, Jeff screamed in a shared terror as his presence faded behind me. Someone, something grabbed him and pulled him to the ground. Falling forward onto my heels, Jeff inadvertently tripped me and I fell to the ground looking behind me for just an instant. What I saw, I could never explain.

Jeff was on his knees, arms spread wide with absolutely nothing visible holding him there. The shrieks of an unknown squealed around us causing an ache deep inside my ears. The shrieks abruptly stopped and Jeff, right in front of my eyes, was ripped apart by the unknown villain. Blood poured from his torso, soaking the ground. I crawled backward as quickly as I could until finally, I made it to the car.

I struggled with pulling the keys from my pocket. Excitedly, I was in the car turning the ignition with fumbling fingers. Turning and turning in hopes of something until realizing the battery was dead. Nothing but a repetitive click from the starter came from under the hood. I was trapped.

Crying out loud and screaming back at the unknown just outside my door, I submitted to my fears and began to pray. As loud as I could, I begged God to step in and protect me. The shrieking from outside grew louder and louder. I screamed as loud as I could to answer every shriek with a verse from God's Holy Bible. Every verse I could remember from my years in Sunday school was the only weapon I felt useful.

A final shout from my weakening breath, "Get thee behind me Satan!" Everything stopped. The shrieking of the unknown quieted as though a switch had been turned off. The tremors from under the car were gone. My breathing slowed; it was over. It was all over.

The shimmer of daylight flickered through the dried leaves of the surrounding trees telling me that I had made it through the night. I sat staring through tear filled eyes at the last place I had seen my friend's only hours before. The screams of my two friends still echoed in my head as I wiped the fear filled tears from my eyes.

Slowly, I reached for the key, still dangling in the ignition and turned it in hopes of the welcoming roar of an engine. My hopes became a reality and a sigh of relief swept through my soul. I backed out of the cemetery and drove away.

The police said there were no signs of a struggle at the chapel and insisted that I had just been dreaming. The problem with that was that neither Jeff nor Chris had been seen by anyone since. Having no family to call their own, no one but me ever missed them. To this minute, the screams of my friends haunt my days. To this day, the shriek of the unknown terrorizes my nights. I now know the true meaning of fear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Otis Moore was born in Louisville, Kentucky on November 7, 1979. He was raised In Somerset, Kentucky where he now lives with his wife Carol Moore and their blended family of nine children. With such a large family, inspiration for the next book or story is never too far away.

Web Page: www.otismoorejr.simplesite.com
Facebook: Otis Moore Jr

Light Greg McWhorter

I sit here all alone, perspiring and whimpering on the cold linoleum floor. I sit with my knees pulled up to my chest and my hands wrapped around my drawn up legs. The cold is sapping my strength. I shiver. I sob. I hurt. I'm in pain. My brain is on fire. It literally feels as if there is a conflagration within my skull that knows no cessation.

I shot up again. I'm a junkie. The chemicals in my veins keep the apparitions at bay, but the cost is my slowly ebbing mental state. I am becoming animal-like. How long have I been here? At least I no longer see the dead. The doctors think that the cuts on my arms are ones that I made, but they are actually from them —the apparitions. The ghosts, or whatever the hell they are, are trying to cut me up. They crave my flesh, but they seem intent on making me suffer. They are intent on my downfall. They are intent on my eventual destruction. They will see me dead.

I'm fighting them off with chemicals, but my brain can't take much more. I must do something. Maybe I can cut the symptoms out. Maybe I can dispel the demons within me. At least I think they emanate from me. Something inside of me is dead. I rock back and forth. There is only one light in this small room and it is directly over my head. A light bulb with no covering. Stark and bleak.

I keep rocking, slowly at first and then with increasing energy until I manage to stand up. I shamble over to a small stand sitting on a nearby table. All of my knives are gone. The doctors were efficient and left me with nothing. I have no way to cut out the demons that howl in my skull. That must be where the apparitions come from. Only the drugs keep them entombed within me. I need to let them out, but in a way that releases me from them.

I turn and see a nearby window. Of course it has metal bars over the outside of it to prevent my falling out. The glass is on the inside though. I pick up the small stand and shuffle over to the window. I stand looking at my reflection in the glass for only a second. I see that the demon is me. That's all I need to know. I pick up the stand and smash the glass before anyone can stop me. I know they watch me from behind their safe distance and video cameras.

As the glass shards fall to the floor, I toss aside the stand and quickly thrust my head through the new opening. The bars outside prevent me from getting my whole body outside, but there is just enough space for my head between the bars. I let my head slide down between the bars quickly and try to decapitate myself on the broken glass still upright in the sill. I don't get my head off, but my throat is cut at the jugular and I can feel life quickly flowing from me. I am free from the dead at last. I am free...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Greg McWhorter is a teacher and pop-culture historian in Southern California. Since the 1980s, he has worked and written for newspapers, radio, television, and film and has owned three punk rock record companies. He has been a guest speaker at several universities and the San Diego Comic-Con. He is a member of the Horror Writer's Association.

Blog: http://gregmcwhorter.blogspot.com/



Gasping in terror, Randall McAdams awoke to the sound of screams.

Bolting upright in bed, the slim young man's senses began searching for meaning. The last decibel of the steamship's sonorous horn fled across the black sky outside his cabin. A pair of portholes stared into the room from either side of the narrow door, the light coming from the deck illuminating the furniture haphazardly. McAdams ran a hand over his pale, sweaty brow and through his black hair. Shaking, he fumbled for a nearby light, stood, and began to dress.

Moments later, McAdams was hurrying along the deck of the *Inevitable*, a small luxury liner making its way from Boston to Britain. *If only they didn't serve dinner at half past eight*, he complained internally. *I wouldn't have time to fall asleep*. He stopped as he came into view of the dining room, seeing several other passengers leaving. He cursed inwardly until he saw the slender form of Mrs. Eliza Felder move away from the rest. She turned her back to the wind, lit a cigarette, and then leaned against the ship's railing to stare out over the waves. Thin plumes of smoke curled past the young woman's shoulders, wrapping briefly around the wide brim of her hat before moving back toward the ship's stern.

McAdams retrieved a silver cigarette case from his vest pocket and paced forward slowly, allowing the other passengers time to move on before approaching Eliza. He cleared his throat gently to announce his presence and she turned and smiled. His practiced hands removed a cigarette from the case and returned it to his pocket, his eyes never leaving her.

"May I trouble you for a light?"

"It's no trouble at all." Eliza produced a book of matches from her handbag and lit one. McAdams, cigarette in mouth, leaned in close to take advantage of the tiny, waving flame.

"Thank you." He took a spot close to her on the railing, looking over the relatively calm sea. Without a moon, the starlight did little to brighten the waves.

"You're late for dinner again," commented Eliza playfully. "It's almost as if you intend to be. Or are you not getting enough sleep?"

McAdams gave her a roguish look. "My sleeping habits have been... upended since this journey began, certainly. I find I'm falling asleep just after dark and then the damned ship's horn wakes me just before dinner." He took a long drag on his cigarette, looking away from her and back out to sea. "When I hear it in my sleep it seems... odd. Frightful, somehow."

"How so?"

He stumbled for the words. "It's as if it's... mixed up with a nightmare I can't recall. I always wake up with the feeling that it's... human voices. Wordless screams of terror and pain."

Eliza pulled closer to him as a sliver of McAdams' obvious fear sank into her. "I'm... I'm sure it's just a nightmare. It's only sounded like a ship's horn to me." She shook her head and forced a smile. "Perhaps it's a sign of a guilty conscience."

"I've done nothing to form regrets over," he murmured. She pressed against him even more tightly for a moment.

The dining room door opened and the two stepped apart and turned round. Captain Hobbs appeared, a silhouette against the dining room's bright lights. "Ah, Mr. McAdams. I'm glad you could make it."

A slight crinkling of his eyebrows was the only sign of McAdams' annoyance at the interruption, but this was quickly covered by a grin. "Afraid I'd fallen into the sea, like old Mr. Norwell? If that's what happened to him."

"What else could it be? He's not aboard." The captain shook his head, his bushy black beard rustling against his jacket. "I would say it was regrettable, but Norwell was not well-liked, and not without reason.

But," he clapped his hands together, "I thought to have a card game tonight. Would either of you care to join me?"

Eliza shook her head. "Oh, I've no money to lose," she joked.

"Might Mr. Felder care to play a hand or two?"

The young woman's features hardened. "Mr. Felder is fatigued and has already retired for the evening."

Hobbs nodded, "I see. Mr. McAdams?"

"I believe I will, thank you." He turned to Eliza. "If you'll excuse me?"

"Of course. We can continue our conversation at a later time. I think I will stroll around the decks for a while." She nodded to them both and began walking astern, looking out over the ocean again.

McAdams watched her for a moment then turned to see Hobbs doing the same, a wry smile on the captain's face.

"You two seem to have quite the rapport," Hobbs commented as McAdams moved past him.

The younger man scowled. "I don't see how. We just met during the voyage."

"I see." Hobbs turned and followed McAdams back into the dining room. "A pity such a vibrant young woman is married to such a... seasoned man as Mr. Feldman."

"You should be more worried she doesn't fall overboard like Norwell," snapped McAdams. "I could swear his isn't the only face I haven't seen since we left Boston Harbor."

The dining room was empty, save for a pair of servers clearing away dishes near the back of the room. A deck of cards already awaited them at a table not far from the door and they both sat down.

Hobbs began to deal. "I can assure you everyone is accounted for," he said smoothly. After a breath he added, "Except for Norwell, of course. Now ante up, sir. It's high-dollar hands tonight."

McAdams' blood quickened as the old habits of the gambling houses took hold. He decided to lose the first hand or two, to give the impression of inexperience. "I'm not sure if I have cash or coin on hand," he said slowly, hoping the lie would elicit pity. He reached toward his pocket to offer up his cigarette case to the pot.

"Perhaps your watch will do for a few hands?" suggested the older man, pointing to the golden chain running over McAdams' vest.

Annoyed, McAdams reluctantly snapped the watch out of its pocket. It landed on the table with a clatter, carrying with it the simple golden ring he'd forgotten was there. Hobbs' eyes widened at the sight of it.

"A fine ring," the captain said through a smile. "Are you married?"

Suddenly, vividly, McAdams recalled striding out of his Boston apartment, suitcase in hand. As the door closed behind him, he heard the sobbing of Lydia, his wife of less than a year. A moment later, the wailing of his newborn son followed him into the hall, even through the walls.

McAdams started and snapped back to the reality around him. In that moment, it seemed his mind had quite literally been pulled back to the events of three months ago. Despite the look of shock passing over the younger man's face, his companion seemed not to have noticed

"No," McAdams answered, his irritation turning to cool resentment in his voice. "Not anymore. And you?"

"Not me," said Hobbs. "My duties leave little time for such things."

Fearing his growing anger might put the captain off the game, McAdams smiled and tried to lighten the mood. "The journey is taking far less time than I'd thought."

"That is thanks to the *Inevitable's* engine. It is so efficient I only need one and its fuel is much lighter than coal. It means our speed is unmatched."

McAdams laughed. "Ah, so that's why the fares are so reasonable.

"Oh yes." Hobbs' teeth gleamed like a wolf's beneath his beard. "I hope to provide passage for as many as possible. Young or old, rich or poor, I welcome all." He looked back at the cards. "But, back to the matter at hand. Will you be wagering the ring or the watch?"

McAdams looked down at the pocket watch and, as a moment before, was suddenly somewhere else. It was less than a week ago, and he was standing in a darkened alley outside a gambling hall. He looked down at a well-dressed man lying at his feet, blood pouring from the back of his skull after McAdams had hit him too hard. He threw the blackjack in his right hand into the shadows and began fumbling through his victim's pockets. He took everything he could find, shoving coins, bills, and the golden pocket watch and chain into his coat. He could sort it all later. He had to get out of Boston.

McAdams' mind flashed back to the dining room and he barked a sound of surprise.

This time, Hobbs noticed. "Mr. McAdams, are you alright?"

The younger man stood up quickly, knocking his chair over and jostling the table. He was out of breath, his mind whirling. "I... I don't know." He put his palms into his eyes.

The captain walked around the table and put a hand on McAdams' shoulder. "Perhaps a tour of the ship would do you some good, eh? Ease your mind?"

"I think— I think I should go to my quarters," stuttered McAdams, his voice thick with alarm. "I haven't been sleeping. I'm just overly tired."

"Some sea air will invigorate you. Come, I can show you the engines. Their operation is quite interesting."

"No... no, I-"

"Perhaps we could also find Miss Eliza. She might still be on deck, somewhere astern."

The younger man's confusion cleared. "Yes... yes. Perhaps you're right."

As McAdams turned away, the captain reached onto the table and scooped up the ring and watch there. He stuffed them into the breast pocket of McAdams' coat. "Now, you mustn't forget these."

McAdams could feel heat radiating from the objects, even through his vest and shirt. "Why—?" Hobbs steered him toward the door. "Come on."

The night air was cold against McAdams' skin, far colder than he remembered it being only a few moments ago. He shivered.

The pair marched the length of the ship, the decks strangely deserted. McAdams, still shaken, was about to ask about this when the ship's horn blew again.

It was a shriek of a thousand voices in agony. The cries of men and women were sifted together into a noise that broke every classification of sound ever conceived. McAdams cried out in pain as it tore at his hearing and pierced his mind's borders. Putting his hands to the sides of his head, he fell to his knees on the *Inevitable*'s deck. The boards vibrated as the blast of sound continued for a moment, then suddenly ceased.

Hobbs, seemingly unaffected, was shouting something McAdams could not hear past the high-pitched residue the horn had left in his ears. After a moment, Hobbs began half-pulling, half-dragging McAdams along their previous course. McAdams' eyes closed and reopened in stuttering intervals and he was dimly aware of blacking out at least twice.

The captain hefted his companion to his feet as he threw open a door McAdams didn't recognize. They entered a nearly-lightless void inside the ship, McAdams' feet scraping on rough iron-grate stairs as he was hauled inside. The air was pungent with the smell of something roasting and heated updrafts flew through the staircase to meet them.

Sudden fear compelled McAdams to struggle weakly but Hobbs maintained his grip. The younger man began to catch a word here and there as the captain shouted over the clanging of their shoes on the metal stairs and a dull, unidentified roar from below.

"Not much farther," Hobbs stated, his voice free from the sound of exertion as he held McAdams upright.

A red-orange glow crept through the darkness as they reached the end of the first flight of stairs. The smell of embers grew stronger, as did the orange-white glow and rumbling monotone. McAdams' deduced that these were coming from a huge fire somewhere at the bottom of the stairs. They were in the ship's boiler room.

McAdams shook free of Hobbs and stood unsteadily for a moment before toppling over. He rolled down the remaining flight of stairs, gravity and metal bruising flesh and breaking bone.

Conscious despite the pain, he came to rest on the boiler room's sooty floor, his face covered in greasy dirt and his own blood. A pair of worn, filthy boots suddenly filled his vision, and he looked up to their wearer.

A hulking man in dirty overalls looked down at McAdams, his heavily muscled shoulders and arms clearly visible. His skin, like his clothes, was blackened with ash. His narrow face sported a long beard that seemed to reach out from the bottom of his wide-brimmed straw hat. The hair came to a point curled upward by exposure to flame. The thick, bloody fingers of his right hand held a long-handled shovel that was surprisingly clean. The smell of charcoal pushed past the scent of blood in McAdams' nostrils.

Hobbs' voice came from behind. "This is my fireman," he said to McAdams.

The fireman's eyes began to glow like red-hot coals. He turned as McAdams screamed, looking back toward the massive furnace behind him. The fires inside were caged by a door the size of a bulkhead. The metal was white-hot, seemingly ready to run off into slag at any moment.

On its own, the furnace door swung open, the superheated metals shrieking in tortured protest. McAdams pulled away from the sudden, intense heat. As his body adjusted, he dared a look up again.

Within the blaze he saw streamers of fire in every color imaginable, all mixing, twisting, changing, amid a backdrop of white. Within these columns of flame were twisted visages that appeared, distorted, and screamed at a pitch impossible for McAdams to sense.

The fires swayed, reaching out toward them. McAdams wailed himself hoarse in terror.

The fireman bent and grabbed the prone man by his collar. "Just in time, Master," he rumbled. "Norwell was almost gone."

As he was effortlessly dragged toward the flames, McAdams kicked and screamed and wept until the moment the fireman heaved him through the furnace door.

Above, the steamship's horn blew again, echoing off sea and sky. From the deck, Eliza looked up at it, heaved a lonely sigh, and began to make her way back to her cabin.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — S. B. Smith is a fiction writer and curriculum designer. He also has professional experience writing and editing blogs, website copy, and comics. Smith is from the small town of Taylorsville, Georgia and received his English degree from Berry College. Several of Smith's short stories have recently been published in print and digital formats and he hopes to someday complete a series of novels.

Terror in Room 1698 Shaun Avery

The woman sitting across from me in the interrogation room was sobbing her little heart out.

"I didn't know," she cried through her tears. "How could I have known?"

I looked up at the camera in the corner of the room, the one that was recording us.

"But it wasn't his usual hotel?" I prompted. "Was it?"

She looked up at me.

Took a tissue from the box that lay on the table between us.

"Max had been complaining," she told me. "Said he was getting tired of all the same old places when he had to go away for a meeting."

"Some kind of mid-life crisis thing?" I asked, smiling.

"You'd have to ask his wife about that," she said.

She did not return the smile.

"So you booked somewhere different for him," I went on. "How'd you find out about the place?"

She looked at me like I'd just asked the stupidest question in the world.

"How do you think?" she replied. "Online."

"Fair enough," I said.

Then paused.

Looking to the camera again.

"So you didn't know there was a clown convention using the place," I said.

"Not until Max called me," she said. "Screaming."

That seemed like a good place to leave it for now.

I thanked her and left the station, stepping outside for a minute to get some air.

That was when the stranger appeared.

"She's lying, you know."

I had been leaning against my car with my eyes closed. Now they popped open in surprise.

Saw the guy standing across from me.

"Is that so?" My fingers strayed towards my service weapon as I spoke, just in case he turned out to be dangerous. "And who might 'she' be?"

"You know," he said, and took a step closer. "Your weird case." His eyes met mine. "The clown one."

"How do you know about that?" I asked, suddenly panicky.

"I'm a psychic," he said. He held out his hand. "Clifton Wheeler, at your service."

What I did next could have been a pretty risky move.

But the guy had intrigued me.

See, I always get the strange cases. I have a reputation for it. That's how this one – the clown case – had found me. But in all of my official dealings so far, I had never come across someone claiming to be psychic. I just had to put him to the test.

So I drove us both over to the hotel where it had happened.

The reception area, the corridors, even the parking lot – all were completely covered in clowns.

Hundreds of them, in all shapes, sizes and colours.

A pretty creepy thing to be around, if you didn't like that sort of thing.

As Max Carlyle most assuredly had not.

We walked towards the room in which Carlyle had been staying.

But Wheeler hesitated.

"Relax," I told him. "Door was locked from the inside when the guy took a dive. We know it wasn't murder."

"Think so?" Wheeler said.

Then he suddenly grew balls and pushed open the door himself.

I nodded, impressed.

But now a little bit worried, too.

He started to moan as soon as we entered, rubbing his arms as if he were freezing.

"The terror," he said. He looked at me. "Can't you feel the terror?"

Saying nothing, I closed the door behind us.

"He saw them *everywhere*," Wheeler went on. "He tried to scratch out his own eyes, so terrified was he of what he was seeing."

And those words crept me out.

See, I'd seen the body. There'd not been much solid left by the time he hit the ground, having leapt from a sixteenth-storey window. But there had indeed been evidence of scratches around the eyes. Just like Wheeler had said.

My worry stepped up a gear.

Wheeler crossed to the phone.

Put his hand on it.

Looked over at me.

"He called her," he said. "That night. Just before..."

He let the thought tail off.

Though I already knew the answer, I said, "Called who?"

"His secretary," Wheeler said. "She booked this place for him, knowing full well the clowns would be here."

"No," I told him, shaking my head. "It was an accident. A coincidence."

Instead of replying, he picked up the phone.

And gasped.

"I can hear them both," he said, face going white. "He's screaming. He's terrified. But her... she's laughing."

He looked into my eyes.

"She told him he was pathetic – a grown man, so scared of clowns. She said he should have just left his wife, like she'd told him to."

He dropped the phone.

His face a picture of shock and pain.

I'm sure mine looked just the same.

"We'd better..." I swallowed, tried to get myself together. "We'd better take your statement. Let's get back to the station."

We never made it there, though.

You see, I was worrying so much as I drove – wondering if this little creep's testimony would stand up in court, if his word would help make a case with some of the *other* detectives, guys who saw a dead businessman with a secretary involved and *always* smelled murder – that I guess the mask I'd been wearing for the past few weeks slipped and he looked at me and I could tell from his eyes that he knew.

"Yep," I said, smiling.

And I reached over and slammed his face into the passenger side window until he was unconscious and dragged his body out of the car and down into a ditch and put three bullets into it.

Then I left, whistling.

Thinking that for all of his showmanship back at the hotel, he obviously wasn't that good a psychic.

She was waiting for me, at my place.

Naked on my bed.

"Thanks for going easy on me in the interview," she said.

I caught the sarcasm in her voice, batted back with: "I had to make it look good for the cameras and for the Chief."

She pouted.

She looked so pretty when she pouted.

Especially when that pout was all she wore.

"But don't worry," I told her, taking off my jacket and hanging it up. "I think they'll write this one off as a tragic accident."

I'd already decided I'd best not tell her about Wheeler. Or about the fact I'd used my own weapon to kill him, that I'd been seen in the hotel with him by about a thousand clowns, among others, just before I'd done so. I didn't want her to know how crazy she'd made me feel ever since that day she'd come to me and said she needed my help to stop things getting too sticky with some of my cop colleagues.

Instead, I started undressing.

"Not so quickly," she told me.

I looked at her.

She was reaching down the side of the bed.

"Max was always so boring," she was saying. "Never wanted to have any fun. But this whole thing's given me an idea."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I want to try a little role-play," she said.

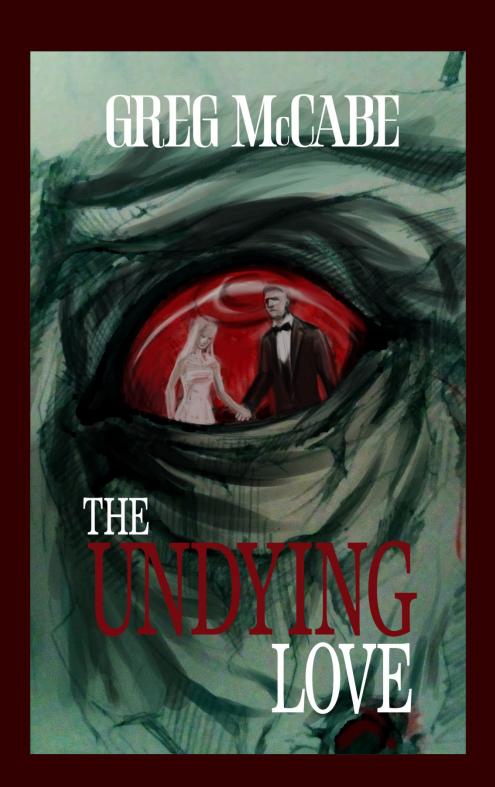
And she held up the clown costume.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Shaun Avery has appeared in many anthologies and magazines with tales of horror and mystery, and has won competitions in various mediums. He recently co-created a self-published comic book — a fact of which, as a massive graphic novel nerd, he is very proud indeed. His clown name would be 'Gassy.'

Link: http://www.comicsy.co.uk/dbroughton/store/products/spectre-show/

The Undying Love by Greg McCabe

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



Converting Esau E. Doyle-Gillespie

Father Pierre listened to the stories that the trappers told when they came back to town -their words trembling in heavy steam clouds that floated up in the night air. He heard the loggers who still spoke the foreign tongues saying the same things their fractured English beginning to quake as they clutched their beer steins with both hands. It had the face of a man, they said. Its hide smelt of moss, soil, and the dank mold of a cave, but it had the sullen, angry eyes of a thief when

it peered through cabin windows and when it dragged horses away from their teams in the middle of the night. And it screamed, they said, like one of the madmen in a sanatorium back east. That was why Father Pierre set off from the town, from the parish, with his communion set and the crucifix he used when he saved the souls of the Iriquois and the gamblers from one town over. He was still clutching them, the story goes, when they found him half-sunk in the ice and mud of an unnamed river - his hands curled like claws, his mouth twisted, his eyes fixed with a blind, faithless panic.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - E. Doyle-Gillespie is a poet and armchair monster hunter who has always had a fascination with things that go bump in the night. Once a teacher of Literature and History, he is now a detective in the Baltimore City Police Department. He is a Baltimore resident (though not a native) who holds a BA in History from The George Washington University and an MLA from Johns Hopkins University.



Sirens Call Publications

PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION

www.SirensCallPublications.com

Nina ~ @Sotet_Angyal
Julianne ~ @CdnZmbiRytr
Gloria ~ @GlorBobrowicz
Sirens Call Publications ~ @Sirens_Call

sirenscallpublications.wordpress.com

In a world driven by steam and power-hungry Industrialists, can one man change the course of history?



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, iStore, Smashwords & Createspace

Mingled with Howls

DJ Tyrer

Screams in the night Mingle with howls Terror and fright As the wolfman prowls Lock windows, bar doors Or attempt to flee Although barriers give no pause To things that should not be And weapons neither harm nor drop As he pursues those who fled This pursuit will not stop Till all his prey are dead The screams of victims taste sweet He savours the awful sound Sweeter than the flesh to eat Of those he runs to ground Then ray of dawn appears And the wolfman takes flight As the sun banishes all fears With the coming of the light

Fairy Tale

DJ Tyrer

A scream

Not fearful but hateful

A curse

Hurled at the one she hates

A child

Who had no right to replace

A beauty

Beloved of father not stepmother

A witch

Powerful yet foolish

An error

Sees her hatred rebound ninefold

Predator & Prey (Double Tanka)

DJ Tyrer

Scream sounds, excites blood Sudden flurry of movement Shadowy figures Moving to surround their prey Restraint fails, leap in to feast

Scream sounds, cry for help Corpse astounds authorities Completely bloodless Cover up, conceal the truth Deny vampires stalk the night

Then, Suddenly

DJ Tyrer

Silent night

Dark woods extend unbounded

River moves slowly

Without a sound

No breeze rustles leaves, rushes

Nothing moves

Cabin windows shuttered, darkened

Nothing stirs

Then, suddenly, a scream

High above the trees, river, cabin

A hunting call

Alien, strange

Flap of leather wings

A momentary flurry of fear

Confusion

Then stillness once more

As action turns to paralysis

Hoping it shall pass over, away

It screams again

Cabin door opens

Perplexed inhabitant steps out, stares up

Sealing their fate

An Eternal Cry

DJ Tyrer

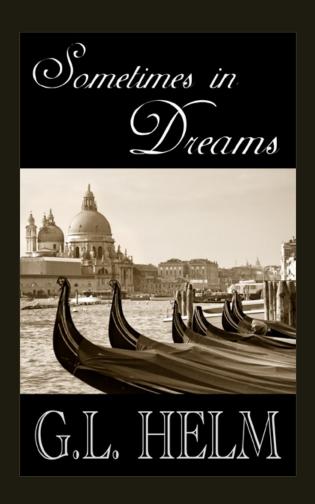
Night shattered
A scream echoes
Swallowed by empty streets
None hear that bitter cry
Save the one who screamed it
Her companions
And the King
All of whom hear it
A scream repeated

Over and over
Infinitely
An eternal moment
Of exquisite torture
And, of course,
Those vouchsafed the sound
By virtue of the Sign
And the Play

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published in *Amok!* (April Moon Books), *In Creeps The Night* (J.A.Mes Press), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Techno-Horror* and *Cosmic Horror* (both Dark Hall Press), and has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

Twitter: <a>@djtyrer

Blog: http://dityrer.blogspot.co.uk/



Sometimes in Dreams by G.L. Helm

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

The Maiden Upon Tyne T.S. Woolard

In the castle new, yonder upon Tyne,
A maiden lies whose beauty knows no time.
There's a maiden that I once called mine.

I was a jester, a peasant of fun.
I loved royal Alice. We planned to run
From Tyne and raise our secret son.

The court invited me one final time,
Living through the charade, a pantomime
-waiting to hold her hand in mine.

Upstairs, everyone lay bare on the floor. Blood splashed, puddled, the room flooded with gore.

Alice and siblings were no more.

Her sisters who asked to help, Anne and Jo, Had slit wrists, life oozed in a gushing flow -losing life with a moving show.

Alice, in a white gown, thrown on the bed, A swollen lump rose on her gorgeous head. Screams tore me into pale, limp shreds.

Her father, the hateful, murderous swine, Ripped her from me so she couldn't be mine, And ran, that night, away from Tyne.

The devil would pay, I promised within.

My stroke traced the curvature of her chin.

I kissed her lips, so cold and thin.

For years I hunted the butchering swine. A decade later he returned to Tyne,

Claiming Wonderland passed the time. He drank in the castle cellar one night. Upon breathing his breath, I had to fight. I longed darkness, he doused my light.

"Please, please don't, jester. I live with remorse."

He screamed, "This is not your only recourse! She wouldn't want this, fate by force."

"How dare you speak of her as if you cared?" I roared, "You killed Alice because she dared.

In your web she became ensnared."

I plunged my knife into his bony chest.

Over and over, I gave him my best

-killed, like the bearers of his crest.

"Is that you," I called, "is that my Alice?"
I felt her there. "This life is so callus.
I feel dead without the malice."

"Tis true, my love," said the ghost. "Tis your time."

"I have come to claim you, again, as mine. Join me beyond the veil of Tyne."

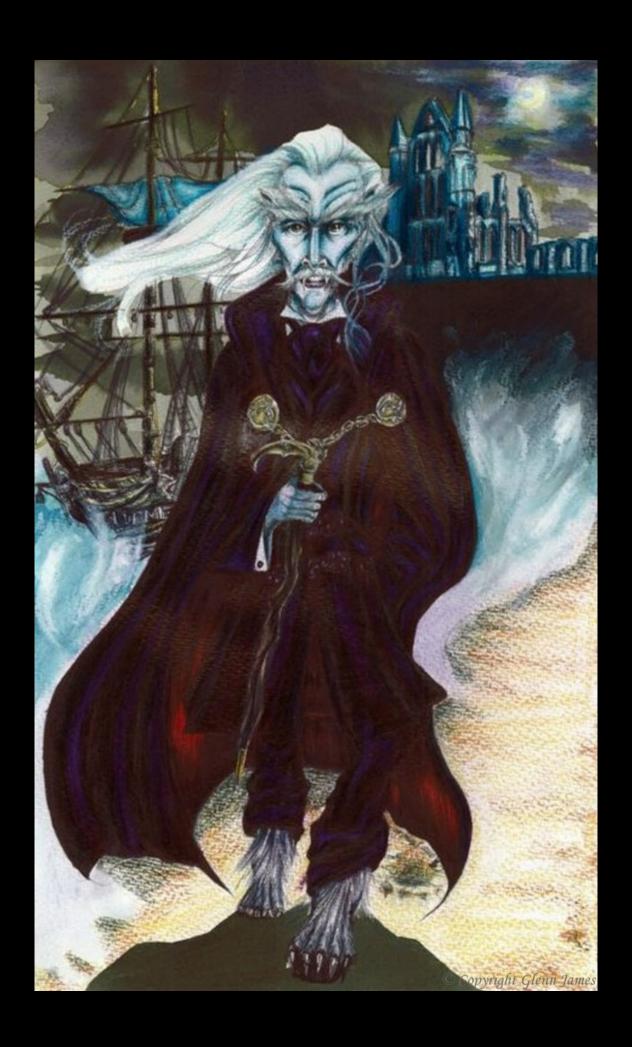
The knife dug in my wrists. Her face came clear, More and more, as I drew ever so near.

I wiped away her spectral tears.

No mortal will ever part us again.
On this plain, our lives finally begin,
Together as shadows, therein.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his wife and five Jack Russell Terriers. For more of his work look for Indiana Horror Review 2014, and Ghosts: Revenge by jwkfiction, Undead Legacy by J. Ellington Ashton Press, Siren's Call 'eZines #17 & #18, and his short story collection, Solo Circus.

Twitter: <u>@TSWoolard</u>
Blog: <u>tswoolard.wordpress.com</u>



An Interview with Artist Glenn James

Recently, Sirens Call Publications sat down with artist Glenn James in order to ask him a few probing questions about his art and what makes him tick. Continue reading to learn what we found out! And don't forget to check out his art featured throughout this issue of *The Sirens Call...*

SCP: Welcome Glenn! Why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself to our readers?



Glenn James: I am an English illustrator and writer with a passion for dark fantasy subjects, and I love working with stories, which is my calling. I studied Graphic Design at the University of Wolverhampton, and worked for quite a time in radio, as the nonvisual medium was a wonderful way of developing my visual imagination; creating pictures for your mind. I write and illustrate stories for schools and museums professionally, and I am a published author and illustrator of mature dark fantasy tales. I have a passion for telling stories, either through illustrations or writing them, and accept assignments and commissions accordingly. I'm a highly experienced performer, both live and as a radio artist and actor, and these skills tie in well with my vocation. My work has strong Celtic and Pagan influences, and I love working with the theme of forgotten ancient influences, powerfully at work

in the modern urban environment.

I'm married to the Children's Poet Angela James, and we live in Staffordshire with our daughters, Charlotte and Elizabeth.

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?

GJ: I started out as a fine artist painting with acrylic, but this didn't suit my needs as I like to work in fine detail. I gravitated to using a Biro, as I am a great fan of the lovely feathered effect you can get with them, almost like etching, and they work fantastically with blendable colour pencils and Chinagraphs; We used to use these oily white pencils for marking ¼ tape when we were editing in my radio days, but I discovered you can use it to wonderful effect with ink and colour pencils, and it almost gives a feeling like oil painting to a drawing. I also use black Quink fountain pen ink and a brush, and occasionally for my drawings for younger children, chalk pastels and watercolour paints. I have never worked with aerosols and would be really interested to give it a try, as I have seen a lot of Bankeys artwork when I have worked in Bristol and you can get some astonishing effects with the medium. It would be fun if I could get a really BIG large scale commission!

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

GJ: I really admire the work of Brian Froud (who drew all the Goblins for "Labyrinth") and Arthur Rackham's fairytale work. Aubrey Beardsley has been a strong influence, and so has H. R Giger, and his work for Alien and the Necromonicon. I am also a really great fan of Niel Gaimans "Sandman" comics; they had a huge influence on me at University. I must mention that back before the flood

when I started out I was a great fan of Doctor Who, and cut my teeth writing and drawing for fanzines, so the influence of that is affectionately historical. I also love Sydney Paget's Sherlock Holmes illustrations for "The Strand Magazine", and the drawings for Lewis Carroll's Alice stories. Goya of course, and Hieronymus Bosch, and in literary terms, Poe, Lovecraft, Stoker, Robert Lewis Stephenson, and the great, great grand-daddy of the English ghost story, M. R. James. My influences are very cinematic too, and I am a great admirer of the early European horror films, and later movies like "The Seventh Seal". In more contemporary terms I also like some of the really clever, well made found footage stories on the internet as well, especially some of the Bigfoot films like "Willow Creek" or "Bigfoot: The Lost Coast Tapes." Really well written and beautifully executed, and so understated! There is a fine little Indie classic called "Howls" which is wholly character driven with a really solid story, and I thought that was just superb.

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

GJ: If I had a time machine I think my first port of call would be to visit the Brothers Grimm, because boy, is some of their work dark! That would be one hell of a juicy challenge, to work with them!

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

GJ: I think you probably you get to know yourself very well when you have to use such self expressive processes as drawing professionally, and as a result you "know" when it just isn't going to happen. I can certainly tell inside about 20 minutes when I sit down if a piece isn't going to work if I persist. It's quite a gut feeling in an odd way, and it's certainly hard to describe, but I can tell because I just have this solid feeling not to pursue it at that moment. I've learnt to put it down for a day and concentrate on something else, because you can't force it. Luckily this doesn't happen very often but I know enough to listen when it does. I pick up again the next day and everything is fine.

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?

GJ: I am fortunately blessed not to really encounter the condition. I know that if the work is not flowing then the thing to do is concentrate on another aspect of the project for a while, as the variety helps to free you up creatively. I feel refreshed and get back down to it when I return. I know that a lot of artists feel that they need music or whatever in the background when they are working, and I am no exception to this, it really helps. When I am drawing I love to start off with Jimi Hendrix music, and swap around what I am listening too according to my mood, and sometimes listen to films while I'm working. ("Lord of the Rings" is fantastic for this!) I can't listen to music when I'm writing, though. I need to have Uber concentration, and I sometimes listen to

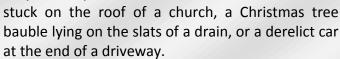
faint white noise on headphones to block out any outside distractions. I also drink a LOT of tea!

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

GJ: It can literally come out of no-where sometimes, quite unexpectedly; I call it being struck by lightning! Atmosphere and lighting influence me strongly, and interesting places or



landscapes. Of all things I photographed a bus stop one morning which was incredibly atmospheric, shrouded in fog with the sunlight trying to get through, and that has such possibilities for a horror story, it's so heavy with potential for a tale! On another occasion, when returning from a session once I was thinking through an alien abduction story with a gothic slant, when I happened to spot a really bizarre sight close to me in the street: a pair of shoes which were propped in an alcove in a wall, just as if someone had taken them off before going to bed and stood them gently there in the corner. This was on a busy main road with traffic thundering past a few feet away, and it got my mind racing. Who had put them there? Why were they left in a corner like that? Did they delicately take them off before being snatched off the surface of the earth by a transporter beam? I like to work photographs in with my drawn illustrations as it provides an extra hint of reality, and something like this really ties in well and gives an anchor to the world around us as part of the fantastic theme. It tied in beautifully with a massive piece of derelict machinery which I came across, covered in ivy and clinging moss, which to my imagination suggested a peice of an antiquated spaceships engines, waiting quietly where it had fallen until it could be recovered. And from this the story and illustrations are really taking shape, tied closely to one another. I will spot things when I am out and about which zap a story into my head: A row of abandoned footballs



I am slightly dyslexic, and this means that you think in pictures. Sometimes an image leaps into my head and it will stay there, almost like a slide in your visual memory, until you can get it down on paper. As an illustrator when I am working on something I go for a walk to think through the themes of the stories, and either inspiration comes like one of these images flashing into my head like a photo, or I observe something which really gets the ball rolling.

A few years ago I visited Glastonbury on a foggy day, and when I climbed the hill and looked through the gateway it was just like looking out into the land of the dead, all rolling mist and no ground to be seen. That has had a huge impact on my own dark fantasy stories, particularly in light of what happened just afterwards. Shortly after this when I was asleep one night I also had a vision in a very vivid dream of a young man in 18th century clothing, sitting in a foggy landscape, looking at a skull. This was a bit like what Mary Shelly described about her inspiration, because in the same way that she saw Frankenstein and his creature in a dream, when I woke up I knew exactly who this youth was and most of his back-story was in my imagination; the whole thing fired me to develop a drawing style of my own, and get it down on paper. This was quite a catalytic experience for me as this character was Skaler, my main character in my own writing, and that one dream has driven me to develop my style of drawing (which I call Pre-Raphaelite Goth) and the whole world around him.

I am also VERY inspired by old Universal horror films, and I have a huge admiration for the work of James Whale and Boris Karloff. My inspiration is cinematic in a lot of its visual influences, and I love the atmosphere and beauty of those gorgeous old pioneering fantasy films.

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

GJ: I am passionate about writing myself, so I would say it would be the story and the subject. I really love to get my teeth into new things, and I would say that's the approach I follow with the greatest interest.

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

GJ: I have to say I think it has to be "Dreamwalker", an illustration of mine of an ancient vampire called Prince Germane of the Royal House of Gosmanger. I think he is my favorite because I gave his character a great deal of thought and consideration, and he has such a wicked sense of humour.

I wanted to him to be a dreamwalker, someone who wanders through other peoples sleep sewing

nightmares, and who teases his victims that he is near in the same way. This guy was walking the world at the time of the pharaohs and before the Christian Church existed, so he would be quite an ancient Pagan vampire, who sleeps in hollow trees or barrows in the ground.

He is all in black and white with just a splash of yellow on his predators eyes, amidst all that grainy pen work, and I really love the way that came out.

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

GJ: Without a doubt it has to be "The Picture of Dorian Grey" by Ivan Albright, which was painted for the 1945 film of Wilde's story. (It's in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.) The movie is in black and white, and there is still an



incredible power to this portrait when it is finally unveiled in all its gruesome detail. When you see it in colour it takes your breath away, as the detail and the imaginative ability of the artist are so vivid, picking up on the themes of decay and corruption and painting something so grotesque that its almost beautiful, as if it has gone through the concept of beauty and come out the other side. It's an amazing achievement, and just shows what an inspired artist can create with horror and fantasy themes.

Thank you Glenn! If you'd like to find out more about Glenn and his artwork, you can stalk him online at www.gmjames.co.uk.

Route 44 David J. Wing

We'd heard a few stories along the way, you do. Travel the country as much as my wife and I and you hear all sorts of things, sometimes you see them too.

A few years ago the kids left home. College and work saw them off to different ends of the country and as we'd retired, we thought we'd give travel a go. We'd saved well - the kids, Jane and Mark were successful in their own rights and short of any disasters; our money was ours to do with as we pleased.

We cleared out the house (heirlooms and sentimental items went to storage) and put it on the rental market - then took the cars to the local dealership. We came out well and sporting a beige, 2008 Winnebago. It had everything you could imagine and then some. A short course in truck driving and we were off. No particular direction. Jean was about to turn sixty and I'd passed that mark a little ways back, so we put the motorhome in drive and took a left out the driveway and onto the highway.

The years went by, mostly without incident. We got the occasional flat – one nearly saw us flat too, but Jean always did have quick reactions and we survived to tell the tale. We picked up the occasional hitch-hiker, mostly nice folk - mostly. We saw the landscape change a hundred different ways and then a hundred more. The 'Winnie' just kept on ticking. Once in a while we changed the oil, every now and then a sparkplug. Mostly things went fine.

The kids didn't like the idea of their 'olds' hippying around the country, but we made sure to check in whenever we stopped and that calmed them some.

New England was where things changed.

We'd been 'on the road' for a few years when I guess my eyes started to play up. I swear I saw them though – birds, giant black ones, must have been twelve/thirteen feet tip to tip, like pterodactyls screeching from the sky. I'd had to swerve to miss them and hit a tree. Jean got a cut on her head and a concussion. The kids begged us to stop travelling, but Jean was adamant. The doctors said it was a cataract in my right eye. It would cause problems from now on and Jean would have to drive at night, I could still see fine in the day.

We spent the next few nights stationary. Despite what she said, I knew Jean was a little nervous. My eyes and my story both disturbed her. She listened attentively, but shy of actually seeing black, flying monsters coming straight for you, it's difficult to believe on faith, even if that faith is based on a fifty year marriage.

The map placed us not far south of Boston. We drove by the local Walmart and re-stocked the cabinets. The shower needed a new head, the camera a new battery and we were all out of hot-pockets. Jean found me a nice pair of slacks with elastic around the waist. She said it was the new style, but I caught the label that read 'maternity' and saw a wry smile on the face of the cashier when I paid. No matter, they were comfy and those hot-pockets needed to go somewhere.

I backed us out of the parking lot and we turned onto route 44 towards Rehoboth.

We'd been travelling for a few miles when the engine started to chug.

"What's happening?" asked Jean.

I glanced at the display, the gas gauge read zero.

"Uh, technical issue" I replied.

"Gas?"

"Gas."

I pulled us off the highway and into a service station nearby. The 'Winnie' jerked and threw us to a stop by the pumps. I stepped out to stretch my legs while Jean took advantage of the novelty

of peeing in a stationary position, although her sea-legs were well and truly established some years back.

The attendant started the pump and asked me where we were headed.

"Nowhere in particular, just going forward."

He hummed in agreement. I thought I sensed a little jealously too.

"You know anything about this area?"

I shook my head.

"Na, we're from California, but we've been all over."

"Not here though."

"No" I repeated. He was being a little 'off', I thought.

The pump hit forty bucks and just kept going.

"Look, you seem nice, so I'm gonna tell ya."

I cocked my head, waiting for the local knowledge to flow from his lips.

"Don't pick anyone up around here."

"Okay."

"No, I mean it! Just don't and if something happens, stay in the vehicle. It's best that way."

I looked the boy square in the eyes, he was serious so I gave him the slow nod, to show I understood, even though I didn't and wished the 'Winnie' would drink her fill and we could go.

Jean came back from the bathroom and we turned back onto the 44.

"You Okay dear?" She asked me, rightly concerned, so I told her about the boy at the service station. She made the 'oooo' noise and we laughed.

The weather began to turn. What had started a nice, clear day now threatened rain. The sky paled to grey and the windscreen wipers took over.

"Maybe I should drive?" Jean asked.

I turned and slightly nodded in agreement. It isn't easy to get old and accept it.

I pulled in; we swapped positions and hit the road again. Taking advantage of the stop, I threw a 'pocket' in the microwave and set it to 3 minutes.

The traffic began to thin. Lights only seemed to be heading towards us. Then the Winnie jerked again. I fell against the sofa, luckily and grabbed onto the table top.

"Jean?"

"I'm Okay, Mark, a flat I think."

We pulled off the highway, onto a quiet side road. The high-beams showed trees and embankments on either side.

The microwave dinged.

"You have a bite, Dear, I'll do the manly stuff."

Jean smiled but said nothing. I grabbed the jack and my windbreaker and stepped into the drizzly rain. It was coming east to west and whipped against my face something nasty. I pulled the hood over my head and grabbed the spare from the back. It was the rear right tyre that had shredded. Must have been a piece of glass or a stray nail somewhere back on the 44. I put the travel light on the road and angled it at the tire.

The nuts came off slowly. This happened to be the only tire that hadn't blown since we'd left California, so much so we had a nick name for it.

Jean called from the door, holding the 'hot-pocket', minus a few bites. "How is it?"

I looked up and yelled back over an increasingly vicious wind. "Its 'old reliable', he's done for."

Jean let out what I think was a sigh, but it seemed to come from somewhere beyond her and she closed the door. I carried on turning the nuts. The last one dropped and rolled under the wheel arch. I shook my head, put the wrench on the floor and reached under. I couldn't see anything. I

flashed the light around and saw it was all but dead center, right under the Winnie and a full crawl away.

I huffed and began the shuffle forward.

I'd just about reached the nut when I felt something. Or, I heard it. I can't be sure. I turned and flashed the light left and right, then all around -nothing.

Crawling back out, I switched out 'old reliable' with the spare and tightened the nuts in place. Just as I twisted the last one I saw something in my periphery. My hood fell back in a gust and there he stood, some way beyond the Winnie's low-beams, just standing there.

He was tall, with a red flannel shirt and an almost red glow around his face. I called out; surprised Jean hadn't seen him and let me know.

"HEY! You Okay?"

No response.

"You need a lif..."

I stopped and remembered what the service attendant had said. I'm not usually suspicious or nervous, but something in the weather was having an effect on me.

He started moving toward me.

I rolled the flat towards the door, opened it and shoved the tire inside, slamming the door shut and locking it.

Jean jumped.

"What's going on? I heard you yelling something."

I jumped into the passenger seat and flicked the low's to high. The blacktop reflected in the rain, empty.

I thrust my head forward and stared, looking all around - nothing.

"Mark, really, what's going on?"

I couldn't help but just stare.

I shook my head.

"It's nothi..."

There was a knock on the door and the pair of us jerked in our seats.

Jean laughed a little and then made to answer it.

"NO! Don't!"

Jean looked at me, alarmed.

"Mark?"

"I mean it, Jean, Just drive!"

There was another knock at the door.

"DRIVE!"

Jean turned the starter, shoved the Winnie into first and took off.

We'd gotten around fifteen miles down the road when Jean slowed to a stop and turned off the engine.

"What was all that about?"

I just kept staring forward.

"Mark!"

I turned towards Jean. She could see the alarm in my eyes and her face softened. I didn't want to say, but after the birds and the boy at the service station I felt I had no choice. She listened, she always does. I told her about the feeling I had, about the man in the flannel, about the red.

Jean put her hand on my arm. I really think she would never have taken it away if it weren't for the laugh. It came from behind and then it came from in front and then it was all around. The

motor-home began to shake and the lights in the cabin flickered off. Jean's light, reassuring hold on my arm became a desperate clench.

"Mark? What is that?"

I shook my head and stood up. We swapped seats and I turned the starter – nothing, not even a whine. I kept twisting the key until I dreaded the thought I might snap it and stopped. Then the laugh disappeared and fell into the distance. The cabin lights came back on and the radio blared into life.

Jean and I damn near shot through the roof. I reached over to turn it off but just as I touched the switch the music stopped and the laughing started again.

It ran all around the cabin, through the speakers and under our skin. My hair shot from my arms and Jean screamed!

I've never heard something so natural and terrifying in equal measure.

The high-beams shot forward and there he stood, staring.

His face shone red and his eyes seemed to match.

I frantically twisted and turned the key. Nothing happened, but the speakers grew louder. The laugh began to echo Jean's scream and I fell back into the seat.

The laughter stopped.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. He got closer and closer, but I couldn't see him walking and then came the knock. Jean's eyes pleaded with me. I turned the starter – nothing.

Don't ask me why, I don't know, but I just felt I had to. I stood up and moved toward the door. Jean held my arm for a second and then released it, accepting.

I unlocked it and took a step back. The door clicked and swung open slowly. In a moment, there he stood, his beard a vicious red, but almost transparent. I could see the dark world beyond him, and then the door slammed shut.

We awoke some time later. The Winnie sat idling at the side of the road, the motor running and the radio playing. We were alone and nearly one hundred miles further into New England.

I reached over and held Jean as tight as I could. The dawn was beginning to rise when we saw the birds in the distance. Jean wept and so did I.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — David is currently studying for a Masters degree in Creative Writing at Anglia Ruskin University. His work is due to appear in Mad Scientist Journal and Theme of Absence and he has had some luck recently in flash fiction competitions. He and his wife are eagerly awaiting the arrival of their baby girl, Alexandra. And yes, he's currently working on a novel.

Twitter: @djwing wing

Blog: https://davidjwing.wordpress.com/

The Ghoul Joseph Rubas

"Hurry the hell up! We ain't got all night!"

Parnell Parker put his hands on his hips and glared down at the two men in the hole, their faces slick and gleaming in the light of the moon. Jamal Frank looked up, hate written on his face. Parnell wished he'd say something. If he did, he'd jump down in that grave and whip his ass.

Jamal didn't, however; he went back to digging, his teeth grinding audibly. "That's what I thought," Parnell snarled.

It was late, past midnight, and the cold harvest moon was high in the milky heavens. Typically, on treasure hunting nights, Parnell had Jamal and his cousin, Devon, start at nine or ten: Melville Cemetery was three miles up a winding dirt road, surrounded by trees; you couldn't see if from the road. It was late and he was tired. He was tired when they showed up at five 'o'clock, and he was tired now. He just wanted to get the coffin back to the garage and get done for the day.

"I think I hit somethin," Devon said, pausing. Jamal leaned over his shoulder.

"Yeah. There it is."

"Come on, then!" Parnell spat. "Jesus Christ. You niggas are slow."

Jamal and Devon cleared the remaining dirt around the casket the way archeologists exhumed dinosaur bones. This wasn't their first go around. They'd been working for Parnell for three years now. When the caretaker hired them, they expected to be cutting grass and mending fences. Instead, they were robbing graves.

Neither one enjoyed their job. In fact, both despised it, and Parnell too, but they needed the money. Isn't that how it always worked?

Presently, Jamal grabbed the hoist straps and helped Devon wrap them around the coffin, at the head and at the foot.

"You good?" Parnell asked.

"Yeah."

Parnell hit the switch, and the hoist's motor coughed into life.

Jamal and Devon scrambled out of the grave.

The hoist slowly lifted the coffin out of the ground with a high, slipshod squeaking. When it was out, Parnell hit another switch, and the long metal arm pivoted.

"Get it."

Jamal and Devon guided the casket over a metal cart. Parnell lowered it.

"You're good," Jamal said.

Parnell shut it off.

The boys undid the straps and stepped back.

"Is it on?" Parnell asked.

"Yeah," Jamal replied.

"Take it to the garage, then! Shit!"

Jamal rolled his eyes.

While they wheeled the coffin to the caretaker's garage near the front of the cemetery, Parnell lit a cigar and inhaled deeply, relishing the warm smoke.

He'd been the caretaker here for nearly twenty years, twenty long, grueling years filled with poverty and hatred. The town didn't pay him enough. He lived on site in an apartment above the garage rent free, yes, but how did they expect him to survive with the pittance they gave him? He needed extra cash, but this damn cemetery was a full time job. What was he to do?

Then, six years ago, while watching a graveside service for a fat old bitch from town, it came to him. The cemetery! It was a goldmine! How many people were buried with their gold fillings and their diamond rings and their jewel encrusted broaches? The old cunt they were burying that day had a ring on every finger, and each one was legit.

He never looked back.

Parnell finished his cigar just as Jamal and Devon came back from the garage.

Back at the garage, the coffin was set up on wooden sawhorses. The lights overhead were harsh, the concrete floor stained with motor oil and gasoline, and the walls were laden with hand tools on pegs. Hammers. Shears. Weedwhackers.

Parnell ran his hand over the coffin's sooth lid, the cherry finish slick and moist under his hand. It had taken nearly an hour, but most of the dirt was gone. When he was done, he'd put the body in another, cheaper coffin; he knew a funeral director in Waynesboro who'd buy this one.

Sighing, his knees and back aching, Parnell got to his feet just as Jamal and Devon returned with the wench.

"Put it by the mower," Parnell said.

When they were done, Devon said, "Hey, man, I'm dippin. I'm tired."

"I'll see you later," Jamal said.

Yawning, Devon left. Jamal stood by the door, looking at Parnell.

"I guess you want your money."

"Yeah," Jamal said.

Parnell sighed, took out his wallet, and went over to Jamal. "Here," he said, taking out a bill, "don't spend it all in one place."

Jamal took the proffered note, looked at it, and nearly choked. "Twenty bucks?"

"You know the deal. You niggas took forever."

"We didn't start until eleven!"

"That ain't on me."

"Uncle Parnell..."

Parnell held up a hand. "I don't wanna hear it. Be happy you got that much. I got bills to pay. You live with your mom and dad. I need money more."

"Man, fuck this," Jamal said, "I'm goin to the cops."

Parnell's heart leapt. Jamal, his chin set and his eyes challenging, took a deep breath through his nose.

"You do that you'll go to jail too."

"Give me a hundred."

Parnell laughed. "A hundred? You're outta your mind, boy."

Jamal turned.

"Don't you fuckin walk outta here!"

"See you at the police station."

Jamal was walking away, his stride sure and deliberate. Parnell panicked. He grabbed a wrench from the workbench and went after him.

The blow was hard enough to crack Jamal's skull; the boy crumpled, collapsing to the ground in a heap of nigga. Carried away by fear and rage, Parnell straddled him and hit him again and again, reducing his head splinters.

When Parnell saw what he had done, he felt remorse.

Now he was going to jail. Forever. Because of this punk/nigga/snitch.

Parnell hit him again.

Seething fury having turned to cold terror, Parnell wrapped Jamal's head with a towel, his hands trembling, and dragged him back into the garage. He pulled down the metal rolltop door, shutting out the night sounds.

He dragged Jamal over to the coffin and left him. What was he going to do? What he going to do? Think! Think! The only person who knew he was here was Devon. If he could get him back here, he could kill him too, and then he'd be free and clear. He could reserve a plot, bury their asses, and

then just never sell it. Perfect. He wouldn't make commission off it, though. Less money in his pocket.

Whatever.

Parnell called Devon's cellphone. After three rings, he answered.

"Yeah?"

"It's Parnell. I need you to come back."

"Come on, Uncle Parnell. I'm in bed."

"I need you back here. Now."

"Damn. Can't it wait?"

"I'll give a hundred dollars."

Devon knew it was serious. If his tightwad uncle was handing out money, it must be the end of the world.

"I'll right there."

It was going to be okay. He had this.

While waiting for Devon, Parnell stashed Jamal's body under the workbench and covered it with a blue tarp.

Now, let's see what you got for me, he thought, going back over to the coffin. He raised the lid.

"Hello, baby," he smiled.

Inside, the girl was still and quiet. Small, petite, and golden haired, clad in a thin white burial dress, Stephanie Marsten was a study in wealth. Her earrings, her rings, her necklace. Bitch was loaded. He was looking at maybe three, four thousand dollars.

Everything else faded away. This was what mattered.

Parnell stroked her cheek. "Thank you."

Her eyes flew open.

Parnell's heart seized.

She blinked, as if the lights stung, and turned her head ever so slightly, as if to look at him.

Parnell couldn't move; he was rooted in place, his terror too heavy to carry.

She blinked again, her eyes crystal green, and raised her hand, one of her diamond rings refracting the light.

She reached for him.

Parnell's paralysis broke. He screamed, stumbled back, and tripped over his own feet.

She sat up.

Parnell's heart slammed, the world grayed.

His heart stopped.

Headline from the *Richmond Democrat*, October 10, 2016:

WOMAN BURIED ALIVE BUSTS GHOULS

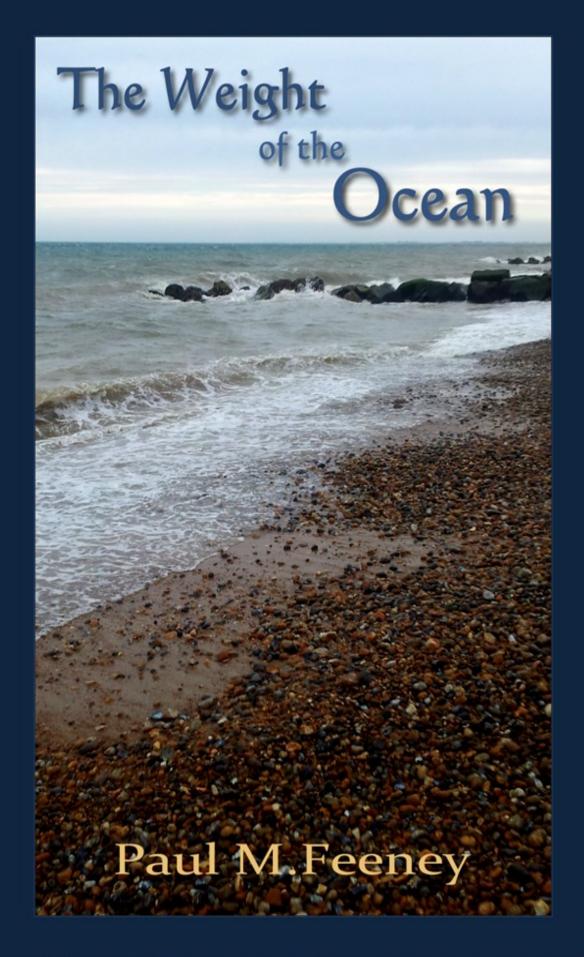
Grave robber/murderer dies of heart attack when victim wakes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joseph Rubas's fiction has appeared in [Nameless] Digest; The Horror Zine; The Storyteller; and many others. He currently resides in Florida.

Twitter: @JosephRubas

Facebook: Joseph Rubas: Horror Writer

Pain is...



Available for Purchase or Borrowing on Amazon

The Garage Wayne Haroutunian

Letter published, Daily Times

My boyfriend Max Wilcox had been missing for months. Police and search parties had since gone out, with myself included, out into the fields beyond town where he had supposedly been before his disappearance, but the searching had been in vain. I've been unable to form a conclusion or even a speculation as to what had happened to him; it has since remained a sickening mystery. Yesterday, however, I received a letter from him. But he didn't write a return address or where he was—not on the envelope nor in his letter. And he didn't write what happened. The reason for this I don't want to even begin to guess. I've reported the letter to the officials. I haven't yet revealed the letter to his work associates or relatives; I don't know what to do!

I've included his letter here, as he wrote it to me. If this gives any of you any clue as to his possible whereabouts, please call me. If you don't have my number, it's (555) 991-6226. This is not a joke—this is real. And if anyone is playing some kind of sick joke ... I swear.

Not dated, but arrival time of the letter was four days ago, in our mailbox. His letter:

You were away, gone to the August Stars & Cool Factory concert for two days. I should've gone with you. Wish you were with me now. I had an upset that first day you were gone, it was at work with the new asshole co-writer, doesn't matter. But wanted to be on my own for a couple hours.

I went to Bethley Side Road that night, for a long walk. Houses are pretty few and far between out there. It was just the massive sky above, the endless farms and fields and these lost, wandering roads. Not even any cars. I loved it. Just needed some space. And I loved the silence, where I could only hear things like the wind or the rustling of trees.

But I heard something else that night, something horrible in the serenity. It cut through all the surrounding infinity, and what I saw...

I was on my way back to my car, which I had parked further down the way a number of hours earlier, when all of a sudden this loud, long scream burst out of the far and wide silence. It sounded like the scream of a woman in terror. I was obviously startled and freaked. It didn't stop, but carried on, with only occasional efforts from the woman doing it to stop to catch her breath.

It was coming from a small house directly to my left. The odds of such a thing happening directly beside me in the empty country rather than further off on a distant road astounded me. Out in the middle of nowhere, I was right in the middle of a scene of freak!

In my fear I tried to spot exactly where in the house it was coming from, and I found the screaming to be coming from inside the garage. The lights were on in the garage but off in the rest of the house.

WHAT the hell.

My stomach began to flip. I didn't know what to do. This crazy scream went on and on like some nightmare that had no end. The woman inside that garage was terrified!

I decided to wait for a few moments to see if it would stop. I thought I might be able to hear her speak or say something and I'd know better what was going on.

She didn't stop—not for a moment. Except, like I said, to catch her breath.

I looked around—couldn't anyone else hear this? But there was no one else, no houses, no cars, nothing.

I swallowed. This had nothing to do with me, I told myself. Whoever or whatever was causing her to scream like that was none of my business. It would end eventually, and she would come out of it somehow, I thought. I would go home and call the cops, just to report it.

It had nothing to do with me, I had thought.

But now I'm not so sure.

I hurried towards my car. When I finally reached it, about a half mile down the road, I could still hear the high-pitched screams and even pain groping out into the whole massive world outside of the garage. I rolled up my window to shut it out. I decided again that when I got home or got otherwise to a phone, I would call the police.

I sped away, still hearing the faint screams following me as I drove off.

**

I didn't sleep that night. I couldn't read my book, either. Neither could I work on the things I had brought home from work. I had called the police, and they had gone out that same night to check things out, but reported back to me that they hadn't found a thing. There was nobody home at that house, and they found the garage empty, on a view through the side window. But that still hadn't comforted me—I was still worried about what I had heard.

I resolved to clean up the apartment until the sun would come up, after which point I would drive back to Bethley and pass by that small house to see that things were normal again.

I drove back to that country road shortly after sunrise and passed by that house.

It was silent.

Good, I thought.

...But it wasn't good. I needed to go back that night. Was it something that only happened when it was dark? I wanted to drive by at night, to see the lights turned off in the garage and hear the silence *then*. Lights off plus silence. If I could just see that, then maybe I had just imagined the whole thing.

I drove along the country roads that very night. All was silent as was usual, and that was exactly what I had wanted to hear. When I turned onto Bethley and came within a few miles of the small house, the country was still silent. Within one mile, there was silence still. Within a quarter mile, still nothing.

Soon I could see the small house ahead, barely seen in the country darkness.

Silence! Perfect!

As with the night before, the house had no lights on, not even at the end of the driveway.

But the light in the garage was on again. My stomach started to flip exactly as it had before.

I slowly pulled over to the side of the road, close to the house. Not directly in front of it, but a short distance away. I shut off my lights and killed the engine. I then waited in the car with the window partly open—just partly. A chilly breeze blew around and for a while all I heard was the shivering leaves of trees.

I noticed a small window on the south wall of the garage, the left side, with the garage light beaming out of it. It must have been the one the police had peered through the prior night. From my point of being in the car, I saw no evidence of motion coming from within the garage. There were no moving shadows, no changes in the light shining out the window. Neither did the streak of light beaming through the bottom of the garage's vehicle door change in the slightest way.

Not a single car had passed since I arrived. Nothing was happening. Nobody was home. The only motion was the rustling of the crops and the trees.

I thought about looking into the garage through that small window.

But I decided against it. The screaming was no more, so I figured I'd better just leave.

But I still had this curiosity eating me about what had happened in the garage that night. Maybe I was attached to it because I didn't do anything about it, when I should have. God only knew what was happening to that woman. I needed to find something of a clue—anything. Then maybe I could know what happened, and at least then leave it behind me.

I opened my door and stepped out onto the road. A gust of wind blew against me, almost pushing me back into the car. Quietly, I closed the car door and approached the small house.

I passed across the front lawn, and under a tree, with my attention super fixed on the small garage window...

When I reached it, I stood on my toes and looked through it...

It was empty.

Didn't make any sense.

It was fully lit and impressively clean and tidy. Rakes and shovels leaned against one wall inside, and along another wall a bicycle leaned against stacked boxes, but that was it.

Nothing.

But ... there was still something about it all. I was sure of it. The light was on in the garage, while all the other lights of the house were off. What did that mean?

Something was in the garage.

The idea freaked me out. And I should've turned around right then and there, got back in the car and went back home. But I didn't. And if I can't be where you are, honey, I so wish you were at least with me.

There's no one else here. I need to find people, anyone else around who might be able to

(The next part of my boyfriend's letter has been ripped off. Then it continues on a new page. Here below.)

I didn't know what it was, couldn't understand it, but I knew it was there—something was inside the garage.

I went over to the brown side door which led into the garage. I checked one more time to make sure that the rest of the place was quiet. It was. So I put my hand on the cold doorknob and turned it, slowly. I then opened the door ... quietly.

I stepped inside.

It was still empty. ...However, I still felt that something was in there! I could *feel* it. I didn't know what it was, but it was *in* the garage, *with* me...

I walked into the center of the garage...

All of a sudden the lights went out and the door closed shut. I freaked, ran for the door and fumbled around for the doorknob. I couldn't find it, was too dark. My heart began beating hard and I'm feeling all over for the door handle.

Then I found it, and turned it—but it was locked.

I started shouting and banging on the door. I yelled for whoever it was to let me out. I tried the doorknob again. Locked! I backed away from the door and then charged at it, throwing my shoulder at it. It didn't budge and my shoulder hurt. I grabbed the doorknob again and kicked at the door. I rammed my knee against it, but it was useless.

To my left was that small window. But I couldn't reach it, was too high. I felt around for the boxes which I had seen just earlier through the window, and tripped over something. The concrete floor was freezing, cold and hard. On my knees, I crawled through the blackness in the direction which the boxes were in. The window let in insufficient light but I knew the boxes were against the wall to its right. I found them, grabbed one and slid it over to the window. I got up and looked outside...

Everything outside was dead and dark. I began yelling for help and banging on the window. I punched at the glass but only hurt my fist. I pounded more on the glass and screamed as loud I could.

No response. I began to remember how solitary that house was, how alone and small it had appeared in the big country beneath the big sky.

In my daze I also recalled the screaming of the woman, how her screams emanated from that garage and reached out into all the empty space around and above, but reaching no one. I imagined my own screams echoing likewise. Echoing into space, from that garage.

Outside, I could see headlights of a car approaching.

Someone was coming—they would let me out!

But the headlights passed by and the outside fell back into darkness and starlight.

If only they could've heard me. But couldn't they hear me? I was screaming at the top of my lungs.

Maybe they would come back. Maybe they had heard it and they'd return the next night, like I did. I came back, so, so should they.

But I wasn't screaming like that woman had been. Why was she screaming like she was, endlessly and in terror? It was like something was being *done* to her or something...

I had to get out. I continued to shout and scream, banging on the glass.

Then the garage light suddenly flicked back on.

I froze.

My eyes still stared wide-eyed out the window, but my attention was behind me, on the space at my back.

Something was there, in the garage, that same thing ... with me!

I took my hands off the windowsill, and I turned around

His letter ends like this, so abruptly. Not even a period to end his sentence!

What happened? I don't know where he is!

I've alerted the officials since receiving this letter, as I said. Police, accompanied by myself, have located and gone to that small house on Bethley Side Road, right after I got this. We inspected the garage when no one was home and found nothing. Not the slightest clue. Even the dogs failed to pick up a scent. When the family who lives in that house returned home after an extended vacation, just yesterday, the police questioned them and combed the entire home, but they came up with nothing. Not a damn thing. Part of me doesn't believe them. Part of me does.

All we have is my boyfriend's strange letter.

I don't understand why he didn't say what happened to him, where he was or what he saw in the garage. Or why his letter was ripped.

He didn't even tell me if he was okay or not.

Like I said, if you have any info on his whereabouts or if this letter has stirred anything in your memory, call me right away.

And, like I said ... I'm not saying anything, but if this is some kind of sick joke, it's not funny. He wouldn't do anything like this to me. And neither would his friends.

I have to find him. Whenever he is, I want to be.

I'll be checking my mailbox every day.

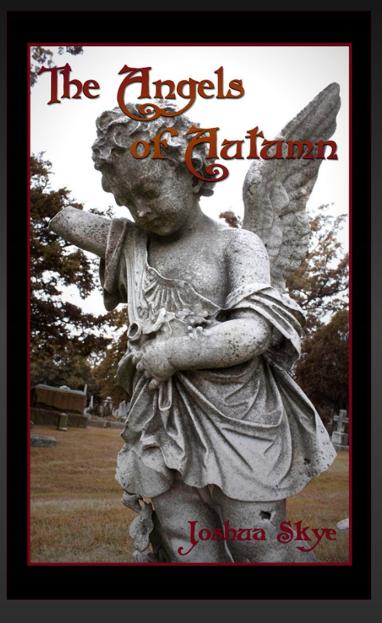
Sincerely, Mary Malone (555) 991-6226 **ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Wayne Haroutunian is a U.S. novelist, poet, screenwriter and short story writer. His fiction has appeared in The Sirens Call, Aphelion magazine, Antipodean SF magazine, and he has also received an Honorable Mention for a sci-fi novelette in the Writers of the Future Awards. One of his stories will be featured in an upcoming radio show. Readers can find his ebooks and stories on Amazon and major online retailers. His email is wayneharoutunian@gmail.com.

Twitter: <a>@wh author

Facebook: Wayne Haroutunian Author

The Angels of
Autumn
by Joshua Skye

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes



Naked Wings Mark Cassell

Another crow slid through the milky embrace of moonlight and crashed into the field. Many black bodies writhed in the ploughed earth. Their caws echoed, bouncing off the farmhouse, off the barns and the stables, and from the trees. Shrill and ringing.

Stephen squinted through the foliage. His hands pressed into the soil, and dew soaked his pajamas. Mom and Dad were still watching TV so most likely couldn't hear those crows. That noise had yanked him from sleep and curiosity sent him tiptoeing from the house. He'd be grounded for a week if caught.

More zigzagged from above, tumbling. They landed with a thump and a plume of dirt; dark lumps in the churned soil cawing ever-louder. Some laid sideways, others on their backs, all kicking tiny legs. Loose feathers puffed up, floating.

And more crows crashed down.

So much noise.

Every crow seemed to be suffering a seizure. Stephen had no idea what could cause this. Perhaps they had some disease, the poor things. He leaned forward, pushing his head through tangled branches. One whipped his face and he held it aside.

In a blur of dirt and flapping wings, their bodies throbbed as if expanding. Difficult to see beneath strained moonlight, but to Stephen it appeared as though each crow grew like an inflating beach ball. Those claws jerked, and still they cawed...cried. More feathers filled the air and lazily drifted away. Legs fattened, extended and thrashed.

The cries intensified into screams.

Stephen cupped his ears, and his heartbeat pulsed in his head. His breath snatched as he failed to understand.

Feathers fell away and the bodies became pale, bloated things. They squirmed. Naked wings scratched in the dirt. Raw skin glistened and stretched, wrinkled. Now completely featherless. Legs kicked...and was that an arm, like a baby's puffy limb?

Tiny hands with splayed fingers clutched for the moon.

Cigarette smoke drifted on the breeze: Dad.

Stephen's heart punched his ribcage and he fell back into the bushes. His hands slapped the ground, and sticks and stones raked his flesh. The screams tore through him as he watched mouths gape, the noise shrieking from tiny throats. Barely any louder than these screaming crows—babies, they were all now babies—Dad's voice crept toward him:

"Put me through to the maternity department."

More smoke drifted, more screams echoed.

"Hi, yes, we've had a delivery."

Stephen held his breath.

"Several dozen," Dad continued, "but we'd like to keep one... No, it would be our second... Nine years ago..."

The moon hid behind the clouds.

"...We called it Stephen."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Mark Cassell lives in a rural part of the UK with his wife and a number of animals. He often dreams of dystopian futures, peculiar creatures, and flitting shadows. Primarily a horror writer, his steampunk, dark fantasy, and SF stories have featured in several anthologies and ezines. His debut novel, *The Shadow Fabric*, is a supernatural horror available in paperback and digital.

Twitter: <u>@Mark Cassell</u>
Website: <u>http://www.beneath.co.uk</u>



Silky Edge of the Night Jon Jefferson

The black sedan cut its lights then pulled to a stop behind a copse of pine trees. In the cover of darkness he sought stealth over speed. Paid for his discretion and methods he didn't like to leave an easy trail.

Barry grabbed his tools from the backseat and strapped the belt to his waist and then hooked up the harness. He released the magazine of his .45 for a quick inventory then snapped it back into place. He hated to carry it, only did for emergencies. Way he saw it, if he had to use it he failed to perform at his best.

Professionalism and discretion, hallmarks of the profession that garnered some steep fees for his efforts. Only once, one time, he screwed up, pulled his gun on a job. He finished it of course, but returned most of the fee for the job. Didn't meet his standards, that's what he told the client.

A quick jog through the woods to arrive at the outer edge of the trailer park. Barry chuckled at the thought, who hides in a trailer park? It's where dreams go to die. But then, no one thinks to look for you there either.

In the end, hiding, life style choice, Barry didn't care. He didn't spend time questioning the merits of the job. Moral dilemmas got in the way of a clean shot. Worst thing a morality question could do on a job is cause him to hesitate. Hesitation in a kill or be killed world resulted in the latter.

The park was laid out in a figure eight pattern. A main road circled the park with a center road bisecting it. Trailers were on each side of the road, mostly double wides. The park owners invested in fancy street lights to give the place some old world charm. Haunting, soft light emanated from the lamps, like old world gas lamps.

The trailer he needed lay just beyond the edge of the woods. He scouted the location over the past few days to ensure access and then egress from the location. In order to insure as little fuss as possible he planned out every step of a job.

A quick look at his watch, told him he had a few minutes till midnight. Mr. Body habitually went to bed at a quarter to midnight. Barry wanted to give him a few more minutes. With good timing he could break into the trailer without waking his target.

"What ya doin' runnin around in the dark mister?" He jumped into the air, when a girl stepped around the shed behind him.

He leaned against the shed as his heart hammered against his chest. "Don't... sneak... up... on... people like that," he said as he caught his breath again. "You could get hurt."

The girl, young, her hair in pigtails, looked him up and down. "You probably shouldn't be sneaking around like this," she said. "Some of the people around here will call the cops at the drop of a hat."

"I'm not sneaking around," he said. "I was hoping to surprise a friend of mine. We haven't seen each other in a few years."

"You friends with Mr. Smith? My dad don't like him. My dad says, that he is a crazy hermit." She lowered her voice. "I think he is hiding from the cops or something. I don't even think Smith is his name."

"Maybe you should head on home," he said. "Isn't your mom worried about you wandering off like this?"

"Oh my mom don't care. She's at work right now anyway."

"Then who is taking care of you?"

"I take care of myself. Learned that a long time ago," she said. "Only person you can ever count on is yo'self anyway."

Cynical, so cynical, she couldn't be more than ten or so, he thought. He couldn't remember ever being that young but he wasn't that bad back then, maybe. The memories hit him, a flash through his brain, unexpected, quick.

His father had come home, drunk again. "Wake up boy," he said. "I said get up."

Barry rolled over to find his father standing over him. He held a bottle in one hand and a backpack in the other. "Wha'?" he asked as he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Get yer shit and get out..."

He blinked, looked around. The trailer park came back into focus. The memories, they weren't his. Where was the girl, he asked himself. He picked himself up from the ground and moved to cover behind the trailer. A quick scan told him he was alone again. "What the hell just happened," he said into the night. He wiped the sleep from his eyes and forced himself to focus on his target again.

Voices floated through the night air from inside the trailer. The words unintelligible but he could make out at least two voices inside the trailer. The side door, no light above it, he could slip through unseen and still dispatch the target inside.

But the girl, he would still need to find her. She saw his face, knew he was there to see 'Mr. Smith.' A soft breeze blew through the alley between trailers, no other movement suggested life around to worry about. She said her mother wasn't home. He would take care of her next. Wasn't his style to kill a child but sometimes the job needed him to step outside his comfort zone.

Barry slipped through the night to the side door and tested the latch. Unlocked, no barrier stood in his way.

"Aren't you going to knock?" The voice, the girl again, behind him.

He turned to see her at the base of the stairs. "I told you I wanted to surprise him." He kept his voice low.

"Now you're just bein' silly," she said.

Her voice, in conversational tone boomed in his ears. A wave of nausea hit him, vertigo brought him to his knees. The memory crashed on the shores of his psyche. His girlfriend had left him at the beach.

Gulls called and jeered at him as he watched out into the waves, tears bled down his cheeks. She not only wanted to see other men, she was sleeping with his brother. Her words a knife driven through his heart. The dagger of confession twisted and turned to the sound of crashing waves.

The memory again not his own. He fought to stand, pulled at the hand rail to the steps to lift himself from the ground. Though he fell to the ground he didn't feel broken or bruised, but the wind sent chills through his body as it dried the sweat.

A metallic, copper taste filled his mouth, his nose was plugged with the smell of it. Barry wiped away the sweat from his chin and neck and found his hand red with more than just his sweat. Trails of blood and sweat dribbled from the corners of his eyes and his ears.

The girl, gone again. He sat on the bottom step to catch his breath. They knew he was here, knew his intentions. The girl did it. Did she hunt him? The hunter now the hunted, when the prey changed the game without warning?

He pulled out his .45. Shoot her when she came back, a simple plan. He lost the element of surprise when she made her first attack. This had nothing to do with money anymore. The girl hurt him, attacked him when he was unprepared. Not this time. Barry chambered a round.

His body swayed with the wind as he stood. Vertigo held him in a loose grip but he fought it off. He looked up and down the alley between trailers but didn't see the girl, so he walked back to where he first saw her.

"You can't hide forever," he said. At the edge of the woods his vertigo stopped. His sour stomach returned to normal. The dim light in the trailer park remained calm, steady. He could see no movement in the darkness surrounding the trailer. "This is crazy," he said. "I'll finish the damn job but their paying double for this one. I don't care how messy it becomes." He jogged back to the trailer, eyes open for movement.

No sign of the girl's return, he slunk back to the side door of the trailer. The door still unlocked, no barrier to his entering. Now or never, he turned the knob and pushed the door open.

A light came down the hall from the front of the trailer but darkness met him from the master bedroom at the back end. Barry switched his .45 to his left hand and drew his K-bar with his right hand. The job might be messy but there was still a chance he could do it quiet.

He heard the drone of a television come from the front as he turned toward the master bedroom. No turning back, he thought as he moved with the shadows into the back room.

The target lay on the bed, unmoving but for the steady rhythm of his breathing. A quick cut with the K-bar on the sleeping form and he could slip back out again with no one the wiser.

"Took you long enough." She stepped from the closet further in the room. The smile, her smile, sent chills down his spine.

"Who are you?" he asked. The .45, he could raise it and fire in a blink, but he had to know.

"Just a girl," she said. "Isn't that obvious?"

Knuckles white on the grip of his gun, shoot her, shoot her, his internal voice screamed at him. He fought to raise his hand, to pull the trigger. His arm remained unresponsive.

She stepped closer to him, stepped closer without moving. So close, so very close, he could hear the gasping breaths that came from her lungs.

Chills wracked across his body as his flesh dimpled and puckered. "What are you?" he whispered.

She stretched out her arms and placed her hands on his temples. "I am the night," she said. Vertigo consumed him as he fell to the ground.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jon Jefferson writes Speculative fiction with forays into Noir and Bizarro. His stories have appeared in the 2013 Indies Unlimited Flash Fiction Anthology, and the Weird Tales Magazine web site. His work can also be found on Amazon and Smashwords.

Website: http://10thdaypublishing.com
Amazon Author page: Jon Jefferson

Shannon's Song Ken Goldman

"Such a pretty face, such a pretty dress. Such a pretty smile, such a pretty me!"

'I Feel Pretty' from West Side Story by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim

As the full moon shone through her bedroom window Malaya studied her little homemade doll in the pale light. Tonight seemed a good night for some magic. Grinning, she knew her modest foray into the world of the occult would do the trick. A few chants from some old book purchased on eBay, of all places, then a small spark of fire, and - - Booga Booga!! - - Shannon Rossi was toast. Figuratively speaking, of course.

Comprised mostly of popsicle sticks, yarn, and some torn bits of colored cloth, her makeshift effigy fell far short of a work of art. Excepting the doll's golden tresses plucked from Shannon's hair brush that Malaya had filched during gym class, the tiny replica in no way resembled the walking fashion plate that was Shannon Rossi. But that mattered not a bit. Malaya's spell would succeed because she wanted it to succeed, and faith was really all a good spell required. Tonight's sorcery needed no eye of newt nor a boiling cauldron, not so much as a single elongated pin punched into the doll's strategic places. Although Shannon truly deserved a healthy dose of ugly in her life, Malaya, still a novice at the craft, tempered her black magic to come in shades of grey.

In appearance Malaya Swain was the yang to Shannon's yin, the Goth beast to her adversary's fairy tale beauty. Malaya's coarse hair seemed a study in chaos soaked in ink, whereas Shannon's approached silken perfection bathed in sunshine. Malaya's body was a formless lump devoid of charm with no trace of femininity; Shannon's turned heads wherever she went. The two girls' habitual facial expressions could pass for the ancient Greeks' masks of Tragedy and Comedy, their dispositions the embodiments of darkness and light.

But Malaya could accept Shannon's loveliness if that attribute were her only grievance. After all, most girls at Carver High were far better looking, fairer complexioned, and significantly more slender than Malaya could ever hope to be. She had managed to accept those shortcomings as her draw of the Tarot cards, crappy as it was.

What Malaya could never accept was Shannon's infuriating demeanor, the way she pretended not to notice how every senior boy creamed his jeans for her. Shannon feigned a complete obliviousness to those who stood in awe of her ability to balance both a grade point average and a social life that made the 'A' List. As if her demure performance in Carver's hallways were not enough, she carried that ability onstage where her vocal talents could send the entire student body into a religious hush that culminated in rapturous applause. The girl seemed a walking cliché whose perpetual cheerleader smile suggested that throughout her seventeen years Miss Shannon Rossi probably never had experienced an affliction that exceeded a broken nail. Her flawlessness drove her polar opposite into a daily rage, although simply carrying out violence on Carver High's golden girl would have proven unchallenging for anyone with even an apprentice's skill in the dark craft. Malaya Swain had other plans for her comely nemesis.

This spell would work. Malaya felt certain of it. Last month her simple chant had caused some mangy alley cat to awaken from her nap and stroll, with eyes wide open, directly into the path of the mid-day traffic. It was a little sad, actually. As it turned out, the creature did not really have nine lives. She'd had only the one, and it ended fast and sloppily beneath the wheels of an old Chevy. As a second litmus test, last week Malaya had constructed a small doll that resulted in her younger sister suffering a blister on her ass the size of a golf ball. For days little Mitzi could not sit down without leaking puss through her Barbie underpants. But that spell would prove kid stuff compared to what Malaya had planned for the girl with the golden locks and the equally golden voice.

That magnificent voice Shannon would display tonight at Carver's opening night presentation of 'West Side Story.' She had snared the lead, of course, playing the star-crossed Puerto Rican Maria whose love for her Italian-American Tony dangerously crossed over the line. There was something deliciously ironic in that.

Malaya instinctively reached for her brush to do what she could with her hair. She had to make do with Shannon's soft bristled hair brush because she had lost her own. Probably it had been stolen in gym class, and maybe initially she had taken Shannon's as a little tit for tat. Illogical, maybe, but the girl's pilfered honey colored strands would prove useful.

"Booga Booga, bitch," Malaya muttered through her smile, then addressed the doll. "Now let's do that voodoo that you do so well ..."

She held the ugly little doll before the mirror. With the ancient book in her other hand and the moon illuminating her face, she recited from one of the frayed pages.

"Moon magic, spin and weave, mirror magic, see, believe ..."

She rattled the doll in the moonlight, spit on it.

"Summon the Tarot, the bones, the runes

Chant only in rhyme and simple tunes

Earth and water, air and fire

Work thee now to my desire ..."

Poking the doll's chest, Malaya added her personal touch to the mix.

"From root to tree, tadpole to toad,

Sing about feeling pretty, Shannon Rossi,

Sing, 'till in blood I see your lungs explode."

She tossed the Shannon doll into her wastepaper basket, lit a match, and watched the grotesque little replica ignite. As it turned to lumpy ash she smiled. The spell was as good as done, and she couldn't help singing to herself.

"I am music and I write the songs ... bitch."

The school auditorium filled quickly. A large placard alongside its main door read 'West Side Story.' Below the show's famous logo of dancing street kids there appeared in bold letters **As Maria**: **Shannon Rossi** near an 8 x 10 glossy of the radiant star smiling in that infuriating way she had, so that even those stuck in the back rows could see every porcelain tooth.

Malaya didn't go inside right away. She really wanted to watch only one number anyway. She could see just fine from the back when Shannon would go into her 'I Feel Pretty' number.

"Don't bet on feeling too pretty later," she muttered to the photograph.

There was a full house tonight. What could be better? Thirty minutes into it, the school play seemed a hit. Jets and Sharks fought and danced and sang in the streets, while studly Tony kissed the lovely Maria upon her baloney. The audience laughed, clapped, even cried in all the right places. Standing in the rear Malaya almost felt like joining in with the two romantic leads to offer her own chorus of 'Tonight, Tonight.'

Wearing a dark wig that allowed her to pass as the Puerto Rican Maria, Shannon seemed in fine voice this evening, her singing powerful and clear as she performed her 'I Feel Pretty' number. As expected, she received thunderous applause. But to everyone's surprise after the applause dissipated to a few rogue claps Shannon continued singing as if some backstage demon had cued her to go for a second take. The three-girl chorus that had provided her number's back-up stared at her, then at each other. Carver's orchestra had already stopped playing and Mr. Donahue seemed bewildered whether he should raise his baton to start them up again. But the star-crossed Maria kept right on singing about how she felt 'so pretty and witty and gay.' A few cast members tried approaching Shannon, but she paid no attention to them. She kept singing, singing, and singing some more. One stage hand dimmed the lights. It didn't matter.

Shannon's song metamorphosed into shrieks. The tendons in her throat turned plum colored, pushing through the soft flesh as if she had digested barbed wire.

" ... AND I PITY ANY GIRL WHO ISN'T ME TODAY ..."

Malaya muttered, "I wouldn't bet on that."

"...IT'S ALARMING HOW CHARMING I FEEEEEEEEEL ..."

("Sing, Shannon, sing your guts out ...")

Gagging on the lyrics Shannon coughed, spitting out the words of her song even as she choked. Retching fleshy chunks of goo, blood spilled from her mouth. It dribbled down her chin in

thick rivulets forming a small crimson puddle on center stage.

Malaya kept smiling even as she waited for the audience's reaction. When finally throughout the theater the screams came she managed to slink out of the auditorium, her wide grin that of the cat with the canary fully inside her belly. Maybe she would be wise to hide out somewhere should anyone suspect her unrestrained joviality. She ducked inside the Girls' rest room to compose herself. Two girls she recognized from gym class, Shannon's vacuous pals, stood by the mirror.

"Hey, look who's here! It's Melanoma Stain!!"

"What's shakin', Goth girl? You trying out for the part of The Joker?"

Giggling like silly assholes, was what cheerleader types did best, wasn't it? Alicia Myers and Heather Daniels belonged to Shannon Rossi's clique, probably hiding inside the Girls' room while getting wasted. Malaya thought she detected the faint smell of weed.

"A girl has to pee sometimes," Malaya mumbled, still unable to wipe the tell-tale smirk from her face. She touched her mouth to see if it had disappeared. It hadn't. She caught a look at herself in the mirror. Her leer had transformed her mouth into a festering wound. "Your friend Shannon's number was a real show stopper," Malaya said, unable to hide her snigger. "The audience is still shouting her praises. You can hear them from here."

Alicia spoke right into Malaya's face, her breath a bit too minty fresh, which of course was a dead giveaway of her recent activities. "Well, you keep smiling, Melanoma. It makes you a little less ugly." She turned to Heather and both girls laughed long and loud. Malaya laughed too, but she had no idea why. The two left her standing before the mirror still chuckling to herself.

"Screw them," she whispered to her image. She always suspected that whole cheerleading squad was a little more than friends. "Screw that whole bitchy Dipsy Chick crew." She looked at her mirrored reflection, snickered at the sight. The truth was that she did look a little like The Joker. Maybe the time had come to knock off all this retarded grinning. She couldn't go back out there chuckling like some idiot after the unfortunate incident that had happened onstage. Malaya really didn't feel like laughing any more, but still ...

She studied her mirrored reflection more closely.

"What the --?"

Malaya tugged at her lips, pulled at her mouth with two fingers on either side. Her moronic expression seemed frozen on her face. But nothing funny was going on here. Nothing funny at all.

"Damn! Damn!!"

That smell ... those damned' giggles ... something burning ... something close by ...

Malaya's senses tracked the smell of smoke to the trash can. Sure enough, something lay smoldering inside. She cupped her hands beneath the sink's faucet, spilled water upon the object inside the can, and reached in. Stifling another uncontrollable chortle she looked hard at the object she held.

The dripping thing seemed a makeshift doll made of popsicle sticks, and upon its tennis ball head appeared a huge grotesque smile painted in thick blood red lipstick. She recognized the doll's black wiry hair, remembered her hair brush that she had lost days before.

Malaya laughed. Trying hard to stop, she laughed again.

Heather.

... and Alicia.

Shannon's good pals!

They were giggling ... giggling ...

And now so was she!

(Booga Booga!!)

If she could have wiped the smile from her face Malaya might have screamed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ken Goldman, former Philadelphia teacher, is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. His stories have appeared in over 755 publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia and have received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror. He has written five books: YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!!, DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, STAR-CROSSED, DESIREE, and OF A FEATHER.

Amazon: <u>Kenneth C. Goldman</u> Goodreads: <u>Kenneth C. Goldman</u>

Prelude T.S. Woolard

Terror.

That scream. It echoes off the dense walls of the dark labyrinth, reverberating in my chest, bouncing, banging, and rattling my rib cage against tender lean muscle. A metallic squeal teased at its core, like an ungreased piston shrieking. I became petrified, still, afraid to move.

The noise, as always, came with a demon's footsteps backing it up. Just like the scream, the thumps ricocheted off the stone and dominated the air. The only thing more domineering was the feeling of fear. Layer upon layer of doom and dread attacked those of us being held captive. My cellmate, Roger, urinated through his pants. A stream of yellow liquid leaked out on the cement floor. His teeth chattered and he shook. His reaction to what came down the corridor wasn't nearly as violent as the outcome.

The demon's heel knocks stopped short of our cell. A rubber and ammonia smell lingered in front of my nose, causing me to be nauseated. The bitter taste of stomach acid burned the back of my throat.

"You Trailer?" the demon asked through my neighbor's cell door in a low, husky growl. "Scott Trailer?"

A whimper issued from the cell.

The demon produced a set of heavy iron shackles. Scott stuck his hands through the cell bars, and the demon locked them around the inmate's wrists. The man cried the entire time. It was sad to watch, but I was glad he chose my neighbor and not me. I didn't move, hoping I would blend in to the background.

"Please, sir," Scott pled, "you don't need to do this. I—"

"Shut up!" The demon jerked the chain connecting the restraints. The crying man's face slammed into the cell bars.

Blood gushed from Scott's, now, crooked nose. A shiny swollen lump began forming on his brow, closing his right eye.

The demon chuckled, a tendril of smoke leaking from mouth. "Cry now," he hissed. He unlocked the cell and pulled the battered inmate out.

Scott fell to his knees and sobbed. The demon turned to look at the man on the floor. He growled at his softness. Coddling cry babies on their last walk down the dank, moist hallway pissed him off.

"What now?"

The bloodied man tried to say something, but incoherent sobs came out. The big, black boot

of the demon struck Scott's sternum. The air exploded from his lungs with a grunt of pain.

"It's time to meet the devil." The demon dragged Scott on the ground as he spluttered and gasped for breath.

The heavy door at the end of the corridor shut with a loud bang. I spun to face my piss-stained cellmate. His knees wobbled so that it looked like his whole body had convulsions.

"Who is next, you think?" I asked. My insides shook like my cellmate's knees. It frightened me to feel the fear I hadn't realized but my core was aware of. It snuck up on me. And when it took control, I couldn't take it back.

I threw up on Roger's puddle of pee. Chunks of undigested slop splattered on his bare feet and ankles. He saw the sludge and produced his own flow of vomit. We were in Hell, the Hell written about millenniums ago on slate tablets and brought down from caves and worshipped for years. Now we faced the devil. He was here, and judged us for what we were.

The scream echoed through the labyrinth again, and both my cellmate and I fell to the floor as though we'd been shot. The demon thudded towards us. Thing only thing pounding harder than his heels was my heart.

"Jasper Motzawicz," called the demon through the cell door.

I didn't respond.

"I called you," he warned.

I rolled over. I knew my cellmate wouldn't fight the demon, especially since there were two other demons flanking him. Plus, it would be pointless to do so. It would only get me hurt before meeting the devil, like Scott Trailer.

"It's time for you to meet the devil." He shackled my wrist through the bars like he had with Scott.

Tears rolled down my cheeks as the demons escorted me to the door at the end of the hallway. As one of the other demons opened the door, I heard the scream of the hinges for the final time.

Gray moonlight carpeted the ground outside. The demon shoved me forward. My legs grew weaker with each step and my tears grew larger.

More demons stood around in cubed formations. They faced the devil, who stood high above everyone on an elevated platform. They wore uniforms with funny looking crosses on armbands and their breast pockets, and shot sideways glances at me when I was ushered before the devil.

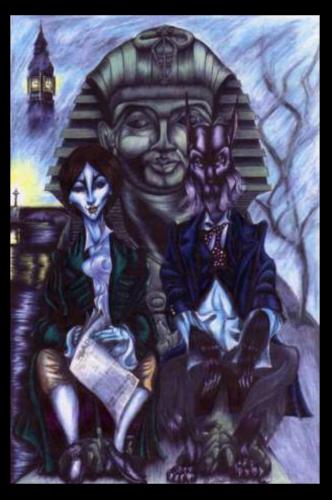
The demon kicked the back of my leg, making me fall to my knees in front of the platform. The devil's beady eyes stared at me with cold distain for my kind, and his queer little mustache lay upon his lip like a dead caterpillar.

"Should the life of Jasper Motzawicz be spared by the Third Reich?" asked the demon.

The devil smiled when he shouted, "Nein!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his wife and five Jack Russell Terriers. For more of his work look for Indiana Horror Review 2014, and Ghosts: Revenge by jwkfiction, Undead Legacy by J. Ellington Ashton Press, The Sirens Call 'eZines #17 & #18, and his short story collection, Solo Circus.

Twitter <u>@TSWoolard</u>
Blog: <u>tswoolard.wordpress.com</u>





HERE BE

DRAGONS

ILLUSTRATIONS AND CONCEPT ARTWORK

BY FANTASY ARTIST

GLENN JAMES

"A True Talent for Darkness"

(Poet Fergus McGonigal)

BEWITCHING AND ORIGINAL WORKS BY A UNIQUE ARTIST



email at: glennjames@gmjames.co.uk online at: www.gmjames.co.uk

The Clearing D.S. Ullery

"What the hell was that?"

Jacob rubbed his eyes to get the sleep out of them. Blinking, he looked over his shoulder at his wife. Barbara stared back with wide eyes. Her lower lip was trembling and even in the gloom, he could tell her normally robust cheeks had grown several shades paler.

Jacob shifted inside their shared sleeping bag, unzipping it from around his legs and turning over to reach for the alarm clock they had packed for the trip. It was an older model, a classic windup with a small hammer that ricocheted between two bells fastened to the top. Not the most pleasant of sounds to wake up to, but it was portable and didn't require batteries.

The clock informed him it was half past three and, given the tent was dark, he guessed that meant three in the *morning*. As in anti meridian, otherwise known as the time when even God probably slept. Cursing under his breath, Jacob sat up and turned himself around, being careful not to accidentally plant an errant foot into his wife's stomach as he turned to face her.

"What's going on, Barb?" Jacob asked, trying to keep in mind she wasn't as accustomed to roughing it in the outdoors as he was. "It's three thirty in the morning. You – we – should be asleep."

"Shhh!" Barbara hissed, placing her index finger against her lips. "Listen."

A small sigh escaped him and Jacob immediately regretted it when he saw anger flare up behind her eyes.

"Don't you come at me like that, Jacob Arthur Paulson," she chided. "This isn't like before. I really did hear something."

Jacob was contemplating the best way to tell her that, yes, this was exactly and precisely another variation on her aversion to anything that didn't resemble their comfortable suburban environment, when a bone chilling shriek shattered the quiet of the early morning forest. His skin turned cold as waves of goose pimples rose along his arms and legs, accompanied by a thousand tiny hairs standing at attention.

"The fuck?" Jacob gasped, staring at Barbara incredulously. "Is that what you heard?"

Barbara nodded. "That's the second time I've heard it. The first was just before you woke up."

The sound pierced the night once more, sending a fresh tide of gooseflesh to race across Jacob's skin. His wife shivered, her cheeks losing the last of whatever color they had managed to retain. The two of them exchanged a look of mutual unease.

"It sounds like someone's hurt," Barbara said. "Maybe another camper got injured out there?" She framed it as a question, as if hoping Jacob would provide a reasonable explanation.

"I didn't recall seeing anyone when we hiked up the trail earlier," he replied. "The lot was empty when we pulled in. I remember that distinctly." The campsite was only accessible by a footpath which wound up the side of the hill it occupied. All vehicles had to park in a lot made available at the base, a solid twenty minute sojourn from where they had pitched their tent.

"Maybe someone arrived after we got here and went for a walk," Barbara said. "Didn't you say you enjoyed taking hikes on the trail in the moonlight?"

Jacob nodded. She had a point. There was a second campsite on the other side of the hill and the trail ran through that as well. There was also a full moon tonight. If another group of campers had arrived at the other site, it was a distinct possibility one of them had decided to take an early morning stroll and somehow sustained an injury.

The scream ruptured the night yet again, strengthening Jacob's resolve. Whatever was happening, someone clearly needed help and sitting here wasn't going to get anything done. He rooted around next to the sleeping bag and found his jeans, slipping them on, followed by his hiking

boots, which he retrieved from their station just outside the tent flap.

Barbara watched her husband dress in silence, looking scared. As Jacob began to push himself out of the tent, she grabbed his shoulder. "Do you want me to come with you?" she asked.

Jacob considered it for a moment, then shook his head.

"No," he said, "there's no need for both of us to go wandering around out there this time of the morning. Besides, I have more experience out here and I'll move faster on my own." Jacob reached into his front pocket and fished out his cell phone, turning it on in the faint hope that he'd be able to pick up a signal. The tiny screen flared to life and Jacob grimaced when he saw that he had no bars.

"Well, calling the local ranger station is out," he told her. "I'm going to grab the machete out of my pack, take one of the flashlights and see if I can find whoever is in trouble out there. When I do, I'll tend to them as best as I can then come back here."

"Why do you need the machete?"

"Because, for all I know, someone might have gotten attacked by an animal and I'd rather not be defenseless if it's still around," Jacob explained. "Besides, it's possible that whoever it is went off the trail and is in the actual woods. I might need to hack some branches out of the way to help them."

He stepped out into the cool, June morning. By mid-day, when the sun was glaring down on them from a cloudless blue sky, it would be hot, possibly in the nineties. But even during the height of summer, early morning on the hill was a chilly affair.

Jacob shivered, scanning the area for his backpack, which he had been forced to leave outside the tent upon realizing there was no room for it. He spotted the pack laying on its' side near the ashen remains of their long-since extinguished fire and walked over to it.

After rummaging through a change of clothes, a towel, a portable shaving kit in a snap case and a thermos, Jacob at last found what he had been looking for. He withdrew a two foot machete encased in a sheath. Then he walked back toward the tent.

"What's up?" Barbara asked as Jacob entered.

"I'm gonna take the mag light," he said, lifting the foot of the sleeping bag and examining the floor beneath."Do you remember where I put it?"

"It's over here," she said, lifting up her jeans, revealing the immediately recognizable shape of the flashlight lying underneath. "I put it over here so it wouldn't accidentally slide underneath us earlier when were...well, you know."

Despite the current circumstances, a small smile played on Jacob's lips. After eight years together, his wife still succumbed to modesty when mentioning sex, even if he was the only one present. It was one of the quirks he absolutely loved about her.

Barbara handed him the flashlight and he switched it on, the brilliant magnesium shine illuminated the interior of the tent. Keeping the light on, Jacob stepped outside again, aiming the light towards the ground. Twisting the lens, he was able to adjust the brightness and width of the beam to his liking. With that done, he looked back over his shoulder at his wife.

She was kneeling in the opening of the tent, wearing her favorite blue pajamas, holding the flap open. She stared at Jacob with eyes alight with worry and more than a little fear. Guilt flared in the pit of his stomach at the sight. Coming here had been his idea. Barbara, who was the original city girl at heart, would much rather have gone away to a resort or even a hotel in a place they had never been before. Her presence was part of an effort to do more things with him that he enjoyed. He regretted that their first camping trip together was host to such bizarre events.

The haunting cry of pain sounded again. Being outside this time, Jacob found it easier to pinpoint the direction from which it originated. West, further down the trail. Whoever it was, they

sounded fairly close, too.

"Don't worry," he told her with a wink, "I'll be back soon." Then he began walking towards the trail.

The combination of the flashlight beam and the full moon made navigating the path an easier proposition than Jacob had expected, allowing him to make good time. He was grateful. Even with the machete hanging in its sheath from his belt, he was uneasy. Other than the unknown person crying out into the night, there was nothing but forest and whatever *lived* in the forest for miles. Being out of the tent this late gave him the creeps.

As if responding to his thoughts, the agonized wail barreled out of the night again. It was much closer now, coming from somewhere off to Jacob's left. He shifted the light in that direction and something unusual about the path caught his eye. It took him a second to realize that the trail broke off here, opening into the mouth of a smaller footpath which curved in a downward incline.

Jacob approached the spot and lifted the light. He found himself peering down a small slope, which he estimated ran for about four yards. At the bottom was a small, flat clearing where neither grass nor tree had taken root.

There was a body lying there.

"Hey down there!" Jacob called, shining the light on the figure. "How badly are you hurt? Do you think you can move?"

There was no reply, but it seemed as if the figure did shift his or her arms and legs.

Shit, Jacob thought, they probably can't answer.

He careful traversed the incline. When he reached the bottom, he shone the light on the figure again. It appeared to be a man. Jacob wondered if perhaps the stranger had accidentally stepped off the path and over the incline without realizing it was there and tumbled down. Even with such bright moonlight, a wanderer not familiar with these woods could find themselves disoriented at night.

Jacob reached the figure and knelt down next to him, reaching out and giving him a small nudge. "Hey, mister," he said softly, "Can you hear m-"

He never finished the sentence. Intense pain - a piercing agony more intense than anything he had ever experienced - lit every nerve ending in his body with the sensation of burning. Jacob shrieked, a primal bellow of horror and suffering which reverberated across the clearing and through the forest, causing things nocturnal and unseen to skitter off amongst the trees, startled.

He pulled his hand back, only to discover it wouldn't move. His fingers were held fast by a clear, viscous paste that had begun to seep out of the figure. The horrible fluid surged across the back of Jacob's hand and up his arm, dissolving his flesh as it crawled towards his shoulder. Through the pain, Jacob watched, horrified, as his skin and muscle disintegrated into an organic soup that intermingled with the translucent mass. In that same, grisly moment he realized the body had no features. It had the form and size of a human being, but no details.

The word *decoy* fleetingly occupied Jacob's mind as the figure he had believed to be an injured camper began to twist and bend. The limbs shriveled up into the torso. Its' stomach swelled like a balloon that had been overinflated, eventually rupturing with a loud, liquid pop. Instead of internal organs or blood, a thick tendril slithered out of the cavity.

Jacob, no longer able to move, watched as the tentacle wriggled toward him. It rose, balancing on itself, reminding him of a snake about to strike. The tip of the ghastly appendage split open into a pair of fleshy flaps, each lined with small, sharp teeth. It attached itself to his head, just above his ear. He could feel those teeth puncturing his skull. He could hear the low thump as it began to suck him clean from the inside out.

Jacob's eyes followed the tentacle back to the ruined body. Something dark and squat was there now, using the tentacle to drink him up. A pair of alien emerald eyes peered back at him.

Then he saw nothing.

Barbara slipped on the plaid flannel shirt, keeping her attention on the campsite just beyond the tent. Next she snapped the fly shut on the jeans she had wriggled back into a minute earlier. Finally she tied her shoelaces.

She searched the tent, locating the other light they had brought with them. It was a small, portable oil lamp Jacob had insisted they bring in case the batteries to the flashlight gave out.

Lighting the wick, Barbara held the lamp out in front of her and exited the tent. The terror she had been experiencing since hearing her husband's shriek of pain was clearly etched across her face. At that moment, she wished she could be anywhere but up on this hill.

When she had heard the first of Jacob's cries, she had assumed it was the same person he had ventured out to assist. But the second time that agonized howl had rolled across the forest at her, she picked up on the unmistakable tenor of her husband's voice. Something had happened, possibly – likely, even- the same something that had befallen whomever Jacob had been attempting to help. There was nothing else to be done about it under the circumstances. She had to find her husband.

Barbara reached the beginning of the trail and raised the lamp a little higher, so the glow would shine further across the path. She began to walk down carefully. She wasn't as experienced with the outdoors as her husband, but she thought if she kept her pace steady and took care to step cautiously, she could manage.

A few yards in, the scream echoed from down the trail. It was alarmingly close. Startled, Barbara glanced in the direction of the noise and saw the opening where the trail branched off. Approaching it carefully, she leaned forward and looked down the incline, seeing the clearing below.

Her heart skipped a beat when she spotted the figure lying prone in the center of the clearing. The build was too familiar, that shock of black hair too close for it to be anyone else but Jacob. He seemed to be shifting ever so slightly, as if he were trying to move, but couldn't. Maybe he had taken a spill down the slope and broken something.

Steeling herself for what might await, Barbara began to climb down.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — D.S. Ullery has had horror stories published in *Sirens Call Ezine*, *Disturbed Digest, Plasma Frequency Magazine*, the collections *When Red Snow Melts* and *Journals of Horror* and at HalloweenForeverMore.com, among others. He is an affiliate member of the Horror Writer's Association and lives in Lake Worth, Florida with his reasonably psychotic feline roommate, a black cat named Jason, who was born on Friday the 13th.

Facebook: <u>Duane Ullery</u>
Twitter: <u>@DSUllery</u>



Valentine Michael Wombat

Such a perfect blue, those eyes. Gareth gazed into them, certain that she was the one. The corners of her faultless mouth dimpled. He stroked her waist, squeezed her fingers with his other hand as they swayed to the seductive rhythm of 'Moonlight Serenade'. As the music ended, he brushed her ear with his lips.

"Will you be my Valentine?" he whispered.

"If you'll be mine," she smiled, those amazing eyes twinkling.

"Come up to my room?"

She bit her lip, and glanced nervously at the other dancers, as if they might have heard. She nodded.

"But come to mine. I shall relax more. And only for a quiet drink."

She gave a stern look. He had better not frighten her with over-enthusiasm.

"I cannot promise not to kiss you, you have beguiled me so. We will stay here, if you feel safer"

Marian dimpled one side of her tempting mouth in a wry grin and raised a mischievous eyebrow.

"Perhaps just one kiss."

Bingo. He had been right to target this shy little wallflower rather than one of the more confident women here. An innocent conquest was far more exciting.

Marian took his hand and gazed up at him. He led her between the gyrating couples and out to the wide staircase. Her ball gown rustled tantalisingly. He pictured what her legs might look like above those delicate ankles, and thoughts of what lay higher set his pulse racing. He would love to be the first explorer of those hidden hills and valleys.

She paused at her door.

"I'm not one of those easy girls, you know," she said, quietly.

"That's why I fell for you, darling. Your purity of spirit." Blah blah blah.

Her room was luxurious; radiogram, sofa, even a bar. Bedroom to the right, he noted.

"Can you find some decent music?" Marian asked, trembling. "I can't work the radio at all."

The machine hummed softly as it warmed up. He found a station playing swing music, all the while gazing at her slight figure, hands clasped in front of her like a shield. Time to clinch the deal.

"Marian," he said. She lifted her eyes like a timid doe. "I don't want you to feel compelled to do anything that you don't want." *Oh yeah, lay it on, boy.* "But I have fallen deeply for you. Fate arranged our meeting on this special night. The night of true love, of Saint Valentine."

She gave a little smile, and relaxed her bare shoulders.

"Turn the music up, please," she said. "It relaxes me."

Excellent. He would have her this night, whether she wanted it or not, and he did not want anyone to hear her screams. He twisted the dial and Benny Goodman filled the room.

"Would you..."

"Anything, my Valentine."

"Would you make us a drink? While I..." she gestured behind her, to the bedroom. He nodded, and began to mix drinks at the bar. Behind him Marian stepped into the bedroom, babbling nervously.

"Do you know much about Saint Valentine?"

"No, I'm afraid not. Do you?"

"Some," she said, lifting the baseball bat from the bed.

"Tell me."

She eased off her shoes and stepped back through the door.

"Saint Valentine was actually two men, joined into one legend."

"Really? How fascinating." Jesus, he couldn't wait to shut up her babble.

She crossed the room, the deep carpet tickling her toes. "They both met the same end. Now you are my Valentine."

She swung the bat violently into his right leg, shattering the bones of his knee. He crumpled with a scream, writhing on the floor. Benny Goodman picked up the tempo.

"They were beaten with clubs," she explained, arcing the bat to shatter his other knee. She thrust the end of the bat hard into his genitals.

"Of course, that's not what killed them," she continued calmly, swinging the bat above her head and down hard across his stomach. He vomited, and sobbed.

"The clubs merely immobilised them, like this," she explained, and with a cheerful smile splintered bones in both his arms.

"No," she said, taking a knife from the bar. "What killed them was being beheaded alive."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — A Yorkshireman living in rural Lancashire, Michael Wombat is a man of beard. He has a penchant for good single-malts, inept football teams, big daft dogs and the diary of Mr. Samuel Pepys. He is an indie author of seven books, editor of two anthologies, and his short stories have appeared in several other collections. His tale "Descent" was shortlisted for the HNS Award 2014.

Twitter: @wombat37
Blog: https://cubicscats.wordpress.com/

Jonquil DJ Tyrer

"Oh, my! I didn't imagine I'd see this again," said Sylvia, lifting a doll up out of one of the boxes we'd found in the attic. Her tone wasn't one of delight and she held it at arm's length.

"Yours?" I asked. I didn't like it. The doll was about two feet tall and wore a faded yellow dress. It had a yellow bonnet pulled tightly about a white porcelain face that was virtually featureless: there had been no attempt to model features and those painted on had been almost wholly worn away. I found that blank white porcelain mask quite unpleasant. I couldn't imagine a child cuddling it.

"Yes," Sylvia replied, as if unwillingly admitting an embarrassing truth. "Well, it was my great-grandmother's first, then my grandmother's and my mother's, before it passed to me. I never really liked it." She shuddered a little.

"I can't say I blame you," I said. "That face – if I can call it that – is absolutely ghastly."

She laughed, a little mirthlessly, and said, "It used to sit on a shelf in my bedroom, opposite my bed, and I always felt as if it were watching me. I was glad when I was able to leave home and leave it behind, if I'm honest." She sighed and lowered it back into the box. "Obviously, Mum couldn't throw it away... I suppose I shouldn't... I mean, it has history..."

We didn't have any children, so there was no chance yet of it being passed down a generation.

"Jonquil," said Sylvia, suddenly.

"Sorry?" I wiped a trickle of sweat from my nose. This was hot work in this weather.

"Jonguil. That was what it was called. I suddenly remembered."

"Jonquil? Isn't that a shade of yellow?"

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"Well, it would make sense; the dress, I mean," I added, when she looked at me in confusion.

"Oh, yes." She seemed a little dazed.

"You okay?" I asked her.

"Yeah." She didn't sound it. Sylvia had been a bit off-kilter since her mother died and the task of clearing her family home had been quite a challenge, but she'd seemed to have got on top of it. But, finding her childhood doll seemed to have upset her equilibrium once more.

"If you want to get rid of it," I said after a brief pause, "you can. You don't have to cling to the past if you don't want to: nobody is going to judge you; I certainly won't."

"It's so old..."

I shrugged. "Keep it. Bin it. Put it away in a box. It's up to you, darling."

I couldn't imagine being so affected by a toy. I'd kept quite a few of my toys out of sentimentality, but had never really invested them with any more import than that. The toys I didn't want, I'd given away, sold or binned, without a second thought. If one had bothered me like that doll seemed to bother Sylvia, I would've binned it – probably after smashing it.

"You don't have to decide now," I told her, seeing that she was still sitting there indecisively. "Leave it in the box, put it to one side and decide later." We had plenty more boxes to sort, anyway.

Sylvia nodded, shoved the box aside and got to work on the next one, although she still seemed out-of-sorts.

A crash of thunder woke me. It had been humid and now the weather had broken. My eyelids felt glued down.

Sylvia screamed and my eyes tore open. I couldn't see anything in the darkness.

"Wha-?" I mumbled.

Before she could reply, the lightning flashed again and I saw what had startled her: the doll, Jonquil, was seated on the mantle above the fireplace.

"Did you put it there?" she asked me, tugging at the sleeve of my pyjama top.

I shook my head automatically, then thought to say, "No."

There was another flash of lightning. The doll looked ghastly in the momentary flash of stark light. Then, when the room was plunged back into darkness, I found myself wondering what the doll was doing in the dark: as if a doll could do anything. Yet, just then, it seemed quite plausible it might do something. After all, if Sylvia hadn't placed it there, and I didn't believe she had, then how had it gotten there? I told myself that one of us had sleepwalked and put it there, but as the lightning flashed once more and thunder cracked, the sight of the doll made me doubt myself and I shivered at the thought.

"Please, will you get rid of it?" she asked in a childish whine.

I switched the bedside lamp on, depriving the doll of much of its spookiness, and rolled out of bed. I walked over to the fireplace and took the doll down from the mantle.

I stood for a moment, wondering what to do with it. I decided to throw it away: there was a big wheelie bin outside the kitchen door. I went down and dumped it in there, and took a loose brick that was lying on the patio nearby and put it on top to hold own the lid. I felt a little foolish doing it, but I just knew I had to. I then spent several minutes checking all the doors and windows were locked, telling myself it was in case an intruder had placed it there, before returning to bed.

"Thank you," Sylvia murmured. She had kept the light on and had a nervous, wide-eyed look upon her face.

I told her what I'd done and she seemed relieved, although I thought I detected a hint of embarrassment behind her relief.

"You can sleep safely," I told her and she gave me a wan smile. "Goodnight."

Eventually, the storm had moved away and we fell asleep. I was awakened when Sylvia screamed again. I sat bolt upright in confusion. Her face a pallid mask, she was pointing a shaking finger at the mantelpiece: Jonquil was sitting there again.

I swore and leapt out of bed. Dashing across the room, I swung back my arm and swept the doll to the floor.

I looked down at it. Its blank face was shattered and a dark liquid oozed from out of the tracery of cracks. I told myself it was some sort of oil, although I couldn't imagine why it contained it, yet I couldn't help but think how much the liquid looked like blood oozing from a wound.

"Get rid of it! Get rid of it!" Sylvia was shrieking hysterically, the sheet pulled up over her head as if to ward the doll away.

"Okay," I said, staring uselessly down at the broken doll; I really didn't want to touch it.

I went to the bathroom and grabbed a towel, which I used to wrap the doll up. Dark stains permeated through the white cotton and I held it awkwardly, not wanting it to dampen my fingers.

I carried the doll out into the garden. It was no use just tossing it back into the bin, not when... it would end up back in our room. I tossed it onto the gravel drive and fetched a shovel, with which I proceeded to hammer away at the bundle; the white cotton was dyed a horrible russet bordering on black in places by the time I was done.

Using the shovel, I dumped the bundle into a bin bag, then double-bagged it, for good measure. I put it in the boot of my car and drove it to the tip — I wanted to be sure it was well away from us. I wanted to be sure it couldn't be brought back. Couldn't come back. To that end, I scattered the shattered, smeared contents of the bundle about.

Arriving back at the house, I still had to clear up the stain that marred the bedroom floorboards. The stain that looked so much like blood.

Sylvia was still in bed when I returned, almost catatonic in her depressed state.

"It's gone for good," I told her; "smashed to pieces and far away; nobody'll be bringing it back."

That seemed to reassure her, bring her out of her withdrawn state. Sylvia turned her head towards me and said, I think I'll sleep now," before lying back and starting to doze. I wasn't surprised – she looked haggard, as if she hadn't slept at all. I left her to sleep.

Sylvia's scream brought me running. It couldn't be, I told myself, despite knowing it would be. I was hoping it was a spider or something that had scared her, but knew it wasn't.

It wasn't the doll, not quite: it was half the smooth-rubbed face, an arm and a bit of the body connecting the two. They were on the mantelpiece, the one faint eye staring down at Sylvia, who was hiding behind the sheet, shrieking. I didn't blame her – I may have screamed as well.

There was no conceivable way in which it could be there; yet it was.

"That's it!" I cried, striding over to Sylvia. I grabbed her arm and dragged her, bodily, from the bed. Thrusting her dress at her, I said, "Put it on; we're leaving."

"What?"

"If it keeps coming back here, we won't stay."

"But, what if it follows us?"

"It won't," I told her. "It was here all these years and never followed you. It won't follow you now." There was no point maintaining the pretence someone was playing a joke.

Sylvia nodded and followed me out to the car. We could hire someone to finish clearing the house and, then, it would be sold. We didn't need to return.

By the time we arrived home, Sylvia seemed much better and I felt a sense of relief. Misplaced, as I soon would learn.

Sylvia's scream brought me running up the stairs and into our bedroom. My blood froze at the sound.

There was no sign of Sylvia, but the last fragments of the doll, Jonquil, were on the bedside cabinet. The door to the en suite bathroom was ajar; I went over to it.

Pushing the door open, I saw Sylvia slumped on the floor, blood pouring from deep gashes in her wrists. I grabbed towels and pressed them to her wounds, the white cotton staining red, deepening to a russet bordering on black in places, but I knew it was too late.

"Stay with me!" I shouted at her.

Sylvia gave the slightest shake of her head. "No; I want to go. It was waiting for me. Waiting to call me home; as it did mum. It won't stop till I leave."

"Home? I don't understand."

"Home. I'm going home. To the city." She gasped and stiffened. "It's a terrible thing," she murmured, then died, her face as white as the doll's had been.

I screamed her name, but Sylvia was gone.

I ran back into the bedroom to get my phone and call for help, but pulled up short: the remnants of the doll were gone, as if they had never been there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published in *Amok!* (April Moon Books), *In Creeps The Night* (J.A.Mes Press), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Techno-Horror* and *Cosmic Horror* (both Dark Hall Press), and has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

Twitter: @djtyrer

Blog: http://dityrer.blogspot.co.uk/

Continuity and Permanence Daniel Marc Chant

The scream was impossible. It had no beginning or end. It was loud and quiet; near but far. And it was hard to ignore.

Farley Arkwright tried. Concentrate on the moment, he told himself. There is no past, no future. Only an eternal, unchanging present.

By reducing time to a single point with zero dimensions, he robbed the scream of its power. Now maybe he could sleep once more. But no... With the scream rendered impotent, another noise came to his attention. Rather, it was a series of identical short-lived noises, one following the other in a steady procession like the dripping of a tap.

Bleep... bleep... bleep...

Irritated, Farley lost his composure and left himself open to the scream once more.

Where was it coming from? Why would it not stop?

Bleep... bleep... That had to be a machine. Some sort of heart monitor perhaps? It definitely wasn't coming from the same source as the scream.

Farley reluctantly opened his eyes. He was not surprised to find himself floating in a luminescent fog. Dim shapes moved in the fog. They reminded him of the fronds of aquatic plants, waving to and fro, caught in the ebb and flow of an invisible current.

One of the shapes darkened. Farley had the impression that it was slowly coming towards him.

"He's awake," said a voice.

The shape loomed over Farley. Part of it evolved into the head and torso of a man with no face. "Can't be."

"I tell you he is. Check these readings if you don't believe me."

The man with no face suddenly clapped his hands close enough to Farley's eyes for Farley to feel the concussion. "See that? Didn't even blink."

"He has no control of his motor functions - voluntary or otherwise - but I can assure you he's conscious."

"Well, that's his look. Let's crack on, shall we? I have a game of golf booked for this afternoon and I'll be extremely displeased if I'm late."

The scream grew louder. It disrupted the fog, causing the haze to dissipate enough to enable Farley to see that the faceless man wasn't faceless at all. He was wearing a green surgeon's mask.

"Scalpel."

"Yes, Doctor Culpeper."

Someone - Farley couldn't see who - handed Doctor Culpeper a scalpel.

There's been a mistake, Farley wanted to say. We shouldn't be doing this... Whatever this is.

His tongue wouldn't move; his larynx remained mute. He tried clenching his fists and wriggling his toes. Nothing happened.

Farley wondered at his lack of fear. He knew he wasn't a brave man. Just the prospect of visiting a dentist had been known to bring him out in hives, yet all he felt right now was irritation at the constant *bleep-bleep* of the heart monitor and that damnable scream which was beginning to resemble the sound of fingernails scraping across a blackboard.

The fog grew thinner. Faces peered down at Farley. He counted four and was certain there were others out there, close by but out of the range of his vision. Beyond the faces, a canopy of nine television screens arranged in a 3x3 grid served as his horizon.

The middle screen was a blank white triangle. Its light seemed to pull at him and he was reminded of the Bardo Thodol, the so-called Tibetan Book of the Dead which he had recently read without really understanding it. He recalled the first chapter which talked about the *Clear Light of the Ultimate Reality* which is the first thing the soul encounters after death and which is the very essence of creation.

Am I dead then? Is that? Is that why I'm here? No, it couldn't be. The heart monitor was proof that he had a pulse. And hadn't someone just said he was conscious though paralyzed?

If only he could remember how he had come to be where he was. What happened? And what was happening now?

One of the television screens showed a much magnified view of the inside of a blood vessel. Corpuscles - both white and red - swam by like exotic jelly fish. Another screen displayed a huge cavern which periodically expanded and contracted.

My heart, he decided. I'm the star of my own movie.

A tremor hit the blood vessel.

Farley was fascinated to see a metal blade breech his body. It moved in a circular motion, opening up the artery to allow blood to escape at an alarming rate.

"It's no good. He's gushing," said Doctor Culpeper. "We're going to have to use the saw."

A hand mopped the surgeon's brow. Another passed him a small circular saw, which he wasted no time starting.

The monitors briefly blanked out. When they flickered back to life, they showed identical shots of a man leaving a house in what looked to be a quiet suburban neighborhood. As he unlocked the door of his car, a woman ran out of the house and began to berate him. Both the man and the woman looked familiar.

I've seen this before. It's a repeat. Some daytime soap opera full of ridiculous plots and twists you can see coming a mile away.

There was no sound but Farley remembered the dialogue, the bitter words of a woman scorned.

Go then! Go to your gold-digging, money-grabbing whore if that's what it takes to convince yourself you're still young and virile. But when she's used you up and bled you dry, don't think you can come running back to me and start again where you left off.

Farley could smell burning. He realized it was due to Doctor Culpeper's saw cutting into something, but he preferred not to think about what it might be.

On the televisions, the man drove off, leaving his wife sobbing in the driveway. The camera swiveled towards the front window behind which could be seen the face of a little girl who was crying because Mummy and Daddy were fighting again and this time it looked like Daddy was leaving for good.

"Tighten that tourniquet!" said Doctor Culpeper. "His blood pressure's dropping more quickly than I'd hoped. We're going to have to work fast. Are the ice boxes ready? Good. We'll get his esophagus out of the way next. Then we can go for the kidneys and liver."

Farley wished Doctor Culpeper would shut up. Couldn't he see he was trying to watch television?

You're a bloody fool; he mentally chided the soap opera man as he joined the motorway and irrevocably left behind what could have been a good life if only he'd had the brains to count his blessings. How could you do this to your own child for the sake of some woman you know damn well you don't love and who certainly doesn't love you?

Farley was angry. He wished he could be in the car so he could wrap his hands around the man's throat and squeeze the life out of him.

A waste of space. Doesn't deserve to live.

The camera zoomed in on the dashboard radio. With a sense of déjà vu, Farley recalled the traffic report which the man in the car had chosen to ignore. It warned of fog and icy patches ahead.

With a press of a button, the man changed channels. He smiled as the Rolling Stones sang about someone having their 19th nervous breakdown.

Of course, Farley couldn't hear the radio. All he could hear was that impossible scream that Moebius strip of sound that wouldn't leave him alone. The heart monitor was silent now, but he presumed it was either switched off or malfunctioning.

My heart's still beating. I'm not dead. Not yet.

Doctor Culpeper blocked Farley's view. His hands were full of meaty tubing that dripped blood. "Just look at this fat," he exclaimed, his voice loaded with disgust. "See what happens when you live on junk food and TV dinners? This man is a heart attack waiting to happen."

Thankfully, the surgeon stepped back, giving Farley an unfettered view of the drama unfolding above his head. As he'd known it would, fog had descended upon the motorway and the man in the car hadn't even thought about slowing down.

Farley noticed the luminescent fog surrounding himself suddenly grow darker and thicker. Now there seemed no boundary between the operating theatre and the world of the soap opera. Reality and fiction had blended into one.

He recalled a Bible passage he had been forced to learn as a child. Corinthians 13:12. For now we see through a glass, darkly...

Saint Paul had been talking about the nature of reality and how it was masked by the illusions of the physical world, but it seemed to Farley he could just as easily have been talking about the age of television.

The car's headlights didn't so much pierce the haze as give it the tiniest of pricks. Visibility was to all intents and purposes down to zero. And yet the idiot wouldn't pull over or even slow down like any sensible man would, because this was soap opera where people did the irrational for the sake of good drama.

The man in the car looked at his watch. He was going to be late and needed to phone ahead. His mobile phone was perched on the passenger side of the dashboard. The man tried to pick it up but it was just out of reach. His seat belt was the problem. No matter. With a deft flick, he undid the seat belt. Now he could grab the phone.

It was at that moment that two dim red lights indicated that the car ahead was braking. He had no time to react. Tires screamed. Metal ploughed into metal. He flew through the windshield, a thousand fragments of glass exploding around him like the remnants of a supernova event.

Fade to black.

"Waste not, want not." Doctor Culpeper was speaking.

On the television screens, black gave way to gray. The man in the car was conscious again, but only just. To him, the world was a blur, and not just because of the fog.

A blue light swept through the haze. Two paramedics and a fireman looked down at him.

One of the paramedics felt for a pulse. "He's alive. But only just."

The second paramedic shone a pen light into the man's eyes. "Mr. Arkwright, can you hear me?"

Farley would have laughed if he was able to. Arkwright! The man on the television and he shared the same surname. What were the odds?

"Paralyzed," said the first medic. "And likely to stay that way. Looks like one for Doctor Culpeper."

"We'll need permission from his next of kin."

The darkness returned.

Someone was singing in a half-hearted, distracted manner. "Toe bone connected to the foot bone... Foot bone connected to the heel bone... Heel bone connected to the ankle bone. Ankle bone connected to the shin bone..."

"Shut up, Meyers." Doctor Culpeper pointed at the offender with a pair of callipers. "Show some respect."

"Doctor Culpeper," said a woman's voice. "Mrs. Arkwright is outside."

"Oh yes. I promised she could watch if she got here in time. See that she scrubs up before she comes in."

The televisions flickered as a camera looked out through Arkwright's eyes. He was in an ambulance. Above him, a wavy line snaked across a green screen. *Bleep!* It vanished and began its journey again. *Bleep!*

The camera shook. A siren burst into life.

One of the paramedics waved a hand in front of Arkwright's face. "Still no reaction. This one's brain damaged for sure."

The other paramedic came into view. "Poor bugger. What a way to end your life."

The ambulance came to a halt. Doors were thrown open and Arkwright was rolled out on a gurney. Through a swing door. Along a corridor that was painted white.

Sound drifted away as the televisions faded to black once more. It was an impossible scream with no beginning or end.

In a voice-over, Farley Arkwright's thoughts carried loud and clear. Concentrate on the moment. There is no past, no future. Only an eternal, unchanging present.

Irritated, Farley Arkwright lost his composure and left himself open to the scream once more.

That's me. I've been the star of the world's worst soap opera. I remember it now. How I left Clare and Samantha. How I tried to run from everything, start a new life. And how I lost it all.

As if responding to his epiphany, the screens above his head returned to normal duty. They showed the highways and the byways of his rapidly depleting body – the veins and arteries that did what they could to supply what was left of him with oxygen. It was like sitting in the control room of a subterranean traffic system.

"Not much left now," said Doctor Culpeper. "Just his head and torso. We'll take his eyes next, I think."

Farley heard a door being opened. At that very moment the scream grew louder as if it had been hovering around outside all this time, waiting to be let in. Now it seemed very close indeed.

Doctor Culpeper leaned over Farley to shake hands with whoever had just come in. "Mrs. Arkwright, I presume? May I offer my heartfelt condolences for your tragic loss."

A woman looked down at Farley. Despite the surgical mask, Farley immediately recognized her as the jilted woman in the soap opera.

Clare Arkwright. My wife.

"Hello, Farley," she said. "I guess things didn't turn out quite the way you planned. Not to worry. You're worth more to me as scrap than you ever were before your accident. And you can die knowing your parts will be put to good use."

Doctor Culpeper picked up an instrument that reminded Farley of something he'd once been given in a restaurant to help him tease muscles out of their shell. The surgeon pressed the end of the device into Farley's eye socket and turned it slowly before giving it a swift yank. With a soft plop, Farley's eyeball came out and was dropped into an enamel tray.

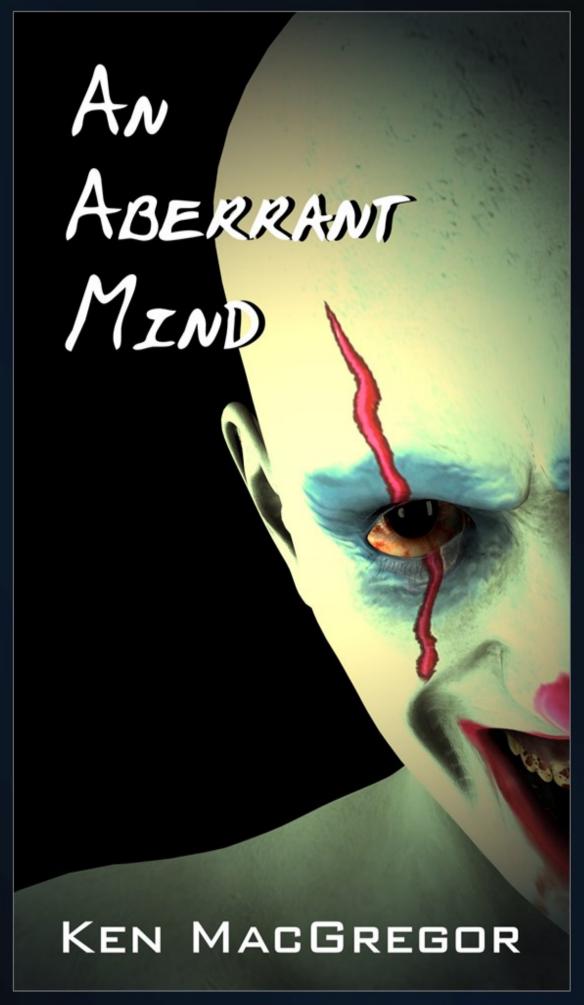
"He has such lovely blue eyes," Clare sighed. "I'm so glad they're not going to waste."

As Doctor Culpeper began to remove Farley's remaining eye, the scream became unbearably loud. It seemed to wrap itself around his head and he finally realized it was coming from his own mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Daniel Marc Chant is an up-and-coming author of horror and strange fiction. His passion for H. P. Lovecraft inspired him to produce intense, gripping stories with a sinister edge. Based in Bath, Somerset, UK, Daniel launched his début titles Burning House and Maldición to rave reviews and continues to hone his craft with a number of dark titles waiting to hit shelves.

Website: http://danielmarcchant.com/
Twitter: @danielmarcchant

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



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

Nightmares Andrew Lennon

I sat in my car parked on the driveway. I waited, trying to come up with what to say to Tess because as soon as I walked into the house she would ask me what the doctor had said. I told her I would go to speak to a doctor about my nightmares, because we couldn't go on like this. For weeks the dreams had been getting worse, affecting her, too. My screams, or crying, in the middle of the night would wake her up, and the both of us got more tired and depressed with each sleepless night. I couldn't tell her I didn't go to see the doctor after all. But I had to, so I got out of the car and stood there for a second, staring at the front door. I walked along the path to the house. I felt like throwing up. It shouldn't have been that much of a big deal.

After standing outside my front door for what felt like a lifetime, I opened it and walked in. "Tess" I shouted. "I'm home."

I went into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea. Next to the kettle lay a note.

Gone out with Trish and Debra,

Be back late, don't wait up.

Dinner in microwave.

Love you

Tess.

This was great! This gave me until morning to think of something to tell her about the doctors. If I left for work early enough I'd even have until tomorrow night. A lot more relaxed I opened the microwave to see what dinner would be; Shepherds Pie. My stomach rumbled, but it would take two minutes to heat it. I set the timer and then went to get out of my clothes.

It took me about thirty seconds, I threw my shirt and pants next to the washing machine but kept on my boxers.

PING!

I grabbed the pie out of the microwave, and on my way to the living room, got myself a beer out of the fridge as well. I sat in front of the TV, ate and watched sports greatest mishaps. It was 10:30 pm by the time the program finished and by then I'd had more than enough beer. It was time to call it a night since I had to be able to get up early to go to work before Tess could ask me what I didn't want to answer. I went to bed and hoped that I fell asleep before Tess got home.

I awoke to a loud noise coming from downstairs. I sat up and looked around. Tess still wasn't home. I waited for a moment. I could hear sounds again. Not loud this time, it sounded like items being shuffled around in a drawer. This wasn't Tess coming home. Someone had broken in. I jumped out of bed. I ran down the stairs and turned the lights on. Broadening my shoulders and sticking out my chest, I paced from room to room.

"When I find you in my house stealing my stuff, I'm going to seriously kick your ass," I shouted. But there was no one. I checked everywhere and found nothing. Had it been Tess after all? Maybe she tried to get in the front door and was too drunk, but when I opened it there was nothing. I went to the kitchen and got a glass of water, then crawled back into bed.

I glanced at the clock, it was 12:30 a.m. Tess should be home soon. Still wanting to avoid the whole *dream* conversation. I tried to get to sleep again. Within seconds, the front door opened. High heels stumbled around, and from the sound of it she had a good night. I lay still and closed my eyes, to look asleep when she came in the room.

"Who are you? What are..." Then she screamed.

For the second time that night I raced down the stairs, only this time I *knew* there was someone in the house, and they had Tess. The screams didn't stop. They got louder as I nearly

reached the bottom of the stairs. Only I couldn't reach it. Every time I got within two steps, more appeared, like an escalator coming up from my ground floor. I carried on trying to get down. I jumped, flew through the air clearing all the steps and hit the wall next to the front door. The screaming continued. On the wall in the hallway giant shadows, cast from the kitchen, fought. I had to get up and help Tess.

I ran to the kitchen, the screaming sounded so loud now, like it was inside my head. As I got to the doorway of the kitchen, the door slammed shut. I pulled the handle down to open the door but it wouldn't budge. Tess's screams got louder. I banged my shoulder repeatedly against it trying to force my way in. I ran to the other end of the hallway, then sprinted back at the door and braced myself for impact. My shoulder clattered the door at full pace, it swung open, and I stumbled into the kitchen. I turned, the intruder fled out the back door, I didn't even get a good look at him. Tess hung over his shoulder like a rag doll. He took her away from me! I sprinted to the back door, the intruder no more than a dark image at the far end of the garden. I ran through the door, and stood in the hallway. Bewildered I turned around. Behind me was my front door, it was closed. Tess screamed again, this time it came from upstairs, and I raced up. I needed to save her.

Once up I charged into the bedroom, panting like I had just run a marathon, and landed smack in the middle of a nightmare. Tess lay strapped to the bed, face down. On top of her pushing her face into a pillow, sat the most horrendous thing I have ever seen. It had the rough shape of a man, a head, two arms, two legs. Its skin looked like it had been turned inside out. Lines, which I'm sure must have been veins criss-crossed all over it. It straddled Tess and shoved her face into the pillow, then it turned its head and looked at me. I braced myself, sure this thing would charge me. But it only stared and smiled. Revealing the most brilliantly white teeth I had ever seen. They were jagged and sharp, like those of a sharks. I was almost mesmerized by them. Then Tess screamed again, breaking the spell. I had to save her. With a scream I ran at this *thing*. I held my arms out and jumped across the bed to grab it. I landed on a hard surface. My chin hurt from the impact of hitting the kitchen floor.

I didn't have time to question what was going on as the screaming got louder again. This time coming from the living room. I jumped up and grabbed a knife from the drawer, then ran towards the screaming. When I reached the living room the screaming stopped. The inside out man stood in the centre of the room, waiting for me, smiling. Tess wasn't anywhere near. I looked at the man. His eyes had shining blue irises, surrounded by yellow sclera instead of pure white. I trembled and wanted to cry, but I couldn't. I had to be strong for Tess.

"What are you?" I asked.

He continued to stare at me, and then smiled that horrible grin again. He had a look that suggested he knew something that I didn't. What was it? By now I was sure it was a dream, but what did it all mean? And why hadn't I woken up yet? This was my fault for not going to the doctors. That's what Tess would tell me. The dreams were going to get worse all the time until I got some proper treatment. As if he could read my thoughts, the creature slowly shook his head.

"No?" I asked "What do you mean, no?"

He continued to shake his head, while smiling.

"Where is Tess?" I screamed.

He laughed, it almost sounded like a roar and echoed throughout the entire house.

"Stop laughing at me!"

The laughter got louder, the creatures belly rose and dropped in sync with the booming sound. Then the room began to shake. He stood tall and strong, raised his hands above his head, arms stretched out almost touching the ceiling.

"Stop laughing at me!"

I charged and tackled him. It surprised me at how easily I took him down. When we hit the floor I crawled on top of him, pinning him down. His wide, shining blue eyes gazed at me and he still laughed uncontrollably. I had a full view of the sharp, shining teeth as his laugh bellowed throughout the house. I raised my hand high, ready to stab him with the kitchen knife, but it wasn't there. I put both of my hands around his neck and squeezed. Still he laughed. I closed my grip around his throat gripping even harder. Then his laughter transformed into a strange gurgling sound, with crunching and grinding noises. I tightened my grip. Dream or no dream, this thing was not going to get me. The struggling and bone grinding noises stopped. He was dead, I had defeated it. I let go and rolled over onto the soft floor. Surprised, I reached my hand down to feel it. I lay in my bed.

The light was still on, and Tess lay in bed next to me. I got up, went to the toilet and had a drink of water from the tap. I rinsed my face and looked at myself in the mirror. That had been one hell of a dream. No excuses, first thing in the morning I'd call the doctors. It needed to be sorted out. I walked back to bed and grinned. If Tess had a few drinks, maybe I could get lucky. I slowly pulled the quilt off of her and climbed on top, sat on her in a very similar position as the demon in my dream. I leaned over to kiss her neck. My shadow covered most of the light, but the bruise on her neck couldn't be missed. I sat up looked down at Tess staring at me, motionless, her eyes wide and glazed over.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Andrew Lennon is the author of "A Life to Waste" and several other short stories. He enjoys spending time writing, reading & reviewing books. Andrew is happily married living with his wife Hazel & their children.

Blog: http://lennonslair.blogspot.co.uk/
Facebook: Andrew Lennon Author

Ruining the House Michael Koenig

No mirrors, Anna Lisa said. No mirrors. Those were the master's explicit instructions. And so I instructed the servants to remove all the mirrors from every corner of the house and stack them in the remotest part of the basement, entombed among the spider webs and mud. And a few hours later we were done, and proud of ourselves for completing the mission so quickly.

But when Anna Lisa returned, she was angry.

"I said 'remove all the mirrors," she said, her voice angry as a clenched fist. It was as if speaking to me were the greatest inconvenience in the world, occasioned only by my overwhelming incompetence.

"But Miss, we did. They're all gone," I said, as the other girls lined up along the wall behind me.

"Are you completely stupid? Look at this cup closely. Can't you see your reflection?"

"I suppose. If you hold it at a certain angle, and then only faintly."

"Our master's instructions were explicit. Every surface that can show a reflection must go."

The girls just stood there with arms crossed, awaiting my orders, even though they could just as easily hear what Anna Lisa said. So I gave them their instructions, and we spent the next two days removing everything in which a reflection could conceivably be seen, every glass and

doorknob and metal implement. A crew came in to replace every glass window, and covered them with bricks.

This beautiful house ruined, but Anna Lisa was pleased.

A few days later, our new master arrived in a long black carriage with blacked out windows. He emerged from the carriage wearing a long black robe that covered the entire length of his body, including his face. I came up to him slowly with an outstretched hand, as if approaching a wary animal, to tell him how happy we all were to meet him. He grunted, and refused to touch my hand. Anna Lisa took his gloved hand and led him away, into the upstairs bedroom, as we servants curtsied and bowed.

From then on, the master stayed in his room all day, and only Anna Lisa was allowed to see him. Anna Lisa relayed his instructions to me, and I in turn relayed her instructions to the downstairs crew. And when the food was ready, I took it upstairs to Anna Lisa, who thanked me in a rude and condescending manner before turning to unlock the master's bedroom door. I would linger on the landing, hoping to peek into his hellish abode, but Anna Lisa would immediately shut the heavy metal door and cock the latch, sealing them both inside.

One morning, Anna Lisa was sick (food poisoning, the doctor said), so I knocked at the master's door, to let him know why she wouldn't be coming. He ignored me, but I kept coming around. At nightfall, he asked me if I knew how to give an injection, some kind of prescription compound that would enable him to sleep.

Even in pitch dark, I could see that the room was a perfect shambles. Litter was strewn all over the floor, and much of the furniture had been upended. I nearly tripped over it on the way to his bed. It frightened me, a little, but I dared myself to go further.

I rolled up his sleeve to take a look at his arm. It was covered in bruises and marked with scars.

"What has Anna Lisa done to you?" I exclaimed, in barely disguised horror.

"Only what I ordered her to. Quickly! I need my sleep."

"More light. I need more light."

"No."

"I don't want to hurt you."

Reluctantly, he turned on a small lamp on the table beside the bed. At first it terrified me, the thought of the needle, but he showed me how he wanted it done, and I simply followed his directions. First I tied the tourniquet around his arm. I filled the syringe, he flexed his arm and made a fist as I plunged the needle into his vein. He flinched a little. The anticipation, he said. The anticipation was worse than the pain itself.

Eventually I learned to conceal my revulsion at the sight of blood. I would shut my eyes and hand him a clean gauze strip to press against the wound. Then I would hold his gloved hand until the medicine took full effect.

From then on, this therapy became my most solemn responsibility. If he did not receive his medicine on schedule, he would thrash and wail in agony.

Soon he began sending me into town once a week to pick up the prescriptions, issued under different names, but never his own, by several different doctors, at several different pharmacies. The task was tedious, but I never delegated it to anyone. He insisted that I do it alone.

He would get so excited when I returned with my packages, wrapped in plain brown butcher paper. It was far better than any Christmas morning.

"Did you get it?"

"Yes, I got it," I'd reply, as if there were any doubt.

Anna Lisa's convalescence took much longer than expected, so I assumed her duties full time. I would sit on the landing all day, filled with anticipation, and when the master summoned me, I would talk to him, and tell him all the cheerful things I had seen during the day. Anna Lisa sometimes accused me of nattering on.

In the afternoon, I would tidy up the master's room as much as he would allow or sit by his bedside, waiting to find out what he desired. I could anticipate his every request, but the master liked me better when I pretended to be taken by surprise.

His high pitched voice made him sound like a little boy, or perhaps a grown man's idea of what a little boy sounded like, and he spoke with the deliberate naïveté of someone who had long ago figured out how to avoid all the vexing details that comprise a working person's life. I always had to lean in to hear his orders. His voice barely rose above a whisper even when he was angry, and when he did get angry, he was quick to forgive. I found myself wanting to please him.

"The girls have been asking me about your old life," I said. "What should I tell them?" (I have a habit of attributing my most embarrassing curiosities to others.)

"Why does it matter? It's over now. Finished."

"Please. I'd like to hear."

"It was a long time ago. Leave me alone. I came here to get away."

"Will I ever see your face? Why won't you show me your face?"

He paused for a moment, and then said with a mixture of wistfulness and pride, "You know you could sell a picture of me for a great deal of money? Even now."

"I would never do that sir."

"It's hell being me, do you know that? I wish I were simple like you. When you become famous you become a completely other person. And when it all ended I could never go back to being myself."

"Why not?"

"Why in God's name would I want to?"

Every few weeks, doctors would visit him and every few months, he would go into the hospital for surgery to his face. Even though he was groggy and in enormous pain, he would be euphoric for awhile, and then just as quickly plunge into a catatonic depression that would last until he found another doctor, with even more outlandish promises of the wonders that new surgeries would bring.

"Why do you keep doing this, sir?" I asked.

"Doing what?"

"Seeing those doctors? Enduring all this pain?"

"That's simple. To look young and handsome. To live the existence that has always been denied me, because of the way I look."

"You've had everything a man could ever have dreamed of."

"No woman will ever love me this way."

"I cannot believe that you consider my sex to be so shallow."

"You don't understand the world as I do. Now get back to your chores."

"Yes, sir."

Every question invariably led to a dozen more. I wanted his story, but his silence was enough. It enabled me to boil his whole life story down into a single sentence: He had achieved the adoration of the entire world and then walked away.

As the months passed, the master began to trust me a little more. Perhaps in some small way he wanted to please me.

One afternoon, he was lying in his usual prone position while I tidied up his room, and he seemed to be in a somewhat jaunty mood. I took the opportunity to bring up a previously taboo subject.

"The girls showed me a picture of you when you were young."

"I was a good singer I suppose. I only heard the flaws. It was such an enormous strain to conjure up the innocence that I had once felt. It was always new to the audience, after all. People still offer me money to tour the world. I can't sing anymore. The surgeries. They don't care. People just want to stare at me."

Was that the day when I finally fell in love with him, or just the day when I finally admitted what had been obvious for weeks? I tried to press on with my duties as though nothing of significance had happened, but it was impossible to deny that there was something about him that fascinated and enchanted me.

Did I have a dream that I would love him, and my love would cure him, whatever his sickness might be? Even death is trivial, in confrontation with true love.

The next morning I found Anna Lisa lying motionless in her bed. I made every effort to revive her, but she was already gone.

I hurried downstairs to tell the servants what had happened, as they gathered from every corner of the house. My voice quavered as I revealed the news, but most of girls remained calm. I was about to order everyone back to their chores when Flossie spoke. (She had been Anna Lisa's favorite, years ago, when I was just a little girl.)

"You killed her!" Flossie said.

"What are you talking about? I found her stone dead."

"I don't know how you did it, you murdered her. She was fine until you started taking care of her."

The other girls immediately came to my defense.

"Don't be ridiculous, Flossie."

"She was an old woman."

"Fifty years old, at least."

"She'd been sick for a long time."

I headed upstairs to let the master know what had happened. He also seemed strangely calm, as if he'd had a premonition of another overwhelming loss.

"So sad," he said. "She was a mother to us all."

He seemed too distraught to make any plans, so I offered my own suggestion.

"No need to involve the police. It would only further upset the other girls, and would likely cause further turmoil. Unless you think it necessary."

And perhaps they might even search your room, sir.

"I certainly wouldn't want to upset the other girls. I trust you to make all the necessary arrangements."

"Thank you, sir. I would suggest we bury her on the grounds. She loved this house."

"Yes, of course."

The next afternoon, we held Anna Lisa's service on the front lawn. The minister gave a lovely eulogy; he said that Anna Lisa had been a mother to us all, and all her sins washed away. (A stranger would have assumed he had known her.).

As soon as the service concluded, I shook hands with the minister, paid him the required donation, and ran back upstairs. I knocked at the master's door with great enthusiasm, but found him furious with me.

"You left me here. To die."

"I didn't. I was only gone for an hour."

"Get out!"

"But, master..."

"Get out!"

At two o'clock in the morning, I put my ear to the door. I could hear the master snoring, a soft gurgle like water exiting a stuck drain. And then I unlocked the door.

I crept over toward the bed and turned the lamp on. I was wearing my prettiest dress, money skimmed from the house (just as Anna Lisa had taught me). I had spent an hour primping in front of the mirror, but had ended up just as before.

He was curled up like a crooked nail, wrenched from a block of wood. It took me several minutes to methodically unzip and unbutton him until, with a great flourish, I pulled his cloak up over his head, like a matador brandishing his cape.

He arose like a slumbering bear, and looked at me quizzically. His naked face was more horrible than I ever could have imagined, and I tried to hold myself back from vomiting. His nose was skeletal, like the hoof of a small animal, and his skin had been stretched and sanded and sprayed and dyed to a bleached flour hue. The doctors had also injected some sort of black dye under his eyes. Their demonic therapies had left his whole face paralyzed, frozen in a palsied smile.

I screamed, more loudly than I had ever screamed before, and turned to run away.

He removed his cloak and threw it to the floor, then patted the bed to indicate that I should join him, slurring my name like a drugged slaughterhouse cry.

"Grrrrretchnnnnnnnn. Pretty. Pretty. Pretty girl."

He tried to kiss me. I spit it out.

"This is what I look like," he said. "Are you proud of what you've done?"

I stared intently at the length of his body, until my eyes settled on his lower appendage, rising like a slippery eel. A pointing finger, in full accusation. His entire body hairless like an overbred dog.

"Handsome," I said, for I knew that it would please him.

"Ugly."

"Handsome."

I was feeling seasick. I pitied him.

"I loooooooooove you," he said.

He began forcing himself upon me, his strong arms pulling me down into the filthy mattress, tearing my pretty dress. I lashed out, scratching him with my fingernails, grown nearly as sharp as claws in my idleness, clawing at the papery skin until blood began spurting out.

He stared at me pitiably, a monster wounded by his mother's rebuke, then growled and leapt at me. I screamed and ran off from the darkness into the dark night, never to return.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Michael Koenig is a writer, editor, and designer in Oakland, California who has published stories and poetry in numerous literary publications. His stories have appeared in recent issues of *The MacGuffin, Harpur Palate, Hardboiled,* and the *Paterson Literary Review*. His work has also been anthologized in Awake! A Reader for the Sleepless (Soft Skull Press) and The Shamus Sampler 2, an international detective fiction collection.

Twitter handle: obeaujanglez
Facebook Page: Michael J. Koenig

John Evers only wanted recognition... How could he know evil was only a snapshot away?



Available on Amazon

Beauty Randy Streu

The last thing he remembers is the scream. The scream, and the excruciating pain that came out of nowhere and seemed to envelop his entire body.

And before that, the two of them, walking.

It had rained earlier that night, and the light from the moon illuminated the clouds from behind, swelling into the mist until the world around them shone with an ethereal glow. She held tight to his hand, hugging closely to his arm. He smiled, listening to their footsteps--her taking two for every one he took. He slowed down some then, trying to keep her from noticing. The ring weighed a hundred pounds, there in the pocket of his jeans. He was nervous, and couldn't believe it. She would certainly say yes, he knew, but he couldn't shake the sweat in his palms, or the shortness in his breath.

The clouds parted, bathing them both in light, as he stopped and let go of her hand. He had reached into his pocket and pulled out the ring--no longer the anchor weighing his footsteps, but small and perfect and beautiful. He dropped to his knees and cleared his throat for her attention. She gasped as she turned, her eyes drawn to the diamond he held between his fingers. She said yes--nearly screamed it--before the words could make it past the growing lump in his throat. She dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around him, even as the glare from the moonlight in the diamond urged the tears from his eyes.

It was as he was slipping the ring up her finger that he cried out suddenly, the pain in his lower back sudden and sharp. And then there was anger. Anger that this--her moment--should be interrupted by this attack. The light in her eyes turned to terror, and as the shriek was ripped through her lungs, he had felt his nose break. As his brain tried to make sense of what was happening, he attempted to turn and face whoever was hurting him. He blacked out before he could finish turning, her screams still echoing in his head.

He lies in the grass, tasting the blood in his mouth. He feels with his tongue for shattered teeth; tentatively raises a hand to his aching jaw. He closes his eyes; tries to focus on where he is-and sees for the first time she is no longer with him. The daylight burns his eyes, clouding his brain as he tries to remember. His body, still aching as though it was pulled apart from every direction, screams as he rises. He doesn't care; he'll have time to lick his wounds later. The condition of his own body--and of his clothes in tatters around him--makes his finding her all the more urgent. In his memory, he can hear her screaming.

He searches the area around him for any sign of her, calling out her name. He wanders aimlessly for a bit, before catching sight of a spot that seems familiar. It isn't a path, and he doesn't know why, but he feels this is his starting point. He quickens his pace, his every sense sharpened as the adrenaline rushes through his veins. He can almost smell her perfume. The scent carries him forward, in spite of the heavy ache in his knees--a scent punctuated by the memory of the fear in her eyes.

He walks for hours, in disbelief that he has gone so far, and worry that he's traveling in the wrong direction. But he walks on. He doesn't know how he got wherever he was-- but he knows this is the way he must go to find her. In spite of himself, he nearly gives up numerous times, only to continue forward, further and further on. Without her, after all, what else is there?

It is the glint that finally draws him to the spot: the reflection from the now-setting sun off something in the grass. He swallows hard and suppresses a scream when he finds a hand, slender and porcelain, and ending at the wrist. The fingers are graceful and long--and on the ring finger, a small, perfect diamond. The tears fill his eyes, but he continues further, knowing she must be close

and, against reason, calling out for her. His mind expects no answer, but his heart hopes. He hopes so hard he can nearly hear her weakly calling his name, over and over.

So real is her voice to him that he follows it. Deeper into the woods, through the long grass, between the trees. He follows the voice to what seems to be a clearing; an impression in the grass.

And he screams when he finds her, the fear plastered to her face. He screams as his eyes search hers for a sign of life--and find none. He screams as he sees her remaining hand, clutching what remains of her once-beautiful neck, and in that hand, a blood-stained piece of his shirt.

He screams until his tears turn to blood; until his face contorts in rage and agony. He screams until his jaw breaks; until his body convulses and his spine shatters. He screams until his shoulders dislodge from their sockets and his knees bend backwards; until his hair overgrows his eyes and he loses sight of the full moon. He screams--until his screams, again, become a howl.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Randy Streu hosts a Christian radio morning show in Northeastern Wisconsin, where he lives with his wife and four children. He writes speculative fiction, blogs about horror movies, and drives his minivan to the sound of radio dramas or very loud music.

Twitter: @randystreu
Website: www.crowded-earth.net

Lustitia Prospero Pulma, Jr.

Justin started counting the minutes to darkness when Caeca started howling. The beast had found Ciudad's mayor, just as Lustitia promised. Justin imagined blood dripping from the beast's maw and strips of flesh dangling from its teeth. At its feet would be Luis Sanchez, the corrupt mayor of Ciudad, very pale from losing much of his blood and several pounds lighter from having his limbs and chest torn. Justin shook his head before an image of the politician's innards scattered on the floor could form in his mind.

Like the images in Justin's head, a description of Caeca down to its size, weight, even the color of its eyes had yet to emerge. Fat John's mother said she heard a creature howl in their yard, then her son scream seconds later. When she checked his bedroom, a wolf-like creature taller than a man was tearing chunks of meat from his abdomen. Justin nodded his head at the description. A beast had to be that huge to kill the 500 pounds of fat that John had become from eating eight meals a day.

Holding a list of Caeca's victims, Justin read the testimony of Arianna's newest bedmate. Her partner described a large dog that jumped through an open window and tore out her throat and breasts while she was disrobing in front of him.

Below Arianna's story was Martin's whose neighbors saw neither wolf nor dog, although they heard a howling that made every hair on their body stand. What they found in his apartment were paw prints around Martin's disemboweled body and a nauseating stench, although they were unsure if the odor came from the creature or the filth in his room. They never saw their neighbor head to work, much less clean his pad.

Justin read the circumstances around Mara's death. Again, nobody saw a beast, only the bite marks on her face. Her husband shared that Mara pined for other people's fortune.

Justin turned to the next page. He frowned at the blank paper.

"Why so furious?"

Justin glanced over his shoulder at Lustitia. The locks on his doors and windows were like air to Lustitia. "If society were a human body, then they are the germs that make it ill."

"Does a physician kill the diseased to restore them to health?"

"Society will die if they live."

"Society has been sick long before your grandfather's time and will still be in your grandchildren's lifetime."

Justin held the list at Lustitia's eye level. "There are only five names here. No matter. I'll find two more vermin for Caeca."

"And you want it to be seven...deeds," she said. "No more, no less."

Every light in the room turned dark. A blackout followed each of Caeca's attacks. Justin set an emergency lamp on a table. "Seven, not six, not-" He gazed at the spot where Lustitia stood before the power outage. He did not hear her shuffling away from the door while he was fumbling with the backup light.

"Seven, yes." Moonlight framed her body as she stood by the window. "When I met you, you were burning with anger. You still are. You believed that you're holier than other men. You still do."

Justin's eyes turned wild with realization. He threw the list and dashed to the door. He stopped in midstride to glance back at the window, then at the door, dumbstruck to see her waiting for him at the entryway.

"The accuser becomes the accused. You should have remembered that when you agreed to summon Caeca to fill your list." She stretched an arm forward.

Justin sneered at Lustitia's gesture before feeling weightlessness then sudden pain as a wave of energy lifted him and threw him against a wall.

"Your list will be complete all right," she spoke.

Justin's back and head ached so much he swore they were broken. Still, he struggled to his feet and put out his arms in front, ready to push back whatever was growling and padding around with heavy feet in the room. He could not see or hear Lustitia. What he saw were eyes burning red staring at him and a mass of black fur moving in a dark corner.

"You asked for seven evil deeds to be wiped off this city." The beast was snarling, but Lustitia's voice came clear through the feral sound.

"Lustitia..."

Lustitia stepped into the light.

Justin gasped. Taller than a man, fur black as night, eyes red like fire, sharp teeth promising death. Any thought of resistance, even taking a step back, vanished when Lustitia howled. He wondered if Luis, Fat John, Arianna, Martin, and Mara accepted death the way he did from seeing and hearing Lustitia.

"Seven foul deeds, six names. Two sins for one name like Caeca and I – two creatures in one." Lustitia lunged at him.

He looked at her bloody maws aimed at his throat. A quick death, he thought.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Prospero owes the editorial staff of Alfie Dog Fiction, Bewildering Stories, Every Day Fiction, Every Day Poets, Flash Fiction Magazine, Flashes in the Dark, Pure Slush, Short-Story.me, Short-story.net, Splickety Magazine, The Corner Club Press, The Gambler Mag, and some major Philippine publications millions of thanks for selecting his works for publication. He has an upcoming work in a Splickety Magazine anthology.

Wordpress: https://pepulma.wordpress.com/



The Cries of Mimic Gulley Maynard Blackoak

Dusk had begun to streak the sky with wispy strokes of gray. Jake sat on his front porch, gazing at the beauty of the setting sun and listening to the sounds of the nocturnal creatures beginning to stir from their daytime slumber. After a long day of fence mending in the blazing sun, his mind and body begged for a peaceful evening of relaxation. The soothing sounds of wildlife and the splendor of the sunset provided all he needed to cast off the shackles of an arduous day.

As the sun continued sinking below the horizon, strange and distant cries began emanating from a wooded area west of his pasture. At first, they were barely audible, but grew more distinct with the advancement of the night. Yet, the louder they became, the more the cries puzzled him. Though they had begun as the cries of various species of animals, they gradually changed to a sound more like the wailings of a frightened young girl. A short time later, they changed again, sounding more like a woman screaming in peril.

Rising from a lawn chair, Jake set an intense gaze toward the wooded area. His thoughts ventured back to a time when his neighbor, Wilson, had informed him of all the local legends of the area. The elderly man had regaled him with tall tales of haunted graveyards and houses, beastly creatures of monstrous repute, and Native American lore about creatures such as the Deer Woman. Only one, however, featured prominently in his mind as his probing eyes fixated on the woods a few hundred yards from his pasture, the story of Mimic Gulley.

The legend of the small stretch of dried up creek bed, surrounded and hidden from view by twisted oaks and elms, states that every six years strange cries from the gulley pierce the serenity of the night. Over the years, many acting on the belief that someone was in need of aid had ventured into the gulley to investigate the cries. Each one of them had subsequently disappeared without a trace, with not even a corpse discovered to explain their mysterious vanishings.

A grimace appeared on Jake's face, contemplating a course of action. Though he did not believe in the old legend, the specter of fear from the unknown prevented him from taking a step toward the ominous wooded area. Shaking his head in disgust at his own reluctance to challenge the veracity of a tall tale, he turned and entered his house. As the door closed behind him, he hoped to find something to divert his attention from the piteous cries.

Stretched out in bed, the cries continued to find their way into his ears, despite the plugs stuffed tightly inside them. He tossed and turned with a pillow firmly wrapped around his head, as the cries persisted to torment him. Throwing the pillow across the room in frustration, he jumped out of bed. It seemed a certainty that he would find no rest until the cries came to an end.

Having dressed, he retrieved his thirty-thirty hunting rifle from the bedroom closet, and headed toward the front door. Along the way, the legend of Mimic Gulley played in his mind. Reaching for the doorknob, his hand paused a fraction of an inch from touching it. Once again, the fear of the unknown gave him reason to question his plan to investigate the cries.

With a deep breath to strengthen his resolve, he forced his hand to open the door. After another brief pause to bolster his courage, he stepped outside, and began making his way toward the cries. Legend or fact, he knew he could not rest until he investigated, and assured himself that the poignant screams did not emanate from someone in danger.

His gait was slow and hesitant at first. Then the cries became louder and sharper. Jake was certain; they sounded as if they came from a woman in peril. Setting aside his fears, he quickened his pace.

Moving briskly through his pasture, the cries became louder and more distressing. He continued progressing swiftly, only slowing long enough to slip through the barbed wire fence that

separated his land from the neighboring meadow.

Finding himself at the foot of the woods that encased the gulley, he came to an abrupt stop. There existed an abnormal and bone piercing chill in the hot summer night. A foreboding sense hung over him, thickening the stilled air with dread, and causing his lungs to ache with every drawn breath. Despite intuition screaming in his head, imploring him to forego the heroics, and return home, he summoned every ounce of courage, and proceeded into the eerie realm of the twisted elms and oaks.

Inside the reaches of the woods, an ill wind whipped through sinewy tree limbs, giving them the appearance of appendages called forth from the bowels of Hell, and ushering him into the unholy grasp of a living nightmare. A ghastly new sound joined the screams of terror, melodic wails that wafted through the trees, sounding much like a chorus of souls in torment, singing a chilling tune of eternal damnation. Once again, his thoughts cried out for him to leave, but a strong sense of honor and duty kept him venturing toward the source of the cries.

Nearing the edge of the gulley, a gruesome sight set his mind aflutter with fright. The once dried-up creek flowed with a thick, red liquid, Jake knew was blood. Casting his eyes in the direction from which the stream originated, he spotted a multitude of creatures, both great and small, hanging upside down from trees, while many bobcats stood nearby, mimicking the sound of their cries of agony. Their throats had been ripped open, spilling their blood into the creek bed.

Following the flowing blood with his eyes, aghast he observed it disappearing into a large boulder. Encircling the boulder were six cougars, each mimicking the scream of a woman in distress. Hovering above them was a beautiful, albeit demonic, woman, adorned in the milkiest of white gowns with eyes as black as the darkest coal. From the manner in which she loomed over the large felines, Jake was convinced they acted under her direction.

Realizing the cries had merely been a ploy to entice him into the infamous gulley, he turned to slip away unnoticed. Before he had taken a step to exit the woods, he found himself surrounded by six cougars, each one snarling with their mouths agape, baring their pointy teeth. Before he could aim and shoot the rifle, one of the ferocious felines stood on its hind legs, slapped the gun from his hands, and shoved him backwards with a massive, clawed paw.

"Ganoria, demands that you not leave this place, ever," it growled in a throaty, menacing voice, as Jake struggled to remain on his feet.

"Oh yea. What if I don't want to stay in this place?" Jake retorted after regaining his balance. "What if I don't want to end up like those critters you got strung up by their heels."

The other cougars immediately stood on their hind legs, and assisted in forcing Jake back toward the gulley, to stand before Ganoria. Along the way, they emitted guttural growls, and clawed at his back with sharp talons. He winced in pain, as long and deep lacerations had been opened in his flesh. Blood seeped from the many wounds, saturating his torn shirt, but the cougars continued to inflict excruciating damage to his body.

Nearing the spot where the bloody flow of the creek disappeared into the boulder, Jake noticed six more cougars making their way out of the woods, forcing another man into Ganoria's presence. Upon arriving at the boulder, she commanded them to prepare the man as an offering. As Jake watched in horror, the cougars subdued the struggling man, tied a vine around his ankles, and then hung him from a tree limb over the creek of blood. Dangling upside down, and wriggling to free himself, one of the felines tore his throat open from ear lobe to ear lobe with a deadly swipe of a talon.

Ganoria turned a wicked façade toward Jake, and with an icy stare that sent chills racing down his spine, she cackled in a fiendish manner. "He is the final offering. Prepare him in a fashion befitting his place of prominence."

"Why are you doing this? What do you hope to gain by murdering innocent people?" Jake inquired of her in a loud and frantic voice.

An evil chortle, such as a chorus of a thousand souls condemned to eternal damnation, passed her blood red lips. "There are no innocents offered to keep open this gateway to Hades, only males of the species that feel compelled to come to the rescue of an imperiled female."

"But why murder males that only want to help? That makes no sense," he countered through a bewildered expression.

Again, an evil laugh reverberated from her mouth. "I hate males, especially those who live by a code of honor and duty. Your foolish kind ignores all reason, and plunges headlong into danger without regard to the consequences."

"By offering your blood to sustain this gate into Hell, I am ridding this world of all males that believe a female needs their help," she continued through a contemptuous glare.

Jake glanced at the five men hanging from the trees with their blood dripping into the creek, and then cast a steely gaze toward Ganoria. "So you think by murdering males who have honor and integrity, you will make this world a better place for females?

"If you do that, the only males left will be the bad ones. How the hell does that make the world better for females?" Jake added, wresting himself free from the cougars' grip, and taking a step toward her.

The cougars quickly moved to intercept him, but Ganoria ordered them to hold back with a wave of a hand. "Let him approach my lovely females. He poses no threat to me and he cannot escape his destiny."

"So from what you say, I reckon that if say blood from a female was to be mixed with the rest, your damn gate shuts down," he surmised, while inching closer to where she hovered above the boulder.

Ganoria studied him with a curious veneer. "That is not meant for your knowledge, but rest assured, not a single drop of female blood shall ever fall into the stream."

Jake shook his head, and then directed a wily smile toward her. "If that's the case, then I guess there's nothing I can do to get out of this. So do what you have to."

Ganoria snapped her fingers. The cougars placed a vine around his ankles, and hoisted him above the creek, without him putting up the slightest resistance. With a swift swipe of a claw, a massive laceration was opened in Jake's throat. Blood sprayed, and fell into the creek below. Jake felt the cold lifelessness of death begin to creep through his body, yet the wily smile on his lips failed to diminish.

Unexpectedly, a strange phenomenon began to occur with the boulder. It began to shudder violently, and then began shrinking. Ganoria watched with shock, as the gateway she had maintained for hundreds of years vanished. Casting a bewildered expression from the gateway to her feline minions, and then toward Jake, rage began to blanket her face. "What have you done? How did you?"

It was Jake's turn to laugh, and he did so as heartily as his failing health would permit. "It turns out there was a fatal flaw in your plan. You never took into consideration that a woman could also live by the same code of honor and duty as a man. Just so you know, Jake is what I go by, but my real name is Jaqueline. I have always hated being mistaken for a man. I never thought looking like one would ever come in handy. Damned if I wasn't wrong about that."

Jake coughed, and continued in a raspy voice, as death continued its march through her body. "Kind of funny, ain't it. Your plan undone by a woman."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Maynard Blackoak is an author living in Oklahoma. The greatest influences in his writing have been the works of Poe and Dickens. He draws inspiration from the sounds and shadows of the night and processes them through the splintered windmill of his mind to create his tales.

Facebook: <u>Author Maynard Blackoak</u>
Twitter: <u>@maynardblackoak</u>

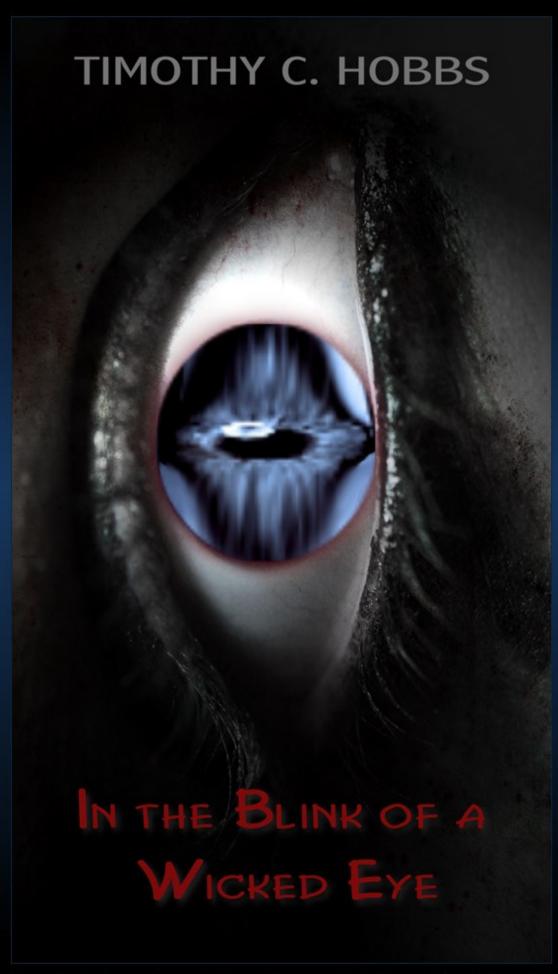




Gape by Aiden Truss

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

AIDEN TRUSS



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE, ITUNES, AND KOBO

An Interview with Author Timothy C. Hobbs

Sirens Call Publications recently released *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye*, a short story collection penned by Timothy C. Hobbs. We sat down with Timothy in order to pick his brain and what follows is a pretty good capture of all that transpired...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Timothy! Why don't you take a moment and introduce yourself to our captive audience?

Timothy C. Hobbs: I am a retired medical technologist currently living in Temple, Texas with my wife Donna. I have a son and a daughter both all grown up now. I have three grandchildren, not all grown up yet, but they're working on it! I turned sixty five last January and still wonder where all the time went. Seems I should still be twelve and spending Saturdays at the Star Barber Shop followed by The Wildcat News Stand where I would pick up the latest Famous Monsters



of Filmland magazine and a new horror anthology before heading to the Arcadia Theater and catching a movie. Those were definitely the good old days.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

TCH: My older brother was a lover of horror and magic. He had a collection of Classic Illustrated comic books from which I learned to read before starting school, the first one being *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. By the time I reached the age of twelve I had read many horror novels and anthologies, but it was when I read *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, I was in the sixth grade then, that I decided I wanted to write horror stories, so immediately after finishing *Dracula*, I wrote my first tale – *The Vampire of England*, fan fiction before it had a name.

SCP: What is In the Blink of a Wicked Eye about?

TCH: In the Blink of a Wicked Eye is a diverse collection of flash and short fiction. I tried to offer everything from supernatural horror to horror that is all to real, melancholy ghosts as well as wicked witches, blood thirsty vampires along with those who are more interested in love than blood, and tales designed to touch hearts as well as provoke thinking.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye* before they read it?

TCH: I approached this anthology with a desire to construct a collection similar in mood and content to the original *Twilight Zone* half hour broadcasts. I remember those Friday nights well. You never knew if you would be amazed, chilled, perplexed, or just down right scared silly. That's what I wanted *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye* to offer – a variety of fantasy and supernatural stories that had a little something for everyone to enjoy.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

TCH: I don't recall ever outlining a project. My short stories or novels seem to write themselves once I have an idea, which usually comes from something I see or dream about. I keep a notebook where I write down any inspiration that comes to me, so, in a pinch, I can go back and work up something that could actually be many years old.

SCP: If you could cast your favorite story in the collection, who would you choose to play your main characters?

TCH: I have many favorites in the collection. One in particular is *Candy Corn*. I think Bill Murray would do a great job as the aging main character who, facing the perils and pains and realities of growing older, is given hope by a visitor from the past.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

TCH: To keep at writing regularly. I have gone through periods of inactivity lasting from a few weeks to a few years. Since Feb of 2014 I have been in a dry spell for producing anything new. At these times I will usually go back and edit an older project I never finished or a story I never published. But it is always a nervous period for me when I'm experiencing these blocks because I wonder if I'll ever get that creative spark back again.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye* apart from other books of the same genre?

TCH: I think because it is a collection that is predominately flash fiction, *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye* offers the reader a compact story that doesn't suffer any loss of substance due to the short word count.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

TCH: I am currently reading an anthology edited by Peter Straub – *American Fantastic Tales Vol. I: Terror and the Uncanny from Poe to the Pulps.*

I am also rereading Of Human Bondage by W. Somerset Maugham

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

TCH: Some of my favorite authors are Richard Matheson, Ray Bradbury, Robert Bloch, Rod Serling, Charles Beaumont, Vladimir Nabokov, Anne Rice, Cormac McCarthy, W. Somerset Maugham, William Faulkner, Sherman Alexie, Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence, and Ian McEwan.

Favorite novels are Bram Stoker's *Dracula, The Werewolf of Paris, Lolita, Interview with a Vampire, The Vampire Lestat, Of Human Bondage, All the Pretty Horses, Sons and Lovers, Jude the Obscure, A Light in August, and Anna Karenina.*

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

TCH: If people read and comment on your work, I think you've done your job as an author. They may praise your work or offer constructive criticism or be quite frank about not caring for it all, but that's what it's all about as far as I'm concerned – the sharing of your story with someone else.

I have been lucky enough to have readers from many walks of life and other countries give me positive and negative feedback, so I feel I've been successful in my attempts to entertain someone else if only for a short time.

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?

TCH: I feel the best pieces of advice any writer can give out for those just beginning to feel their way around writing are 1. Try to write as often as you can and don't let the occasional "block" get you down. 2. Welcome constructive criticism. This is probably one the hardest things for budding writers to accept. It was for me. But it is a vital part of the creative process. 3. Don't let rejection notices blindside you. Keep sending out those queries. The field is crowded and publishers just don't have enough time or space available for everyone, but, believe me, somewhere there will be someone willing to give your work a chance if you will be persistent in submitting. 4. Edit, edit, and then edit some more! This was by far the most difficult process for me to get my head into. Like constructive criticism, editing is one of the most important facets of the writing process and can make all the difference between rejection and acceptance.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

TCH: I want my readers to be entertained. I want them to laugh, to contemplate, to feel melancholy, and to have a shiver as well. I want them know they have shared the lives of all the different tenants living in the pages of *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye* be they ghosts, witches, vampires, or just the person next door. I want them to walk away with a sense of joy, empathy... and just a pinch of fright!

Thank you Timothy! *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye* can be found online in digital and print versions on Amazon as well as other fine retailers.

Credits

Fiction and Poetry

Shaun Avery

Matthew J. Barbour

Matthew M. Bartlett

Maynard Blackoak

Mark Cassell

Daniel Marc Chant

E. Doyle-Gillespie

Lee A. Forman

Ken Goldman

Wayne Haroutunian

Jon Ingoldby

Jon Jefferson

Michael Koenig

Vincent LaManna

Andrew Lennon

Ken MacGregor

Greg McWhorter

Otis Moore

Prospero Pulma, Jr.

Joseph Rubas

S. B. Smith

Randy Streu

Michael Thomas-Knight

DJ Tyrer

D.S. Ullery

David J. Wing

Michael Wombat

Joriah Wood

T.S. Woolard

Alex Woolf

Featured Author

Timothy C. Hobbs

Featured Artist

Glenn James

Copyright © 2015 Sirens Call Publications All rights reserved

All stories are the intellectual property of their respective authors. Sirens Call Publications has been granted permission by the authors denoted on the page of contents to print their works in Issue #20 of The Sirens Call. All characters and events appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Artwork is reprinted under the expressed permission of Glenn James.

All Advertisements are property of SCP Designs, with the exception of The Shadow Fabric (Mark Cassell) and Here Be Dragons (Glenn James).

License Notes

This eZine is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eZine may not be sold, reproduced, or reprinted in any format if you do not hold the copyright to the individual work in question. Thank you for respecting the hard work of these authors.