# The Sirens Call

April 2017 issue #32



Hack & Slash!

Works of Dark Fiction

A Horror that explore

the worst of humanity,

and the more gruesome

side of the genre!

An Interview with Brent Abell, Author of 'The Calling'

Photography by
Isaac Sanchez and
Irene Villalba
featuring Model
Einsam Vuk

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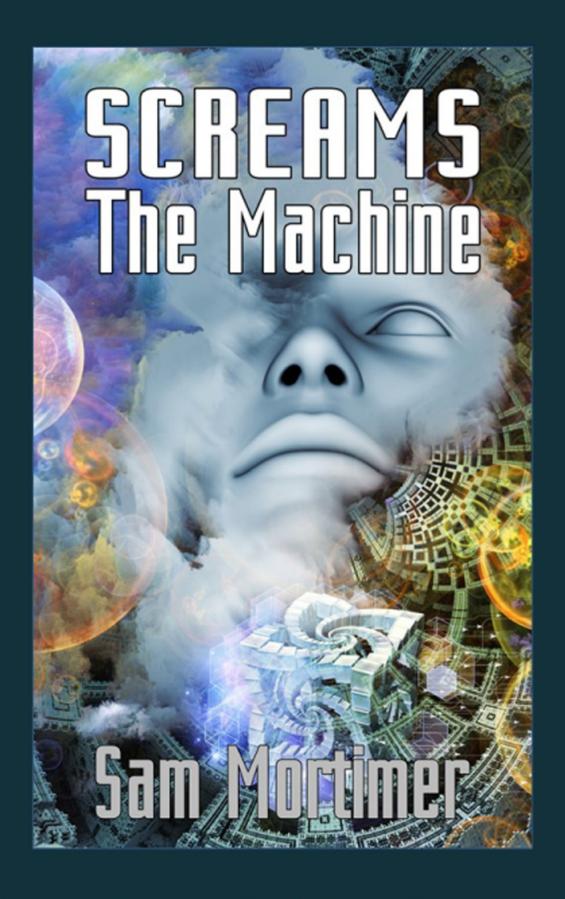
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#### A Lavender Tone | Joshua Skye

The world had taken a somber tone as the crickets crooned, the loons cried, and the wind whispered through the labyrinthine weave of the tree branches. It was the kind of dusk that gently urged Annabelle Leigh into nostalgic reverie. Even the smell, the wet earth, sodden bark, and the sweet hint of the apple orchards on the other side of the vast, enchanted forest, took her to a simpler time when she was but a boy, shy, effeminate, and pensive, minding his own business in a world filled with people who never understood him. The boy she was, as much as she'd grown to love him over the years, was long gone, and the woman she always knew she was, outgoing, beautiful, yet still contemplative, was the person standing in the cabin doorway absorbing the sentimental impressions of the twilight world around her.

"I love this time of year," she mused in barely more than a murmur. The back of one wrist rested on her forehead in a dramatic pose, just below the steep slope of her beehive hairdo. "It's so romantic, as though passion is alive in the very air itself, don't you think?"

She turned from the sluggishly falling night to face the horrible him, the biggest bully of her childhood, her teenage rapist, the man who'd beaten her as an adult, Ryan Paulson. It still pained her to admit how attractive he was, handsome, chiseled, the brunette, blue-eyed lady's man he'd been since he was fifteen. As she thought him still good-looking at that moment, she groaned in disgust, her stomach turning as though in a vice. Pressing her right fist into her abdomen as hard as she could, seemed to ease the revulsion, so she did so as demurely as possible. Mustn't let him see any vulnerability, nothing he could use to...twist things in his favor.

"Fuck you, you vile bitch," Ryan spat his reply. More filth flowed from him as easily as a stream trickled down a hillside, but she ignored it as she had a hundred times before. The victims of villains could do that sometimes, learn to just not hear. Silence was better.

She'd expected nothing more from him, such vulgarities were quite suiting to his personality, one cultivated by the traditionalist world he lived in as much as it has been nourished by his own, more private animosities. No lamps were on in the cabin, instead all the curtains wreathing all the windows were tied back to allow the light of the full moon to flood in. Adorned in a flowing lilac evening gown, bespeckled in convincingly realistic jewels, and presenting herself with an air of sophistication they both knew she naturally lacked, she crossed the room to the bed and sat down next to him.

The queen bed was a marvel of rural craftsmanship, fashioned from actual logs stripped of their gnarly skins to reveal their inner beauty, it was also solid and heavy. It mattered not how much the man tied to it struggled against his restraints, it wouldn't budge. The bed was as steadfast in its purpose, as he'd been in his bullying. For the first time in her whole life, he was hers to do with as she pleased. And oh, how she had such plans for him. She smiled at him, proper, polite, and gently touched his hip. He tried to pull away, but was unable to. Her emerald eyes, gray in the wash of the moonlight, moved along his v-taper to the flaccid flap of circumcised flesh between his legs. It had a much darker skin tone than the rest of his body, nearly black toward the base, a glaring apposition to the rest of his pale form.

From his genitalia, she turned her attention to the nightstand where she'd carefully laid out all the tools she'd need for her purposes, including the dissection tray with the hole in its center

just large enough to accommodate his equipment. Beside it lay the usual assortment of companions, among them alcohol, dissection pins, toothpicks, forceps, and a scalpel. She imagined it would be remarkably like dissecting a worm, something she'd found rather repulsive in the seventh grade when she'd been forced to by an unsympathetic science teacher. Now, however, with the specimen being Ryan's unremarkable endowment, she wasn't so much repulsed as she was enthusiastic.

"Do you remember the stories about these woods when we were kids?" She reached over, paused a moment to admire her long nails painted exactly the same shade as her dress, and picked up the dissecting tray. Holding it high, she peered through the hole in the center to her captive's petrified, wide-eyed expression. His lips were moving, spewing hateful things she couldn't hear. "The scary stories, you know, the ones they told us around campfires and we shared with each other in the cloakroom in elementary? No? I do. I remember them well."

It was easy to maneuver his flabby manhood through the opening she'd made in the icy, metal platter, regardless of how much he tried to keep it from being done. His squirming was useless, as useless as his dick would be, as useless as he was as a human being, as useless as all the begging, pleading, and bargaining Annabelle had done as a sniveling, fearful little boy being beaten. She picked up the scalpel, and it felt good in her hand, like gratification incarnate.

"The only thing that terrified me more than the stories about the Puk-wudgie, was you. You terrified me, Ryan, on a daily basis. And you know what? I think you liked it. You liked terrorizing me more than any adult liked to frighten kids with their ghost stories. You got off on it, quite literally, if you remember." She glared at him, the anger she'd felt her whole life was so fiery in her eyes, Ryan was silenced. "No one forgets having that done to them." She leaned in to him, her face inches from his, the scalpel following. "No one," she growled.

After a deep breath, Annabelle sat up straight, shoulders back, bosom out, chin high. Her expression, however, did not change. "The stories of the Puk-wudgie have always haunted the land, even before white men came to steal it. They've always been, and they always will be. They're little things, barely coming up to your waist. Usually unseen because they're absolutely black, like shadows. There's one night out of the month they can't hide from seeking eyes. Under the full moon, their charred flesh appears as lavender."

Standing, she scooped up the dissecting pins with her free hand, did an elaborate melodramatic twirl, and hurried to the foot of the bed. She allowed a hint of smile to return to her ruby lips. "They're attracted to wicked people to enact their wicked deeds, but since you and I both know you've camped in these woods hundreds of times, it's going to take a bit more to call to them. If your screams don't, the smell of your wicked blood will."

While keeping hold of her instruments, she lifted her dress ever so slightly, and mounted the bed as ladylike as possible, shuffling slowly up between Ryan's legs. He began to scream, his lips not forming vulgarities, but contorted into an elongated O. Annabelle Leigh tuned it out, and in her mind put a warped Connie Francis vinyl on an old phonograph. "Who's Sorry Now?" began to echo through her thoughts as though being played in a vast, unknown canyon.

Down, down close to the tray she leaned and could smell the mild stench of his musk. She dropped the pins on the tray, took hold of the shriveled glans, and stretched his ashen worm out as far as it would go. The circumcision scar was a jagged mess, something that might have

elicited pity in her had it belonged to anyone else. Such a barbaric, antiquated practice it was to mangle the genitalia of little baby boys. The testicles tightened in fear against the base of the penis, little more than two discolored walnut halves sucking into folds of flesh.

In a brooding voice, she asked, "Do you remember when you and your cronies tackled me on the playground, dragged me behind the restrooms, and urinated on me as you called me all those horrible names?" She could tell her words were drowned out by his shrieks, but realized they were more for her benefit than his. "I didn't even know what most of them were at the time, horrible things designed to denigrate and humiliate. But that was the goal, after all, wasn't it, to humiliate me? I could see that some of you liked it, you especially. Imagine how confusing it was to me, how mortifying, how disturbing, how enthralling..." Tears stung her eyes, and she let them flow down her flushed cheeks as she continued. "Because as awful as it was, it was attention and sometimes any attention is better than none at all."

The blade of the scalpel sunk into the tender flesh just inside the under valley of his crown as easily as a tongue through softened butter. Pearls of crimson formed immediately, ballooning up the reflective surface of the metal's edge before popping as though a soap bubble. A tiny spray of warmth spattered over Annabelle's face. Without thought, she licked away the droplets from her lips, the copper taste spread across her tongue as bittersweet as the preliminary fluids oozing out as soon as she wrapped her mouth around a hard cock. As she would work her tongue down the shaft of a lover, she moved the blade down her bully's flaccidness, pressing harder to slice through the tissue. As the urethra itself became exposed, blood ran down the sides onto the tray and pooled in the twisting crinkles of the tightened testicles.

She opened Ryan's penis just as she had the worm back in seventh grade, cutting meticulously with the blade to peel the skin away from the tissue underneath, careful not to cut the pulsing veins covering the corpus cavernosum like spider webs. Still, there was blood, lots and lots of it, endlessly disgorging. The metallic stench was sickening, but she held her composure. Mustn't give her captive anything to use against her.

Oh, no. Mustn't do that.

The pins held the flaps of skin stretched apart. So caught up in her work, she hadn't noticed he'd stopped screaming. His eyes were wide, unblinking, staring up at the ceiling. Annabelle dropped the scalpel and crawled backwards off the bed. Admiring her work, she didn't realize that the Puk-wudgie had already come. They stood beside her and all around the bed, their eyes firmly focused on the bleeding genitalia of the man tied to it, their flesh the same beautiful hue as her dress in the light of the moon that filled the cabin. As she stepped away, they crept closer. As she finally noticed them, they climbed up onto the bed. As she watched, with a smile from ear to ear, the little lavender creatures feasted greedily and gorily upon her childhood bully.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Joshua Skye is an award-winning, bestselling author. His work includes The Angels of Autumn and Cradle.

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#### A Howl for Horrible Men | Sheldon Woodbury

She had the kind of beauty that was impossible to resist, like a mythical siren from a distant time. Her hair was long and midnight black, tumbling down in twisting curls. Her eyes were dark too, shimmering with a mystery lurking inside.

But he had a secret as well, and it was far darker than her raven colored hair. They'd met the night before in an online chat-room for people with erotic desires that were way too extreme for the usual sites, and agreed a meeting was in order. They'd just left a smoky bar at her whispery request.

"I have an art studio downtown if you'd like to see it..."

And of course he knew what that meant, a secluded place where they could indulge their desires in the secrecy it required.

His urges were already beginning to surge up as they raced through the rain splattered streets. He'd stopped trying to figure out where his brutal yearnings had come from long ago. He'd been ruthless in business and it had made him filthy rich, so he decided it was just his nature to find pleasure in the agony of others. Torture was a word he never used, except in that secret place where he did unspeakable things to beautiful women.

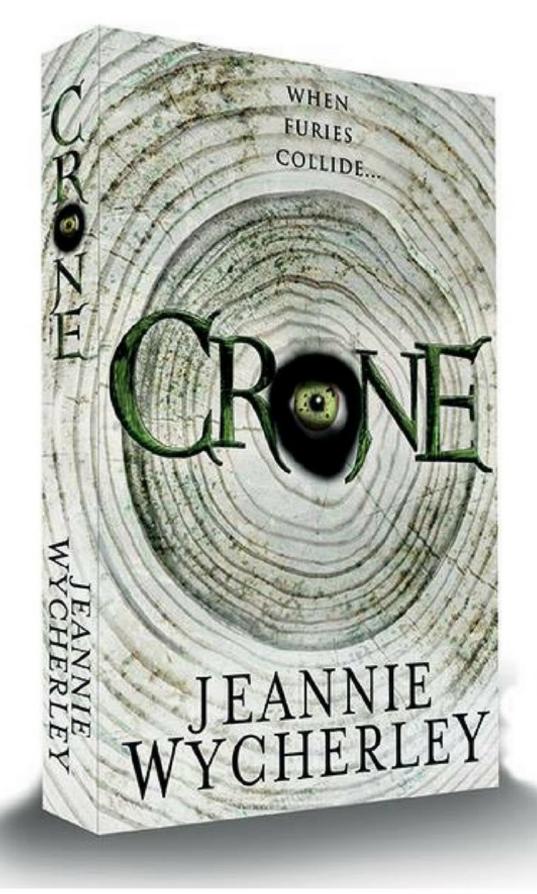
When she unlocked the door, he could barely contain himself any longer because the roaring fire of his violent urges was aching to break free.

She flicked on the light, and that's when he saw it, a towering sight looming in front of him, a colossal figure made from bones. It looked like a monster spawned in another world, with rickety legs, a blood smeared body, and a giant head made of skulls. Rotted flesh and other craggy bones were scattered on the floor in random heaps.

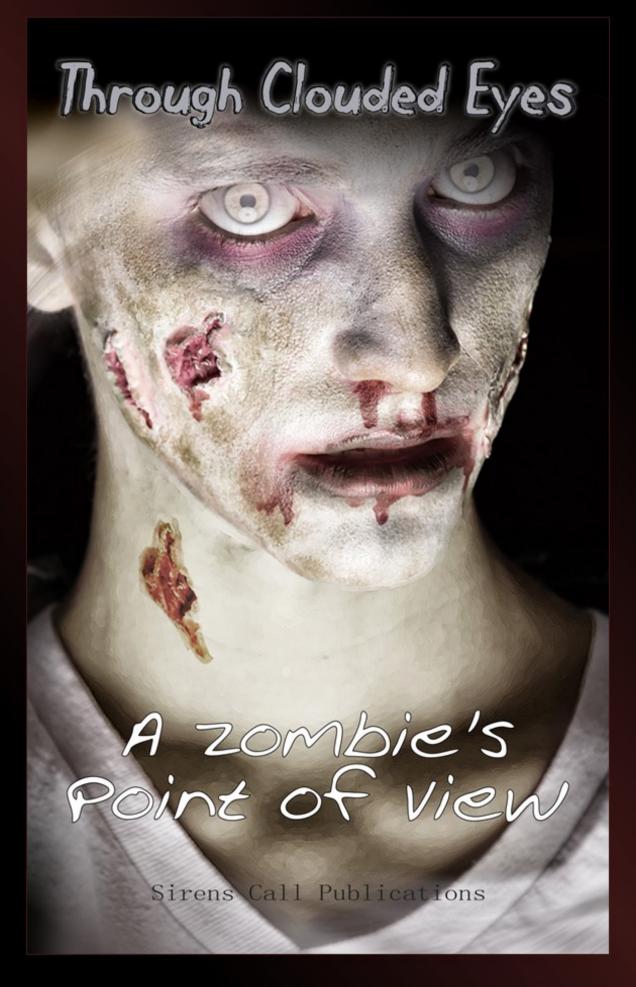
The beautiful woman with the midnight hair cracked open her mouth far wider than was humanly possible and unleashed a wail that shook everything in the room, especially him. It was rage and fury, wrath and vengeance, a primal howl. The monstrous sculpture of bones shivered in front of him, but stood its ground. And that's when the real horror began. Most of his body ended up on the bloody floor, but not all. His skull was placed at the very top of the colossal figure with exquisite care. It was still dripping with blood, but that just made it even more glorious to the beautiful woman with the midnight hair.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Sheldon Woodbury is an award winning writer (screenplays, plays, books, short stories, and poems). He also teaches screenwriting at New York University. His book Cool Million is considered the essential guide to writing high concept movies. His short stories and poems have appeared in many horror anthologies and magazines. His novel The World on Fire was published September, 2014 by JWK Fiction.

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#### Catch Me When You Can | Rivka Jacobs

"The gentleman wants to meet you," Perle Mendel said, sweeping her arm in the direction of the parlor's only sofa where an older man reclined stiffly, primly, his dark crusher-hat brimdown on his lap.

Reisel sashayed over, wearing a crepe de chine silk nightgown and matching, open robe. She was plump with fashionably bobbed, curled brick-red hair and splashes of freckling on her exposed white skin.

The man narrowed his lugubrious, close-set eyes.

"Goldie, Faiga," Mrs. Mendel called into a hallway to the right that was blocked from view by ripples of green-velvet curtains hemmed with fringe.

Reisel stuck a finger in her red mouth and made eye contact with their customer; she pulled her finger out with a 'pop.' "You don't like me, mister?" she asked, swiveling her hips.

Goldie, her brown hair flounced on the sides and pulled into a low bun at the base of her neck, danced into view wearing a set of silk bloomers and a Middy-blouse. She was followed by tall, thin Faiga dressed in a low-waist gingham morning dress buttoned at the shoulders and down the back. They giggled and gave Reisel a hug and a kiss as they joined her in the line-up, waiting for the man to choose one of them.

"Is that all of the girls who work here?" the man asked. His large, white, drooping handlebar mustache moved more than his thin, purplish mouth when he spoke.

Perle's face seemed to harden a moment, then she smiled. "Well, there's Libke. She's kind of shy..."

The man nodded slightly.

Reisel put her hands on her hips. "Ah, come on..." she started, but blushed and shut up when she caught Mrs. Mendel's glare.

The older woman shouted, "Libke, we got customers!"

A petite, pretty young woman with blonde, wavy hair flowing over her shoulders, hesitantly peeked between the curtain panels, then stepped into the parlor. She wore a simple box-pleated skirt fastened up the side and a white silk blouse with pink embroidery framing a modest neckline. A pair of black patent-leather, low-heeled pumps graced her feet. She looked like someone's younger sister just returning home from *shul*.

The man leaned forward slightly, and raised his chin. His high-bridged and long nose seemed to sniff at the group of four women. "I will take that one," he said flatly, raising an index finger in the direction of Libke.

"Ohhh," Goldie whined, not very seriously. She did a small pirouette as if she were on parade, and passed in front of the man again, showing off her legs. "You don't know what you're missing," she said, laughing as she disappeared into the hallway, the curtains flying.

Reisel and Faiga—who was very dark with olive skin, brown eyes, and black, curly hair—slipped an arm around each other's waist. "Maybe another time," Faiga said, without much conviction. They too exited, giggling, with a backward simultaneous glance at Mrs. Mendel.

Perle Mendel—her graying auburn hair styled in an old-fashioned Edwardian upsweep held by art-nouveau combs, her dress a modern wool-jersey Chanel knock-off tied loosely at the waist—took a step toward Libke and yanked her over by an arm. "She's a sweet little thing, ain't she?" Perle put her arm around Libke's back as the girl slouched, staring at the dusky oriental carpet on the floor. "Looks like a regular Lillian Gish, like in that new movie *Orphans of the Storm*. I said to my Harry—he took me to the Mark Strand and we were dressed to the hilt—anyway, I says to Harry, don't Lillian look like our Libke? She thinks she gets married when she comes from a *shtetl* in Poland to America, but her husband turns out, he was a pimp. A nice Orthodox girl like this. My husband and I take her in..." Perle smiled and squeezed Libke, then bent and studied the girl's expression for a moment. She twisted her mouth slightly, straightened, sighed. "You have the dough?" she asked. "It's one dollar for this one."

The man stood. "Yes, I have money," he answered. He was taller than most of their usual visitors, gangly. His eyes were glints of steely blue. He still clutched his hat in both hands, but now removed one to slip his fingers into the breast pocket of his rumpled, gray jacket. He extracted a folded square made of paper. It was a half-inch thick. He held this out to the madam.

Perle reached and plucked the offered wad from her visitor's thumb and forefinger. She shoved Libke forward.

The blonde girl stumbled and regained her balance just before she bumped into her caller. She raised her face until she was peering up at the man's wiry, silver mustache hairs. Something about his smell, the way his lips curled, his posture, made her shiver. But then, all men made her shiver.

"Libke," Perle said, her tone conveying impatience and authority, "take this gentleman ... do you have a name you'd like to use here...?"

"I call myself Miller," he answered. He offered an elbow to Libke, as if she were a duchess.

Libke's face flushed a little and a faint smile appeared, her sunken hazel eyes brightened. She slipped her arm around the crook of his elbow and began to lead him to the hallway, off of which branched the various rooms the girls occupied and used for their clients. "That's an interesting accent you have, where are you from?" she asked in a high, almost childish voice as they brushed through the folds of green velvet and entered the shadows beyond.

Perle heard his answer, "England," float back to her ears as she lost sight of them. "Hmph," she said, and she unfolded the money Miller had offered. She stretched the packet out, holding the crisp, white squares on either side. "Huh? What?" she exclaimed. "What the hell is this?" Her voice was loud.

The other girls trotted back into the parlor. A voice came from above the stairwell at the other side of the room, "What is it *gelibte*? What's the matter?"

"Harry, Harry come here," Perle cried. "Look girls, what the hell is this?" She yanked at the paper.

"Some kind of money," Goldie said. "A whole lot of it, I'd say."

They heard the heavy footfalls of Harry Mendel as he trudged down the carpeted steps that led from the couples' living quarters in the apartment above the brothel. He reached the last stair and emerged into view, whipping around the banister as he progressed toward his wife. He was dressed in trousers and shirt-sleeves, with his high collar removed and his suspenders uneven, as if they'd been hastily pulled into position.

Perle quickly scanned his appearance and made a mental note to question him another day,

but at the moment, she was attempting to quell her rage. "Harry, what is this shit? Is this money?"

"Let me see," he said, pulling a pair of spectacles from his front shirt-pocket. He came behind his wife, took her hands into his, and leaned over to see the script as Perle wouldn't let it go. "That's a five-pound note, a 'white note'—that's five-pounds sterling from the Bank of England. How many of those do you got there, Perlie?"

She hastily shoved paper-corners with her thumb, counting to herself in a mumble. "There's ten notes here," she said. "That's what? Fifty-pounds? How much is that in American? And what the hell can we do with it?"

"Perle, that's a lot of money. One pound-sterling is worth about four-dollars American now. Who gave you that?"

"Some old guy with an English accent who went with Libke," Reisel answered. She batted her eyelashes at Harry and patted her bobbed, ruddy curls.

Perle jerked her head up for a moment, then kicked at Reisel. "Save it for the paying customers," she said.

Harry laughed. "I know plenty of places we can get this exchanged for American," he said. "They'll take a cut of course..."

"Who, the Italians, Tammany, or our Jewish brothers?" Perle asked.

"Well, we owe them all a smidgen of something," Harry answered. He carefully pried her grip apart and seized the notes. "But for this, I'll go to A.R. himself."

"Ooohh, Mr. Rothstein," the three girls chorused at once, Faiga bringing her hands together at her breast.

"Yes, Mr. R. But Perle, my sweetheart, my *gelibte*, who would give us two-hundred-dollars for Libke?"

"He said his name was Miller, and he's from England, and he's a creepy-looking old coot," Perle answered. "And who cares why; maybe he doesn't know the rate of exchange."

Harry straightened, looking thoughtful. His face was angular and still handsome, even with the receding hairline, the lines that cross-hatched his sunken cheeks, and the sagging gray skin around his chin. He squinted as if concentrating on something while he rolled the pound-notes into a tube. "Do you girls hear anything?"

Goldie tugged at her Middy's red scarf. "Uh uh," she said, shaking her head.

Perle looked up at her husband. She trusted him completely, and relied on his vigilance and good sense. She'd been a prostitute herself years before, fresh from the old country on the streets of New York City, but Harry had seen the intelligence and drive in her, as well as her beauty, and he married her—he even found a rabbi from one of the Lower East Side gangs who would perform the ceremony. They set up their own brothel in this tenement, on Eldridge Street between Hester and Grand. She took care of the girls and the business, Harry dealt with the cops and the politicians, the rackets and the crime bosses. Despite their best efforts, things had been difficult for several years, until Mr. Rothstein took control. He and Harry were old friends. Now, when something needed greasing or fixing, they went to A.R.

"Too quiet," Harry said, inhaling deeply, letting the breath out slowly. "Don't like it. Taking too long. Libke doesn't make a party out of her business."

Perle felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise up. It was like a chill breeze passed over her, despite the warmth and stuffiness of the room. "Go see, Harry, go see if she's okay," she urged him.

Reisel nervously looked at the husband and wife. She and Faiga held hands. "You think there's trouble? Libke knows to scream for help..."

Harry stuck the roll of bank notes into his trousers pocket, and strode towards the hallway entrance. He disappeared into the darkness, the green velvet curtains thrust in billowing waves to the side.

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It was almost midnight, and the parlor was crowded. Perle, Reisel, Faiga, and Goldie rested on the plush and tufted emerald sofa. They looked like a row of exhausted marionettes with their strings detached. Perle in particular looked blanched and slack-jawed, her eyes staring forward, moving only to acknowledge the police officers as they carried the stretcher with the bloody sheet wrapped around it, and the lumps underneath, out the front door. It had taken them a long time to find all the body parts and organs.

Harry was in a rapid and animated conversation with two men, A.R.'s associates—one might have been Mr. Lansky, the other was an Italian—Perle wasn't sure she'd seen him before. Another four or five of Rothman's thugs stood around near the door, and a couple more were outside. They made sure the curious and the press kept away. Mr. Lansky would be handling the police, and the Tammany boys.

"Mr. Mendel looks really tired," Faiga whispered. She sat on one side of the madam.

Perle grunted, still trying to get the images out of her mind. The sight of so much blood, of such unbelievable savagery, had shocked even her, and she'd survived violent pogroms in Russia. Poor Libke; cut open like a butchered animal, her legs spread, her arms folded over where her small breasts used to be. Discolored, clotted, twisted pieces of her internal organs, her gut, her flesh lay beside her, and splattered around the room. But her face, her expression—Perle Mendel groaned, and pressed her stomach with both palms. "She looked so peaceful," she said out loud, looking at no one, her sight fixated on the small gate-leg table and brass lamp that sat against the opposite wall. "How can she look like she's asleep when her throat was cut all the way to her spine..."

"Oh, oh God," Reisel said liquidly, and raised her hands to her ears. "I don't want to hear it." She'd refused to go look, when they heard Harry's shouts and loud cries, and then the sound of his retching. Perle had gathered her dress and dashed toward her husband, making the curtains fly and whirl. Faiga and Goldie started to follow, but then stopped, like Reisel, afraid of what they would find, afraid something might happen to them, too.

"Sweetie, Perlie," a man's voice hovered over their heads.

Perle lifted her eyes under her brows and focused on her husband, who was standing in front of her and leaning over, one hand on the back of the sofa.

He clutched one of her upper arms. "It's all taken care of. There won't be no trouble, not from the authorities, not from our neighbors. No bad publicity. Mr. Lansky and Mr. Luciano will take care of everything. Come on, my Perlie, I'll take you upstairs and you can lie down, get some sleep." He paused, and as his wife said nothing but only gazed into his eyes, he added, with

concern in his voice, "Do you need anything? Do you want a doctor?"

"But Libke, poor little Libke," Perle finally said. Her eyes filled. "Why did he do this? How could he be such a monster? What could that girl possibly have done to deserve this?"

Harry squeezed her shoulder. "The Independent Benevolent Association will take care of the funeral, and she'll be buried under Jewish law, don't worry. We'll settle on some story—maybe say she took her own life?"

"What I want to know is where did that bastard go," Goldie interrupted. "You expect us to sleep in our beds down here, tonight? He could still be in here!"

Reisel's eyes looked like coins. "Oh God, oh my God," she whispered again.

Harry straightened, and reached out his fingers to his wife, who sighed and nodded and grasped his offered hand by which she pulled herself to stand. She smoothed down, tugged her clinging pale-blue dress into place. "I'm all done in, let's go to bed. I'll deal with this tomorrow."

"Wait, wait, you're leaving us down here?" Faiga whimpered, bouncing once in place, as if she was about to bound up and confront Harry.

He gave her a cold stare, and raised one finger. He was the boss, after all. Ruled by a whole hierarchy of other bosses, to be sure, but the absolute ruler of this little realm. "A.R.'s boys checked every inch of this place. The window in Libke's room was open. The ghoul got away down the fire-escape."

Perle slipped an arm around her husband's waist. "Come on, Harry, they'll be okay."

Reisel, Goldie, and Faiga sat upright and watched their middle-aged madam and pimp amble toward Meyer Lansky, who touched his hat in a gesture that said 'hello' and 'goodbye' and 'we're done here' all at the same time. After some conversation, Rothstein's men ushered out the two police detectives, and exited through the front door. No one would think much of seeing a crowd of men egress from a Lower East Side brothel.

Mr. and Mrs. Mendel made their way to the staircase.

Goldie, in the middle, wrapped her arms around herself. "Peas and shit, I'm scared," she said, as the place became deathly quiet. The occasional shout, cat yowl, and car horn bray could be heard from the streets and sidewalks outside. "Can we stay together, please?"

Faiga nodded. "Try to keep me out of your room," she said to Goldie. "Yours is the farthest away from Libke's. And it has no window."

Reisel was shaking. "It's the Ripper," she said softly.

"Oh come on," Goldie responded, but her tone wavered with uncertainty. "That happened before we were even born. In some other country. And... and... then there was a murder happened in New York a few years later, but..."

"They never caught him," Reisel continued. "What if he never died? What if he came here? What if he doesn't ever die?"

They stared at one another, eyes wide. No one wanted to be the first to move.

"Well, we sitting shiva here? We going to stay like this seven days and seven nights?" Goldie's voice was loud and filled with nerve. "Come on, ladies..." She reached out and gripped the hands on either side of her. "Everyone, up!"

They came to their feet together. They faced the quiet hallway entrance and the heavy green

curtains with the festive fringe hems.

"We have nowhere else to go," Faiga admitted. "Are the streets any better? Who else will give us a roof and a bed?"

The three young women swallowed and sniffed back their tears. Each took a deep breath, as if they were about to jump into a murky and impenetrable pond. They advanced step by step, side by side, forward into the dark.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rivka Jacobs currently lives with four Siamese cats in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology. More recently she's placed stories with The Sirens Call eZine, The Literary Hatchet, Fantastic Floridas, and Riding Light Review. Rivka has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and mental health counseling, and a BSN. She most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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### One Bad Fur Day

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#### **Kissing with Tongues** | Shaun Avery

"So, Shondra... how badly do you want a part in this movie?"

The stacked girl with the surgically enhanced everything answered in something like a nanosecond. "Oh," she said, pouting out every word, "so bad I can taste it."

Behind the table, Wayne grimaced at her choice of words.

Whilst next to him, Norman grinned and said, "Funny you should say that."

Wayne drove an elbow into his colleague's ribs, warning him to be quiet. But he supposed he shouldn't have been too surprised. That was Norman's style, always threatening to give the game away before it had even started. And then where would they be?

The thought made Wayne look down to the end of the table, where the third of the three judges sat.

Before them, Shondra gave a practiced flick of her long blonde hair, a move copied and pasted from obsessive viewing of about a hundred reality TV shows. "Thanks," she said. "My friends always tell me I'm funny."

Wayne shivered a little when she said that.

It was worrying to hear that an auditioning actress had friends.

Friends that could come looking for them when they disappeared.

\*\*\*

The third man behind the table, though—the man whom, in a strange way, this whole scene revolved around—was not so concerned. He just sat there smiling, and as Wayne watched he reached out and began to stroke an item that lay before him.

Shondra saw this, and something about the man's silence, coupled with the suddenly intense stare he was fixing upon her, began to unnerve the girl. She tried to work out what it was, the item he was caressing, but a black cloth lay over it, hiding the object from view.

Whatever it was, though...

She could tell it was pretty small.

Her mind—what was left of her mind after years of trash TV gazing—boggled.

So, trying to regain some control of the situation, she said, "what's this project you're auditioning for? The card I found just had your number and 'actress wanted' on it."

Wayne preferred to answer questions like this; he felt he had the most entertainment experience and prestige. But the previously silent third man beat him to it, saying, "We haven't decided yet."

Then he smiled, and Shondra was no longer so anxious about him. That smile, she thought, was really kind of charming.

He turned it next to on Norman, saying, "Right, my friend?"

And, at the end of the table, frozen out again, Wayne felt anger flare inside.

\*\*\*

But it was no surprise that Norman sided with the man called Bob.

That was just the way things had been going between the three of them since bad judgement had brought them together.

"We're juggling a few potential projects now," Norman told Shondra. "But I think you'd be

pretty good for all of them."

Then he attempted a smile, too.

Wayne noted with some satisfaction that his wasn't quite as endearing as Bob's.

"That's great," she said. Then looked around the dark and dingy abandoned factory, which wasn't quite the glamorous surrounding she had expected to do her audition in. "So what do you want me to do?"

Run! Wayne thought.

But he didn't say it.

He couldn't.

All he could do was watch as Bob pulled back the black cloth, revealing what lay beneath.

Wayne groaned.

Shondra gasped.

Then asked, "Is that ...?"

"Just a prop," Bob told her. Then his eyes—dark eyes—moved to Wayne. "Isn't that right, Wayne?"

He wanted to tell her the truth.

He wanted to be out of this place.

But he nodded.

Once again.

"Can I look at it?" Shondra asked.

"My dear," Bob said, "I insist upon it."

\*\*\*

She came toward the table, making careful measured movements across the dirty, grimy floor, a care necessitated by the huge heels she was wearing. Her gaze only wavered from the item on the table for the briefest of seconds. But Wayne's never did. And he saw, he knew he did, the thing pulse.

He shivered.

"Thing is," Norman said to Shondra, "most of the projects we're working on require a little bit of heat."

As he spoke, she reached the table.

Laid a hand upon the item.

"So," Norman went on, "we need to see how you act when you're, you know, hot."

"Really?" she said. "I thought you'd all just want to bang me."

Even after all we've seen, Wayne said to himself, the things they say can still surprise you.

She looked down at the thing on the table. "So what am I supposed to do with it?"

"Kiss it," Norman said, and Wayne looked over at him.

They'd worked together for years, been an on-off partnership of varying types long before Bob's unpleasant shadow had cast itself over their lives. Wayne had always thought that he knew the guy pretty well. Which was what made it so hard for him to accept that Norman was starting to enjoy this.

"Yes," Bob added. "It'd probably be easier if there was a face attached to it. But that's why they call it acting, right?"

Shondra lifted the tongue from the table.

Looking at it, once again she began to feel uneasy.

But this was her big chance. That was Wayne Martin sitting over there. She didn't know who the other guys were, but Wayne was a big time movie director. She had to show him what she could do.

And after all, it was just a prop.

Wasn't it?

A pretty good one, that was for sure. It *felt* real. But it couldn't *be* real. No way.

Yeah, she thought.

And began moving the tongue towards her lips.

Hesitating only slightly before bringing out her own tongue to meet it.

The three men watched.

"Move with it a little," Bob said.

"Yeah," Norman added. "Do a little dance."

They were both looking at Wayne as they spoke, enjoying his discomfort, his reluctance.

Shondra did not notice, though. She closed her eyes, and began to get into it a little. With your eyes closed, you could almost imagine that some handsome movie star—the type you saw in Wayne Martin's films—was behind the tongue. Imagine that her free hand, the one not holding the tongue and currently running across her loosely hanging breasts, belonged to someone else.

She opened her mouth wide to receive him.

And the tongue leapt inside.

\*\*\*

Her eyes went wide in shock and now Bob and Norman were on their feet, watching, as she began to choke. Her hands went to her throat, trying to stop it, trying to force the tongue out. But it was growing now, expanding, and moving deeper, deeper, blocking her airwaves, filling her windpipe, and she staggered around the floor, flailing her arms, begging the three men for help, but two of them were laughing, enjoying this, and the third was trapped, could do nothing but meet her eyes as she choked to death on the living organ that pulsed and thrived within her.

She fell and was still.

There was silence in the abandoned factory.

And then...

The tongue exploded from the other end of her body, covered in blood and filth and things that Wayne had no name for and did not *want* to have a name for.

At last, the smile fell from Bob's face and a serious look took its place. A slight reverence in his tone as he said, "Praise be to Tony."

"Praise be," Norman echoed.

Wayne looked up at them.

Bob was sneering at him now.

"We'll let you clean this one up," he said. "Shall we?"

\*\*\*

Back at home that night, another trip to a familiar cliff to dump a body into the sea behind him, the clothes that he had been wearing covered in Shondra's blood and gore and now consigned to the bin, Wayne sat and drank.

And remembered that night, so long ago, cruising, searching the seedy end of town with Norman, both of them in disguise, looking for fresh meat of either sex to satisfy their desire. And there was one that looked nice, with a sexy little smile, and maybe they were dumb, maybe they were naive, but they didn't bat an eyelid when he said he wanted them to come back to his place. He didn't push them for an expensive hotel, he didn't demand they went to that exclusive sauna at the back end of town; he just sat right back and looked at them and said, "Let's go to my house." And added, "My name's Bob," and how he had come to loathe that name, how he had come to regret that night, but regrets are ten a penny in this world, and even though his house was dingy they'd gone inside, and Wayne realized now that the wedge had been driven in even then, as far back as the moment they entered his house, Wayne feeling suddenly a little nervous but Norman sinking into a chair and accepting the drink that Bob gave them, and Wayne had his doubts but he took the drink too, and when he came round, when the pill that Bob had slipped into both of their drinks wore off they were naked in a dark room and pictures had been taken of them in some career-threatening poses, but worse was to come, as Wayne looked around and saw that the entire room was covered in photographs of Tony Carlson, the recently executed serial killer, and then Bob was appearing before him, looming like some nightmare figure, and he said, "Like my little exhibition? I'm Tony's biggest fan." And then something was appearing in Bob's hand, and maybe he was hallucinating but Wayne was sure that it seemed to pulse, seemed to increase and decrease in size depending on how Bob was handling it, and he said, "I'm such a big fan that I went and dug up his grave." He grinned. "And look what I found." The tongue wriggled and squirmed, and Wayne tried to recoil as Bob rubbed it against his face, leaving a cold trail of dirt direct from the grave. "Seems some part of Tony is still alive." Bob looked into his eyes and seemingly his soul, taking all he saw there. "And he wants to have some fun."

And so he had plunged Wayne into Hell on Earth. Brought into his life a monster that had to be fed, with Wayne's career in the balance. So every few months they printed up a card with a phone number on it—a phone number belonging to a disposable phone, of course—and left them in all the usual actor hotspots.

He was recalling all of this when the doorbell rang.

Wayne staggered to the door. Staggered a little like Shondra and all the others had done, and was his career really worth this?

He looked around at all of his awards.

The posters for hit movies.

*Maybe not*, he thought.

But it was all he had.

He swung open the door, and was unsurprised to see Norman and Bob standing there.

The ever-present black cloth, with its unholy cargo, in the latter's hands.

"Tony says he's tired of girls," Norman said.

Wayne just looked at him.

Betrayed.

"He still likes the pretty actor types," Bob added.

"But he wants a boy next time."

Wayne sighed.

And then let them in.

\*\*\*

"So, Brian..."

On the table before them, beneath the black cloth, Tony's tongue vibrated.

"How badly do you want a part in this movie?"

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Shaun Avery is a crime and horror fiction fan who has been published in many magazines and anthologies. He has co-created a self-published horror comic, and recently sold his first comic script. 'Kissing with Tongues' is his nightmare take on what a movie casting session might be like. With one or two slight exaggerations.

Websites: <a href="http://www.comicsy.co.uk/dbroughton/store/products/spectre-show/">http://www.comicsy.co.uk/dbroughton/store/products/spectre-show/</a>

&

http://shanewsmith.com/allthekingsmen/contributors/shaunavery/



#### **Dead Faces** | R. J. Meldrum

The woman was young and very pretty. Her face was serene, her eyes closed. She sat in the driver's seat of a car that lay on its side in a ditch. A trickle of blood from her ear was the only indication she was dead. Her head had shattered the windshield. Jim hated car accidents, but it was his job to photograph these incidents on behalf of the police.

He focused his camera on the corpse. As he stared through the viewfinder, the woman's eyes flicked open and her mouth moved. A voice spoke in his head.

It was a drunk driver. He drove me off the road.

Jim closed his eyes, feeling nauseous. It was happening again. He waited a few seconds, then reopened his eyes. The woman was a corpse once more. He carried on, photographing the scene.

It'd started about two months before. The first time had terrified him. A young man, sprawled dead on the road after a street robbery. There was a small round hole in his chest, ringed with dried blood. His back was a gaping chasm of exposed muscle, bone and organs. His

killer had used a large-caliber weapon. As Jim had bent to take the photograph, the corpse had opened his eyes and his mouth had formed words.

I was shot for my cell phone.

There had been a thunderbolt of pain in Jim's head. He had staggered. A nearby police officer had to steady him before he fell. Afterwards he reasoned it'd been a simple hallucination, brought on by stress.

As the weeks passed and the dead continued to speak to him, he began to realize it was real. Looking down the viewfinder of his camera allowed him an insight into these peoples' deaths. He thought back to the words he'd heard over the last few weeks.

A woman whose throat had been cut open with a kitchen knife.

My husband did this. He cut me open and watched me bleed.

A teenager bloated and pale, recovered from a river after five days in the water.

I drowned myself. I wanted to die.

A man impaled on a metal fence post.

I fell off my motorbike. I felt the metal pierce my heart.

The stories accumulated in his mind, his memory unable to delete them, but there was still one type missing from his unique collection. He knew it was going to be unbearable when he was required to photograph that particular scene.

It was a dark, wet night when the police phoned, requesting his attendance at a house on the south side. He asked the particulars, even though he wasn't supposed to. The officer spoke the words he dreaded to hear. Infanticide.

He replaced the receiver. It had finally happened, the one corpse he'd dreaded since this all started. He stood, opened the drawer of his desk and removed the coiled rope. He'd prepared for this, knowing he couldn't bear to see a tiny mouth speak of atrocities and horror. He hung the rope from the hook he'd drilled into the ceiling, placed the noose around his neck and stood on his chair. With a sense of relief, he kicked it away.

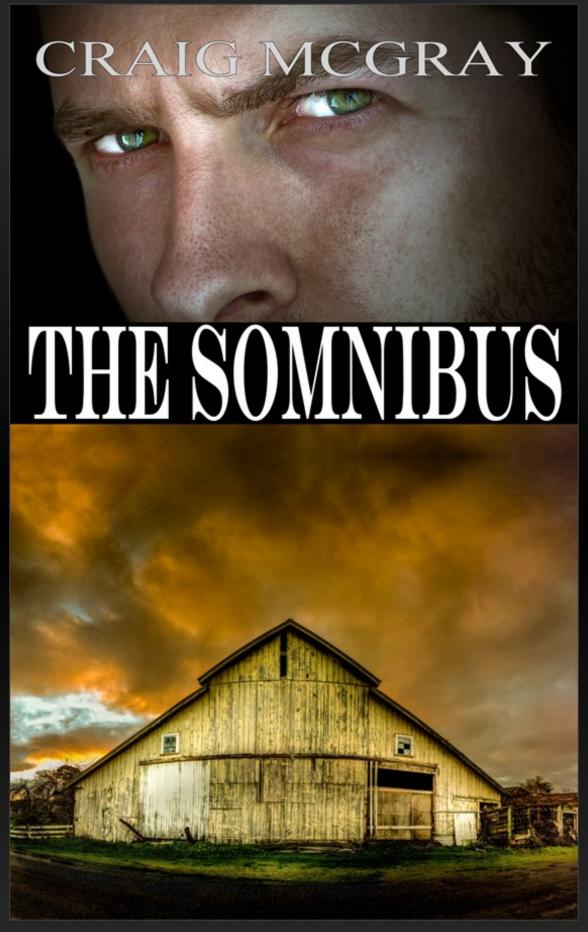
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Canada in 2010. His interest in the supernatural is a lifetime obsession and when he isn't writing he is busy working to increase his collection of rare and vintage supernatural books. He has had stories published by *Smoking Pen Press*, *Sirens Call Publications* and *James Ward Kirk Fiction*.

Facebook: R. J. Meldrum



Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

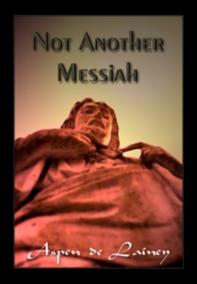
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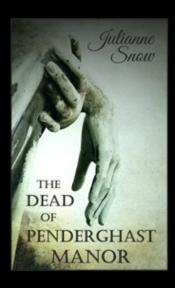


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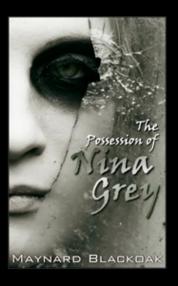
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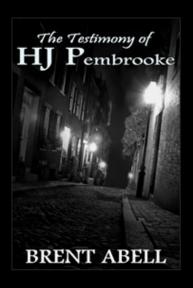












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#### **The Dinner Party** | Daniel Braithwaite

Today is the day, months of planning have led to this exact moment. Every machination fine-tuned by my hands. A dinner of importance takes place tonight. Under close examination, I unearthed each guest's life. I prayed for details I could manipulate. Perhaps the fact of my guest's having no history of interaction will lend in my favor. To speak of truth, I've grown decrepit, my body is abandoning me. Age does that, at eighty-seven, long gone are my prosperous years. At twenty-two, I had made my fortune; I stumbled onto an untapped resource on my property. Money granted me the capability to live in luxury. However death is beckoning, he shall come to collect me.

"Sir, your guests will arrive soon," Jones said. "How sure are you about this?"

"I've told you many times already, I am certain," I said.

"But sir the last time you barely had the strength to finish the ritual—"

"Silence! I know the risks you imbecile" I said. "Now go prepare for their arrival"

"Yes, sir"

An hour until my guests arrive. If it wasn't for my butler Jones, nothing would get done. At times I treat him with ill temperament, but it's because he looks after my best interests. Jones is a man of servitude, a prerequisite for my present condition. In my journeys, I stumbled across Jones. He was destitute; I saw an opportunity to acquire his loyalty. Stepping into my chambers, I noticed Jones had laid out two suits. My attire for the evening is down to a choice of brown or blue evening jacket; blue looks better with my complexion. The clock chimed signaling my guests arrival in ten minutes. Of all the preparing, the moment they first set eyes upon me will be glorious, for I am Douglas McNulty.

\*\*\*

From my chair at the window, the shadows bled from the lights below. The guests had arrived. Each waiting to unravel the reason for their invitation. The reason I hold close to me is, I'm dying. With my death, the fortune I have amassed will be left to no one. In my youth, I had opportunities at starting a family but a career held my attention, those choices left me with no heirs. My ambition is to leave my fortune to one of my visitors. On the logistics of whom I am uncertain, hence the invitation to dinner.

As I walked down the spiral staircase to my great hall, I noted the reverence in their posture. All the people here have heard of me, yet I keep the reputation of a recluse. These guests are viewing what could be considered a feat higher than shaking hands with the president. They beheld a man who made any whim a possibility. Upon reaching the final step, Debra Quinn stood to the left of the dining room door. Close to her was James Torelli, his nervous adjusting of his sleeves, a sign he's out of his comfort level. David Santo tried making small talk with James, but neither cared. Susan Johnson and Thomas Glenn spoke to Jones on where he stored their coats.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sir, your guests are here," Jones said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Jones, it is almost among us, I'm growing anxious." I said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Oh Sir, Mr Humphrey is running late it appears."

<sup>&</sup>quot;When Humphrey graces us with his presence, see fit to exhibit the usual method."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Excellent, I'll see to it."

Debra Quinn had been the leading force in architecture and property development, to put her style to such buildings in Dubai, Paris, Los Angeles, and countless others. Speaking of her building style, dubbed goth-art; a mesh of art déco and gothic revival, it's the empire state building with flying buttress'. She has changed skylines of cities all over the world, because of this she has considerable clout behind her name. With Debra's accomplishments, she came to the forefront of possible invitees a few years back. I consider her a potential candidate for my will.

"Hello Ms. Quinn," I said.

"Sorry, Mr. McNulty, honored to meet you," said Debra.

"Do you usually apologize when meeting new people?" I asked.

"No I get nervous with people of such esteem as yourself, you've accum—"

"That's flattering, I look forward to talking to you about your upcoming development in San Francisco."

"How do you know?"

"In due time, I must greet the others," I said.

Simplicity is the perfect term to describe James Torelli. From the basis of his appearance, James wore a turtleneck with a dinner jacket over top, one would regulate him to a man on a late night infomercial. On the opposing end of the spectrum, James maintained a fleet of oil tankers with adequacy. Speculation has it, James has become embroiled in a hostile takeover of his rival competitor.

"Mr. Torelli, how was your trip?" I asked..

"The drive was spectacular, I love the trees this time of year," James said.

"That's wonderful, I'll speak with you later," I said.

Susan Johnson, an arrogant, pompous, individual, she stands with an air of superiority over the other guests. Only if she could listen to her peers speak behind her back. Susan, a figurehead in the world of banking, she uses others' money to do her bidding. While useful, if you removed the money she would be a nobody. If I had to pin a title on to Susan, it would be a narcissist.

The information on the next two guests was scarce. Greased palms and back-channels were not enough to get any sizeable cache of insider secrets. I had to finalize a decision on what I had knowledge of, their job titles. David Santo, CEO of Renzev Pharmaceutical, appointed the position of CEO ten years ago. Under David's control, Renzev rose from near bankruptcy to one of the leading companies in the industry. Such accomplishments were duly rewarded, in the form of generous bonuses and expense paid vacations. In contrast to his career endeavors, David's life mirrors my own; give or take 40 years.

Thomas Glenn had started his career with eager intentions of pursuing law. He achieved his dream and became a lawyer but wanted more. After years of defending clients of ill repute, he decided he needed a change. With determination, Thomas became a judge. One case had a horrible impact on Thomas, based on the act of granting bail to a violent criminal who proceeded to commit a spree of robbery homicides. Thomas' eyes carried the guilt of those who lost their lives to those murders.

Once the acquainting and first meetings were over, I ushered my guests into the dining room. The banality of our conversations had a motive. I was getting a read on each person's body language, gestures, and tics. Even though I looked old, my mind was as sharp as ever. It

took me minutes to memorize every person's character details. The conversations were to get a grasp on their cadence.

"Please everyone join me in the dining room," I said.

As we entered the dining room, Jones showed everyone to their appointed seats. Jones moved a tray with empty snifters and a decanter with jet black alcohol. Upon placing the drinks on the table, Jones went back into the kitchen to get the dinner he prepared for the evening.

They all sat down, unfolded their napkins. Their mouths watered from the wafts of cooked meat. As the food was presented by plate I objected to a toast until dinner was finished and business had been spoken about.

"I can see on all of your faces that you are hungry, so we will wait until the pang is remedied," I said.

They all nodded in agreement.

\*\*\*

"Jones, serve the drinks," I demanded.

Jones walked from beside my chair. With measured pours, he served the drinks.

"I won't drink this," David said. "Get me something other than what your butler gave me."

"Why Mr. Santo?" I asked. "It's a family recipe going back years and your refusal is insulting."

"God damn it, David just drink the damn thing," said Susan

"I want to be transparent, the cause of why I summoned you all here tonight is I plan on choosing one of you to be my benefactor," I said.

"Why one of us?" Debra asked. "Why not one of your siblings?"

"First I shall toast to the evening, alcohol helps explain these matters," I said.

Everyone raised their glasses and clinked them with each other.

"What are we toasting to?" James asked.

"To life and its mysteries," I said.

"To life!" everyone cheered in unison.

All I have waited for was now presenting itself as the guests ingested what they thought was alcohol but in reality was a mixture of my distilled blood. Soon the effects would take hold; the chosen would be my new vessel.

Susan, under the influence of my blood, felt guilt for her behavior. Deciding she deserved atonement, Susan smashed her plate and used the sharpest piece to gouge out chunks of flesh. The muscle Susan sliced would be placed on her napkin. I wondered if she would consume her flesh. Blood covered Susan, a consequence of self-mutilation. From the amount of flesh removed, her body sent itself into a state of lethargy. Sadly, she perished before I got the chance to witness it.

Thomas no longer had any inhibition. His guilt drifted from his personality. The look in Thomas' eyes was the same as those who stood in front of him countless times; a killer. He glared towards Debra. All the while, Debra foamed at the mouth. Debra lost her ability to swallow. Both Debra and Thomas clutched their silver steak knives, ready to attack. When tension boiled over, they lunged at each other. Thomas quickly gained top position, as Debra laid on her back. The stabbing of Thomas' steak knife pierced her chest. Thomas stood victorious

over Debra, as he screamed at her corpse. I noticed Debra left Thomas with a parting gift, a knife buried in his neck. I had not seen how Thomas got stabbed; it must have happened when they were scuffling. Removing the knife caused the blood to flow. Thomas died grasping his wound in panic.

James, in his fright, ran to the kitchen. Unbeknownst to James, Jones waited there. I heard a scream and a loud gurgle. Within seconds, James' beheaded corpse toppled from the kitchen doorway. Silence grasped the room, David was slumped over in his chair. I heard a whisper in my mind resembling David's voice. My blood had chosen him.

I could feel my presence grow within David's mind. His mind called out to me asking questions about what I was. But he would soon learn.

David, you are wondering what I am? I shall tell you because I know you don't have the ability to grasp what has transpired tonight. Does it bemuse you that you can hear my voice in your head? Follow along slowly now. I won't explain this more than once. In the far reaches of your untapped mind lives a realm. This sphere is where I was born, or lashed into existence. Vile suffering is what feeds my kind. One day I discovered the ability to travel to other worlds, so I made the trip here; to be the most powerful being on your Earth. I remember the day I stepped on this primordial rock. The entrance to this world was located in a young boy's mind; to be specific his amygdala. Now David, if you're too ignorant to understand the basic composition of your own brain, the section where fear originates is the amygdala. By chance, this boy's amygdala was damaged. In psychology people with damaged amygdalas hold the moniker of psychopath. David, you too are a psychopath. Short on time before my life faded from this world, I infected the boy's brain. I learnt I could live forever through infecting others with my conscience. This is where my blood comes in, as a means of traveling into other beings like a parasite. You consumed my blood, hence why I'm in your head. Soon, my dear David, you will cease to exist. I enjoyed the chat with you but it's time for us to part ways. David witnessed as Jones snapped Douglas McNulty's neck.

"Jones, how do I look now as David Santo?"

"You look marvelous,"

"Splendid, I want you to prepare Douglas McNulty's will for David Santos," I said. "Tomorrow we have a busy day disposing of these corpses."

"I shall see to it sir," Jones said.

"Jones before you go, did you add something to the steak seasoning?" I asked. "It tasted different,"

"No, I prepped the meat the usual way like you asked, maybe it was his aftershave sir."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Daniel Braithwaite writes in the genre of horror, inspired by his love of all things dreadful. Read his previous work in *The Sirens Call* - Issue 28, titled Watching You.

Facebook: Daniel Braithwaite



#### The Scourge | Mark Steinwachs

Sitting on the floor, with my back against the end of the counter of Pauline's Coffee Co., I look over my left shoulder at Emily's body crumpled on the floor. The last frappe that she'd ever make spills over her, mixing with blood from the bullet wound just below her left shoulder and the gash in her head from where it slammed into the counter before she dropped.

Her coworker, Austin, has his legs pulled up to his chest, rocking, unharmed, while tucked in the corner where the wall and the register area meet.

"Sit tight," I half yell to him. "It's going to be okay."

"It's not going to be okay!" Jacob responds to my comment. Austin just trembles and whimpers. I'm not sure who Jacob has the gun pointed at since I can't see him. I really hope it isn't himself.

"Jacob, this isn't you," my partner says. "I know what's going on. There's a creature inside you telling you what to do. My name is Teris, and I have the power to help you."

Teris has taken cover behind an overturned table off to my right and his attention is on a mother crouched in the corner shielding her crying toddler with her body.

For a brief second, the child hushes, and the only sound heard is the soft sobbing from a woman lying on the floor in front of the register.

I reposition myself so I'm on my knees and poke my head out enough to see Jacob and reassess the situation. Blood flows from the chest of the man who Jacob shot first. He slid down the condiment bar leaving a dark red trail of blood and I can't tell if he is still breathing or not. His second shot took down Emily, and then his third left a lady sprawled over a table up against the front window of the shop.

There is a middle-aged man behind two tables flipped on their side forming a barricade, texting someone, probably telling his wife to call the cops, which is the last thing we need right now.

Jacob stands rock still, ready to fire, his gun pointed at the table Teris is behind. Over the course of the last few minutes he has gone from shaking with a quiver in his voice to strong and confident. Teris is spot on, Jacob isn't in control of himself anymore, the Scourge has almost consumed him.

"Jacob, listen to me," Teris starts talking again. "We can help you, I promise. There's a monster inside you. It's been tormenting you your whole life. I'll bet it told you everything would be better if you did this."

Jacob takes a step closer to Teris. "Shut up! Just shut up! What do you know?" Jacob's words erupt in the room. I'm not sure if they're meant for Teris or the entity inside him.

Teris continues, "I know quite a lot actually." His steady, soothing voice breathes a calm in the air. "My partner, Nikias, and I are two of thousands of angels on Earth fighting against the hordes of the underworld. One of their demons has infected you."

As Jacob lowers his gun slightly and relaxes his body, I tense mine. If he would drop the weapon a little more, it would be safe for me to go for him.

The man Jacob left for dead at the condiment counter wheezes, shattering the calm. Jacob straightens up, points his gun at him, then fires without breaking eye contact with Teris. The

bullet rips into the man's face, shattering his cheek and eye socket before lodging in his brain, bits of flesh smattering the table shielding the texting man.

The woman by the register screams and pushes herself up, knocking over the coffee display as she bolts for the door. Jacob spins on his heel and fires off two quick shots. The deafening retorts linger in the air mixed with the crash of display shelves as the woman is propelled into them. She falls to the ground as bags of coffee tumble down around her dead body.

I catch Teris' eye. With a flick of my head, I motion behind the counter and he nods in return. We not only have to get the gun away from Jacob so he can't kill any more innocent people, but also so he can't turn it on himself. Then get him out of here before ...

"The police are on the way," the texting man announces as if on cue.

Jacob takes a measured step beyond the table barrier; his eyes give away that he is gone, the Scourge has dominion over him. Jacob sneers, firing off another round at close range.

The bullet explodes the texting man's chest, pushing his body against the table. His phone clatters across the tile floor. Jacob smiles, blood christening his body. He puts the barrel of the gun near the man's temple and pulls the trigger. Bone and mucus-like bits of brain cover the area, resembling a demented Jackson Pollock painting.

Austin starts crying and Jacob snaps his head around, focused on the sound. Before he can move, I rise and take a step, giving myself a clear path to him.

"Jacob, enough of this," I command, in an attempt to draw his attention.

Teris follows my lead and stands. "Jacob, I know you're still in there," he says, as sirens call out in the distance.

We stand a few body lengths apart facing Jacob. He points the gun at Teris, then at me, his attention focused on us. His eyes are inky black and wild. If there's any chance that he's still in there, we have to do something fast. We're losing him.

The sirens get louder.

"Jacob, come back to me," coaxes Teris as he steps from behind the table. "I can see you, a sliver of you. Put the gun down. We can help. The beast is inside you and it's going to get out. We know how to cure you."

Jacob tilts his head. "What? What's inside?" he questions.

Teris inches closer. "A Scourge. A creature that lives in a human, feeding off the pain of life until it grows too powerful. It needs to destroy your body to reproduce."

Jacob shudders and blinks, a bit of white appears at the edge of his sclera, and his eyes are tame. The sirens wail and I see flashing lights in the street.

"Put the gun down and come with us," Teris says.

The police cars screech to a halt in the parking lot. Jacob glances over his shoulder, his body going taut.

"Shit," I bark, and lunge toward him.

He turns and looks at us, his eyes midnight ebony. Bringing the gun up to his mouth, he pulls the trigger. His head snaps back as I tackle him, droplets of warm, sticky blood splatter my face and an explosion of bloody gray mist that was once Jacob fills the air. We tumble to the ground and his body goes slack.

Two lithe humanoid footlong creatures with taloned hands and feet, burst from his chest

leaving otherworldy wounds only Teris and I can see. They sink their clawed feet into me and I scream feeling an acidic burn before they push off.

Visible only to us, we watch as they pass through the window in search of new hosts. I wince, looking down at the claw marks through my torn shirt. It doesn't take long for the poison to react to my angelic blood, the edges of the wounds are already an ugly shade of green and thick puss begins to drip from them.

"We need to get you to Michael," Teris says, and hooks his arm around me. I close my eyes and my body lurches inside as Teris shifts us from the mortal world where our presence will be dismissed as trauma-induced hallucinations.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Mark Steinwachs is a roadie who retired to shop life and is now GM at Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Over a decade traveling in tour buses, plus time as a United States Marine, and rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique outlook in his storytelling. He writes in the wee hours of the morning trying not to wake his wife and two kids.

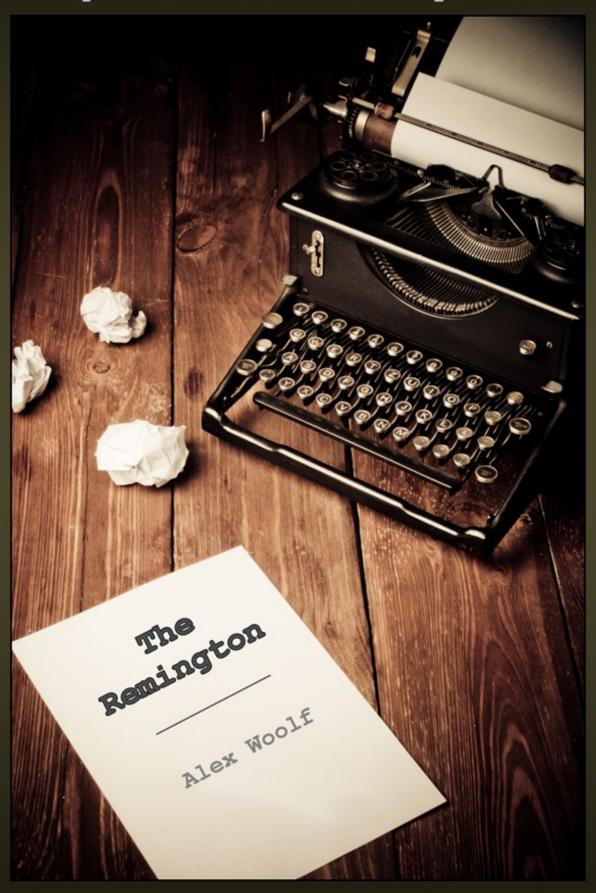
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#### The Last Animal | B.B. Blazkowicz

I am very hungry. Everybody's gone and all the lights are out. The fungus took them all. At first it seemed too good to be true. They said it tasted sweeter than any dessert and smelled like the finest cut meat. Then everybody changed. The devourer became the devoured. The fungus burst through their flesh and made the deceased their fertile soil. Still, they continued to eat it; the allure was beyond reason. Even now, as the last one left, I can't help but salivate for it. I am so very hungry. Just one bite shouldn't hurt...

#### **Blood** | B.B. Blazkowicz

A wicked looking man walked into the Red Cross one day. At his side were two frail, pallid fellows each dragging a black suitcase. He went up the receptionist and said. "I would like to donate some blood." When asked if he has donated in the last fifty-six days, he smiled and called the two fellows over. They placed both suitcases on the counter and opened them up before promptly falling to the floor. In the suitcases were glass vials filled with warm fresh blood. The wicked looking man turned to the receptionist and replied. "No, somebody else's."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — B.B. Blazkowicz is a horror fiction writer from a cultural dead-zone in the middle of nowhere Ohio. He is a fan of movies that spook, and video games that shoot. His writing has been previously published on Horror Tree, Bloody Disgusting, and Horror Writers.

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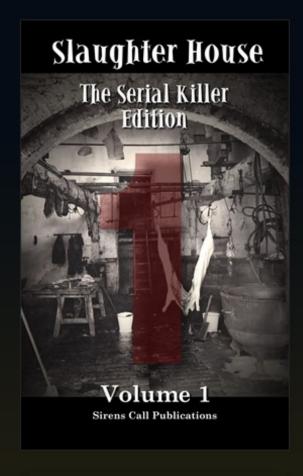
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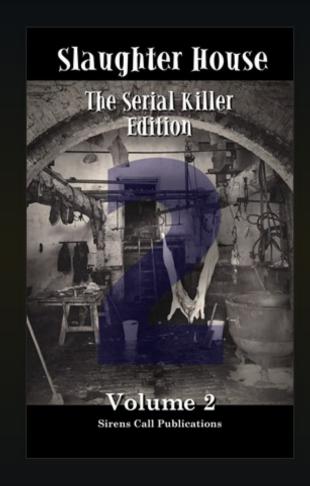
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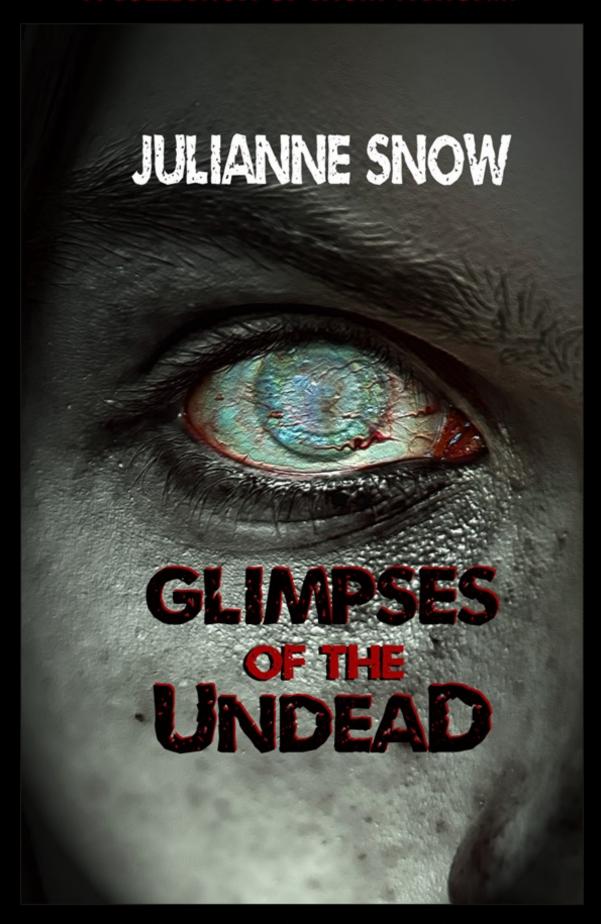


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#### A Matter of Taste | Samantha Hill

Stella watched as the attractive man sitting on the park bench ate his sandwich. She wondered what he might taste of. She also wondered what was in his sandwich, and whether or not what he was eating would affect the flavor of his flesh, like she'd heard it was supposed to do with sperm.

Probably not, she thought, deciding that if the human body which is to become dinner is often called long pig, it most probably just tastes like pork, no matter what you choose to have in your sandwich. Mind you, she remembered once reading that William Buehler Seabrook had described the taste of man to be like good, fully developed veal. She hoped that was true. Stella much preferred veal to pork.

\*\*\*

Jeff noticed the girl in the red dress the moment she'd entered the park. He'd surreptitiously watched her as she strode over to the oak tree opposite the bench he was sitting on, eating his lunch. He admired the shape of her long, pale legs as she sat beneath the tree, leaned against the wide trunk, and took a book from her bag. A rather hefty tome which looked even bigger when balanced in her tiny, childlike hands.

She really is lovely, he thought to himself. The dress she wore was like some sort of 1960s prom dress, but on her feet she wore black trainers. The trainers were in stark contrast to her milky white skin, and her wavy auburn hair clashed with the bright red of her dress. The girl was a mass of visual contradictions that somehow made sense.

There was an air of confidence about her that was very attractive. She was just the kind of girl he was looking for. So different to the last one. The last one had been short, voluptuous but firm, and had had dark brown skin as soft and smooth as a newborn baby's. She'd been shy, so very shy, and meek. He'd been sorry when he had to get rid of her. But it's the rot, the reek. He didn't like to keep them around much longer when the smell began to kick in, and so every Friday he went out looking for a new one. A fresh one.

Yes, this girl would be just right, he thought. Jeff never liked to have more than one of a certain type in a row. He thought of his women as a box of chocolates and his taste was for variety: shapes, colors, aromas, textures of skin...

He looked around the park, not too many people about. A couple walking one of those tiny, pointless dogs and a boy kicking a ball around. It's not that he'd have to make a grab for her, she'd go with him willingly, they always did. It was just that he didn't want anyone to be able to describe who she had left the park with – when her nearest and dearest discovered that she was missing and the police started asking questions. She'd just be another Friday girl who vanished without a trace.

\*\*\*

He was coming over. This would be easier than she thought. Stella licked her immaculately made up, scarlet lips. He's handsome, she thought, not that attractiveness was important in terms of how he would taste, but sometimes a bit of garnish could really make a dish. She noticed with glee that he was a little fleshier around the midriff than she'd first thought.

"Hi," he said, taking off his sunglasses.

Stella was immediately taken with his pale blue eyes. The garnish just gets fancier and fancier, she thought.

"Hello." She folded down the corner of the page of the book she was reading and put it back in her bag.

He smiled down at her. "What you reading?"

"Gray's Anatomy," she said, looking up at him and squinting through the bright sunshine "It's heavy going but fascinating, and ever so informative."

"Are you a medical student or something?" he asked.

"No, just interested. There's nothing more magical than how our bodies work, it's incredible when you think about it. How someone's life can be saved by transplanting an organ from a dead body into a desperately ill one and, voila, all better. I bet old Henry Gray would never have even dreamed it possible when he wrote this."

Stella gazed dreamily at the front cover of the book as if suddenly being drawn back into the 1800s.

The man knelt down next to her. "My uncle had a heart transplant a few years ago, and all of a sudden, after years of being about as artistic as a fish, he was able to paint these masterpieces worthy of Leonardo da Vinci. Turns out the bloke whose heart he ended up with had been an artist. I've heard it happens a lot to transplant patients; they end up with some new skill or other inherited from the previous owner."

Stella turned quickly back towards him with an eager expression on her face.

"Really?" she asked. "That's utterly fascinating. You could be given the lungs of a dancer and become a prima ballerina, or the kidneys of a musician and become a rockstar. Utterly, utterly fascinating."

"Listen," he said, "I don't normally do this kind of thing, but I wondered whether you might like to go get a drink with me somewhere? I mean, unless you already have plans, of course."

"Love to," she said.

\*\*\*

Jeff felt slightly alarmed by the way she leapt to her feet immediately and took his arm in hers, smiling up at him like an adoring little kid. He couldn't help but smile back. She was almost too adorable for what he had in mind, and for a second he felt a slight reluctance to go with her. But no, she was too tempting. He had to have her.

"Where do you fancy going? We could go to my place? If you like?"

"Actually," she said, "I live near here and I just happen to have a pretty well stocked bar. Why don't we just go to mine? I'm Stella by the way." Stella unlinked herself from him and held out a hand for him to shake.

"Jeff," he said as he held onto her almost unnaturally cold hand. He quickly weighed up this unexpected turn of events. Was it wise to go to hers? He decided that if it turned out she lived alone he'd go. It would make a change, and it would throw the police a little to find the body of a Friday girl in her own home, instead of dumped in one of the local parks.

"Listen, Stella, thing is, I might not seem it but I'm actually quite shy, a one on one kind of guy. I don't really feel like having to meet your family or flat mate or whatever, so..."

"Oh, that's okay," said Stella, "I live quite alone. Just little old me on my lonesome."

"Well okay then, Stella. Let's go."

They walked, chatting amiably as they went about nothing in particular. Jeff pulled a cap out of his back pocket and put it on. He also put his sunglasses back on. It didn't hurt to be cautious about nosey neighbors peering out of windows. They reached the end of a row of shabby looking terrace houses, and Stella turned to walk up an almost jungle bordered front path to a grimy blue painted door, and used her key to let them in. The inside of the house couldn't be more different to the outside. Neat as pin from the hallway through to the kitchen and into the living room. Not a thing out of place. Another contradiction, thought Jeff. Who was this woman? It was almost a

shame to have to kill her. She intrigued him.

Stella took off her trainers and tucked them under a sideboard before offering a choice of beverages. Beer? Wine? Whiskey? Vodka?

Jeff went for a beer and she came back through from the kitchen carrying a bottle of Budweiser for him and a whisky sour for herself. She placed the drinks on a small dining table in the corner of the room and they took seats opposite each other. For the moment just watching, waiting for each other's next move.

"You should be careful, Stella. Inviting in strangers like this. What about all those girls who've been going missing recently? There are lots of weirdos about, you know."

"Maybe I AM one of the weirdos," she said, grinning at him and taking a sip of her drink. Something about her smile unnerved him.

\*\*\*

Stella wondered how long it would take for the Chloral Hydrate that she'd spiked the beer with to kick in. With anticipation and barely contained excitement she waited for the moment when his speech would begin to slur.

She began to ask him questions:

"How old are you, Jeff?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Where do you live?"

"Slough, Upton Park. Only a little flat, though, not a nice house like this one."

"Who do you live with?"

"Myself. I live alone. Not met the right woman yet I'm afraid."

"That's a shame Jeff. Maybe you just did. So tell me, what do you do for work?"

"I'm a taxi driver actually."

"Really? I'd have said builder. Something hands on. Big strong chap like you. Oh, and before I forget. What was in the sandwich you were eating earlier?"

"Cheese and pickle. You do like to ask a lot of questions, don't you? I... er... I'm feeling... Can I..."

Jeff's head nodded slowly towards the table as if in slow motion, before a fast little jolt at the end of its journey brought his forehead into contact with the polished wooden surface.

Stella leaned her face right down on the table so that it was inches away from his.

"Can you what, Jeff? Don't suppose it matters now eh, love? Let's get you somewhere more comfortable, shall we?"

Stella was stronger than she looked and Jeff was not a particularly heavy man, but even so it was a real effort to pull him off of the chair and grip him under his armpits to drag him through the sliding doors, into the back room. The room, previously used as a dining room, was now bare except for a huge white plastic sheet which covered the carpet, and some black refuge bags which had been taped generously to the walls and to the solitary window. A stained butcher's block stood in the corner. There was also a bag of tools on the floor which Stella was just desperate to play with.

When Jeff was lying on his back in the center of the room, she hurriedly grabbed some duct tape from the bag and covered his mouth. She knew from experience that although Jeff may be all dopey and pliable from the drug he'd ingested, in fact for the moment he appeared totally out of it, he would wake up for sure once she started with what she was about to do next. Well, she couldn't have him trying to run away now, could she? She reached for the hammer and held it high above her head.

Jeff came to with a searing jolt of pain. He had no idea where he was, he appeared to be lying on a plastic sheet on the floor. Everything was blurry, and he needed badly to vomit. He leant over to his side to let it out, but realized very quickly that he couldn't. He began to choke. He tried to move, to get up, but couldn't. Everything felt strangely surreal, and cold. The pain in his legs came and went in waves. He heard a voice, and remembered, hazily, the girl.

\*\*\*

Stella really didn't want Jeff to choke to death, so she ripped the duct tape from his lips and moved out of the way as quickly as possible, whilst he emptied the contents of his stomach on the floor.

"Gross," said Stella, ripping off a new piece of tape and slapping in onto his mouth as soon as it seemed that the tide of vomit had finished flowing for now, "Like there's not going to be enough to clean up when I'm done. This could really put me off my dinner, Jeff."

As he appeared to drift in and out of reality, Stella tilted her head to one side, looking at him, deciding what must be done about this inconvenient mess.

She shrugged and went out into the kitchen, coming back with paper towels and a spray kitchen cleaner. Leaning down next to him she grimaced and mopped up Jeff's sick.

She stood up and kicked him in the torso.

"Animal," she sneered before taking the soiled kitchen towel and the spray back out to the kitchen.

"I really am quite cross with you, Jeff."

Coming back into the room she looked at him and chuckled. It will be kinder just to slit his throat, Stella thought, but much less fun.

In her tool kit she had sharp knives of various sizes, a hatchet and a hacksaw, also very sharp. She picked up the hacksaw and sighed. She'd done the research but hadn't paid as much attention as she should have. Her excitement at the idea of doing all of this for real had kept dragging her train of thought into daydreams of bloody, raw meat.

She took the hacksaw and began to saw a few inches above the knee. This is when, as his bowels evacuated loudly and putridly, and as his bladder let go of its contents, she remembered that it was recommended to let the victim starve for 48 hours before carving. Typical me, she thought laughing to herself and shaking her head, always in a hurry. No patience.

By the time she'd violently sawn off both lower legs and then the upper legs directly below the groin, she was lost to everything except for the task at hand. She was not even sure when Jeff breathed his last, she just knew that by the time she pulled out his heart it was not beating. She put the heart aside to broil up with some onions and herbs whilst she got on with the rest of the job at hand. She could hardly wait.

In the meantime she gouged out one of those pretty eyes, enjoying the funny popping noises it made as she bit into it. It wasn't too tasty, though, thanks to the chewy old optic nerve, so she spat it out.

The legs were chopped into various size fillets and wrapped to be frozen. The arms, once removed, she just wrapped whole to deal with later. The head, too. Minus an eyeball.

Hours had passed, when tired out and aching all over, Stella gazed at the mess of bone and blood, of salvageable pieces of meat and stuff to get rid of. There sure was a lot of Jeff to go around.

She took a load of cuts to the big chest freezer in the kitchen and then wrapped up the unusable parts of him in the plastic floor covering. There would probably be enough room in the

bottom of the freezer to stick the gloopy, bony bundle until she decided what to do with it all.

The rest of the cleanup could wait. All Stella wanted was a hot shower and bowl of that beautiful smelling braised heart.

\*\*\*

Stella was kept well satiated with bits and pieces of poor old Jeff over the next week. She checked the papers every day to see if he'd been reported missing, but for some reason he hadn't. She felt a little sad for him that nobody cared enough to miss him. The biggest news was all about how no girls had gone missing the last two Fridays, and so now the police thought the killer had stopped. Maybe it was him I ate, she joked to herself, wouldn't that be something?

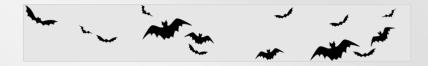
She had decided that next time she would go hunting for a woman. She had a hankering to try some breast meat. She'd go on the hunt for a likely specimen soon. Perhaps on Friday?

As she unwrapped another fillet from the freezer to defrost for that night's tea, she thought about how William Buehler Seabrook had been right: Jeff *had* tasted like veal.

And nothing at all like cheese and pickle sandwiches.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Sam lives in Windsor in the UK with two teenagers, an actor, a four year old and his imaginary friend Toby. Her favorite things are horror films, The Marx Brothers, Fatty Arbuckle, and William Goldman. She is currently working on a novel.

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#### The Hunt | Jackie Valacich

There was no doubt Sable would kill someone tonight. There were criteria she must follow but she wasn't terribly picky. Although, she thoroughly enjoyed the hunt.

Muscles coiled with adrenaline, she stalked through the sweaty, undulating crowd of Seattle's popular waterfront night club 'Trinity' and flipped a mass of jet-black curls over one shoulder. Her eyes surveyed the scene while she spread lip gloss over plump lips. The short, white-silk Grecian dress caressed her body like a cool breeze. She smiled at the heads she turned.

When she reached the bar she leaned in. "Shot of Patron with a lime twist." She batted her lashes and fingered one of the large, gold hoops dangling from her ears while she scrutinized the dancers on the crowded floor.

"Put that on my tab," the muscle-bound man standing next to her said.

She turned and took in his pretentious leer, angular jaw and acne-covered shoulders pillowing from a sweat-stained wife-beater. *Steroids*. "I can buy my own drink, thank you." Drink in hand, she turned her back to meathead and swayed to the beat of the music.

A greasy-haired, twitchy guy made eye-contact and zoomed in.

Meth-head. Won't do. "Walk away," she snapped, before he could open his mouth and attempt his pick-up.

"Bitch." He made a U-turn and focused his attention on a middle-aged blonde drinking alone.

"Hey, sexy," a masculine voice said in her ear.

She turned and internally catalogued sparkling sea foam-green eyes, dirty-blonde hair and a strong jaw covered with a perfect amount of stubble. *Healthy and sexy, you'll do just fine*. "Hello, handsome," she replied and smiled wide. "Dance with me." Even though she was working, she still deserved to have some fun. She grabbed his hand and led him onto the dance floor where they proceeded to jump, dip, twirl and gyrate until her olive skin was slick with sweat and her eager partner gasped for air.

When the music slowed, he seized her by the hips and pulled her close.

Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply of sweat mingled with spicy cologne. "Easy, sailor." She giggled and removed his hand from her apple-round butt. "I need a drink," she said and pulled him back to the bar. "Patron, twist. He'll get it," she said and jerked her thumb toward her new friend. When her drink arrived she took a sip. "What do you do?" she asked.

"Engineer at Boeing."

"How often do you come here?"

"Maybe a couple times a month." He furrowed his brow and took a gulp of his whiskey and coke.

"Any illnesses or health issues?"

"No. Why? What's with twenty questions?" He tossed back his drink and pinned her with his intense green eyes.

She grinned. "Let's dance!" She drained her drink, snatched up his hand and dragged him back onto the dance floor.

"Ah, what're ya tryin' ta do, kill me?" he slurred.

When 'last call' was announced she leaned in and whispered in his ear, "My sloop is docked outside. Wanna go for a sail?"

He hesitated.

Before he could answer she nipped his ear and pressed her body tight against his. When she pulled back, he nodded hungrily and groped at her breast. *Too easy*. She pushed his hand away, then clasped it in hers and led him through the crowd to the door. She nodded and smiled knowingly, playing along as guys high-fived and fist-bumped her male friend while he humped the air and panted rudely behind her. *That's right, honey. You're a big man, aren't you?* 

She removed her gold, strappy Jimmy Choos when they reached the dock, and held him upright as they stumbled and staggered to the slip that held her craft. She stopped once to let him kiss her. He was a good kisser. There were many perks associated with her line of work.

"What's this?" he asked, fingering a small round scar directly over her heart.

"Take it, take another little piece of my heart now baby," she sang in a husky voice and then tilted her head back and laughed deep down in her throat when he put his lips on the scar. "Slow down, we have all night." She slapped his hand when he attempted to lift her dress. *Dude's an octopus*. "Here we are." She stepped onto the polished wood deck of a handsome little white Catalina sloop.

"Nine Lives." Her randy, sloshed friend read the side of the boat before clumsily joining her on deck.

"Untie that line." And try not to fall in. She pointed to the thick rope anchoring the boat to the dock at the bow while she untied the line at the stern and shoved the small craft away from the dock with a bare foot. Her inebriated guest leaned against the rail while she started the engine

and expertly maneuvered the craft into the calm dark waters of Puget Sound. When the lights of the city were reduced to small twinkles on the horizon, she dropped the anchor.

"I'm Trevor by-the-way," he said and wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her close.

"I don't care," she said and slammed him up against the wall of the cabin.

"Whoa, you're stronger than you look." He moaned and slumped against the wall while she unzipped his pants and jerked them down around his ankles in one fluent movement.

She stuck her tongue in his mouth, staring into his eyes while he roughly yanked up her dress and grabbed her between the legs. His eyes shot open and she grinned, her teeth against his lips. *This never gets old*.

"What? Who—"

"Surprise, baby," she purred and thrust a knife into his lower abdomen. She reveled in the calm satisfaction at the ease with which the sharp blade entered his body. *Like slicing through butter*. Hot blood spilled onto her hand and splashed the pristine boat deck. "Tsk, tsk. Look at the mess you've made," she cooed as he slid down the wall, choking on his own, dark-red blood.

An hour later, she placed his liver, kidneys and eyeballs into a cooler chest filled with crushed ice. The heart and lungs were transferred into a portable organ care system embossed with the letters H-A-L (Heart and Lung), where she swiftly set the temperature to 98.6 and connected the organ to the modules. Once the heart began to beat, she sealed the lid and then rolled the weighted body of her would-be lover into the ink-black water with a splash. A very productive night's work.

A few moments later and the deck was hosed clean. "No giblets for you tonight, Miss Antoinette," she told the blue-eyed, white Persian cat that sat on the railing staring at her with a combined look of disgust and disinterest. She meticulously wiped blood from the ten inch, Hunt-Down, fixed-blade knife, with polished wood handle, on her already stained skirt and slid it back into the leather sheath strapped to her inner thigh.

Below deck, she paused in front of the full-length mirror. Tall and lithe, with a beauty queen's face and a monarch's regal stance, she noted her large doe-brown eyes, full lips and glowing, olive skin. She had a figure runway models would kill for.

She turned from side to side, lifted her blood-soaked dress and scrutinized the undeniable bulge taped beneath the white-silk panties. With a satisfied sigh, she sat at a vanity, removed the jet-black cascade of curls from her bald head and wiped at the make-up on her face with a tissue while the cat lay on the bed, daintily licking a spot of blood from one fuzzy paw.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jackie Valacich is a mother of four; two humans and two canines who have trained her well. She lives in Tucson, AZ with her professor husband and spends her days writing, reading and attending writing classes. Her passion is horror; words and movies. The creepier and scarier the better.

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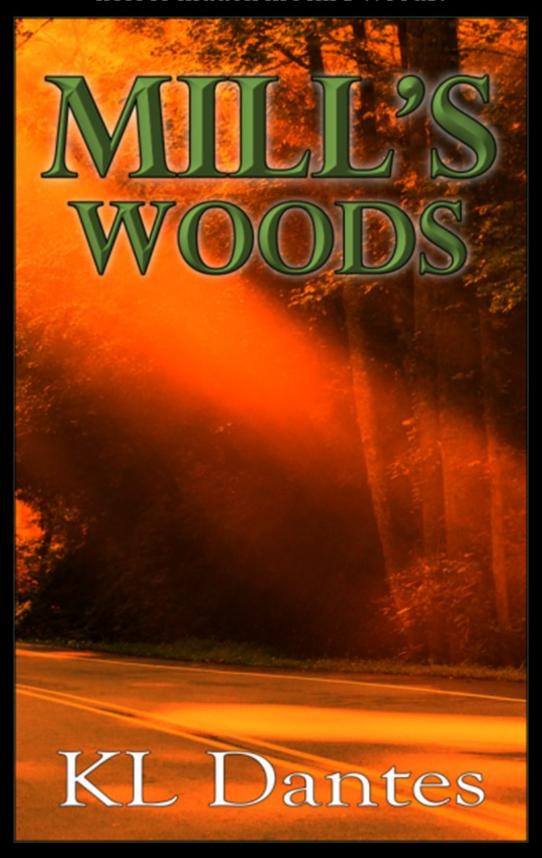
He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

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#### **Rakshasa** | G. H. Finn

Crouching in darkness, beneath a bodhi tree, he heard voices.

"Arjun, which grave?" asked the first.

"Any, Sanjay. Just dig up a body. See if there's jewellery."

Two men. In his cemetery.

Jasmine, lotus, earthy patchouli and fragrant frangipani-blossoms scented the cool Indian night.

He was chewing the remains—yesterday's leftovers—when he saw them.

Grave robbers.

Had they no respect?

He became angry, walked toward them, sandals flip-flopping against leathery feet, shouting, "Stop! These are my graves! My graveyard!"

The digging paused. "A night-watchman?" said Sanjay.

"Kill him," said Arjun, "he's an old man. He won't put up much struggle."

Sanjay nodded, "Easier when they can't fight back."

The night-watchman let the illusion fade, showing its true self—a huge, demonic Rakshasa with flaming-hair, bulging blood-red eyes and enormous fangs.

It was insatiably hungry.

By nature it ate human flesh, killing for meat. But as the years went by it read the sacred Hindu Vedas, and Buddhist teachings.

The Rakshasa had decided to become a better person. It vowed only to eat corpses—to avoid adding to its karmic burden through killing. It had eaten the dead in this cemetery for generations. It *tried* to lead a good life, so it might be born as something better, in its next incarnation... It had been *so* hard.

The grave robbers attacked, swinging spades.

The Rakshasa growled. Razor-sharp claws eviscerated Sanjay—intestines spilled from the wound, falling, writhing, snakelike upon the ground—it wrenched out innards and stuffed gory entrails into its hideously fanged mouth.

Arjun stabbed. The Rakshasa decapitated him. Bloody fountains gushed from Arjun's severed neck-stump. Gaping-mouthed, it sucked the arterial flow into its hungry stomach.

As it gulped blood, the Rakshasa was philosophical. It's hard to fight one's nature, it thought, but the thing about reincarnation is that you get another chance...

Maybe I'll be born into a better existence in the life-after-next...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — G. H. Finn is the pen name of someone who keeps his real identity secret (so the multidimensional alien fungus can't find him). Finn has written a wide range of speculative fiction and enjoys mixing genres, including mystery, horror, steampunk, sword-and-sorcery, dark comedy, fantasy, detective, crime, dieselpunk, weird, supernatural, sword-and-planet, folkloric, Cthulhu mythos, sci-fi, spy-fi, crime and urban fantasy.

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#### Vengeful Marilyn | Soter Lucio

Marilyn returned home from jail at one in the afternoon on a rainy day. Her home was deserted and dilapidated. Ten years is a long time. No matter, she can start over. At twenty-five, her whole life was still ahead of her. She spent the following three days cleaning inside and outside the unfenced house. Nobody came calling.

For one little mistake in her teens, she has to suffer for the rest of her life. Small town vengeance. And it's not like she was the only one. Not even the only one to get caught. But, she was the only one whose family weren't on the church's council and who never attended Sunday services, ergo perfect scapegoat.

"Hello? Who's there?" She heard a familiar voice calling while scrubbing the kitchen sink. Deep down she was happy to hear that voice but not sure of the reception she didn't show it.

"It's only me." she said to her brother Mark as she peered out the kitchen window to see him walking up the front path.

"Marilyn. It's you. You came back here? Why?" He was unbelievably cold.

"Where else would I go? Where's Mum and Dad? You didn't even come to see me, Mark. Why?"

"Dad said we should stay away."

"I see. For one little mistake. I was only fifteen." Marilyn shook her head from side to side in disbelief and returned to her chores with her back to Mark in an attempt to hide the pain of disbelief and abandonment that was gifted to her by her family.

"That's not it. There was a whole lot more involved, Marilyn." Mark sat on the chair closest to him but it fell apart under him and he ended up on the floor.

"Sorry. I haven't had a chance to check the furniture. But I did fix the leaks and the hinges on the front and back door."

"You were always handy like that. Dad missed that a lot. Remember he couldn't do much after his stroke." Mark was warming up to her.

"How is he?"

"They're dead Marilyn. They overdosed on their medication six years ago. Sorry I couldn't get to you. They wouldn't let us. We didn't desert you, Marilyn," Mark stated in a low voice as he bowed his head and contemplated the past events.

"Are you crying, Mark?" She asked as he turned away.

"Did you hear that?" Marilyn cocked her ears to one side listening.

"No." He answered eyes dry again.

"Shh," she whispered.

"That would be the village watch dogs," Mark informed her as he recognized the grunt of one of the men. They caused the death of Mom and Dad."

Marilyn's head swiveled like it was on a spinning wheel. "What?" She practically screamed.

"I'll tell you about it later. Let me just show my face. They'll probably pelt some stones then leave us alone."

Mark walked towards the door, but it was more than just some stones that came through. Bags of filth, both human and animal came through the doors and windows. Where Marilyn was first a little bit scared, she was now so angry that she attempted to rush out with a kitchen knife, but Mark grabbed and pulled her back and under a table.

It was all over in about a half hour, then Mark apprised her the sequence of happenings as soon as they were gone. She got all quiet.

"Well Mark, I suggest you go on back to where you now call home, and I'll clean up this stink. After all, I have to eat, drink and sleep here."

"Shall I bring you some disinfectant or something?"

"No. Don't bother. That will cost. I remember what bush to burn. I'll be fine. You go ahead."

Though she washed the place clean with soap and water, she emphatically decided against the air freshener burning. She needed the stink to keep on fueling her anger to prepare her revenge for past sins against her family.

She planned and re-planned. Plotted and re-plotted until she was mentally and emotionally satisfied with the result.

She then prepared the fireside. When hot enough, she heated the cutlass till glowing red, straightened and shaped it, then cooled it and sharpened both sides on her father's sharpening stone that was always ready. Her father had taught her these things as Mark wasn't interested.

Using the finest cutlass wire, she affixed a new handle to suit the shape of her hand. Satisfied with her preparation, she donned her black jumpsuit and leather belt along with her favorite cowboy hat, and with that feeling of confidence she embarked on her journey of avenging the wrongs done to her family over a period of time.

They'll have to pay for making her hate her parents and brother all this time she was incarcerated for what was done by their children.

Her mistake was going along with them, believing them to be her friends and standing where she was told to, while they committed the dastardly act against the priest by defecating on the pulpit. Granted she was stupid in disobeying her parents and hanging out with the elite in their society. But she was only fifteen!

At twenty-five she had the wisdom, knowledge and experience of a seasoned criminal.

Since small town habits never change, it was easy to locate the same group of boys and girls now men and women at the rum shop on a weekend. She positioned herself where she could get them one after the next while walking home. It's always been relatively safe, so no one would be on their guard.

Benedict was first on the scene.

Like the Angel of Death, out she came from the shadows, and sliced him across the belly. Not too deep, he mustn't fall too quickly. He grunted a bit and looked at Marilyn like he was seeing a ghost. She pushed him gently on the shoulder and he fell to the ground, his intestines snaking out in slow motion. She poured some of the liquid she had into his entrails and he screamed like a banshee. Satisfied with the first of the miscreants, she sneaked back to her house unseen by anyone but the night crawlers.

Mark visited early the next morning, grinning from ear to ear.

"I recognize your signature, Marilyn. Pepper sauce in a cut? You're devious and evil minded." Mark greeted his sister with what passed for a compliment. He laughed so much, he

had to sit.

"Well. He looked for that. No, he begged for it."

Marilyn got some juice from the fridge and gave it to her brother who'd dropped by to congratulate her on the 'job'.

"They have to pay for making our parents do what they did."

"Yes," Mark concurred. "But that was going a bit far, don't you think?"

"What did you think, I'd let them get away? Oh no. Not on your life. Benedict is just the first."

Mark gazed at his sister's stern expression and knew she meant what she said.

She was never on good terms with their parents, but dammit, they were still her parents.

The sounds of raised voices cut through the cold morning air to them.

"Marilyn!"

"Do you recognize that voice, Mark?" They exchanged glances.

"No. That's a foreign accent," Mark said.

"You stay here," Marilyn said as she walked to the front door.

"I am Marilyn. Can I help you?" Marilyn said as she pushed opened the screen door and walked towards a wrestler of a man that stood a few feet from the house.

"I am Jonas. Benedict's first cousin. His mother and my mother were sisters. My mother died when I was born, and was raised by my paternal grandparents down south."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Jonas. But how can I help you?"

"Benedict was attacked last night and he's in a terrible condition at the hospital."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But again, how can I help you?"

"I'm here to warn you. To put you on notice as it were. Should he die, you'll have me to deal with. You heathen."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. But if Benedict is not well shouldn't you be with him rather than issuing veiled threats to me? I haven't seen Benedict since he and the others including their parents sent me to jail ten years ago. I got out only a few days, and haven't been out since. Goodbye."

Marilyn turned her back on him and calmly walked back into the house.

Mark, frowning and trembling, suggested that she come stay with him in the city.

"At least you'll be safe."

"No Mark. Not until I've settled the score with all of them."

"They are powerful Marilyn. More than you realize. They made sure that Mom and Dad could find no work. When they applied for welfare they were rejected. Dad could not get his medication." Mark frantically paced the floor, scratching his head, a habit he developed whenever he's scared or nervous. Marilyn took his arm and sat him down. Smiling, she said, "My dear big brother, where do you think I was for the past ten years?"

"In jail?" He answered haltingly.

"Do you have any idea what happens to people in jail? And that church group weren't saints. Not by a long shot."

"What do you mean?"

"They own the jail and all who work there. Benedict and the gang defecated on the pulpit.

They said it was me and I was arrested. Tell me Mark, even if I was guilty, was it worth ten years?

"No."

"They had it in for our family. Do you know I spent most of the first year in the infirmary?"

"You were sick so much? But you never get sick. Not even the common cold."

"They beat you up in there, Mark. Officers and a special bunch of hard backed women. Then they had men come in at times. I'll leave out the details. Too sordid for you. Suffice it to say that I learnt to protect and defend myself. No easy feat I can tell you." Marilyn's face clouded over and Mark was concerned.

"I'm sorry for what you went through sis. I didn't know it was that bad."

"Don't worry. I'm glad they chose me rather than you. You'd have been dead within six months." She laughed then, injecting some humor into the sad situation.

"I know. You've always been the tough one."

"Mark, I don't mean to rush you, but you remember Dad always said to beat the iron while it's hot? That iron is quite hot right now and I have to beat it."

It was easy to plant some of thesharpened cutlasses at strategic locations in the forested areas due to the distance between the houses. Countryfolk dislike close proximity to their neighbors. Not enough privacy, they say. Well in this instance it's advantageous for what Marilyn had in mind for them all.

She pounced on Juliana at the corner between the dry spring and the huge immortelle tree. With a stab to the chest and a slash across the back she was temporarily incapacitated. She fell to the ground, but Marilyn got the shock of her life when she in turn was pounced on by the not before seen group who accompanied Juliana on her way home. She felt rather than saw them pounding on her with their fists. She doubled up, and dropped to the ground, rolled away to the opposite side of the track, and retrieving one of the cutlasses hidden in the underbrush, came out swinging and slashing. She cut downthose blocking Juliana and dealt her a few chops across the body. She must feel physical pain. She must have some scars to remember the days of her wild youth. The days when her powerful parents caused the suffering and death of others who had no power. Taking the kitchen knife from her waist, she crisscrossed Juliana's face.

Doubling again like a fetus she rolled away once more, using the skills learnt from the jail alongside the ones learnt from foraging in the forest for fruits to sell in the market and having to escape snakes and other animals, she landed on her feet near to the fig patch. From this vantage point, able to see and recognize the enemy, she quickly acknowledged the strength or lack of same. All they had were words. To insult, threaten and terrify.

With the brightest smile she could muster, she came out with her hands swinging.

"Mother Earth is drinking up your blood. What do you suppose that means? You holier-than-thou self-righteous bitches?"

"The battle is not yet over, you miserable wretch!" The voice came from behind her. Owner unseen.

"Is that you Jonas? You're back. Very good. Let's have some fun." She swiveled on her toes like a swizzle stick and caught him in the groin with a flying kick. Fighting Jonas was child's play compared to what she dealt with in jail. While he was down she got out her loyal kitchen

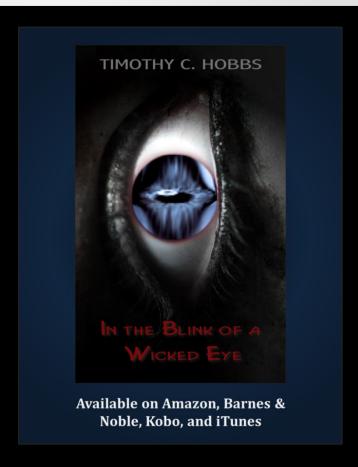
knife and stabbed him repeatedly in the back.

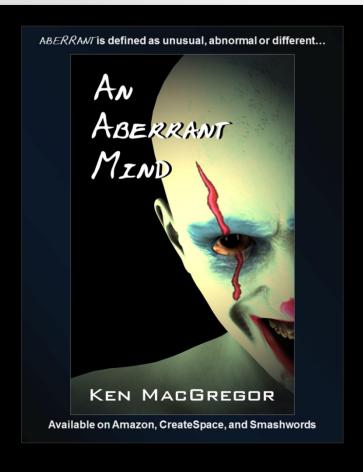
Fifteen years of frustration and hell not to mention the hate she nurtured for her parents, poured out of Marilyn like the water up at the Blue Basin waterfall. None of them had the upper hand on her. She was done and they were all down unable to move. She meant to punish and not kill, but in her present frame of mind she couldn't let them live, so she ensured they were all dead. As to who would point a finger in her direction, she had no issues there. Time would take care of that.

She gathered her weapons and made her way home.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — I am a great grandmother, who does ironing for a living and loves all things horror. I travel the world right here in my country and come back with change in my pocket and stories from all over. I tell horror stories to my descendants because a little scare never hurt anyone. Other than that, I like a good cup of coffee.

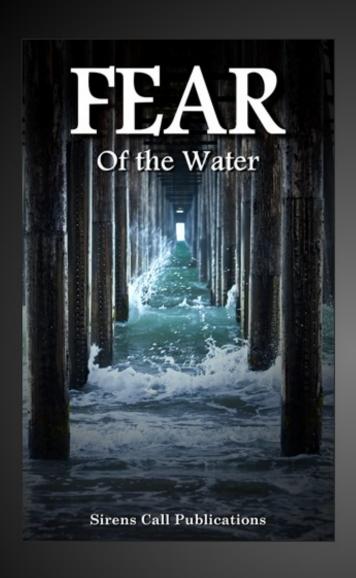
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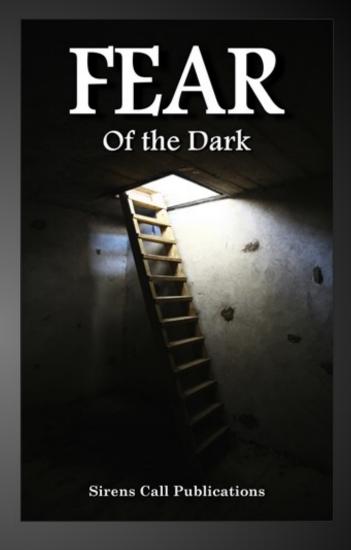




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#### **Crave** | Shah Wharton

those demons with their eternal hum, their collective tick-tock and ram-slam against bony enclosures, sap my will, force my hand, animate the great groping gannet inside

dire directives reel around dusty guts
—echoes, inescapable echoes—
with clawed fingers and oral daggers, I
anticipate peace, and track and lure noise
to a swift, slick, strike of claw

boosted by its cruel din, the hallowed discharge from open flesh is a sonorous spitting storm—their pall—I tear and rip and chew, inhaling its sour cloud and extinguish one savage beat at a time

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Shah Wharton, a freelance writer since 2012, writes short horror fiction and blogs about writing, spec-fic and horror. A psychology graduate who previously worked in industries as dissimilar as perfumery and social work, Shah now lives with her husband and two dogs in Birmingham, UK and is currently studying for her MA in Creative Writing.

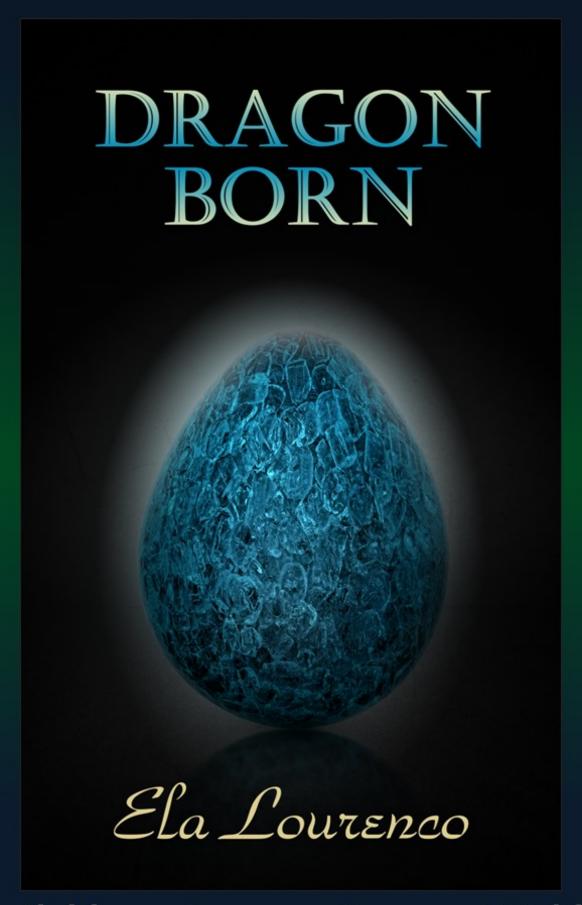
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Website: <u>http://shahwharton.com</u>



Nora's Wish

John Mc Caffrey

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

#### **Avenge** | *L.E. White*

The blade slips in Beneath the skin Then works to make a line

The cut is thin
Pain burns like sin
And all of it is mine

Each little beast Will have a feast Killers feed rats well

The meat that's pieced Is fresh at least Despite the rancid smell

Echoing screams
Bounce off the beams
More red spills on the floor

Not wildest dreams Nor nightmare themes Prepare for real life gore

Revenge is sweet Peace can't compete With such a simple joy

So apply some heat To fresh peeled feet On a withering human toy

State another sin Then begin again And peel a little more

Wear your wicked grin
And avenge your twin
Killers dance on the slaughterhouse floor

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Happily married father of four living in Indiana. You can find more of my work with Sirens Call Publications in *Slaughter House: The Serial Killer Edition* — *Volume 3, Carnage: After the End* — *Volume 2*, and *Mental Ward: Experiments*.

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#### Poetry by Mathias Jansson

#### Luke 21:18

One, two, three the fun has just begun four and five let's eat some lunch

She wiped the blood from the cleaver and counted them again one, two, three, four and five little fingers on the floor

Five fingers, ten toes hands, feet, arms and legs there was still a lot of fun left before the final blow the decapitation of the head

She looked at her husband gagged and chained to the autopsy table with his tearful eyes desperately staring at her

Take it easy my love
I remember what I promised:
"There shall not a hair
of your head perish"
if you were unfaithful to me
it's a promise I will keep
but the rest of your body
I will slowly chop in pieces.

#### Runaway Bride

He felt dizzy when he woke up chained to a wall behind a white Cadillac

Just married said the sign on the bumper and he remembered that he was getting married today

The engine started with a roar black fumes spat out from the exhaust pipe he coughed and noticed the string attached to his belly

The car began to roll away and when the string stretched it started to pull out his guts

What an irony he thought their last quarrel on the way to the priest was about how long the intestines were

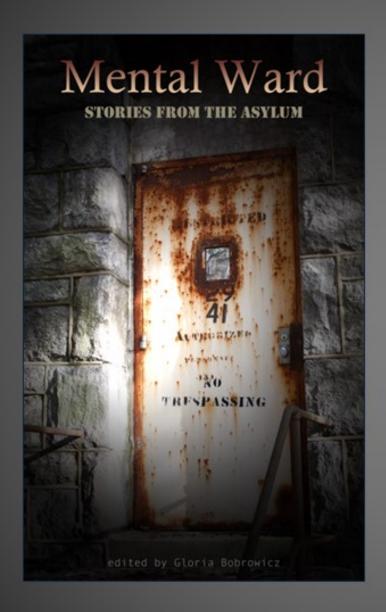
She had been so mad
when he had pointed out
it was not ten feet
more like twenty-three
that she had lost her control
and hit him hard with the candlestick
on their way to the altar

He assumed that she soon would find out that he was right as usual.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press etc.

Website: <a href="http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/">http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/</a>

Sanatorium, mental ward, psychiatric hospital - they're all the same. Places where the infirm, the crazy, and the certifiable go for treatment... Or what passes for 'treatment'.





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

#### Poetry by H. Steinwachs

#### Asylum

Muffled screams of anguish
Howls of fear
Restraints pulled tight
Lips back in sneer

Back arched up
Current courses through
Eyes roll back
Lips turn blue

Body falls limp Blood drips from ear Eyes now closed releasing one red tear

Rag pulled out
Whispers fill the room
White coats rustle
Within the cold steel tomb

Pupils constrict with blinding light
A chuckle bursts in pure delight
"Mine" He whispers in her ear
Filled with the thrill at the thought of her
fear.

#### Silver

Bones that crunch Blood that drips Tear the flesh in long red strips

Screams and howls meld into one Screeches and growls and bang of gun

Silver rips through fur Straight to the heart With the bite left behind another cycle will start.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — When she's not running around caring for her two amazing children, Heather Steinwachs is living the real life horror story of a GI surgical nurse. From exploding ostomies to rectal bleeds, it takes a lot to make this girl freak. In her youth she was a poet and has recently decided to return and try her hand at horror.

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#### **Poetry by DJ Tyrer**

#### Scream

Home alone
Phone rings
Promise of death
Urban legend
Movie script
Redux
Try to laugh it off
Put on some popcorn
Just for show
Killer appears
Bloody flowers blossom
Barely a chance to
Scream

#### Too Late!

Bolt the doors Switch out the lights Pretend you're not home As you bury your head Beneath the covers Too late! The killer strikes Was always inside Waiting Ready to pounce Axe in hand Hamstringing you Then pausing Preparing the killing blow Savoring the moment Before the axe blade falls

#### Puppeteer

Beaten Battered Bloody Too weak to resist He sets to work Reshaping Refashioning Reforming Limbs into playthings A puppet on a string A ghastly toy An unwilling marionette Made to entertain him Until boredom looms And the game Comes to its grisly end

#### Final Girl

A living stereotype
But
For how much longer?
He wonders.
She stops, sags
Weary.
He steps forward
Savior.
She turns to him
Smiles
Lips bloody red
Stabs him.
The last person standing
Final Girl
Is the killer, too.







#### **Killing Spree**

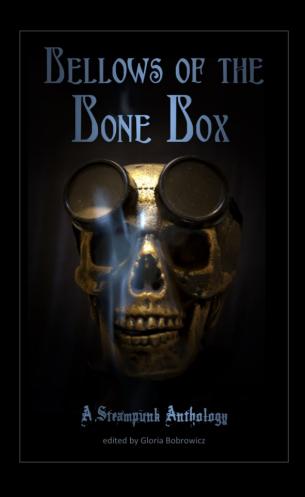
Blood-red morning sun Summer fun on agenda Death waits in the wings Fire-axe, dagger and chainsaw Each stains red with repeat use

Sun gives way to night
Balmy bloody evening
Body count rises
Soon vengeance will be fulfilled
Chooses to kill just one more

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing, was placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Award for Genre Poetry, and has been published in The Rhysling Anthology 2016, issues of Cyaegha, Frostfire Worlds, Illumen, Scifaikuest, Tigershark and California Quarterly, and online at Three Drops from a Cauldron, Bindweed, Poetry Pacific, Scarlet Leaf Review and The Muse.

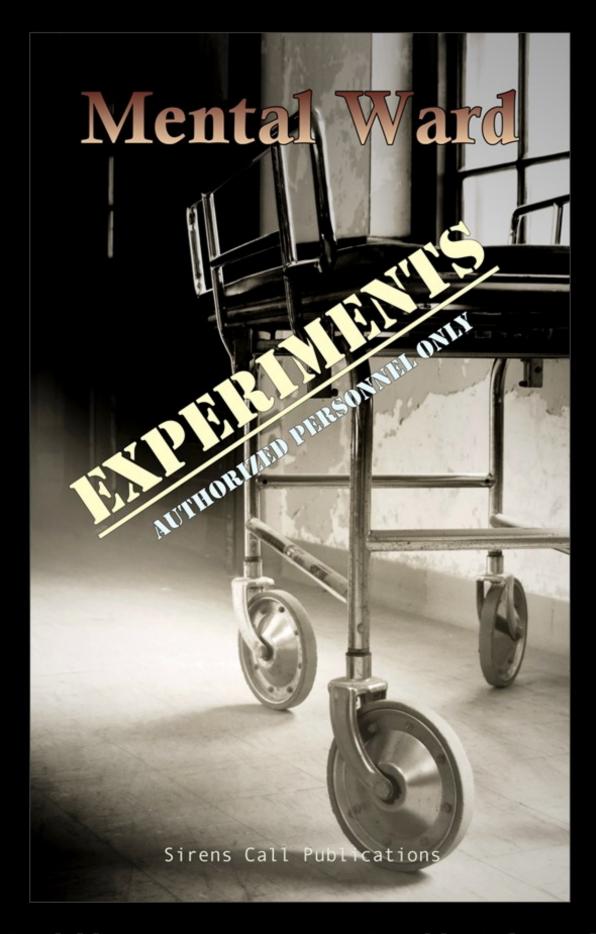
Twitter: <u>@dityrer</u>

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## **Bellows of the Bone Box**

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



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

#### A Little Something With Your Coffee | Melissa R. Mendelson

It was a hot day in July. They said that it would be hotter with temperatures in the high nineties, but a cool breeze was blowing. It was a beautiful day for a hike outside the resort. The aroma of coffee caught me off guard, for what was a coffee shop doing all the way out here? It was parked right off the county road, almost hidden by the trees, and only discovered by that scent of coffee that now lured me inside, and I realized that I wasn't alone, for other hikers and nature observers were ensnared in the same trap. And we lined up beside each other, waiting on the old, bent man behind the counter to *hurry the hell up*.

"Was that a scream?" The woman in front of me asked the guy with her. "What is taking so long," she snarled as she checked her cell phone. "No service," and she laughed at that. "You would think that this guy would have someone, at least one other person to help him. Am I right?" She glanced my way. "I have things to do," and she looked at her long, pink nails and released a loud sigh, which caught a glance from the old man behind the counter.

"I thought you hate hiking," the man with her said.

"Shut up," she snapped at him. "I'm dreaming of that swimming pool back at the resort. I am going swimming as soon as we get back there, if this guy hurries the hell up," and I laughed at that because it was as if she had read my mind.

It was finally my turn. I stood before the old, bent man. His eyes shined a dark blue. His hair was thin and white. His skin reminded me of dried paper. His lips parted, and a smell of death escaped. He tapped his fingers harshly against the counter as I looked up at the small, blackboard behind him, which read: Coffee, Black.

"Coffee... Black," and he quickly grabbed me a cup. "Wait. I want something with my coffee," but I realized that there was no food, no desserts. "I don't want it black. I want a little something with my coffee," which he now forced into my hands. "How much?" He pointed at a badly drawn 5 on the blackboard behind him. "Five dollars," and he nodded in response. "Okay," I muttered as I dropped the money onto the counter, purposely missing his hand, and then I moved over to a tall table nearby with a metal chair.

The chair was cold and uncomfortable. I didn't like sitting high up either, and the table had real silverware and napkins. Who was going to use a fork and knife for food that wasn't even being served? Was food served here once? I turned in my chair as I drank my coffee, but I didn't see a kitchen. The place actually reminded me of a small box, but luckily, there was a bathroom nearby, if I needed it. It was funny. The back of this place had a wall, but the sides and front were all made of glass. The door was even all glass except for the handle, which was black and also cold, and I shuddered. Maybe, I shouldn't stay in here for too long.

Suddenly, the sky turned black. Then, I heard an ugly sound, a sound that made my heart drop. Bodies were falling from the sky. Dozens and dozens of bodies now bounced and thundered around the place, and the six people inside including me tried to move. But we couldn't. Our bodies refused to respond, and our heads turned toward the sides to watch the dead strike the glass like birds flying blindly into windows. And one head came smashing through, landing on a photographer's table, and still, he drank the coffee in his hand.

Gunfire erupted as ghosts of men raced through the place. They knocked those sitting in

their chairs to the floor, pushing the silverware off the tables, and one flew through the man that had accompanied that woman with the long, pink nails. He took one panicked look at her, and then he exploded, covering that woman in his blood.

"Mister," I heard a young voice from behind me. I was fortunate to remain in my chair, and then I realized that I could move. I hurried off the chair, and again, I heard someone say, "Mister." And I looked down to see a small child staring at the floor, and without thinking, I knelt beside him. How did a child get in here? Was he in here all this time, and slowly his head rose upward, covered by long, blonde strands of hair. And again, I heard him say, "Mister," and the long, blonde hair fell away, revealing a shattered skull face.

"Make it stop," the woman with long, pink nails screamed as she covered her ears. "Make it stop," she screamed like a banshee, distracting me from the monster that was now only inches away from me, and then the kid disappeared. "I'll make it stop," and I turned just in time to see that woman launch a fork into her left eye. She screamed as she ripped the eye from the socket, and she didn't stop there. She crushed her left eye in her hand, and then she proceeded to launch the fork into her right eye, again removing it from the socket. Then, she turned toward me as if she could still see me as blood coursed down both of her cheeks. "I made it stop," she said, and bile rose into my throat. "I made it stop," she laughed, and again she laughed before smashing her head against the floor.

I turned to the side and spewed the coffee out. The liquid coming out of me was brown, but I knew it wasn't the coffee. It was something else, and my stomach flipped. My skin turned cold, and the place spun around like a merry-go-round. I fell onto my back and gagged, and my body twitched. My head flopped to the side, and I saw a man sitting against the wall with a knife sticking out of his chest. I forced my head to the other side, where another man had rammed the long leg of his chair down his throat, and then I heard a sound. Was another body striking the glass?

"Let me out! Let me out," the last man standing screamed. "Where's the door? It was right here! Where is it?" He screamed, and his screams made me flinch in pain. "Where," and then that man realized that the old, bent man was standing right behind him. And before he could say another word, that old, bent man snapped his neck.

"Please," I cried as I struggled to move off the floor. "Please, don't kill me," for the old, bent man was now leaning over me. "Please, don't snap my neck."

"Quit your whining," his voice scratched as another smell of death escaped and washed over me. "You're different. You care. Do you know why I do this to you humans?" I shook my head in response. "Because you're disgusting. The way you are today. The way you treat each other. You're all rats. Well, not you, so you can go." And he moved away from me.

"Go," I gasped.

"Unless you want to stay," and he gestured toward the door, which now re-appeared. He followed my gaze and nodded. "I thought so. Just remember that I'm watching and that I spared you."

Did this guy want a thank you? His dark blue eyes snapped, and I realized that the old, bent man had heard my thoughts. I quickly got to my feet, stumbling a bit, but then I moved toward the door, hoping that it wasn't another trap. I pushed against the glass, and a cool breeze greeted

me. I escaped outside just in time to see more hikers and nature observers heading this way, and I wanted to scream and shout, warn them to stay away. But again, I was no longer in control of my body. Instead, I slowly moved past them and even raised a hand in hello, and just as the door was about to close behind them, I heard someone say, "Was that a scream?"

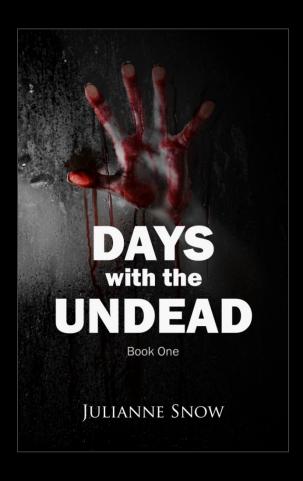
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Melissa R. Mendelson is an author and poet with a variety of writing published by Gadfly Online and Antarctica Journal News. Her writing was included in Names in a Jar: A Collection of Poetry by 100 Contemporary American Poets, Espresso Fiction: A Collection of Flash Fiction for the Average Joe; and Beast: A New Beginning. She recently finished writing her first Horror/Sci-Fi novel, Lizardian.

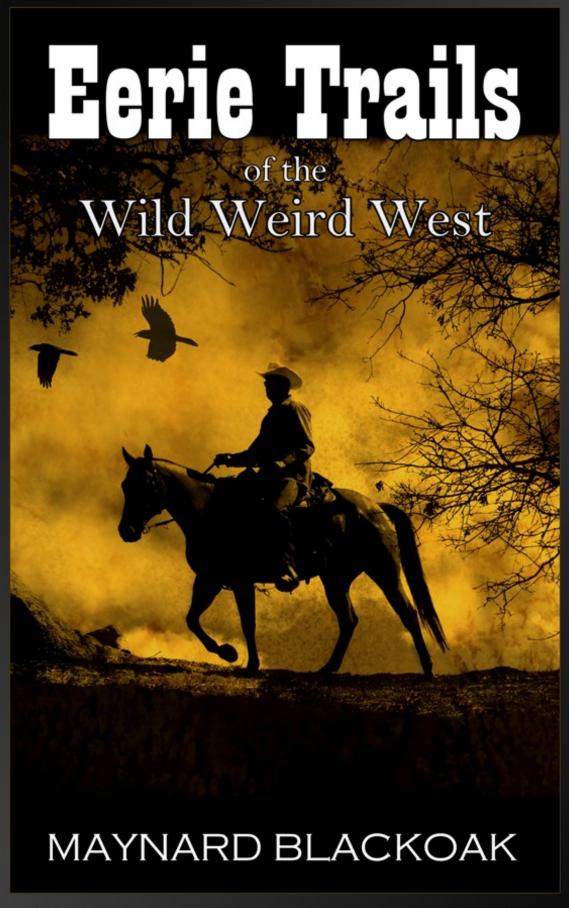
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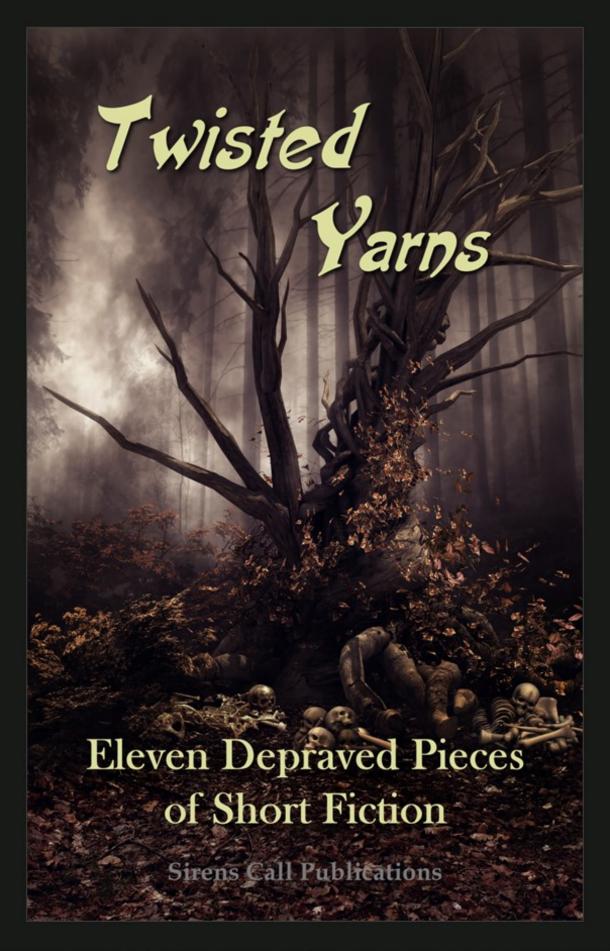
# Days with the Undead: Book One Julianne Snow

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#### **Blood Doll** | *Samuel L.F.*

Alison crossed her legs, gaze fixated on the small box before her. The bundle shipped from overseas, arriving after one long month. She sliced through the packing tape, opened the cardboard folds, and beauty graced her sore eyes; inside was a crudely sewn doll, made by hand, pasty in tone and lacking features. It was a mold, ready to be slashed away and shaped by her blade. The rules of use were scribbled on a paper slip that she took from the box and crumpled to the floor.

She lifted the toy, rested it in her sweaty palm. A red Sharpie in hand, she jotted 'Aaron' across its breast. The seller demanded it only be inflicted with needles, but to Alison that wouldn't differ from a few slices. Carnage was carnage, regardless of the method.

Knife in hand, she began at the base of its throat and made a small incision down to the doll's stomach, and bits of fluff tumbled out. She could picture Aaron in bed, a hooker lying with him. She hoped the girl was paid in advance.

She stuck a digit in, grasped the inner padding, and tore it out. Maybe those were his guts tumbling onto the motel bed, and maybe the hooker wouldn't mind—she might like knife play.

She laughed as the doll and blade fell from her hand. They laid with the list of rules. Rule one, do not remove stuffing from the doll. The rest were trivial.

Alison laid back in her loveseat, snorting and wheezing. Her feet pounded the ground, left and right. One foot landed on the doll's hollowed chest, and the yellowed fabric wrinkled beneath her.

The name written in ink bled through the doll, and the knife shifted. Fabric brushed against her heel. Steel cut through layers of muscle in her ankle, and then clattered to the ground.

A shriek filled the room. Alison dropped to her knees, and tore the dolls head at its seams. It bled crimson ink, thick and dark onto her hands. She clawed at it, and her nails were painted red.

The fluid seeped through her clenched fists, the stuffing in hand like human entrails. She dropped it, and it splattered in her mind. She lay back, sunk to the ground, body still and flat before she erupted in a fit of laughter.

The fabric brushed against her throat, and the metal cut through flesh and veins, opening her jugular. Blood spurted from the wound, as the knife carved new gashes into her neck. It plunged into her chest with the finality of her resolve.

The seller promised death, and it had been delivered.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Samuel L.F. is an avid fan of horror, sci-fi, and all things macabre and chilling. He is inspired by the works of John Saul and George Orwell, along with many psychological thrillers. In his spare time he paints, reads, and spends time with his cats.

Facebook: Samuel Leoniuk



### Civic Sacrifice | Jeff Durkin

"Fuck Wall Street!" Jesse screamed. Beneath his black bandana, he was grinning from ear to ear. He felt better than he had in a long time. His body shuddered a little from the adrenaline that was flooding it. At that moment, he felt powerful. He was part of something, a seething organism made up of hundreds of individuals, showing the world how pissed off they were.

A group of people in black hoodies and Guy Fawkes masks were smashing in the windows of a police car. A young black man with a shaved head scrambled onto the car. He began to jump up and down on the hood, his fists in the air. Every time he landed on the bowing metal, Jesse felt a sympathetic cold surge run down his spine.

I'm part of something. Something bigger than me. I matter.

Jesse reached into his hoodie's pocket and pulled out a baseball. It had been given to him years ago by his father on opening day at Yankee Stadium. He felt the familiar shape in his hand. It had been a good day. He remembered the taste of hot dogs, peanuts, and Cokes. The Yankees played a great game. He and his parents had cheered along with thousands of other people, urging them on to victory. That day made him feel connected to his family and to something bigger.

He spotted a Starbucks and cocked his arm. He took aim at the store's plate glass window. *This is a better community*, he thought. He threw the ball, watched it hurtle to its target. When it hit, the glass exploded inwards, a shower of fragments that sparkled in the light of the street lamps. People nearby cheered. Jesse smiled.

This is a better family. A real family, built on action. We don't just go through the motions. We are the motion.

He turned back to the police car. The man on the hood was now wildly kicking the windshield, trying to break the thick safety glass. "Fuck the pigs up!" Jesse screamed, his hoarse voice lost in the incoherent roar of the mob. He was so fixated on the people destroying the police car that he didn't notice the tear gas canister arcing across the sky towards him. It smashed into the side of his head. Jesse's vision exploded with red. As the canister began spewing out a cloud of stinging vapors, he stumbled off the street. The world seemed to be turning to liquid, a jumbled rush of colors and sounds sucking him into the depths of a newly risen ocean. He collapsed onto a bus station bench, coughing and wheezing.

Not right. Not right at all.

He rolled onto his stomach and hugged the bench. He managed to turn his head to one side before throwing up. Lying there, gasping for breath, face covered by the now sodden bandana, he lost consciousness. With his last thought, he wondered where his new family was.

Jesse woke up to a man's voice. It was soft and reedy. "Ah, you're awake. Very good. It is wrong for anyone to be unaware of the great honors in life."

When he opened his eyes, he had a hard time focusing on the face that loomed over him. The man's mouth seemed to move slightly behind the sound of his voice. "You took a nasty blow on the head. When the police brought you here, I thought you wouldn't be suitable. But, you are. Isn't that nice?"

"Where am I?" Jesse asked. He thought his voice sounded wrong, thick and heavy, like he was talking with a pillow pressed down on his face.

"You are at the threshold of power. That's what people like you want, right? Power? To shake the rich and entitled from their pedestals." The man's face drew closer, coming into focus. He was bald. His skin was so pale it was almost translucent. "I've seen many like you. They all come through my parlor."

Jesse's perceptions began to clear. He looked around. He was strapped to a metal gurney. There were three other gurneys lined up next to his; each had a young man or woman strapped to it. From the clothing they wore, Jesse surmised that they had been part of the protest march. The room's walls were pale green and a sickly white light lit the room, coming from fluorescent tubes that hummed noisily.

He strained at the leather straps that looped around his ankles and wrists. They held firm. The man was still leaning over him.

"You can't get free."

"Why have I been arrested? I want a lawyer."

The man laughed. It was a horrible, gobbling sound. Jesse instinctively tried to shrink away from him, pressing the back of his head against the table. "I never said you were arrested. You were brought here by the instruments of authority to feed the system."

Jesse felt panic rising in his throat like vomit, an acidic pressure that made it hard to breath. "What the fuck are you talking about? I have friends. I have family. I want a phone call. I want..."

"I want' is the refrain of your generation. Suckling at the great teat of society. Well, to produce milk, society needs to feed." The man jerked his head up at the sound of a buzzer. "Excuse me. I have to prepare the table."

The man left the room though a sliding metal door. Jesse strained at the straps again with the same result. He turned his head to face the other captives. The person closest to him was a diminutive woman with delicate features and pink hair.

"Hey, what the hell is going on?"

The woman looked at him. Her heavy black eye makeup had run due to her tears, etching dark trails down her cheeks. She shook her head. "I don't know. I woke up a few minutes ago."

"We need to get out of here."

The woman laughed loudly, without any hint of humor. "No shit. How the fuck do we do that?"

Jesse felt on the verge of tears. He wanted the man to come back so he could beg to be released. "I don't know," he muttered.

The door clanged open and the pale man reentered. Two other men were with him. Both were wearing gray jumpsuits and featureless white masks. "Time to start the ceremony." The men pulled knives from sheaths they wore on their belts. They approached Jesse first. They carefully cut his clothes off, leaving him naked. They did this to the rest of the bound people, leaving their shredded clothing in heaps on the floor.

The men in jumpsuits then rolled the gurneys through the open door, one at a time. Jesse's was the last one taken. "Please, I have money. My parents have money. If you let me go, they'll pay you. I won't tell the police."

Neither of the men replied. The only sound was the clatter of the gurney's wheels and the thudding of the men's boots.

"Please."

The gurney was pushed through an opening covered by a heavy black curtain. The room on the other side was large. The other gurneys were arranged in a semi-circle facing the far wall. Once Jesse's gurney was in position, the men winched the surface into an upright position.

Jesse was shocked to see that there were other people standing along the edge of the room, men and women dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns. He was even more shocked when he recognized the President talking to his predecessor. Both men were laughing at some joke Jesse couldn't hear.

The pale man walked into the center of the semi-circle of bound people. He was wearing a robe made from a purple material so dark, it was almost black. He held up his thin arms and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, on this anniversary of the Compact, we rededicate ourselves to the life of our nation, the Founders and those who walk between worlds."

The wall that Jesse faced split apart with the sound of rock grinding on rock. Beyond lay impenetrable darkness. Jesse thought it looked less like shadows or the absence of light and more like a mass of shivering black gel.

As the pale man left the center of the room he passed Jesse. "Please," Jesse said, "someone help me. I don't want to be here."

The pale man paused. He regarded Jesse's naked body and anxious face. "You and your friends are the key part of this ceremony. Long ago, those who founded the country made a pact for power and prosperity. Our partners have always delivered on their end of the bargain. You are the price we pay. This nation values your passion. It just needs it in a more directed fashion." He placed his hand on Jesse's shoulder. It was cold and moist. "You're doing a great service for your country," he said before joining the people standing along the walls.

The room was silent. The darkness bulged outwards disgorging a thing that made Jesse's mind reel. It had a vaguely human shape, but the proportions were wrong. The arms and legs were too long and bent at multiple joints. The fingers were over a foot in length and ended in ragged talons. The body was thin and covered in loose, chalk-white skin that slid in a sickening fashion as it moved. The face was elongated, with small red eyes, no nose and a wide mouth filled with rows of razor-sharp teeth.

As it loped to the nearest bound person, a young black man who was praying loudly, Jesse tried to turn away. He found he couldn't. When it inserted one clawed finger into the man's eye, he tried to look away. He found himself unable to stop watching. He wanted to stop up his ear and block out the sound of the man's shrieks, but he had to listen. The creature hooked its finger behind the bridge of the black man's nose and pulled. With a sharp crack, it pulled part of the skull free. The bound man was still alive and shrieking as the creature dug its mouth into the hole where his eyes and forehead had been. Blood cascaded down his bare torso, pooling on the floor.

The creature pulled its mouth away from the ruined head. It turned to survey the three people still alive. The white skin of its face and chest was red with blood.

It went to the next person. Jesse recognized him. Not by name; but he had been at some of the protest planning meetings on campus. The creature rested on its knuckles and ran its tongue over the man's torso. Tiny hooks on the tongue's surface tore at the flesh, leaving a wake of shredded skin, weeping blood.

"No no no no."

The creature inserted its clawed forefingers into the man's abdomen. His pleas became a high-pitched screech as the fingers disemboweled him. His intestines spilled out in thick coils. The screeches turned to a whining moan as he watched the creature push a mass of purplish-grey tubes into its mouth and start chewing.

Jesse vomited, splattering his own chest. One of the people along the wall — a Supreme Court Justice — laughed.

The pink haired woman was screaming out profanities as the creature moved on to her, a fragment of intestines trailing out of its mouth. It swallowed, then leaned ominously over the woman. It lifted one of her small breasts up. It lowered its head to her chest and engulfed the breast. She screamed as it sank its teeth into her flesh and pulled back, trailing muscle tissue.

To Jesse, her screams seemed to fade, but it was only his mind attempting to protect itself from the horrors he was seeing. He couldn't help but watch as the creature reached into her open mouth, took hold of her tongue, and pulled it free with a lazy tug. It held the pink scrap of flesh in front of her bulging eyes before tossing its head back and dropping the tongue into its gaping maw. Jesse could see its throat pulse as it swallowed. The woman was tossing her head back and forth. She made a wet grunting sound. That turned into a thick gurgle as the creature clawed open her throat. It let the warm blood spray on its face, before clamping its mouth over the hemorrhaging wounds.

I'm not here, I'm not here. I'm home and Mom is going to wake me up for breakfast and Dad will lecture me about school and work and it will all be okay.

The creature stared into Jesse's eyes. The thick odor of blood filled his nostrils. He felt one hand, sticky with blood, caress his thighs before cupping his genitals.

"Good boy," it said, its voice soft and gravelly.

Jesse felt a lance of white hot pain tear through his body as it twisted and tore his genitals free. A gush of hot blood coated his legs. He didn't scream; the pain he felt was nothing that he could give voice to.

"Good boy."

The creature slid its index fingers into the gaping wound. Jesse tried to will himself away, as he felt the fingers burrow into his abdominal cavity.

"Please," escaped from his open mouth, a high-pitched wheeze.

"Good boy."

All Jesse could see were teeth. All he could feel were waves of burning pain rising through his body. The frigid breath of the creature washed over his face as it opened its mouth wide enough to engulf his head.

Mommy mommy mommy.

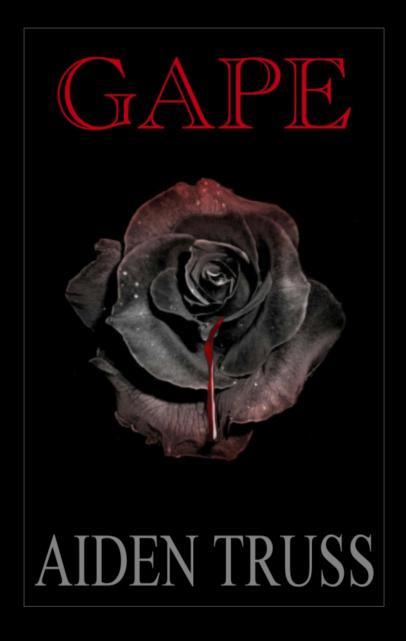
As the teeth began to sink in and the bones of his skull began to crack, he heard one last thing.

"Gods bless America," the President said as Jesse's head was crushed.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. After 14 years of Federal service as a computer engineer, Jeff transitioned to full-time writing in 2013. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres and owns and operates a number of movie and pop culture blogs. He published his first novel, The Age of the Jackal in 2015.

Twitter: @sprocketland

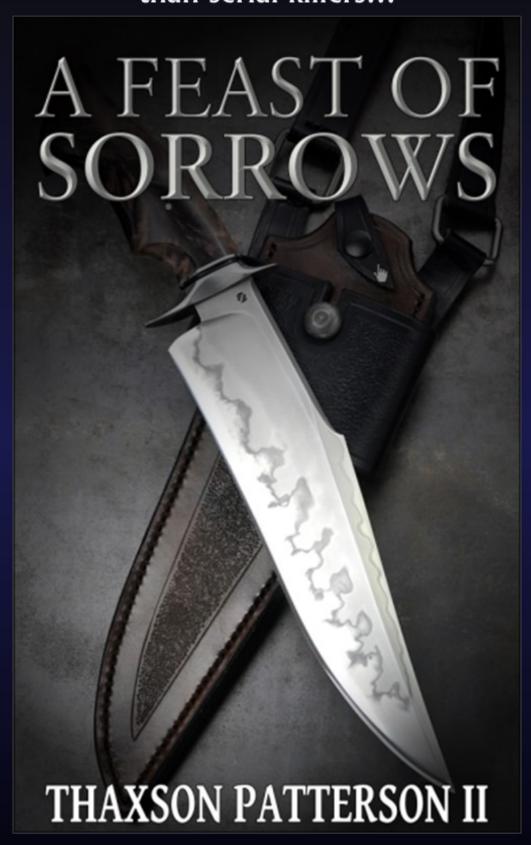
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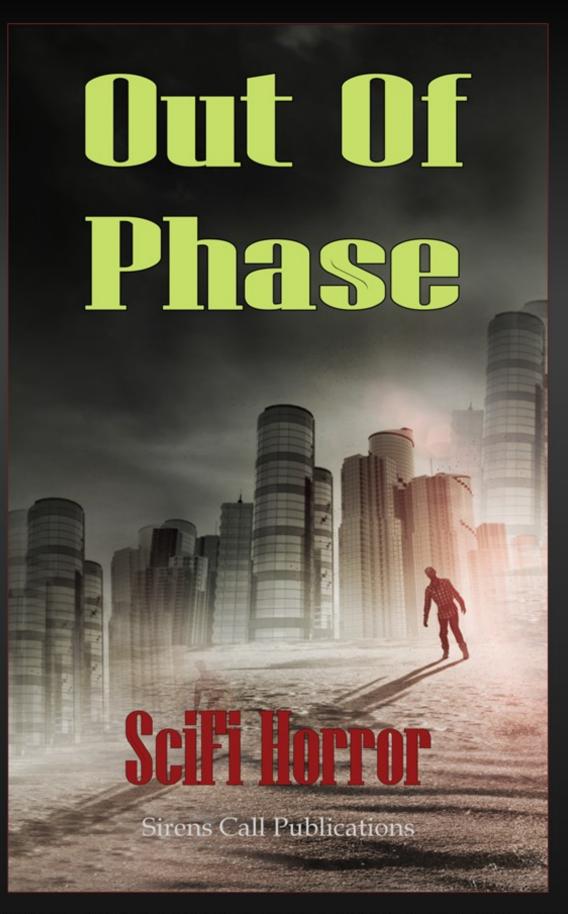
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### Where Did the Wendigo? | R. J. Meldrum

Wendigo: A legend of the Great Lakes. A spirit that can take on the shape of a human and is driven to consume human flesh.

The last part of the drive to the logging camp was along a steep dirt track. Eric took it easy, worried about traction on the wet mud. He turned one last corner and found himself at the camp. He parked and climbed out the pickup, reaching back into the cab to grab his laptop, hard-hat and fluorescent jacket. He glanced around the site. There was only one person present and he was clearly about to leave.

"I'm Eric Williams from head office. I'm here for the equipment audit."

"John Braddock, crew chief. Bit late, aren't you? We were expecting you this morning. It's nearly four o'clock."

"I got held up, but I'm here now. I would have phoned but there's no signal."

"We always leave early on Fridays. The crew's gone and I was about to head off myself. Best you come back Monday."

"I can't. I have a number of appointments next week and I'm not driving out here again. I don't mind working by myself, just show me where the records are kept."

Braddock pointed to a small metal cabin.

"Everything you need is in there, but I don't think you should stay by yourself. We lost a man last month."

"I know, I read the report. Wasn't he killed by a bear?"

"It wasn't a bear."

"Bear, wolf, coyote. It's all the same."

"No, it's not all the same," said Braddock, giving Eric a measured look. He spoke again.

"Okay, since you clearly intend to stay here alone, you deserve to know the truth. There've been tales about these forests for years, tales of disappearances and violent deaths. The locals say there's something in those woods, something evil. That was what killed Bud. He decided to stay back one evening by himself and repair the log cutter."

"What was this mysterious something that killed him?"

"It was a wendigo, Mr. Williams."

"This isn't the time for jokes, Braddock. I'm here to do an audit."

"I'm not joking, I'm telling you the truth, don't stay here by yourself. Somewhere out in these woods there's a wendigo."

Eric stared at the man.

"I don't know why you think it's funny to make up a story like that, but I won't fall for it."

"Well, I've warned you and I can sleep well tonight knowing that."

Braddock headed to his truck.

"I hope to hear from you again, Mr. Williams. I really do."

Eric watched as Braddock's truck headed down the trail. He felt a mild sense of disgust. A crew chief, of all people, trying to wind him up with a silly, childish tale. Ridiculous. A gust of cold wind whipped through the site, chilling him. He walked to the cabin, opened the door and

clicked on the light. The files he needed were stored in a rusty filing cabinet. Time passed while he checked the records. He noticed the serial number of one machine was missing from the maintenance reports. He had to make sure the machine matched the equipment inventory held by head office. Stepping outside, he noticed it was already getting dark. He spotted the machine he was looking for. Opening the control panel, he flicked on a small flashlight and read the serial number. He scribbled the number onto a scrap of paper and headed back to the relative safety of the cabin. He wasn't worried about the so-called wendigo, but there were still bears and wolves in these woods. The wind whipped grit into his eyes. Looking through a veil of tears, he saw a blurred shape.

His vision clearing, Eric saw the dark figure of a man standing between him and the cabin. He paused, unsure about what to do. He shone his flashlight into the man's face. Dead eyes stared back at him, the skin of the man's face starting to flicker and change. Eric dropped the flashlight and backed away. This thing in front of him wasn't human. Braddock had been right. A wendigo, a creature of fantasy and legend, was standing no more than twenty feet from him. It moved, disappearing into the darkness of the forest. Eric saw a shovel on the ground. He picked it up and clutched it to his chest. He ran for the cabin, praying he could make it, hoping the cabin door was strong enough to withstand the wendigo.

Despite the opinion of Eric Williams, John Braddock was really a decent person. He had driven home, worrying about the man he'd left alone on the mountain. He didn't sleep well on Friday night. It was on Saturday afternoon when his wife, perceptive as ever, asked what the problem was. He told her. She insisted he head back to the camp to make sure Williams had left safely.

It was close to five o'clock when Braddock pulled into the camp. William's truck was still parked up. Feeling uneasy, Braddock unclipped the shotgun from the rack behind the seat, chambered a round and clicked the safety off. He walked towards the cabin, noting the door had been smashed open. He entered. The light was on. Williams sat on the floor, covered in blood and gore. Next to him lay a mangled body that looked like his twin. The head had been smashed open, gray matter was smeared across the floor. It was clear to Braddock that Williams had been killed and the wendigo had taken his shape. Braddock raised the barrel of the shotgun and was about to kill the creature when it spoke.

"It's me Braddock. I'm not the creature."

Braddock lowered the gun.

"What the hell happened, Williams?"

"You were right, it came out of the woods. I was outside. I managed to make it back in here, but the door didn't hold. It got in. It tried to kill me, but I got it first. With this."

He raised the blood-stained shovel.

"I never would have believed it possible," gasped Braddock.

"It made a fatal error. A mistake that cost it its life."

"What?"

"When I first saw it outside, it was huge. I could never have defeated it in that shape."

Braddock nodded, after it killed Bud last month, the creature would have taken on his shape. Bud had been six foot five and two hundred and fifty pounds in his underwear.

"I couldn't have stopped it, not with just a shovel."

"So what happened? What mistake did it make?"

"It saw me all alone. Vulnerable. It thought it had me cold. Before it attacked it changed into me."

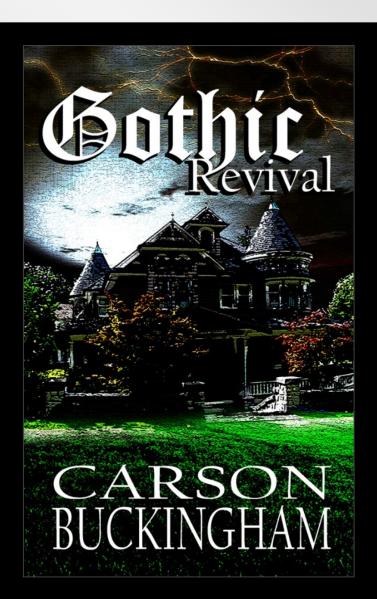
Braddock understood. Williams was short and skinny, no more than one hundred and fifty pounds. Williams giggled, a high-pitched laugh. He wiped the blood from his face.

"Now I know how easy it would be to kill me, Braddock. Turns out it would be very easy, very easy indeed."

He smiled at the crew chief, as blood dripped from the shovel onto the dusty wooden floor of the cabin.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Canada in 2010. His interest in the supernatural is a lifetime obsession and when he isn't writing he is busy working to increase his collection of rare and vintage supernatural books. He has had stories published by *Smoking Pen Press*, *Sirens Call Publications* and *James Ward Kirk Fiction*.

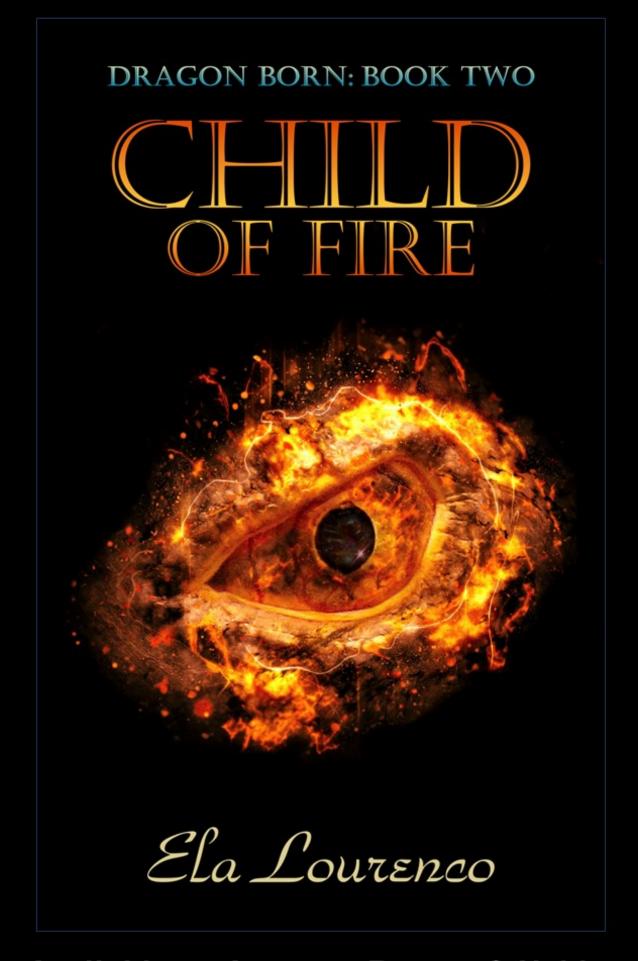
Facebook: Richard Meldrum



### **Gothic Revival**

Carson Buckingham

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### **Insanity** | *Dee Langone Bonney*

Jon had no pattern when he sought out his victims, nor in his brutality. For him, anyone was fair game. He found various ways to torture them, but his favorite method was to beat them to the bone and watch as they bled to death. After, he dipped the right hand in acid and removed the left ring finger, which he later mailed to the newspaper. When he was through with them, he discarded the bodies in the river.

\*\*\*

In his childhood, his twin brother, Thom, enjoyed torturing small animals. At that point, these actions disgusted Jon and he often urged his brother to stop. However, when Jon's wife, Lois, asked for a divorce, Jon found that cruelty toward other humans numbed that sting. In fact, after a desperate attempt to explain to Jon that she no longer felt connected or free to speak due to his daydreams, Lois became his very first victim.

\*\*\*

Jon's new hatred for his wife drove him to draw her death out as long as possible. He strung her up by her wrists in an abandoned farmhouse where nobody could hear her screams. He loved the feeling of slicing into her flesh. He doused her in vinegar, then let acid eat away at her right hand. In a fit of rage, he cut off her ring finger, wedding band still glistening upon it. However, he decided that she would never have the choice to leave, and kept her as a work of art he visited nightly.

\*\*\*

For months, he hunted and mutilated unsuspecting victims. His deeds were put to a standstill when Violet, his wife's best friend, grew concerned. When she inquired about her dear friend's absence, Jon simply informed her that Lois had gone to England. However, Violet didn't buy it for a second. She was well aware that Lois was seeking a divorce, but she accepted the lie and went on her way.

Suspecting foul play, Violet went straight to the police to inform them of her missing friend. Knowing Jon's claim of England, she knew the man hadn't done so. She explained everything that Lois had told her before her disappearance.

A full investigation was ordered immediately, and the police found Lois' corpse at the farmhouse. The similarities between her and recent victims closed all cases at once and Jon was arrested. After a rather short but fair trial, Jon was found guilty and faced the death penalty.

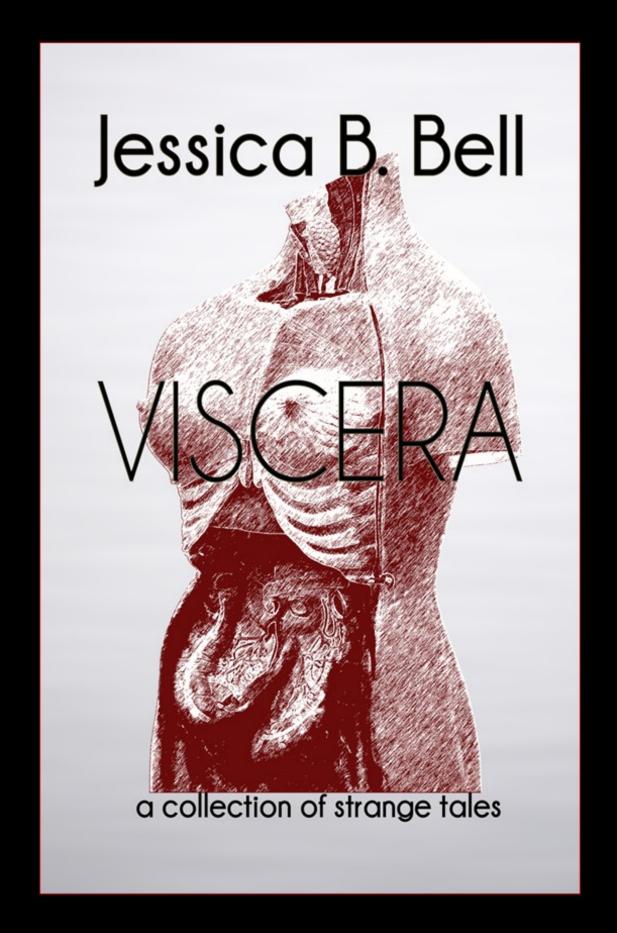
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Dee Langone Bonney was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY, and later moved to Middletown, NY, where she met her husband, Richard Bonney. Together, they had one child, named Rory J. Roche. Dee always loved writing poems and short stories.

Twitter: @Dee62958

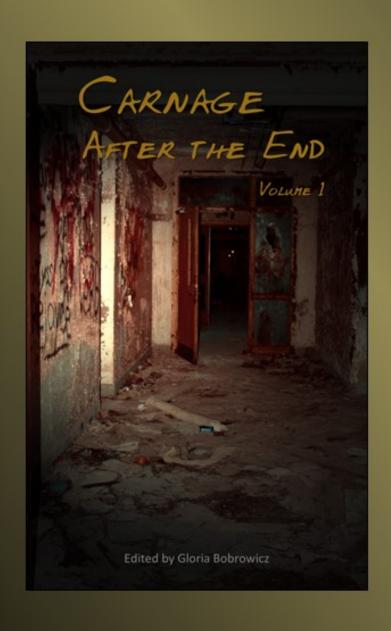
### Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

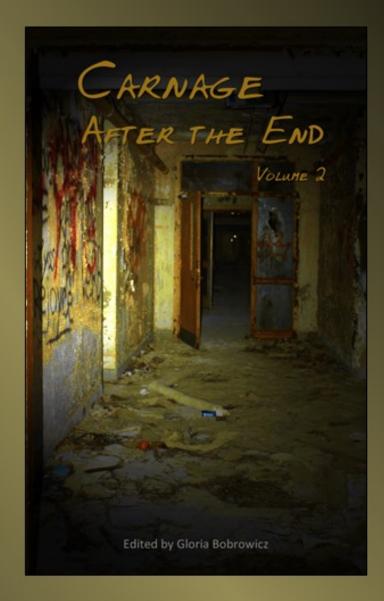
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### **Calendar Girl** | *Rory J. Roche*

"In recent news, 23-year-old model, Lindsay Grier has gone missing. Police say she was abducted from her home last night after a neighbor reported hearing screams. There is no sign of forced entry, but Crow Haven Police Department is leading a deep investigation. If you have any information, call the number be-"

The blonde turned off the television. With a smirk, she looked over to the strung up brunette caked in blood. "They think my scars are too ugly for me to model anymore. I'm going to show them how pretty you can be."

\*\*\*

Detective Warner sat at her desk, sipping coffee that had long ago gone cold. She looked over one report among the towering stack of papers next to her and let out a troubled sigh. The details of Grier's headshot, from the bright, green eyes, to the pearly ear-to-ear grin, to the curly brown locks draped over delicate shoulders stared back at her. Her stomach knotted at the idea that someone could abduct young women like this. She plucked the photo from the folder and pinned it to a wall to join the other young faces, then returned to her desk to read another report.

\*\*\*

"When is the last time you saw your girlfriend, Mr. Valdez?" Warner asked, watching the trembling young man before her.

"T-two days ago. I-We were... we had a date planned for today. I texted her last night to check and I fell asleep waiting for an answer. I didn't find out until the news came on at work this morning. I... you'll find her, won't you?" asked the shaken man as he did his best to puff on a cigarette.

"That's why I'm here, sir. Can you think of anyone that might want to hurt Ms. Grier?"

"No. Everyone loved her. She lights up a room. I- can't understand why someone would do this. Did they leave a ransom? I'll pay it, I swear! I don't care how much it is. I just want Lins back safe!"

"There was no note. No sign of forced entry... I know this is hard, Mr. Valdez, but please try to think if there was anyone. A family member, friend, ex, anyone."

"Her and her ex were friends. They ended on good terms. Her family's proud. I... I don't know. Do you have a number I can call if I think of anything?"

"Sure. You call at any time, okay? Try to get some rest. We'll do everything we can to find Ms. Grier," said Warner, offering a contact card.

\*\*\*

Oldies drowned out the agonized screams that filled the dimly lit room. An icy blade sliced through flesh, drawing out the viscous red liquid. As blood trickled down, flaps of skin were peeled back and pinned to extend a toothy grin.

"There, there, Angel, smile for the camera. You have such a beautiful smile. Everyone will just *adore* you!"

\*\*\*

The sharp ring of the telephone ripped Warner from her cat nap against her desk. A paper stuck to her dark forehead and she snatched it off as she plucked up the phone. She rubbed at her

eyes and stifled a yawn into her shoulder as she nearly knocked the empty coffee cup off her desk.

"Detective Sandra Warner... Sir? Sir! Mr. Valdez, please calm down! I can't understand you... yes, please bring it to me."

\*\*\*

The terrified green eyes of Lindsay Grier gazed up from the photograph as Mr. Valdez clutched his stomach in an attempt to keep his lunch down. Warner let out a noise of disgust as she took a closer look. The detective's office was silent for several moments, aside from the soft sobs erupting from Valdez.

"She's alive... at least in this photo."

"How can you tell?"

"There are several signs. Just- don't worry yourself with it. I'm going to look into this."

"She's mutilated! Look at her! How can I not worry?"

\*\*\*

Two days later, a woman in a floral dress approached the frazzled detective. Warner had lost significant sleep over the Grier case. She still had no leads. She hadn't even wanted to speak with anyone, but the young woman was frantic and in tears.

"I'm not taking any new cases, ma'am. I can direct you to another detective."

"They- told me to come to you," the redhead squeaked, bottom lip trembling.

"Who did?"

"The other detective. He said you would take it. Please, I'm desperate. My- partner didn't come home."

"I understand, Ma'am, but I'm up to my neck in another case. Who did you speak with?"

"Detective Carter."

"I'll call him. Hang on. What's your name?"

"Adriana Becker."

Sandra picked up her phone and dialed her co-worker's office. She drummed her pen anxiously on her desk as she watched the distraught young lady out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to help her, but she needed to find Lindsay Grier before it was too late.

"Carter? Yeah, it's Warner. I have a young woman here that says you sent her to- Listen, I can't take another case. I'm losing sleep over the Grier case as it is."

"Lindsay?" the young woman interjected. Warner put Carter on hold as she side-eyed the woman.

"Yes, Lindsay. Why?"

"That's what I was trying to tell you, Detective. My partner works with her. I know Lindsay."

With a sigh, Warner hung up the phone and pulled out her notepad. She offered the young woman some coffee and asked her to sit in one of the plush, black chairs opposite her. The woman accepted the cup with shaking hands and stole a tissue from the desk to wipe her eyes.

"Who is your partner?"

"Angel Ramirez."

"You say they work together?"

- "Yes, Detective. Angel and Lindsay have modeled together for two years."
- "Was Angel aware that Lindsay went missing?"
- "Yeah... Um, Angel was really upset. Scared. It took me all week to calm them."
- "Them?"
- "They're an androgynous model. They didn't come home last night. I'm- so scared!"
- "Okay, Ma'am. What else can you tell me?"
- "I called some of their friends to see if anyone knew where Angel was. Nobody knew. They haven't been seen since before their photo shoot yesterday."
  - "Photo shoot?"
- "I wanted Angel to cancel it after we found out that Lindsay was missing. They were so upset, but they said they couldn't. So while they went to work, I went to comfort Julio."
  - "Mr. Valdez?"
  - "Yeah."
  - "What time did you speak with him?"
- "Angel's shoot was after breakfast. We left together. I went to his place and tried to get him to eat. He looked like hell. I made us some grilled cheese and I told him that Lindsay would be okay. Y'know, stuff to calm him. I left after lunch and went home."
  - "Julio came to me after lunch. He didn't mention you."
  - "Did he need to? I mean... I'm not a suspect or something, am I?"
- "For now? We cannot exclude anyone from our investigations. Tell me whatever you can about Angel. Is there anyone that would hurt them?"
  - "No! Of course not! Angel was the sweetest!"
  - "What about Lindsay?"
- "Lindsay's great. Everyone loves her. She makes everyone smile. Even if they don't want to."
  - "Okay. I'll need a list of mutual friends between Lindsay and Angel."
  - "Of course! Please find them."

\*\*\*

Warner leaned her back against the wall with a groan. She rubbed her hands over her face as she waited for Detective Carter to meet with her. She had questioned every friend, but everyone had the same answers. The stack of files on her desk was growing and she remained without a clue.

"Sorry I'm late," said a middle-aged man as he bustled through the door and slapped another folder onto Warner's desk. "Another model was reported missing this morning."

"Another? How many is that now? Nine? And still no clue?"

"Still no bodies either. David Taylor reported his wife, Maddi, missing for two days. He said she was supposed to visit her parents for the weekend. He expected her home last night, but she never arrived. I called the parents this morning. She never arrived there either."

"It's been two months since Lindsay went missing. We have received seven photos of the models; all mutilated, but alive."

"Let's go over them again. We've got to be missing something."

"Lindsay Grier was covered in lacerations, with her cheeks removed. Angel Ramirez's face

was pulled back into a bloody smile. Dominique Jones was strung up with her hands removed. Parker Lewis and Zoya Tomar disappeared two days apart, but were stitched together by the lips, the skin on their backs removed. Ming Sun's breasts had been removed, and Ash Turner was carved into in the same fashion as an autopsy."

"These models have nothing in common except their career and the same age bracket. Not race, not gender, not hair color, and except for Angel and Lindsay, they didn't share friends."

"How are we going to find them?" Warner cried, slamming her fist against her desk as she spread out the photos of the victims. "What the fuck are we missing?"

Carter took the photo of Lindsay pinned to the wall and set it down with the rest. "Seven photos. Eight- *nine* missing models. There's no clue if any of them have survived. We need to stop this from happening again."

"We don't even know who the next target might be."

"Andrei Baranov was concerned he might be next."

"River's boyfriend, right?"

"Right. They're both models-" Carter was interrupted by the ringing of his phone. The call was short and he seemed to age as he turned back to Warren. "They found a body."

\*\*\*

"It's- no, no! It can't be him! Why? Why would someone do this? Are you sure? I can't- I need to see him," Andrei sobbed, voice thick with his Russian accent. He brushed his raven hair from his puffy, bloodshot eyes and hugged himself. He rested his lithe frame against the wall, unable to support himself.

"We do need you to identify the body to make sure it's him, but are you sure you can handle it?" Warner asked.

"Da. I must. I- was going to p-propose to him. Oh God, I love him so much! Why him?"

"We're trying to find out. I have to warn you..."

"Warn me what?"

"He's not- as you would remember him."

"What did they do to him?"

"I... It's better you just see for yourself. Come, I'll escort you to the morgue. I'm so sorry for your loss, Mr. Baranov."

Sandra gently took the young man by the arm and led him out of the room. She rubbed his back soothingly as she led him to the morgue. His body shook as he tried to stifle his sobs. The stretcher covered in a white sheet was already sitting in the middle of the room, waiting. Tension filled the room with a deafening silence as they approached. The coroner carefully slipped the sheet away and Andrei broke into heart wrenching sobs.

"Oh God! What did they do to him? Why! River, n-no! Not my R-R-River!" he wailed, immediately placing his hand on River's shoulder. "Baby, no. No! I'm so s-s-sorry-y-y. Sweetheart, my love. My..." He trailed off, placing loving kisses onto River's forehead with trembling lips. He planted sweet kisses over his lover's face, avoiding only the spots where skin was missing. He looked up to the coroner, then to Detective Warner, then back to River. "I want to see the rest. Want to see what was done... how long has he-?"

The coroner bowed his head, then carefully pulled the sheet back further to reveal marks

identical to an autopsy. Andrei sobbed harder and placed a gentle hand over River's carved chest.

"I haven't gotten to take a thorough look yet, but I estimate he's been dead a few days. The bruising patterns along his body indicate that he'd been kept for some time and started to heal."

"There were others, though... are they dead?"

"River's is the only body found so far. I promise that he's going to help us find the others and the person responsible for it."

"You make sure of it. River was my whole life. Now I have nothing."

"A photo of another victim was sent to us. He was treated the same way. River is going to help us. I can refer you to a grief counselor, if you would like."

"All I want is to watch the motherfucker that killed my boyfriend burn."

\*\*\*

"The coroner said the incisions were skilled, indicating a surgeon," Carter said, pouring himself his fifth cup of coffee.

"The rest weren't like that. Just Ash and River."

"A distaste for men?"

"Practice. Whoever it was started small and worked toward it. No organs were missing. He was just carved into."

"A surgical student? What would a surgical student want with a bunch of models?"

"I'll ask around. Maybe one of their friends knows of one."

"Three more photos came this morning. Whoever's doing this is working faster. Two of them weren't even reported missing."

"The third?"

"David Taylor's wife, Maddi."

"Shit. Eleven victims?"

\*\*\*

"Valdez and Becker mentioned a friend in med school. An Alyson Wright. She was a model and lost her job after a car accident scarred her face," Warner told Carter over sandwiches.

"That's motive. What else do you know?"

"She's studying under a Dr. Erik Marsden, who hasn't showed up for lectures in a week."

"Think she got him, too?"

"He might be helping her. Get this, one of the victims is his ex-wife's daughter."

"Then we have to find them."

"Their cars were both spotted at the old hospital. Police are already on their way."

\*\*\*

Police arrived to the abandoned hospital to find Alyson Wright stripped, carved into and strung up by her wrists. Dr. Marsden lay dead in a pool of blood at her feet. A camera sat on a tripod in the center of the room, facing them both. Police helped the blonde down and took her to the hospital for medical attention, while the rest of the team swept the abandoned building for the remaining victims.

\*\*\*

<sup>&</sup>quot;Wright's been interrogated," Warner told Carter, pouring them each a tumbler of scotch.

"And?"

"She claims that Marsden abducted her. That he had lost his mind. That he was making a calendar and wanted to feature her. She said she was happy about it, until she got to the room. She said he had carved into her and took pictures of her days before police rescued her. That on that day, he had let her down to show her the calendar and she stabbed him. He hung her by her wrists before he bled out."

"Why did Marsden do it?"

"She didn't know. But we found the calendar. All twelve victims."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rory is an artist and writer from upstate New York. He has a knack for all things creative and finds comfort in darker themes. He dabbles in acting and modeling and takes pleasure in art and photography. He published a vampire novel under a pen name and has the second novel of the series in the works. He is currently studying German, French, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Russian.

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### A Laughing Goddess Rhamnusia | Wies Blaize

She stood in the kitchen and dried her hands. It was a mechanical gesture before cooking dinner for her and her husband. She did so every evening for 40 years, as long as they had been married. They were not especially beautiful hands, short and fleshy, and firm. *Strong hands*, she thought while playing with the dry cloth. She then turned towards the kitchen unit and continued her activities while looking with one eye into the unfolded cookbook.

"First the soaked and skinned sweetbreads will be baked slowly in butter to firm them, and to let them give up their juices. Then they will be braised in wine and other flavors. After that, preparation even one day early, they are ready to be served with an accompanying sauce." She whispered the words slowly in front of her while her dexterous hands did the job.

It was hot in the kitchen and sweat pearled over her forehead. She cut the carrot, onion, and celery into little pieces and made an herb bouquet of the parsley, thyme and bay leaf.

Thoughts intervened her work. Suddenly, without a warning beforehand there was that pain in her heart. Anguish, as physical as the blows he had given her this morning. *Why, why?* 

She looked up for a second and saw her dim silhouette shine in the kitchen window. The blue spots on her face were barely visible. She knew from experience they would go away eventually anyway. Like always. But the pain deep inside remained and was anchored in her

body.

Sometimes she would like to scream at him. Don't, don't, stop! Sometimes she would want to hit back with clenched fists, pounding his scapula, with ruthless force lash out to that face she knew so well. But she realized what that would mean. More beatings, more forceful anger towards her. Instead, there was this never-ending feeling of helplessness. And she matched her fate. Every day over and over again. Then there was this hope that he would stop one day. That his switch would turn and that he would see that this no longer could continue. That he would make excuses and would swear it was the last time; that she could trust him to it.

It wasn't always like this. She remembered how happy they were those first years. "You are my sweet", he had told her then and he had caressed her cheeks softly. However, somewhere something had changed and those big hands had turned into weapons to hurt her.

She rubbed the sweetbreads with salt and pepper, laid them into the pan and threw the butter, the vegetables, and herbs in. The lid went onto the pan to simmer. She uncorked The Chateau Vignol Rouge of 2008. Half a liter went in the dish. She took a glass out of the cupboard, took a sip of wine and closed her eyes for just a while.

At first glance, that morning was like every other morning. The alarm rang at eight o'clock and she had stretched arms by her head to her back in an attempt to ease her muscles a bit. A moment like there were many, of freshness, well-being and even a feeling of happiness. Everything was still possible in that moment. The world at her feet, she still was that beautiful woman. Already middle-aged, certainly, but still with that feeling of possibilities. Today was the day, she was ready. Today was her birthday.

The snore in bed next to her made her crunch. And like all the other days there was that black cloud around her head immediately. Her husband turned again, his thick upper arm touched her shoulder so very lightly and she felt a bitter taste in her mouth. Her forehead cramped slightly and the thought began to grit. Again captured in a hopeless life with a man she hated. Because she hated him, oh yes, with everything inside of her.

"What are you looking at", he had slung at her with a drowsy voice. One eye open, the other still closed by sleep.

"Nothing, nothing is the matter. I am getting out of bed, go back to sleep." Quickly she had pulled the blanket off the bed and she stood next to the bedstead. Ready to run out of the bedroom, away from him.

But he was wide awake now, and with a swift jump, he stood beside her. One lump of meat, one lump of anger.

"Bitch, why you always, always start in the early morning with your meow," he had said, his hands clenched into fists, his face cramped in fury.

And he had hit her, in the face, on the chest, on her breasts, and in her stomach. Until she panted for breath and had begged him to stop.

With a scowl, he then had hid in the bathroom to take a shower. She had heard the water running while she still was shivering on the mat by the door. Her arms crossed in front of her body, her cheeks wet with tears.

That morning she had dressed quickly. A cup of coffee at the kitchen table. A feeling as if she was about to choke. Only until the front door slammed she could breathe again.

She had cleaned the house in a haze; she had done the laundry and swept the floors. Doing the groceries there was that sudden panicky feeling so she ran home, the bag with vegetables dangling in her arms. Inside came the tears; on her way home, she had lost the meat.

He came to the house that afternoon at four o'clock. She had hoped he had bought flowers for her 60th birthday. But he had looked at her as if she was crazy.

At that moment, she knew something had to give.

While he stood with his back to her, she had taken the big butcher's knife. The four thrusts went stupendously easy. When he collapsed without a sound, she had a peaceful feeling. She cleaned the bloody mess off the floor, washed him in the scullery and towed his naked body back to the kitchen. With all her might, she put him on the big table. Then she took a shower. She was ready to cook now. She smiled, she laughed, and then she cried.

- 1. Place the raw material ready for use.
- 2. Place the meat with the crown on the cutting board.
- 3. Remove with a sharp boning knife the outer skin of the shoulder.
- 4. Detach the breastplate by cutting the two meat muscles to the blood vein.
- 5. Remove the scapula by starting to cut from the head of the shoulder.
- 6. Cut the shank bone if present.
- 7. Remove the bone by cutting the meat along the bone.
- 8. The shoulder can be trussed and used elsewhere.
- 9. Clean and disinfect all the used materials, tools and working surface.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Writer and poet Wies Blaize from the Hague, the Netherlands has only ten months writing in the English/American language behind her belt. She activates her Muse every day writing blogs, short stories and poetry in English. This is her first publication abroad.

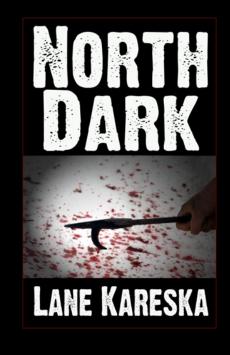
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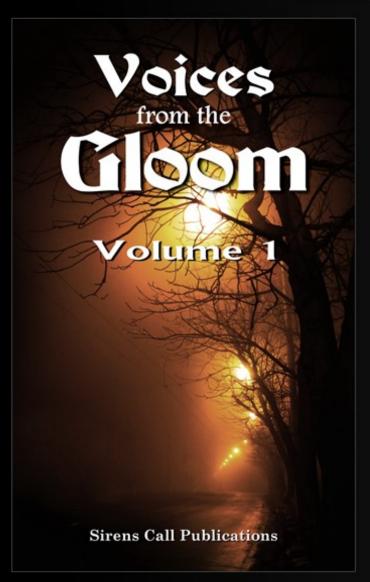
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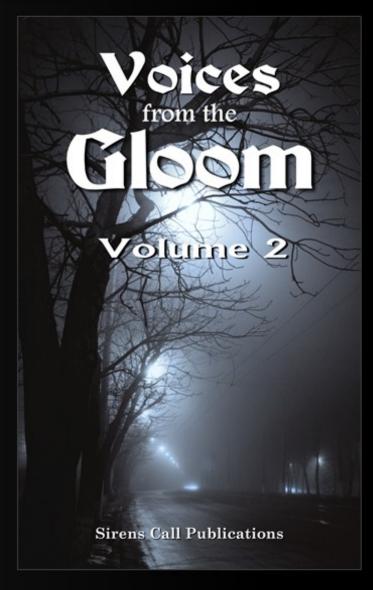
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### **The Hit** | *DJ Tyrer*

He hadn't had a chance to react: when he'd spotted the car coming towards him, he hadn't even been able to turn to run. An open door smacked into him, sending him sprawling across the sidewalk. The two men in the back of the car leapt out and bundled him into the footwell where he couldn't move, hands and feet holding him down. He attempted to protest his innocence, of what he didn't know, but only received a smack in return. There was no pity, no appeal.

They rode around for a while, before reaching their destination. Once the vehicle came to a halt, he was bundled out into what appeared to be a junkyard. He was dragged along by the two men who had grabbed him, the driver of the car following along behind.

Having reached the center of the yard, he was shoved forward into a sheet of corrugated iron. He just about kept his footing and turned, fearfully, to face his tormentors.

A first smashed into his jaw, stunning him and causing him to slump against the sheet. He could taste blood and his tongue probed a loose tooth. A series of blows followed against his face and body, his punishment for some slight he was unaware of.

Retching, choking on blood, he looked up to see the driver pointing a small handgun at his head. He had no chance to do anything before the trigger was depressed and the muzzle flashed. It was a .22 caliber pistol, the hit-man's close-up weapon of choice: the slug had enough energy to punch its way into the skull, but not enough to punch its way out again: the result was that it ricocheted around inside the skull, shredding the brain until it came to a halt. It did its job efficiently and with alacrity: he slumped to his knees and, then, toppled face down on the sheet of iron, dead.

With the professionalism of men well used to such activities, the three men wrapped the body in a plastic sheet and placed it in the trunk of the car. It would be taken elsewhere and carefully disposed of, leaving no hints as to who had dealt with him, or why. Another successful hit...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), Snowpocalypse (Black Mirror Press), Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Night in New Orleans (FunDead Publications), Miskatonic Dreams (Alban Lake), and Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen (Hieroglyphics Press), and has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

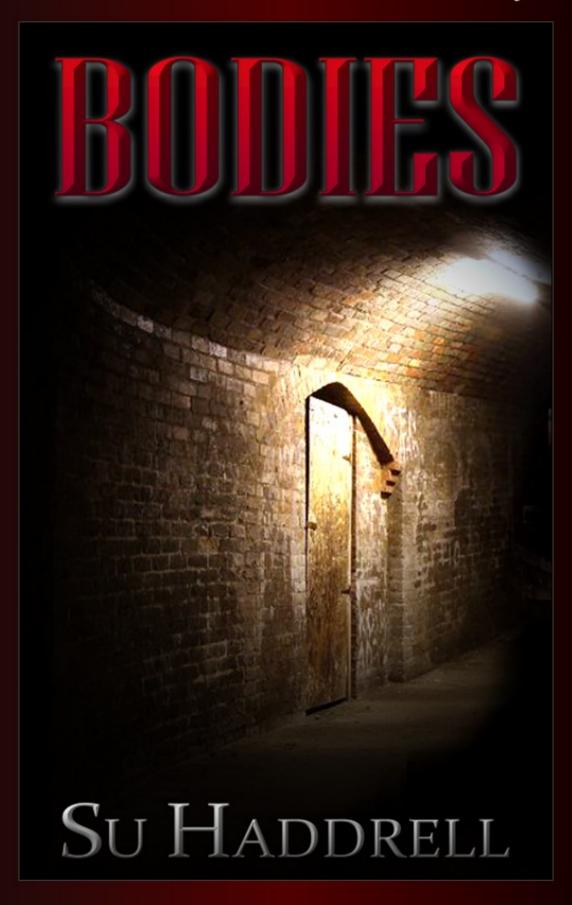
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## There are horrors beneath the city...



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### The Suicide Storm | Morgan K Tanner

Alex was one of the first to brave the outside. Confident that the rain had subsided he tentatively opened the front door and stepped over the threshold. His cheeks tingled as he walked down the driveway, an invisible fog surrounded him and clung to his eyeballs like rotten limescale.

He coughed at his first full intake of breath as his lungs attempted to rid themselves of a globule of gunge that had collected there. His brow wept with the heat and he pulled at his collar to get some air to his clammy chest.

His truck had become one with the tarmac, it's metallic red paint spreading beneath it like a rash, as though the machine had been bleeding to death for the last few days. Alex's nostrils tingled and he sneezed violently, spraying a blackened slurry of snot onto the ground. The discharge sizzled like acid before evaporating into the humid air. The atmosphere seemed pleased with his contribution as a cool breeze swept past, thanking him.

He attempted to speak but his words emerged muffled and foreign to his ears. His throat burned making him wish he hadn't bothered. Who would he speak to anyway? The suburban street he'd lived on with his wife and child for the last three years was as quiet as he'd ever seen it. He paused and tried to listen, but there was not a sound from anywhere.

For two solid days the winds had howled and the rain had fallen on their house so violently it had sounded like they were surrounded by a stadium full of applauding spectators witnessing an everlasting spectacle of greatness. As he now stood outside in the strange stillness Alex could still hear that incessant noise deep in his ear canals.

The ground was warm through the soles of his boots and as he walked further the warmth turned to an uncomfortable heat. There was little grass left on the lawns in front of the houses, appearing as though they'd been hacked at and chewed up by some great beast. There were patches of black mud spread like vomit from the guts of something unimaginable.

Moments before the power had been cut in their home the local weather report informed them a great storm was fast approaching. They advised everyone stay inside and not go out, even if it was absolutely necessary. They'd never given that kind of advice before.

A distant thunder rumbled with a monstrous intonation and an incongruous shiver passed through Alex's warm body. He rubbed at his eyes. Now that the storm had passed he had left to get some milk and bread and other essentials. Esther and little Harry had insisted on staying home.

Alex had made it perhaps two hundred yards down the street when he saw the man lying on the driveway. At first Alex thought that someone was having a barbecue, until he saw it was the man's flesh that was cooking on the tarmac.

The man was still breathing. He was a large fellow with no hair on his head but plenty of singed ones on his arms and belly that stuck out from under his shirt. Alex tip-toed over to him, the ground like hot sand on a beach. He couldn't find any words as he looked down at the man's face, arms, and belly that were bubbling with multiple white pustules that burst sending droplets of discharge into the air like a miniature range of pus volcanoes. The charred meat smell caught him in the back of the throat and his body juddered as his stomach cramped in disgust.

The man's cries were weakened by the denseness in the atmosphere, and his eyes were tightly closed in an extreme grimace. His yellow teeth were stained red as they cut deep into his tongue that was hanging on by the smallest portion of tissue. He moaned incoherently as a pool of blood rushed out, covering his face and three chins.

When Alex had left the house earlier he'd no idea why he picked up the largest knife from the kitchen. He'd held it tightly as he walked along the street, forgetting it was there. He looked at it now and understood.

Alex lay himself down carefully next to the fat man and snuggled himself between a couple of folds. It was like lying on hot coals but Alex was numb to any pain. He held the shiny blade aloft and in one fluid motion brought the tip down towards his own throat. As it connected with his windpipe there was an audible gasp as the air escaped from the gash. Alex's mouth gurgled as it filled with blood. His other hand instinctively reached to try and stem the flow but his defenseless fingers were slashed as he brought the knife down for a second infliction on his throat. Faster and faster he hacked at his neck and hand, the steel grinding against bone and cartilage like a machine.

He managed nine strikes in total before his body gave up. His neck was a moist bloody pulp as the knife clanged to the ground beside him, leaving only his spine as the link between his head and body.

\*\*\*

Esther opened the bedroom window and looked down onto the empty street. There was no sign of Alex. A row of trees were blocking her view of him where he lay, self-mutilated, cooking on the road.

She spluttered before pulling her head back inside and making her way downstairs. Ignoring Harry, who sneezed that cute kid sneeze as he played with his cars on the living room rug, she walked silently into the kitchen and towards the utensils hanging on the wall.

The metal meat tenderizer felt heavy in her hand but she had no problem lifting it high before bringing it down on her skull with the masochistic precision of a pro. It cracked then squelched as pieces of flying debris painted the wall a deep red while pinky-white chunks embedded themselves into the plaster. Esther fell to the floor with the metal tool swinging from her head where it was now wedged firmly in the bone. Her body twitched and her foot caught the leg of the table, a pile of clean plates fell and smashed on to her writhing corpse.

This crash was accompanied by a another in the living room where little Harry had pulled himself up against the tall bookcase before it fell upon him, crushing his small body and smashing the glass on the coffee table.

\*\*\*

Roger had looked out at his front garden many times during the storm and almost cried at how the rain was destroying it. Mother Nature was a cruel beast. But now that it was over he just had to get out there and tidy it up. The mower was light enough, even for an arthritic old timer like Roger, but today he struggled to move it. By the time he'd brought it around the front from the shed he was aching all over and out of breath. He pulled on the cord, engaging the engine, then turned it upside down on what used to be his lawn.

He powered up the motor and watched as the blades turned into a blurry circle beneath him.

As though lowering his face into a sink of water he brought himself closer towards the whirring blades. Sounding like wet sheets being ripped, his nose was sliced off, before his cranium was hacked into bloody fragments that clunked robotically in the mechanism. The blood sprayed out in all directions like a sprinkler, dousing the ground around him. Roger slumped forward as the power died. The blood now pumped out of the mess atop his neck like an overflowing drain during a heavy downpour.

\*\*\*

As Roger's broken lawnmower restored silence, Lance, the beefcake from across the street, stood proudly on his roof. The steroid-fueled man-mountain had spent the storm doing reps and sets, but now he held his arms aloft, before bending his knees and diving head first into the driveway below him. His hands shattered on impact, then his head smashed into the hot asphalt. An explosion erupted from where his skull had been, before his body snapped like a twig. He lay there surrounded by more blood than it seemed possible for his body to contain, with limbs contorted like they had multiple joints in them.

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Joyce sat in her armchair looking out of the window. She was shaking at the horrors she had just witnessed. She'd seen a man in the street cut his wrists before he fell to the ground tearing at the bloody wounds with his teeth. Another man had fashioned a noose from his shirt and was now dangling from a tree, his face blue, his eyes bloodshot and bulbous. There were three other bodies lying face down in the road, their hair on fire and their bodies smoldering.

Just what is going on here? Joyce was housebound and relied on carers visiting her every day to prepare her meals, give her her medication, and change her bags. There had been no one in since the storm hit and Joyce had been panicking. She tried the phone again, knowing it would still be dead. Her head throbbed and she felt on the verge of fainting. Her breathing was desperate and her heart beat irregularly. She had to get help.

She struggled in the chair to try and maneuver herself so that she could slide onto the floor and hopefully crawl to the front door. But there seemed to be no way that that was going to happen. Her body defied her, as it had done for years. When she looked out of the window again it was already dusk.

She sighed, dejected. Had it really taken her that long to get *nowhere*? Joyce began to cry and in moments she was sobbing like a child, her tears dripping from her chin like heavy perspiration.

Joyce stopped suddenly as she heard something outside. It couldn't have been another suicide, surely not, she wasn't sure she could cope with any more of those abhorrent images. She'd already seen enough to plague her dreams forever.

There was a hum coming from the street. She squinted her tear-filled eyes to try and focus. The sound became steadily louder and the closer she listened the more the noise seemed to change. Joyce shook her head to try and rid her senses of what sounded like a swarm of insects burrowing into her ears. But they only got louder.

Outside the light darkened dramatically. One moment the houses opposite were visible in the murky air, then instantly blackness coated the scene. There were tiny splashes of light like fireflies buzzing with purpose. In seconds they multiplied, swarming rapidly around the corpses.

Joyce shrieked and threw her head backwards as the thing threw itself at the window. It looked like a rat, with piercing eyes and ravenous teeth. But its body seemed almost metallic in its shiny appearance, and it fluttered two pairs of bright wings as it stared intently at Joyce. Its tiny claws scratched at the window before two more of the creatures joined it.

Joyce yelled so hard that her throat burned with the exertion. Her chair shook as she desperately tried to move herself away from the window, as fruitless as that was. Her quivering arms made trying to move even more of an impossibility than it had been for the last few years. She closed her eyes, straining with all her might to keep them as tightly shut as possible. Her screams eventually relented but the scratching and grinding at the window was getting louder by the second. The buzzing was now deafening.

"Go away, just leave me alone," she wailed.

Joyce's eyes seemed to be beyond her mind's control. Against all her wishes she opened them. The view outside was completely blocked by the flying metallic rodents. There were hundreds of them. Joyce threw off her glasses, her poor vision for once a savior.

The window cracked then smashed, shards of glass exploded into Joyce's face. Within seconds the beasts were around her, their claws slashing at her cheeks. She raised her arms and swatted them away, the feel of their slimy bodies on her fingers would have been a disgusting sensation had her mind been in tune with all its senses. The only sense she had now was one of abject terror. This was it, she knew it, the end.

But still she didn't give up. Through survival instinct she continued to swat at the monsters as her tears flowed with the blood from her wounds. The buzzing came from all directions, she could only imagine the sight of these hordes of abominations taking over her home.

Then suddenly the sound stopped. Joyce froze although her heart was pounding like it had grown twice the size in her chest and it pained her to control her breathing. Her face throbbed from the lacerations but her cheeks were burning as though she was in a giant oven. The heat from outside danced in her nostrils and she coughed as it hit the back of her throat.

Joyce reached forward and picked up the pencil she had been using for her crossword from the table next to her; she'd been in this same seat for so long she could find anything by touch alone. She held the pencil and took a deep breath to steady herself. She plunged the pencil deep into her eyeball. There was a loud 'pop' as the lead penetrated the membrane. She hammered the rubber end with both hands, driving it deeper into her skull.

Joyce's head slumped backwards in death and the flying beasts that had infested the floor of her home, waiting for her lethal strike, finally attacked. Their teeth were small but sharp and without the victim fighting back the tribe was highly effective. In seconds Joyce's flesh and viscera had been devoured and all that was left was a crippled skeleton with a rotten wooden pencil sticking out of an empty eye socket.

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As the sun appeared in the morning sky there was a strange blanket of red fog covering the silent town. The beasts had fed until not a morsel of flesh remained. The storm had passed but continued its journey as the swarm followed closely behind, waiting for nightfall, ever hungry.

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Jeff heard the news that a storm was coming. A huge patch of blue on the weather map

indicated it was sweeping across the country and no one was safe from it. Ever the sensationalist, the presenter warned of the severity of the storm and advised everyone to stay inside.

"Ain't nobody keeping me inside," Jeff moaned to his wife as they sat in front of the TV. "I'd rather kill myself than be stuck inside for days on end."

Then came the rain, drumming a deadly tattoo on the windows of the house.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Morgan K Tanner is a writer, drummer, and golfist currently residing in the English countryside. The quiet surroundings make it an ideal place to write, drum, and hide the bodies. The sound of the typewriter is perfect to drown out the hum of the torture equipment. His works of fiction and threats have appeared in the mailboxes of many a celebrity, who then sells their story to the tabloids, claiming that they are being 'terrorized.'

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### **The Hunter** | *Kevin Holton*

Troy and Sarah were already dead. We didn't know what the killer was, or why it was here—only what it looked like: a pale nightmare with four arms, four legs, and no head. Just a stump where it should've been. Bone-white skin stretched across a sickly thin body, a complete lack of visible genitals. Enough to make the stomach churn just from looking at it, never mind the fact that it was hunting us.

"W-w-what do we do now?" Luna asked, voice barely a whisper. I told her I didn't know.

Jesse, hands shaking, eyes darting around the room, said, "We gotta kill it. That's all there is, you know, just gotta kill it."

"Why don't we just *leave*?" she snapped back. "Someone's gotta have a plan for getting us out of here!"

"What if it goes after someone else?"

He had a point. If this thing chose to go after other people, they wouldn't stand a chance. At least we knew it was after us. And it was roaming *our* house, so there was a chance we could trap it inside. Maybe. None of us knew how it got in.

Luna, Jesse, Troy, and I had thought splitting the rent on a townhouse right out of college was a good idea. It let us keep costs down and relocate to a place where we'd all have a chance at stable employment. Having our own place made us feel smart, tough, like real adults doing adult things, not some post-college punks who had few prospects and no idea how to live in the real world.

Floorboards creaked in the hallway beyond the door. We'd huddled in Jesse's room. Not a

great plan—we were trapped here, but a little safer than we'd been before. This place was cheaper for being in a rough neighborhood, so the windows had bars over them. Even on the second floor. The creature ensured we weren't getting to the front door anytime soon.

I tried not to think about the couple in the other second-floor bedroom. Troy with his face peeled off, eyes torn out with the ocular nerves still attached. Sarah with her stomach ripped open, the look on her face as the creature picked her up, one arm grasping each limb, and twisted her apart. The snap and squelch of torn ligaments and destroyed joints. How peaceful she looked once her eyes stopped seeing, frozen open, gazing into the afterlife forever.

Sarah had managed to scream, but in our area, one cry wouldn't get reported. I doubt anyone even noticed.

Three long taps came at the door, then the doorknob rattled. I tensed, preparing to run. Jesse reached for the baseball bat under his bed, while Luna whimpered and made the sign of the cross. Shuffling and scraping filled the hallway, then silence. For a too-brief moment, it seemed to have walked away.

The door flew open, smashed right off its hinges, and there it was, filling the doorway, and then Jesse's room. Lisa shrieked, and the beast pointed one of its spindly arms at her, the quintessential *You're next*. Seeing this, Jesse rushed it with the bat, smashing it against the outstretched arm. "You want them, you go through me!" he yelled with a shaking voice. He swung again, and the bat snapped in two against its torso.

With the two arms on its left side, it grabbed Jesse, lifted him up, then slammed him down into the ground. A crack resounded as bone broke. He didn't groan or cry out, maybe disoriented from pain, even as it drove him into the ceiling, then ground, then ceiling, over and over. I covered my mouth, unable to stand the sight but unable to look away as sharp white splintered through his flesh, sprays of red repainted the walls and floors. I'm not sure if it was enraged or amused, but Jesse was starting to resemble a bag full of pudding and toothpicks, more liquid than solid, ruptured organs leaking from the lacerations left by his skeleton attempting to escape his body. The briny stink of gray matter wafted over us as his skull burst against the floor.

This was our only chance. Grabbing Lisa's hand, since I knew she wasn't going to be able to run by herself, I made a dash for the door, dragging her behind. The creature seemed so preoccupied with smashing Jesse to pieces that it barely reacted to us. It wasn't until we were in the hall that I really understood why.

The scraping I'd heard was the creature dragging furniture around. It had completely blocked off the hallway, creating a floor-to-ceiling barricade so tightly packed that it didn't budge, even when I ran and threw myself at the obstructions.

"Screw it, upstairs!" I said, pushing Lisa along. Getting up there was our only chance. The third floor was a hell of a drop, but the windows weren't secured there. No bars. We might break something, but we'd have a chance to get away.

I sprinted up the narrow stairwell. Lisa stumbled along behind me. She sucked in deep lungfuls of air, half crying, half begging for god to have mercy on us.

My room was our best bet, because it overlooked the street. Even if we broke both our legs, someone would see us. They might not care, but they'd notice. They'd bear witness, if the creature followed us outside. I got Lisa inside, slammed and locked the door, not that the lock

helped us last time. I ran to the window, threw it open, and waved for Lisa to get over there. She shook her head, a hard no.

"C'mon, I know it'll be rough, but it's our only chance!" I wasn't going to leave her behind.

"B-b-but Jesse... Troy, Sarah... We can't just..." Her legs shook so hard they gave out beneath her. She hit the floor with a heavy *thump*.

I ran over, tried to pick her up, but she grabbed my arms hard. Eyes wide and wild, she shrieked, "We can't leave them! We can't! They're still here! It has them, and if we give ourselves up, it might let them go!"

"What are you talking about?" I yelled back, trying to pry myself out of her surprisingly strong grip. "You saw what that thing can do!"

"It has power! It'll have mercy! It just needs a reason!"

"Lisa, we have to get out of here!"

She pushed against me hard enough to make me lose my balance. I toppled over, hitting the wood floor hard, rattling my desk. The supply box I kept on top of it fell off, scattering office supplies around us.

Her hands coiled around my throat. "I'll give you to the creature, and it'll let everyone go! It'll bring everyone back, even you, just trust me!"

Pressure on my throat caused blood to surge in my brain. I couldn't breathe. All thoughts of escaping the creature shifted to getting her off me. Survival took on a whole new meaning.

Unable to speak, I shoved against her, but whatever madness had taken hold of her also gave her incredible strength. The creature tapped at the door, three times, like it had downstairs. Out of options, I fumbled around my head, reaching for the supplies until I found half of a scissor. The two blades must've separated in the fall.

I swung, and her gaze softened, her grip slackened. Blood sprayed out of the gash in her neck, drenching me. Lisa didn't react, not even to stop the bleeding. She kept trying to choke me, using what little energy she had left toward my death as I shut my eyes and pressed my lips shut, her wound hanging open like a second mouth, exposing her freshly opened trachea. Shoving her to the side, I sat up and ran my red-slicked hands through my hair, gasping for oxygen now tainted by the acrid stink of exposed viscera.

The door burst inward. Splinters flew everywhere, but the creature halted at the doorway. It didn't move or point, though I wondered if it had infected Lisa, if pointing had caused her to lose her mind. Didn't really matter now. There I sat, panting, face and chest covered in one of my best friend's blood, even as it continued spraying from the open wound.

"Well?" I asked, looking up at it. Standing on shaky foal legs, knees cocked in, a little bubble of mania bloomed in me, too, I opened my arms and yelled, "What do you want, huh? What's your next move?"

The headless monstrosity appeared to think for a moment, then lumbered over, picking up Lisa's body. It pried her head from her shoulders, wrenching it clear off in one loud movement, then placed her head atop its neck stump. Holding the rest of her aloft, it inserted one claw-tipped finger into the top of her chest, drawing down, tearing her completely open. I watched, numb from shock and adrenaline, trying not to notice the stench of shit filling the room as her innards hit the floor. They coiled, already cooling, freshly still-birthed snakes.

As if looking out through Lisa's eyes, it turned to me, waiting. Neither of us moved. It picked up her heart, cut its attached veins and arteries, and handed the organ to me. I held it in both hands, this center of Lisa's body, while drenched in the life I'd taken.

It reached out to the side, extending a claw and drawing down, as it had against Lisa's body, only this time the air rippled and ripped in its wake. A dark hole now shimmered in my bedroom. There was an impression of another world beyond, but nothing distinct.

Stepping back, it gestured to this new gateway, like a human holding the door open for the person behind them. It was an invitation—one I knew I could refuse.

I didn't.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Kevin Holton has written dozens of short stories, poems, and essays, having published with Crystal Lake Publication, Thunderdome Press, Mighty Quill Books, Pleaides, Rain Taxi, and The Literary Hatchet, to name a few. When not writing, he's an actor and gym rat who spends too much time talking about Batman.

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### **An Ineffable Situation** | *John H. Dromey*

Screaming loudly, Leon awoke in a hospital.

A hazmat-suited orderly approached the patient's bed and asked in a voice muffled by an opaque visor, "What's the matter?"

Leon answered, "In a nightmare, I dreamed Earth lost an intergalactic conflict with cannibalistic invaders from Grawlix... the Cussing Planet. They were trying to fatten me up for slaughter."

"What a crock of freaking, blankety-blank, steaming bleep!" the orderly mumbled.

A second attendant approached carrying a carving knife. Unlike his disguised-as-a-human colleague, this clumsy creature was not wearing his shapeshifting camo suit. He stubbed a tentacle, and said, "#@%^! \*\$<!"

Leon resumed screaming.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries especially—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Crimson Streets, some previous issues of *The Sirens Call*, Stupefying Stories Showcase, and elsewhere, as well as in a number of anthologies, including Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree Publishing, 2015)



### **Down Bayou Way** | Wile E. Young

There was a time when the odd curse was the only thing that required my attention; some voodoo wannabe or journeyman magician hexing folks who were just trying to get by in the world. Now there wasn't a world left and people who had once looked at me in suspicion now looked at me with the desperate hope that I could keep them alive in the grim reality that had supplanted the world.

I could hear the sobbing as I grimly stared at the scene; the two teenagers had been stupid... In the new world, if you were going to engage in premarital sex, you ran the risk of drawing attention from the new inheritors of Earth.

"What do you think, Luc?"

I came out of my musing and looked over at Uncertain, Texas' erstwhile Sheriff. "Idiot kids engaging in forbidden practices while one of them was near." Larry Knowles licked his lips and tried visibly not to lose his cool. "It's not funny. If this one makes it back to Shreveport we'll have a horde bearing down on us."

"I'm well aware," I replied as I examined the bodies.

The boy had valiantly tried to defend the girl; his intestines squished under my boots as I bent down and examined his ragged flesh. He had been split balls to brain by what looked like a chainsaw (popular weapon amongst their kind). The girl had tried to run away, but had been rundown easily. She hadn't been molested, small comfort, as the monster had impaled her on a nearby pitchfork before flaying her skin away and hanging them around like grotesque tapestries, 'Fornicator' carved as a grisly manifesto into the remains.

"The one I took down in the Karnack School right after this whole thing started was like this," I said as I purposefully stared at the grieving parents of both victims, letting the anger wash through my bones. "I studied him back in the bayou until I could learn nothing more."

I spun and strode out of the barn. Larry's voice called behind me, "What did you learn?"

"That outside of marriage, it makes them feel like their skin is on fire," I called back without turning.

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It wasn't hard to pick up the trail. After a lifetime in the backwoods and bayous, I could have tracked an alligator through the muddiest river, but this monster had met an unfortunate deer on the way and wrestled it to the ground, devouring it and leaving it for the crows, making my job easy. Skin, discarded guts, and bones were the only things left, the head and antlers completely missing.

Mojo padded along beside me and whined, the faithful mutt ever present when I went about my work. In this world, he was my most valuable companion. Dogs knew before any human when someone was going to go Slasher.

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I had woken up in a cold sweat that first night when the Lords of Murder descended on the world; dream killers, mask-wearing maniacs, deathtrap psychotics, redneck cannibal clans... a chorus line of beings that wanted only one thing: to kill, kill, and kill again.

All had fought, some had turned, but most had died that first night.

I had raced around the bayous and roads of Uncertain, Texas carving symbols, runes, and all manner of other spells in the trees. Just like the namesake of our town, I had made us Uncertain.

They couldn't find us in our dreams, they would instinctively turn away when they marched down our roads, the water would seem insurmountable if they tried to come through the river.

Slashers followed rules and behaviors (turns out sometimes it is like the movies) and as long as we followed the rules, it would stay that way.

But now the spell was broken.

Stupid horny fucking kids.

The air was hot; winter had already given wing and was replaced by a muggy spring. The cypress trees didn't care, the gray moss hanging from their limbs and stretching down like veils, shrouding the entire area in gloom.

A few lake houses showed through the trees, but I trusted my senses and they told me to keep walking. My murderous quarry wasn't intent on small fish... this Slasher was on a mission.

My conjure was strong, but I relied on the element of surprise... rootwork hoodoo worked slowly and I didn't want to test it against something so borderline inhuman that was wielding a chainsaw.

I grasped the small red mojo bag I wore under my shirt, letting the items roll around in my hand as the back of my neck prickled at the working.

"Turn aside all attacks from me, oh Lord, lest your servant be felled," I whispered as I checked to make sure the rest of my herbs and powders were in their proper places.

From somewhere distant I could hear the sudden revving of a chainsaw and shouts of alarm. I tore through the trees.

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I arrived in the immediate aftermath, the smell of pot hung heavy on the air and the mangled remains of a teenage girl smoldered in the fire. Her face had melted against the hot stones and her flesh bubbled and sizzled. She had been pinned to the ground with a pair of deer antlers, one through her right hand and another through her thigh.

I would have to drown myself in a bottle of scotch later, but for now there were four chairs and the path of destruction leading deeper into the bayou.

Mojo disappeared into the trees, his braying barks mixing with the roar of a chainsaw and the screams.

I pulled out the antlers and dragged her body from the fire, offering a quick prayer over her soul as I quickly went about my work. I pulled three irons nails from my pocket and rapidly looked around for anything I could use to work something against my enemy. A discarded beer bottle lay by one of the chairs and I quickly wiped one of the nails around the rim. A splotch of blood was splattered in the dirt close to another and so I wiped another nail... Two out of three, I just needed one more... something personal or connected to one of them.

My eyes were drawn to the third chair. This muggy spring was a blessing in disguise when I noticed the sweat-stained fabric. I washed the third nail in the perspiration before sitting back down close to the fire and reciting the Psalms I had grown up with, the stanzas and prayers infusing the nails.

I drew out a human skull from the pouch I wore. It was all that remained of the last Slasher

that had come near Uncertain. I plunged the nails into equidistant points around it, the bones cracking and splintering as the nails melted where the center of the brain should have been.

From deep in the cypress trees I heard a long, throaty howl that momentarily drowned out the sound of the chainsaw. I laid the skull down on the base of the stones that formed the fire pit and stood up with grim satisfaction.

My spell had gone to work and filled him with rage and he was coming back for me.

I prepared, sprinkling some hot foot powder around me and making sure that my other roots and supplies were ready. There wouldn't be much time. I sat down next to the fire and waited, whispering prayers for protection.

I heard a noise and looked up. And there he was, at the edge of the clearing.

He carried the chainsaw lightly at his side and it grumbled, the blades dripping with blood.

I could feel the fury and hatred radiating from him.

His skin was paler than white... albino... and his eyes hidden underneath a patchwork cloak of human flesh and animal fur. He didn't look like he had bathed in a while.

Not a surprise. Who has time to bathe when you've got to kill, kill?

"Tell me your sins..." His voice sounded like a snake, a quiet hiss above the crackling of the fire.

"I'll tell you if you tell me your name."

The man took a step towards me, probably expecting me to run or panic. A small glimmer of surprise washed over his face when I did neither. "You don't need to know my name. I just need to know your sins."

I snorted in laughter and saw his mouth twitch as he took another lumbering step forward. I noticed that his fingernails had been filed into claws that had turned black from all the dried blood crusted under them.

"You mock me!" He roared and revved the chainsaw while I clambered to my feet. "I condemn you... you and all the rest."

He rushed towards me only to stop in his tracks as the hot foot powder did its work. "What is this?"

"You know, at least the Tree Man was quiet. That is what they called him over in Shreveport, right? Your herd of bred victims? The Tree Man?"

The Slasher just stared at me uncomprehendingly. "I'll kill you."

I picked up the skull. "No you won't"

My spell was broken when a teenage boy stumbled out of the trees and stared openmouthed at the scene before him.

Then he began screaming.

The Slasher smiled a predatory grin and yelled something unintelligible as he rushed forward, his chainsaw revving. I muttered a spell under my breath as I ran, grabbing him by the shoulder.

He swung around and I felt my magic work on the chainsaw as he attempted to hit me, only for the chainsaw to malfunction and grind to a halt rather than bite into my skin. It still dealt me a nasty cut, but nothing permanent.

The teenage kid had stopped screaming and instead was making a gurgling sound as he

stared down at his innards and intestines as they spilled onto the dirt. He gave me a despairing look and toppled over; someone else I wasn't able to save.

"He deserved it."

The maniac's voice ignited the fire I had stored in my bones and I heaved my fist and connected solidly with his face, sending him stumbling back. His nearly black blood was smeared across my knuckles.

He didn't seem to be in pain, but I rapidly pulled out another nail and wiped the blood across the iron and went back for the skull I had left lying in the dirt. I had just managed to drive it in when I felt the dirty black nails dig into my back.

I screamed as I felt the nails work under my skin, dropping the skull. That snakelike voice whispered in my ear, "You're a sinner, a fornicator, a magical—"

I didn't listen, instead lashing out and kicking the skull as hard as I could. It went rolling and bouncing across the dirt, each bump and bounce accentuated with a gasp of pain from the maniac. With one final roll, it slid down the embankment and into the river.

The lunatic took his nails from my back and I fell to the ground, gasping, as I looked up to see him grasping at his neck.

I felt a devil's grin spread over my face.

One should never let someone like me have their blood; you never knew what kind of workings would be sent your way.

He coughed and clawed as the water filled his lungs until, with one spasming gurgle, water fountained from his mouth and he fell to the ground, twitching for a bit before finally lying still.

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I fed his body to the gators. I had seen their kind come back before from worse than a little drowning. The reptiles had been grateful for their snack and had torn into the flesh of the Slasher with abandon bordering on starvation.

I had watched the blood bath with little curiosity, turning my back and making my way into the cypress trees, intent on finding the survivors and returning them to their parents.

Mojo's distant barking caught my attention and I followed the sound.

I found him hovering over the body of a young girl. Her face was blue from asphyxiating on the water she'd inhaled. She had drowned alone in the middle of the forest.

I felt the guilt hit my heart as I remembered the nails I had bound to the skull.

It was all because of me.

I sank to my knees and wept.

And throughout the rest of the world, thousands more died.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Wile E. Young is an author who specializes in southern themed horror stories, both terrifying and bizarre. He has many short stories under his belt with many more to come.

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## **The Abomination** | *A.R. Farley*

It was him. The ghost, the demon, the abomination whom held domain inside Jerry's consciousness. It was waving from outside his window. It was not the first time that Jerry had seen him. Oh no, it was every night. Every night, he would see the abomination's flat, toothless, smiling face. And when he wasn't awake, in his dreams, the demon would seize him by the throat and scream, "Do you remember me? Do you remember me?"

Yes, he did. The scene in which he had first encountered the waving man dominated his waking hours, enslaved his thoughts, and drove him closer and closer to insanity.

The abomination stood outside the house. In a loud, deep, scratchy voice he was saying, "Jerry, do you remember me Jerry?"

"Jerry, what are you staring at?" His wife had asked.

Jerry did not answer.

"What is it? Do you see something? Is something out there?"

Jerry did not answer.

"Where are you going?"

Jerry slammed the door behind him.

He heard the abomination's voice as he walked down the hallway. "Jerry, do you remember me? Do you remember your old pal? Your old pal: you, me, and the car, remember?" The voice grew louder as he came closer to the door.

"Remember, do you remember me Jerry?"

Jerry squeezed his eyes shut as he slapped his hand onto the knob, and stepped into the freezing night air.

The abomination stood next to the mailbox. His face carried a large, broken-skulled, smile. Every bone in his body was broken. The meshed remains of his skin were blood-blotched and ground with dirt.

"Hello, Jerry." Blood poured from his mouth as he spoke.

The door to Jerry's house opened behind him.

"Jerry, what's going on? Why are you outside?"

The abomination began to float down the road.

"Jerry, come back!"

But it was too late. Jerry had begun to chase the ghost that only he could see.

Jerry ran faster than he knew he was capable. He couldn't slow down; he could barely keep the hovering body in his sight. He didn't know where he was going, or how fast he was running, but it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was keeping sight of the hovering legs.

The abomination stopped.

Jerry felt as if he was on the verge of fainting. The world was spinning. He felt vomit trickling down his throat.

The abomination stood on a sand covered playground, in a neighborhood where all the lights were turned off. "This seems like a nice place to talk alone."

Jerry could nearly touch the demon. Large droplets of blood oozed from the demon's face and splattered the sand.

The abomination began to talk.

"You killed me twenty years ago today. But you don't care about that, do you? If you would have cared, you would have stopped. You would have checked to see if I was alive. But you didn't. You left me alone to be trampled in the middle of the road."

Jerry stood in silence.

"I will get my revenge. You won't know when, but some night, at any time, I will enter your house. I will enter your house, and I will torture your wife. And you, you're going to watch. You will watch as I take my knife and I gouge the eyeballs out from her skull. You will watch as I, slowly, carve her skin and slice it off her body. You will listen to her scream, and scream, until you watch her die in my arms. Then, I'm going to kill you."

The abomination disappeared.

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The next night.

"Jerry, what's wrong? Do you see something outside again?"

"No."

"When are you coming to bed?"

"I'll come in a minute, maybe."

A book was clenched inside Jerry's trembling hands. His face was buried deep within the pages.

Jerry read, but he did not understand a single paragraph of what he was reading. Every time he looked up, he saw the abomination waving at him from the front yard.

\*\*\*

Three nights later.

"Jerry, what's wrong? Why don't you come to bed anymore? Jerry, please! Tell me what's wrong!"

Jerry said nothing.

"Jerry, please! I'm worried about you."

And still, Jerry said nothing.

"Answer me!"

Finally, Jerry opened his mouth to speak. "I will come to bed in a minute, maybe." He then turned his attention back to his book. The pages were soaked with tears.

\*\*\*

For one week, Jerry watched the abomination wave at him from outside his window. But one night, as he was unlocking his front door, he heard the abomination's voice. "We're upstairs," the voice said. "Come inside Jerry, your wife is waiting for you."

Jerry collapsed against the door. The strength was sapped from his body.

"Come on!" the voice roared, "Come on, or I'll kill her now! I'll kill her, and your last memory of her will be the sound of her screaming as you did nothing! Nothing! Now come inside."

Jerry staggered to his feet.

His shaking hands grabbed the doorknob, and he opened the door.

The moment Jerry entered the living room, he could hear his wife's muffled, desperate, screams coming from up the stairs. The abomination screamed, "Come upstairs Jerry!"

He walked up the steps. His face was covered with tears. The worst images that he could imagine flowed throughout his mind.

He opened his door.

The moment that Jerry entered the room, the abomination let go of his wife and she ran to him. But when they could nearly touch, the ghost flew to her, wrapped his broken arms around her waist, and together they crashed through the second floor window. The left arm supported her by hugging her chest. The right hand then took out a knife, and raised it to her face.

Jerry's wife screeched a loud, ear shattering scream. Outside, neighbors turned on their lights, left their houses, and saw the woman screaming in the sky.

The abomination then began to carve slits into the wife's face.

Jerry screamed, "Stop it!" But it was pointless, there was nothing he could do but watch.

The abomination laughed. He took his knife, and raised it in front of her eyes.

It was then that Jerry realized that he had no choice. He knew what he had to do. He reached into his back pocket, and he took out a gun.

He aimed, and fired at his wife's neck.

Jerry shut his eyes. He didn't want to see his wife die. Or worse, he didn't want to see that he had missed.

And he *did* miss. Or at least, that's what he thought. Outside, at the sound of the gun, at the sight of the body hitting the ground, the neighbors erupted into chaos. They were so loud, that Jerry mistook their noise for his wife's screams.

It was only after Jerry opened his eyes, and saw the abomination glaring at him, did he realize that his wife was dead.

The abomination flew to him and screamed, "Why'd you do that!? Why'd you kill your wife!?"

Jerry did not answer.

The demon took out his knife and shoved it near Jerry's face. "Why? Why'd you kill her?"

"Because," Jerry said, his voice a scratchy croak, "because you can't hurt her. I love her. I won't let you kill my-"

But before Jerry could finish, the abomination kicked him in the stomach and he collapsed to the floor. The abomination continued to kick, and kick, until blood began to leak from his waist.

The abomination then took out his knife, and began to slice off the man's skin.

But it didn't matter. No matter how much skin was cut from the man's body, the abomination would never be satisfied. He had never killed the wife. He had never seen the man suffer, really suffer, the way he had envisioned. He had failed. The man, the man who was screaming, had won.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — A.R. Farley lives in South Carolina. He loves to read Horror's and Mysteries. This is his first publication.

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## Carly's Seventh | Patrick Winters

"I hope that isn't what I think it is," Amanda grumbled lightly, looking out into the dining room and over at Paul's mystery present.

She turned back to her husband with a probing glance, slowly handing him the last of the bowls. Paul just gave her a quick shrug, avoiding eye contact and scooting away from her as he set the bowls out for the cake and ice cream that would come later on.

That just made Amanda even more suspicious of him.

Her husband had snuck the present out and set it among Carly's other gifts while she'd finished up the decorating. It dwarfed their daughter's other presents by comparison, taking up a good deal of space at the end of the table and looking like a mountain behind the stacks of dolls, books, and play makeup kits they'd gotten her. Paul had given the mystery gift a cute kitty-cat wrap-job, deviating from Amanda's idea of a Peppa Pig theme. Peppa tablecloth, Peppa plates, Peppa balloons, Peppa cake, Peppa wrapping paper—and a now this giant box clad with kittens, impossible to miss and guaranteed to catch Carly's eye.

That he'd decided to just spring this on her without any warning was one thing; but if the present turned out to be what Amanda expected, that was a whole other matter.

Paul had been adamant in getting Carly something special—something very specific, big, and expensive—for quite a while now. Something that he'd sworn up and down she would love. Amanda, though, had been far less assured of his idea. She'd caught the glint in her husband's eye every time he'd offhandedly mentioned it, had seen the extra pep in his step every time they conveniently walked past one at Wal-Mart. It hadn't taken much for her to realize that Paul wanted it for Carly more than Carly could ever want it for herself.

It was one of those cases where a parent thought they were going all out for their child, when in reality, they were indulging in their own peculiar hang-up, forcing their interest onto the child. Amanda had experienced it herself when she was Carly's age. My Little Pony had just become the big thing back then, and her mother had simply fallen for the fad. For the whole next year, her mother had bought her nearly every bit of pony merchandise she could find—despite the fact that Amanda hardly ever bothered to play with them. Her mother had liked it, so she'd wanted Amanda to like it, too. That's all there was to it, and now Paul had been doing the same deal. And he may have just bought the proverbial pony.

"I'm serious, Paul," Amanda said, rummaging through a kitchen drawer for a utility lighter. She kept her voice as low as she could, just in case Carly came rushing in and overheard them. "If you went and got that stupid thing behind my back, you and I are going to have a serious talk later."

Paul gave another maddening shrug as he walked to the freezer and grabbed the tub of chocolate ice cream from inside. "Even if I did get it, I don't see why it'd bother you so much."

He spoke in such a nonplussed, matter of fact way that it sent a bit of heat underneath Amanda's skin. He brushed past her and set the ice cream on the table. "And why is it 'stupid' all of a sudden, huh?"

"Well, it's expensive, especially for all we already spent on Carly this year; it's bulky, and we'll have to find somewhere to keep it; and you won't admit to yourself that maybe she won't

like it as much as you hope she will."

Paul scoffed through his nose and set his hands to his hips. He tried to keep some playfulness in his voice, but Amanda could clearly hear the condescension beneath it. "Oh, come on! It didn't cost that much and it won't be at all hard to store! And I do think she'll like it—and I also think that *you don't* like it, so you don't want her to have it!"

"And I think you're just trying to force it on her before she's even ready!"

Paul scoffed again. "Oh, really? Well, what about...?"

"Is everything ready?" Carly called out from the living room. They heard the sound of their daughter rushing down the hall, closing in on the dining room with an excitement that could no longer be contained.

Carly came skidding around the corner, immediately gawking at her presents and her mother's decorations. Amanda saw her daughter's eyes widen all the more when they caught sight of Paul's gigantic present.

Carly gave a squeal, jumping up and down. "Can I go ahead and make my wish first and then open my presents?"

Amanda gave a sigh, sending a quick *this isn't over*-look towards Paul. She turned right back to Carly, speaking cheerily. "Sure, honey. Let's light 'em up!"

The family stepped over to the table, Carly hopping up into a chair, Paul dimming the lights for effect, and Amanda striking up the utility lighter. She watched its little tongue of flame flick about for a moment with a smile on her face, then set to lighting all fifty-three candles around the pink-icing face of Peppa Pig. It had been her idea to surround the design with as many candles as she could fit on there, placing them so tightly together that it made a veritable wall of wax around the cartoon character's round head.

Amanda lit them slowly, savoring the sight of each wick as it caught fire and going gradually around, until a circle of flame had formed. She could feel their heat upon the skin of her hand, warming it with a glorious sensation. She found it to be so beautiful . . .

Paul cleared his throat pointedly. Amanda gave him a side glance, seeing the incredulous look on his face in the flickering light of the candles. *Come on, already*, he said without speaking a word.

Amanda flicked the lighter off and leaned back. She started singing "Happy Birthday," Paul picking up the tune with her as Carly arched over the cake, prepped and anxious to make her wish. She let out a huge burst of breath, snuffing the candles after a couple extra puffs. Her parents gave her a round of applause after.

"Can I open my presents now?" Carly asked without missing a beat.

Amanda said she could, and the seven year old was tearing into the first of them before Paul could flick the lights back on.

Carly tore through her gifts with zeal, squealing with each unveiling and thanking her parents up and down. She whittled away at the pile of presents—until only Paul's mystery gift remained. As Carly set her hands to it, Amanda glanced her husband's way. His eyes were wide and his lips were turned up in mischievous anticipation, and he was leaning in to watch their daughter open it.

Carly ripped away at the paper, a big flap of it tearing away from the side and revealing the

box beneath. Amanda couldn't help but groan when she saw the Ryobi brand name on the box's top corner, with the words "14 in. 40-Volt Lithium-Ion Brushless Cordless Chainsaw" scrawled under it.

"So cool!" Carly fawned, doing a little dance in her chair as she unwrapped the rest of it. She beamed at the image of the lime-green saw on the box's broad side.

Amanda reached out, grabbed Paul's elbow, and pulled him over to her. She started scolding him as quietly as she could manage, though their daughter was still fully intent on the surprise gift.

"Damn it, Paul! I told you we shouldn't get that yet!"

Paul kept up the covert argument. "That's what you said, but what you meant was that we shouldn't get it at all! Right? Come on, look at her! She loves it!"

"I just don't think she's ready for that yet! It's not safe. You're forcing it on her. Besides, maybe she doesn't want to do it your way!"

Paul scoffed and gave her a knowing look. "Oh, really? I'm forcing it on her? Well, what about the new gas can you got for her last week and told her to keep secret from me?"

Amanda went into stunned and embarrassed silence for a moment. She'd been caught, she knew it, and she had no real rebuttal.

"Well, I'm just... trying to show her that there are other ways to..."

"Oh, sure! Other ways, meaning *your* way! And how is using a chainsaw to do it any less safe than setting them *on fire*? Hell, she could burn the house down before she even gets to kill her first one!"

While the couple was busy debating, Carly had left the table to get a drink from the kitchen. As she came back into the dining room, something outside the window caught her attention. She looked out at the front yard, smiling big, and then shouted in excitement.

"Uncle George is here! Uncle George is here!"

Amanda and Paul turned to see their daughter running out of the room and towards the front door. They quickly looked back at each other, both with worried looks on their faces.

"Oh, jeez..." Amanda groaned, looking towards the chainsaw. "If he sees that..."

"Go get Carly and I'll hide it!" Paul stammered.

The couple bolted off, Paul lugging the gift away and into another room as Amanda rushed down the hall. Carly had left the door wide open and her mother went running through it and out into the evening.

Her daughter had been right. Paul's older brother had just shown up, the exhaust from his old Ford Contour still wafting out from behind it. George had already gotten out of the car and was standing by the sidewalk as Carly came running up to him, giving him a big hug.

"Happy birthday, munchkin!" he told her, laughing as she hopped around him.

"Uncle George, guess what! Mommy and Daddy got me a chainsaw for my birthday!"

*Shit*, Amanda thought in dismay. She ran up to them and set her hands to Carly's shoulder, greeting George with a strained smile. *Shit!* 

George just looked at her funny, neither saying a thing to each other. Amanda heard Paul dashing up beside her and decided to let him handle it. He'd bought the damn thing, after all.

"Hey, George!" Paul said happily, setting his arm around Amanda to set the pretense.

"How've...?"

"You got your little girl a chainsaw?" George interrupted, obviously dumbfounded. "Not a real chainsaw, right?"

Dismayed that the act was already crumbling, Paul hesitated. "Well, uhm... I mean..."

"God, you did. *That's* what you got her?" Uncle George said, looking beside himself with shock. "What in the hell's wrong with you, Paul?"

Paul shook his head and started to defend himself, but George cut him off again.

"A chainsaw... that's just not satisfying enough. If you really want to get some thrills out of a kill, an axe is the way to go! Put your back and your frustrations into it!"

Amanda and Paul looked at each other, trying not to roll their eyes. They knew that George would give them crap over the chainsaw, as he always did when the topic of their individual methods came up. They'd wanted to avoid the criticism and the hailing of his almighty axe, but that was out the window now.

Uncle George gave the parents a sad and judging shake of his head. But then he smiled down at his niece.

"After all, we have the princess of power here! She could lift and bring that axe down like no one's business, right sweetheart?"

Carly giggled and gave her uncle another big hug as he looked back to Amanda and Paul.

"Besides, you don't just give a kid a chainsaw! That's like giving them a bat and no baseball! She has to have something to *use* it on!"

George put on a mischievous smile and reached for the backseat door. He let it swing open with a hearty "Ta-da!"

A teenaged boy lay across the backseat, his whole body wrapped in floral paper and bound in rope. Muffled pleas came from his gagged mouth as he looked out at the family, tears in his eyes. George had put a huge, neat red bow across the teenager's forehead.

"Luckily, the fun uncle has got you covered, sweetie!" George said, patting Carly's shoulder. "I picked it up at a Toys R' Us just last week!"

Carly did another excited dance and squeezed her uncle's leg. "Thank you so much, Uncle George! This is so, so cool!"

George gave Amanda and Paul a shit-eating grin and a knowing nod. The couple just looked to each other again and shrugged, each figuring that their little girl's birthday was as monumental a time as any for her to get her first kill.

"Can we go ahead and do it, Mom and Dad?" Carly wheeled around and begged them.

Before either could answer, Uncle George was saying: "Well, of course you can! What good's a party without a piñata, of sorts? I'll even let you borrow my axe, kiddo! Got it in the trunk. Or you can use that loud and bulky new chainsaw, I suppose..."

"And don't forget the gas can mommy got you," Amanda couldn't help but put in excitedly. Paul gave her a *Really?*-look, but she shrugged it off.

"Well, what's it going to be, sweetie?" Paul asked. "What do you want to use on Uncle George's gift?"

Carly had a serious, pondering look on her face as she thought it over. She glanced back at the still-struggling teenager, who was rolling about and trying to scream out for help.

Then, Carly smiled big.

"Can't I try a bit of all three?"

Amanda, Paul, and Uncle George looked at each other, smiling a little bitterly.

"Sure, honey," Amanda finally answered. "It's your birthday, after all. We'll have cake and ice cream afterwards."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Patrick Winters is a recent graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He has been published in the likes of Sanitarium Magazine, Deadman's Tome, Trysts of Fate, and other such titles.

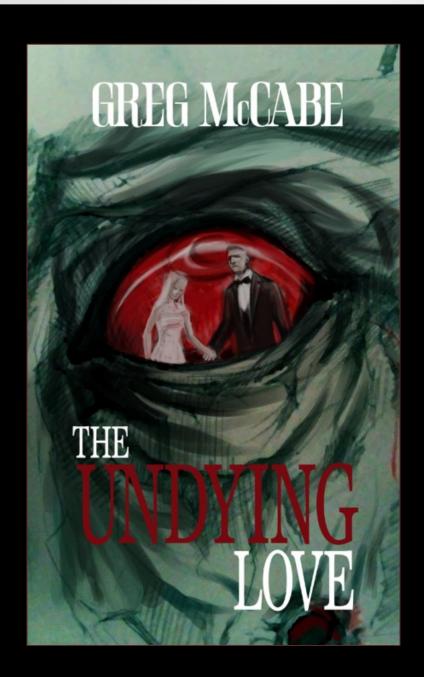
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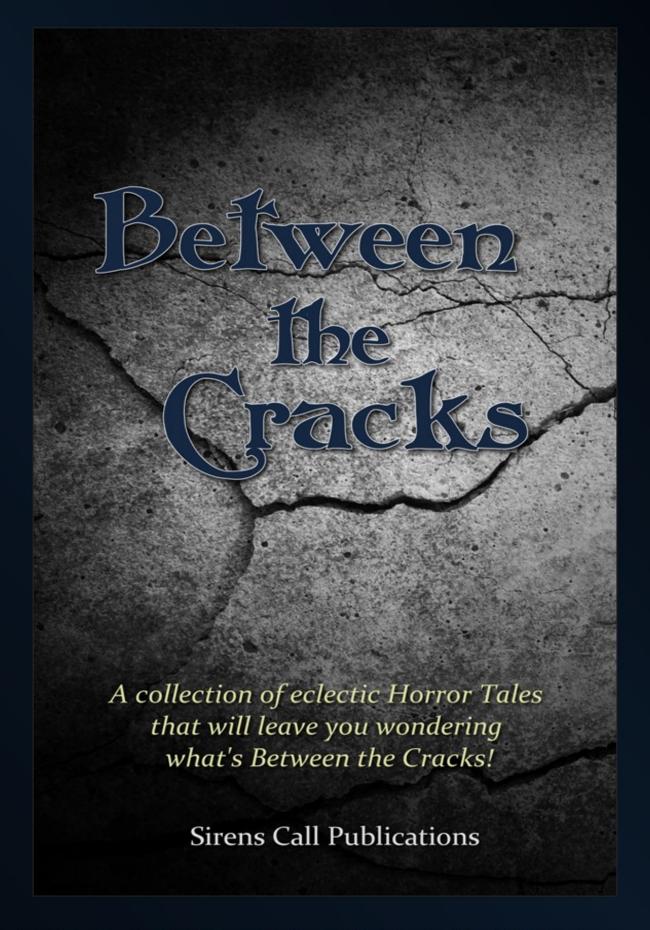
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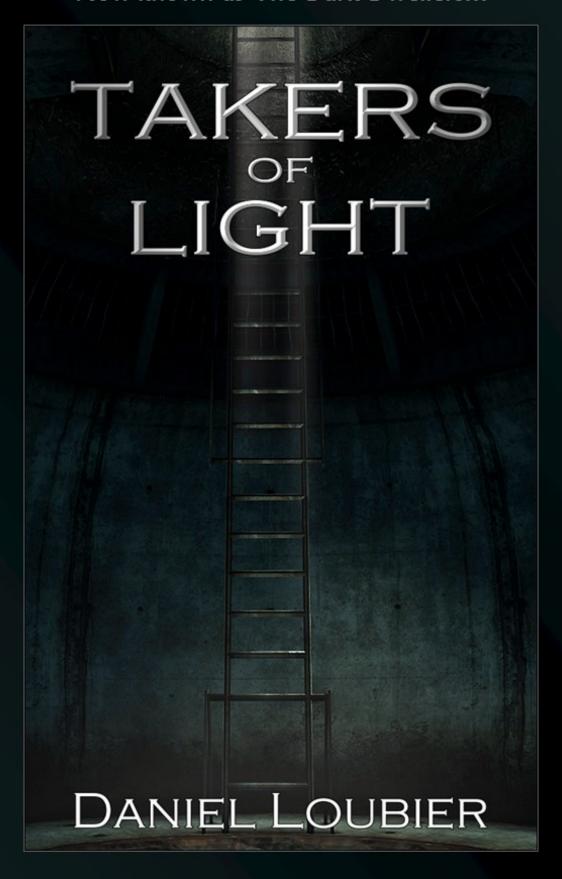




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## Interview with Brent Abell, Author of The Calling

Sirens Call Publications recently released Brent Abell's creepy, supernatural novella titled The Calling and we sat down with him to ask him a few questions about it and his writing process. For those of you who aren't yet acquainted with Brent Abell, he resides in Southern Indiana with his wife, sons, and the spirit of his beloved pug who haunts the space next to his desk. Brent enjoys anything horror related and also enjoys a good cigar. In his writing career, he's had stories featured in over 30 publications from multiple presses. His books *Southern Devils*, *In Memoriam*, *The Calling*, and his *Wicked Tales for Wicked People* collection are available now. He is also a co-author of the horror-comedy *Hellmouth* series. Currently, he has completed the second book in the *Southern Devils* series and an upcoming novella. You can hang out with him at his blog "Our Darkest Fears" at <a href="http://brentabell.com">http://brentabell.com</a>.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Brent! What made you decide to become a writer?

**Brent Abell:** Writing had been something I began dabbling in while in high school. After I graduated, I took a few years off before going to college. It was something I always wanted to do, but didn't do anything about until a few years ago. I wrote a few things and found some quick sales. It planted the thought in my mind that I could do it on a more professional level. Right now, I'm trying to make my morning commute to the coffee pot and back.

#### SCP: What is *The Calling* about?

**Brent:** The Calling is my love letter to 1970's occult movies. I grew up watching any horror I could find on the television. It didn't matter how cheesy it was, I'd watch it. Late night shows usually focused on the 70's and 80's low budget fare. I devoured them. The Calling is the beginning of the White Creek cycle. White Creek is my little small-town slice of Hell. When Carl Volker awakes to find his wife gone, he figures she finally split town on him. As more bodies turn up and the crows begin to hang out around his farm, Carl isn't sure what's happening to him. His friend, Sheriff Frank Hill, has to solve the puzzle to keep the town safe from an unholy force rising in the town.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *The Calling* before they read it? Brent: This is the first book in the White Creek Cycle. There is another book, *In Memoriam*, but you don't have to read one to understand the other. I'm building a mythology around the town and it's a good place to start.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser? Brent: My writing process is to randomly bang my fingers on keys until words form. I am a slow and terrible typist, so it takes some time to finish something. My wife does think I'm the fastest hunt-



and-peck typist in the world. To answer the second part... I'm a pantser. Usually, I'll have the opening and the ending figured out; then make stuff up as I go for the middle. Sometimes, however, it means in the end I may have to tweak a few things to get everything lined up.

SCP: If you could cast your favourite story in the collection, who would you choose to play your main characters?

**Brent:** I would cast Sam Elliott to play Frank Hill, Mitch Pileggi as Carl, and Robbie Amell as Pratter. Nobody else

would even be let in the door to audition as Frank.

## SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

**Brent:** The hardest challenge I've faced about writing has been trying to find the balance. It can be a very difficult task when you have to juggle a job, your family, and the writing. Sometimes, I go without sleep or sometimes I lock myself away and sacrifice some personal time to write. Finding time to do anything outside of those becomes hard to do. But, if I want to drop the job part, they are sacrifices that have to be made.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *The Calling* apart from other books of the same genre? Brent: I tried to tell a story of friends who have been secretly at odds. As Frank and Carl's story unfolds throughout the book, I wanted to explore lost love and how it impacts relationships. Sometimes the people we thought we know the best are the ones we really know nothing about at all.

# SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

**Brent:** I'm trying to catch up on my Dean Koontz books. I've been very lax about keeping up-to-date on them and I'm a few books behind. I finished his novel *The City* and I finally am reading William Peter Blatty's *Legion*.

#### SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

**Brent:** My favorite authors would be Brian Keene, Wrath James White, John Everson, Dean Koontz, Stephen King, and Joe Hill. If I had to pick a favorite book from each one; I'd say Keene's *The Rising*, White's *The Resurrectionist*, Everson's *Covenant*, Koontz's *Night Chills*, King's *Salem's Lot*, and Hill's *Horns*.

## SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

**Brent:** This is an area where my answer has evolved over time. When I wrote and sent off my first few stories, I thought success was being published. In the beginning, I thought having my work in print was success enough. As it went on and I had more stories published and more for money, my attitude shifted. I began to see it as a possible career shift and began to focus on longer works. The goal is to write full time, so I'm not there yet. Have I been successful? Yes, but there is still a long way to go.

# 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?

**Brent:** Don't be afraid, don't listen to the negative voices in your head, and write what you want to write.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

Brent: I want them to feel White Creek is a pretty messed up place and they should come back to visit soon. The town always has its welcome signs up, but if they get to leave is another matter. White Creek invites all the readers back to watch friendships twist and the secrets buried in the past unearth themselves. All readers are welcome anytime...

Thank you Brent for taking the time to answer our questions.

The Calling is currently available and you can read an excerpt coming up next!



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

## An Excerpt from *The Calling* by Brent Abell

# Chapter 1: June 1994

Carl Volker awoke that morning with a hangover that split his head in two and the rooster outside calling out the dawn didn't make things any better, but instead drove the alcohol's wedge deeper in his brain. Rolling over, he felt for Maggie's body and found her half of the bed empty. The early morning light streamed into the window and hit Carl like a sledge hammer. He rubbed his blood shot eyes and pulled the pillow over his head. He drifted off to sleep again, the pillow blocking out the sounds of the rooster and the outside world.

Two hours later he awoke and found the other side of the bed was still empty. He sat up and sniffed the air, hoping to catch a whiff of breakfast cooking or any faint scent of recently cooked food. He smelled nothing and wondered what the hell Maggie was up to. This late in the morning, she usually would have some food cooked up for him before he headed out to the fields for the day. Carl swung his legs over the side of the bed and put on his slippers. His bladder was killing him and his stomach rumbled in hunger.

Carl wandered through the house in his boxer shorts, first visiting the bathroom to unburden his bladder, and then heading down the stairs to fix the stomach issue. He sniffed the air again and was once more denied the smell of breakfast. Stopping in the kitchen doorway, he opened his eyes fully and saw nothing had been moved or used. The skillets lay in the sink where they were left the night before and the loaf of bread sat with no other slices removed. He scratched his head in disbelief.

"Where the hell is that woman?" Carl muttered to himself as he sat down at the kitchen table. "Not even any damn coffee either."

He turned his head to the window to see if maybe Maggie had headed out to the fields to feed the cows and the pigs. From his vantage point, the cows were lined up at the fence waiting for food and the pigs were poking around in their pens seeking a bite. Carl started to be very concerned, not only because he had no coffee or breakfast, but because Maggie seemed to be gone and that was highly unlike her.

Carl began to retrace his steps, only this time he decided to keep his eyes open. The morning hadn't been kind and his vision remained blurry no matter how many times he rubbed them. He trudged back up the stairs, all of his fifty-two-year-old body protesting every step. This time when he opened the bedroom door, he noticed that Maggie's clothes were thrown from her drawers and strewn across the floor in a crumpled pile. Carl scratched his head and went to the closet door. Opening it up, he saw that the suitcase was gone. He still didn't compute what was going on until he peeked into the bathroom and saw her makeup case missing too.

Carl scratched his head again and said, "Well ain't that a bitch," to nobody in particular at all.

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The chores were done by three in the afternoon and Carl decided to leave the field alone for the day. He had to figure out just where his wife went. The last thing he remembered was drinking his whiskey straight from the bottle while Maggie downed glass after glass of wine. They laughed, they drank, they made love, and they drank some more. As he thought back, he couldn't place anything that Carl thought would make her want to walk out on him. He hung his hat up by the back door and walked to the fridge and grabbed a beer. He removed the church key from the hook besides the fridge and opened his Busch Light. Carl found himself dismayed that supper was not being cooked for him and decided to sit on the porch swing while he finished his beer.

It was when he saw it for the first time; the crow perched in the tulip tree next to the birdbath.

Carl fixed his gaze on the jet black bird that stared back at him; its red eyes burning Carl straight down to his soul. The crow's beady little eyes unsettled him greatly.

"Get the hell out here ya' bastard!" Carl hollered out to the bird. He reached down and took off his boot. He stood up quickly and chucked the shoe in the direction of the tree. The boot fell far short of its intended target and thudded harmlessly to the ground. The crow called out like it was laughing at Carl and it really pissed him off. First his wife vanished, he still was hung over, and now a damn crow mocked him. After thinking about it for a few minutes, he figured it would be better if he just fired up the Ford and went into town to have supper and get a drink or five at Telly's Tavern.

Taking one last look at the crow, it spread its wings and took off into the darkening sky. Carl tossed his empty beer can off the porch and went in to get ready to go.

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An old black man sat up in front of the bar and picked the strings on his beat up old guitar. The instrument looked like it'd been through Hell, but the blues ringing out from it sounded like Heaven to the crowd at Telly's. The farmers and hands all drank while they tapped their feet and smacked the heavy wooden bar as the music struck a chord with the working men. A cloud of cigarette smoke hovered in the air and the haze grew thicker the further away from the bar one got.

Carl sat hunched over a beer at the bar and he stared off at the various signs hanging behind Telly.

"What the Hell wrong with you Carl? You've been sitting there quiet as a mouse all evening. Maggie got you in the dog house?" Telly bellowed and laughed.

"Ain't seen her all day," Carl answered and took a long pull from the beer bottle.

"What do you mean you ain't seen her all day? Don't you control your wife out there at the farm?" Telly prodded and let out another loud laugh.

"You let me worry about her, Telly. Why you got an old Negro in here playin'?"

"Times changed a long time ago you old bastard and he picks the best blues strings for miles," Telly retorted.

Carl took another long pull from his beer and emptied it. Slamming the glass on the table, he tossed a few dollars beside it and got up from his stool. "Well, I gotta go and see if she's come back yet. See ya tomorrow, Telly."

Telly watched Carl stager from the bar to the door and he shook his head. If he knew Maggie like he did, her splitting was a permanent thing and she wouldn't be back no matter how

much Carl begged. He'd known Carl since high school and he knew he would never beg her to come back. What did surprise him was if what happened was terrible enough she left, she didn't say anything. His cousin knew how to argue and she'd let Carl have it on her way out of the door. Someone hollered for another round, so he buried his thoughts and went back to work.

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The first thing Carl noticed when he pulled his old Ford truck in the drive were the four crows perched along the fence by the well. None of them flew off and their heads followed him as he parked the truck and opened the door. In the dark, Carl felt their bright red eyes burn through him.

Picking up a rock, he hurled it at the fence and it smacked the post with a loud thud. The rock bounced to the ground and the crows sat there glaring at him, none of them taking flight.

"Go on! Get outta' here ya' bastard birds!"

He ran at the fence waving his arms around like a mad man yelling and screaming. The crows stayed perched and remained still.

Caw, caw, caw, the crows sounded out in unison.

Carl froze a few feet from their perch. They stared at him and he felt his booze laced blood go cold. Their eyes locked onto his and he held their gaze for a moment. Neither moved nor blinked. After a few seconds, Carl turned and stormed off into the house.

Inside, he heard the crows begin their song again. The four birds and their constant calling grated on his nerves as he rushed to the hall closet. Flinging the door open, he grabbed his twelve gauge and broke it open to make sure it was still loaded. Everyone told him keeping a loaded shotgun in the house wasn't a good idea, but he figured at some point, he'd need to defend his property.

Right now, he needed to clean the yard of some annoying birds.

"Here you go you bastards!" Carl cried out as he kicked the screen door open. He brought the shotgun up and fired it at the fence.

Flames danced from the gun's muzzle and he heard the buckshot pepper the fence posts and rails. The sound he didn't hear pissed him off. He didn't hear the crows die. Instead they sat motionless, still perched on top of the fence. Quickly, he cracked the casing open and ejected the spent shell. Slamming another shell in, he closed the barrel and aimed at the fence.

The crows were gone.

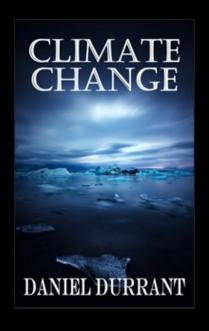
Carl walked to the fence and studied it. He found splintered wood along the top rail and on the center post where the crows were sitting. Running his finger along the wood, he felt the deep grooves, but he couldn't find any blood or sign the crows were even there.

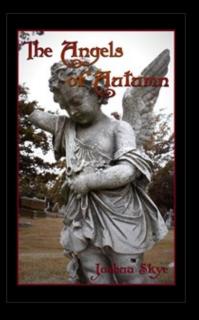
"I know I saw them sons a bitches," he muttered and dropped to his knees. "If them crows were here that long, they must have shit."

The grass below the fence appeared to be all green without a trace of white. Frantically, Carl ran his fingers through the cut grass and only found clippings from where he cut it three days ago. Shaking his head, he stood up and sulked back to the house. Once inside, he poured a shot of bourbon and watched out the window with his shotgun leaning up next to the kitchen door.

He wanted the crows to return.

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