

The Sirens Call

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*A Dark Fiction
Horror eZine*

*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, Poetry,
and Artwork*

*Featured Artist:
Francois
Vaillancourt*

*Featured Author:
Kealan Patrick Burke
with an excerpt from
his novella,
'Sour Candy'*

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Featured Artist

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George Larson stood in the parking lot of a windowless MacDonalds on the outskirts of Clarence, Iowa. His pickup truck was a few meters behind him. He was at the edge of the Zone. He knew this because of the metal stakes topped by faded red flags that ran across the field next to the parking lot. There was one stake every meter along the perimeter of the Zone. 160934 stakes drawing a line between the living and the dead.

He had been driving for days. His journey to the Zone started in Seattle. He had left his tiny apartment in the middle of a downpour, the weather reflecting his mood. He had driven through the Rockies and across the Great Plains. As he entered Iowa, the population grew sparse. He had passed through Des Moines earlier in the day. The only people he saw were the soldiers manning a check point on Interstate 80. He had been concerned at first. If they searched his pickup, the trip would have been for nothing. But, the bored looking men had waved him around the concrete jersey barriers.

No one wants to go near the Zone. Why would they?

A cold drizzle started falling. George thrust his hands into his pants pockets and shivered. It would be dark soon and he didn't relish having to navigate over the poorly maintained roads at night.

He was about to finish the task that had brought him halfway across the country, when he saw movement in the Zone. A woman pushed through a skeletal tangle of leafless brush. Her grey skin sagged from the rot of connective tissue. The left side of her head was a jumbled mass of mangled flesh and jutting bone. She was leaning to the left, dragging that leg behind her. She walked towards him in a slow, deliberate manner and stopped in front of him. She was only a few meters away.

If I were just a few steps closer, the Reanimate would tear me apart. I stand here and I live. I walk into the Zone and I die.

He took a step closer. The woman cocked her head to one side. A bit of pulped brain slipped free, falling to the ground.

"What are you?"

At the sound of his voice, she straightened up. A soft keening sound drifted over her tattered lips.

After 15 years, no one can answer that question.

Watching her watch him, he thought back to the arrival of the Sphere. It had come from outside the Solar System. NASA determined it would strike the Earth in less than three months, impacting somewhere in North America. Billions of people followed the slow procession of the Sphere through space. After a month, it was large enough to be visible in the night sky, a blazing white pinpoint of light. After two months, you could see it in the middle of the day, a tiny second sun. When it was only hours from the end of its journey, the Air Force tried to intercept it.

George had watched it all on TV. The missiles rising into a clear blue sky. The nuclear warheads detonating at the edge of space, creating a blazing red and gold aurora. The Sphere—a kilometer-wide glowing sphere—descending unscathed through the nuclear fire.

To everyone's surprise, the Sphere—after first cutting a blazing path through the sky—rapidly slowed. It gently landed at the intersection of Interstates 88 and 39, obliterating the town of Rochelle, Illinois. Twenty minutes after landing, while the skies over North America still pulsed nuclear fire, every dead body within 160 kilometers of the Sphere reanimated and attacked the living. Those who were killed revived within minutes and joined in the slaughter.

The Reanimates were almost impossible to destroy. They had no weak spots. Whatever brought the dead back infused every piece of them with restless life. Only dismemberment or immolation worked.

George remembered the panic that had swept the world. Even though his family was living in Miami, riots had swept through the city. Everyone thought the reanimated dead would spread across the world.

They never did. They remained in the Midwestern Security Zone—which soon was just called the Zone—haunting the dead cities and blighted fields. George had seen experiments on TV, in which heavily armored troops would drag Reanimates outside the Zone. The moment they passed between the stakes and flags, they would stiffen and collapse.

The world accepted the stalemate and adapted. The Reanimates stayed in the Zone and the government soon gave up on attempts to clear them out as being too costly and dangerous. The US Army set up checkpoints and monitoring stations and the rest of the country moved on. Millions had died and risen; but they didn't come out. After a time, no one went in.

A few years ago, George had watched a documentary on PBS. A scientist who was part of the last expedition into the Zone was interviewed. She said that there wasn't anything new to learn. The Sphere was still at the center of the Zone, glowing like a piece of the sun. It never responded to attempts to communicate and it seemed to radiate nothing but light. The reanimated dead lurked among the ruins and there was no practical way to stop them, short of physically removing each one of them from the Zone. The interviewer had asked about using nuclear weapons. The scientist had shrugged and said the number of weapons needed would probably start a Nuclear Winter.

"The cure would be worse than disease," the scientist had said, "No one knows how the dead reanimate. No one knows what the Sphere is. No one knows what its purpose is."

Recalling that now, George thought he knew. "It's here to remind of us of our mortality. To fuel our regrets," he said to the keening woman.

The rain began to increase in intensity. With the sun set, the cold intensified. He knew he had to finish up. The Army still ran patrols along the perimeter and he didn't want to be caught.

He walked back to the pickup. He grabbed hold of the cargo bed door and took a deep breath. He had to steady himself.

I need to go through with this. I don't have a choice. Just do it.

He opened up the tail of the pickup bed. Lying on the bed was a plastic wrapped bundle, a meter and a half long. George pulled the bundle out and slung it over his shoulder. He hesitated for a moment, the weight on his shoulder making clear the enormity of what he was doing. Over the course of 2000 kilometers and dozens of hours, he had been able to detach himself from this moment, when he would be at the end of his journey. Now that he was here, a few meters away from the end, his suppressed doubts surfaced.

I can just go back home. I can drop this...someplace. Anyplace. Anyplace but here.

He saw the Reanimate staring at him, her one eye gleaming in the darkness.

Stay focused. This is what has to be done.

He walked to the edge of the Zone. The Reanimate made a chuffing noise as he dropped the plastic bundle on the wet ground.

George took out a pair of garden shears and cut the plastic away. Inside was the body of a young woman. She wore jeans and a pink tee-shirt that had 'Sexy' written across the chest in sequins. Her attractive features were marred by a blotchy red wound on her forehead and the bloat from the early stages of decomposition.

"Melissa, I'm sorry I hit you so hard. But, you'll be fine here. You can live again. You can forgive me."

He picked up the body and rolled it into the Zone. The Reanimate pounced on it with a speed that startled George. He fell back onto the wet asphalt. After a moment of sniffing the body, the Reanimate stood up. For a moment, it regarded George with its single, gleaming eye. Then it wandered off.

"Come on," George muttered.

Melissa sat up. Her eyes snapped open and she looked around slowly. One eye was flawless, emerald green and milk white. The other was dark red from a hemorrhage. Her gaze settled on George.

"I love you. Please forgive me."

Melissa struggled to her feet. She continued to stare at George for a moment. The new organs that were growing in her body showed her new things. Alien things. Colors and sounds that the living had no words for. The music of a thousand crystal bells filled her ears. She saw George as a blank space in her kaleidoscope world, one she felt sorry for.

She heard a voice, soft and slippery. It said, "One day, all will be color. One day."

Satisfied, she turned and walked into the bright and beautiful night.

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.

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Marco Calabrini stood in the shadow of a skeletal tree, squinted down the path between the tombstones, and cursed the full moon. It shone over his cemetery, silvering the marble and revealing every hiding place he haunted. It was hard to hunt on nights like this.

Footsteps announced the approach of his latest victim, one Louisa Luchini. She was twenty-five, with lustrous black hair and brilliant blue eyes. Other men found her beautiful but Marco did not. He was a new breed, far removed from the species he had once been. Louisa was human and human beings were sustenance, nothing more.

Louisa stepped into the moonlight at that moment and the most attractive thing about her came into view. Her large, round belly strained against her coat as she walked by.

Hunger wrenched Marco's insides. To feast on a pregnant woman! Such things happened only in dreams.

Marco stepped out from behind the tree and slipped over to a nearby statue of the Christ. Jesus stared after the woman, a benevolent smile on his face, and Marco snickered. The Good Shepherd couldn't protect this member of his flock tonight.

Louisa passed by several towering crosses and Marco followed. She led him toward a small, marble building near the outermost edge of the cemetery. Marco knew it well. Louisa visited it every night.

A wooden door led to the inner chamber of the crypt and Louisa passed through it. Marco's blood surged in his ears as he pulled the knife from his coat pocket and crept after her.

A single torch sat ensconced in one stone wall. It illuminated the chamber with soft, flickering light and revealed the dais at the center of the room. A lonely casket lay upon the dais. Louisa knelt beside it.

The subtle perfume of Amaryllis filled the room as Marco fingered his blade. What ambiance! It was better than he'd dreamed it would be. He shut his eyes and his tongue darted over his lips. The image of warm and succulent flesh filled his mind. He could wait no longer.

Marco opened his eyes. The room lay empty before him.

He glanced about. Where had Louisa gone? He hadn't closed his eyes long. No footsteps had sounded in those brief seconds.

The door suddenly slammed behind him and the tumblers of a lock clicked. He turned and found Louisa leaning against the door.

Her feverish blue eyes gazed upon him.

"At last," she whispered. "I thought you would never come."

Trembling, she took a step toward him.

He raised the knife, and she slapped it out of his hand. The blade clattered against the wall as she lunged forward and took him by the throat. She lifted him off the stone floor as though he were feather-light and tossed him toward the dais.

Something cracked when he hit the stone floor. He moaned.

"He is here, my love," Louisa cried.

Marco's arms and legs refused to obey him. He tried to rise but his body remained limp. Something moved in the casket above.

A skeletal hand clutched the side of the casket. An emaciated man rose to sitting position, his bare chest, heavily bandaged. He stared down at Marco and grinned. Two sharp canines gleamed in the torchlight.

Louisa moved into Marco's field of vision. She smiled at the living cadaver in the casket and then down at her belly.

"Papa will be alright now," she crooned.

The cadaver climbed out of his casket and knelt beside Marco. He licked the tip of one canine and croaked a single word.

"Sustenance."

About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, and horror writer. She serves as Head of Publishing/Interviewer for HorrorAddicts.net. She also works for Crystal Lake Publishing. Naching lives in Eastern Washington State with her husband, Dan.

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Have you ever missed your stop? On the bus or train, I mean. Have you ever missed your stop and traveled onto the end of the line? I have...just once.

I was fifteen. I'd skipped school. The plan was to spend the day in the center of London. I loved seeing all those famous places; Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament. It never got old, never got boring. I got so immersed in my own personal tour I forgot the time. I only became aware when I noticed it was getting dark. I checked my watch. Time to head home.

I jumped on the underground at Piccadilly Circus. I lived on one of those huge sink estates in south London, miles away from the bright lights, so I grabbed myself a seat and settled in for a long ride. I soon fell asleep.

I woke to an empty train. It'd emerged from the tunnels beneath the city and was on the surface. It was twilight, rain trickled down the glass. I stared out at the darkness. Have you ever noticed that once you get outside the center, London really is just a series of dreary, anonymous housing estates? That was all I could see, rows and rows of grey boxes.

I suspected I'd missed my stop. I was right. After another ten minutes of rumbling through depressing housing estates, the train pulled into a station. The sign read 'Slaughter Hill'. The doors whished open and the engine shut down. End of the line. I exited the train. I was alone.

The station was a typical London suburban stop. Despite it being only six p.m., the place was deserted. No commuters, no staff, not even any sign of the driver. There was no timetable posted, so I didn't know when the train was due to return to the city. After fifteen minutes of waiting in the damp, staring at the torn adverts on the wall opposite the platform, I decided the train wasn't going anywhere. I climbed the steps to street level. Hopefully, I'd be able to catch a bus.

Slaughter Hill wasn't very big, and the town center seemed to consist of one main street, with a number of shops, pubs and cafes. Beyond the center, the land rose in elevation. The hill was lined with rows and rows of identical terraced houses. At the top of the hill sat an elegant mansion. The streets were cobbled, an unusual sight.

Now, you may think the name would have given me some premonition of the darkness to come, but you'd be wrong. London is an ancient place. I was used to names like Gallows Corner, Eel Pie Island and the Isle of Dogs; names that reflected the historic association of these locations. If I'd thought about it, I would have undoubtedly assumed that Slaughter Hill was a place where livestock was, at one time or another, killed and butchered.

The whole place was deserted. Silent. The shops were all dark and closed. There were no vehicles and no pedestrians. The rain fell steadily. I was alone. It was odd, no doubt, but I felt no fear, no premonition of doom; I was fifteen, I was immortal. I headed along the high street, looking for a bus-stop.

I'd walked for about five minutes when I noticed the figure. It was an old man, sitting in the middle of the road. His face was obscured by a wide-brimmed hat. As I approached he looked up. I gasped at the sight. He had no eyes, his sockets were rough holes, red and inflamed. Someone had gouged the eyes out of his skull and not too neatly either. It looked like they'd used a spoon.

His hands groped for the bloody sockets. He stuck a finger in each and twirled them around. He removed the bloodstained digits and licked each one carefully. He grinned, and I could see his teeth had been removed too.

"You're not local. They've all gone. No one stays here on Candlemass Eve, not in Slaughter Hill."

I was suddenly aware of doors in the nearby houses creaking open. Faces peered out at me.

"It's the one night of the year when we get to roam. We get to reign...to kill."

The figures had left the houses and were standing behind me. I daren't look to see what they were. I ran, up the hill towards the mansion. Footsteps followed me.

I felt my breath harsh in my throat, the incline was steep. I sensed my pursuers were getting closer.

I reached the gate of the mansion. I had a few seconds to open the gate and save myself. I started to fumble with the latch. A man in a white coat appeared on the other side of the gate. He held a garden hose.

"Get down!"

I dropped to my knees. He sprayed my pursuers with water. That seemed to be enough to stop them and force them back. He opened the gate, grabbed my arm and yanked me through. I heard a padlock click behind me. He dragged me across the courtyard and into the building.

My savior was a tall, thin streak, about forty. He leaned against the door frame, gasping for breath.

"I'm not fit enough for this."

He turned to me.

"Who the hell are you? You're not local."

I explained my situation.

"Well, at least you stumbled into this by accident. I was dumb enough to hide myself away to see what happened. I wanted to know what took place on this night, when everyone else leaves the town."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see the monsters."

I glanced around myself, wondering where I was.

"It's a mental hospital. An asylum," he said, apparently reading my mind.

"Who are they? The people who chased me? Who was that man, the one with no eyes?"

"Our residents."

"Huh?"

He removed his glasses and rubbed droplets of water from the lenses.

"I came here ten years ago. Resident physician. I was told about this at the time. On this night, the 2nd of February, something happens to our patients. Something takes them over. We release them from their cells. They go feral for one night, destroying themselves, anyone they encounter."

"What takes them over?"

"I don't know. Something from the darkness. Something from this place's history. Something that requires penance."

"What?"

"This place is called Slaughter Hill because it was a place of execution. Some say it was used for sacrifice in pagan times. Perhaps the spirits of the dead are allowed to return for one night to wreak revenge on the living. Perhaps the insane are the perfect conduit. I wanted to find out, that's why I stayed."

"I'm glad you did."

"I was watching from the tower when I saw your plight. Johnson seems to be the leader. I watched as they removed his eyes and teeth. He laughed while they did it."

"But why did they do that?"

"God knows, maybe he served as the sacrifice. I simply don't know."

He opened the door and peeked outside.

"They're all still there, pushing against the gate."

"How do we get out of here?"

He laughed.

"We don't. This place is a fortress. We stay until dawn. That's when they turn back to normal and the staff return to scoop them up."

"I want to see them."

"Don't open the door, that'll just encourage them. Let's go up to the tower, we can observe them without being seen."

At the top, I knelt and stared out the small window. It was completely dark by now, but the streetlights illuminated the scene. I could see the lunatics pushing against the gate of the asylum. They wore pajamas or hospital tunics. Their eyes were wide and wild, empty. They fought with each other, pushing and shoving to get to the gate. Luckily, the padlock held.

I saw Johnson, sitting in the middle of the road, about halfway down the hill, crooning and nodding. Then I noticed the child. She was about ten years old. She stood outside a house near the entrance to the station.

"Where the hell did she come from?" asked the doctor.

"I didn't see her on my way up. She must have come from one of the houses. She must have been forgotten."

"No matter, we need to get her."

"How?"

"We can use the side entrance. Sneak down the alley behind the houses and grab her off the street."

"What if they see her before we get to her?"

"Then she's dead."

We headed out. Two brave warriors, facing a band of ravaging maniacs.

"What am I doing?" I asked myself out loud.

"Saving a life. Paying it forward. Call it what you will, but you're helping me."

The doctor, who finally introduced himself as Craig, led the way. We headed downstairs to the main entrance hall. After a couple of moments of searching, Craig found himself a baseball bat. He handed a crowbar to me. I felt as if I was in a video game. I just wasn't sure I could use my newly found weapon to bash in someone's head.

Craig opened a small side door. We were hidden from the group at the front gate by a row of trees. We crept carefully to the wall surrounding the hospital. Craig unlocked a metal gate that lead to the street.

The journey down the alleyway behind the houses was tense but uneventful. There were eight-foot-high brick walls on either side of us, enclosing small gardens and yards. The layout was typical of English terraced houses. Craig, leading the way, stopped.

"I think this was the house she was standing in front of."

He pulled open the wooden door to the back garden.

We crept through the house, hoping the child had been sensible enough to head back indoors, but she hadn't been; she still stood in the street, clutching a stuffed bunny.

Craig and I stood on the threshold of the front door and tried to get her attention. If we could coax her back inside, then we could lock the doors and wait till dawn. The house wasn't as secure as the asylum, but it would do. She glanced up at the sound of our voices and screamed when she saw us. Johnson heard. He raised his sightless eyes and pointed.

"A sacrifice, my brothers!"

The group at the top of the hill turned and started to run down the road towards us.

"Shit," breathed Craig.

He turned to me.

"Grab her, head for the train. Save yourselves."

He ran out of the house, past the girl and up towards Johnson and the rest of the residents. As he headed up the hill, Johnson reached out to trip him. Craig, with a single sweep of the bat, split his head open. Johnson slumped to the ground, brains and blood oozing out onto the cobbles.

I left the house and grabbed the girl. She sensed I was normal, just trying to help. She allowed me to lead her away. As we ran I glanced back at Craig.

He was running towards the inmates. There was perhaps a dozen. He had no chance, he must have known. He threw himself into the group, his fists and bat making contact with as many as possible. They piled on top of him. It couldn't have lasted more than perhaps a minute. The first inmate to emerge from the scrum held aloft a bloody souvenir. Craig's head stared blankly at me. I cursed him for wasting his own life, but I knew his bravery, his foolishness, had given us the chance to escape.

I headed to the one place I thought might be safe. The station.

As we ran down the steps to the platform, my ears strained to hear the noise of pursuit. None came. We reached the train, still sitting in the station. I used the crowbar to open the door and pushed the girl inside. I slammed the train doors shut. The girl stood next to me, trembling.

"We're okay now. We're safe."

I hoped that was true. She started to cry.

We stood side-by-side on that deserted train and waited for the dawn. We waited for salvation.

We weren't rescued in the conventional sense; by cops and soldiers descending from helicopters and plucking us from disaster. We were rescued by a grey man in a grey uniform, opening the train doors on the grey dawn of the third of February. The child, Sonia, ran back to Slaughter Hill without a word to me. I had expected something from her, some thanks, some acknowledgment of the sacrifice that had been made for her. Perhaps she was too scared, too traumatized. Perhaps she simply accepted the annual horror fest that gripped her town as normal. Part of her life, like birthdays and Christmas.

For days afterwards I scoured the newspapers, looking for a report of the horror that I'd experienced. Craig's death was mentioned, but according to the article he'd been found in his office at the asylum, dead from a heart attack. There was no mention of Johnson, nor any of the others. Obviously, the hospital authorities were part of it. I told no one about my adventure in Slaughter Hill, even at fifteen I knew there was no point.

It all happened fifteen years ago. I think you'll laugh when you hear my fate. I did my best to forget that night had ever happened. I went back to school. When the time came, I left the world of education and got a job. A wife. Family. I tried not to think about that night and for the longest time I managed not to. It wasn't until last year, when my daughter turned ten that it all came flooding back in an uncontrollable deluge. My daughter's face reminded me too much of the girl I rescued from the monsters. The flood gates broke and so did my mind. In my madness, I committed a

terrible crime. I killed my daughter and then my wife, when she tried to intervene. And now, at the bidding of the judicial system, I am here, detained in the one place I tried to avoid for my entire life. Yes, irony upon irony, I've been a resident in The Slaughter Hill Asylum for nearly eight months. It's the end of January. Fate, it seems, is a very cruel mistress. As I lie in the darkness of my cell, I can hear the staff talking. They can't possibly know that I'm aware of what they're talking about; it would just too much of a coincidence for a patient to have experienced that dread night. They are making their plans. The ritual, it seems, still continues. I can only think of one thing. What is going to happen to me when Candlemass Eve comes round again?

About the Author:

R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, The Infernal Clock, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Smoking Pen Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

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Elysium | *Tawny Kipphorn*

The withering season has fallen once more, and this lonely path along the river of tears knows well your weary tread. A reflection stares back from within the sacred chalice, the one in which your dreams have drowned. Somewhere deep within the witch's mind resides a secret that holds the key to Zion. Engage in the consumption of her majesty's divine offering of sanguine sangria, and you shall rest eternal in her Elysian fields.

She is likened to that of an angel, warming those whom have only known the cold. To others, she is that of a dragon, harboring a beast within that will burn any man to ash. What is done returns with a vengeance that runs deeper than the blood in your veins. So be careful of rejoicing in the pain of the antagonist, in the presence of the druidess.

She is the white witch of the wild. She is the eyes of Elysium. Take care not to dine upon the flesh of your fellow man in the literal and metaphorical as you enter the netherrealm. The words which spill forth from her lips are as honey to the bee, and cursed are those who only taste bitter vinegar. As the season of death has arrived, remember to hasten as she beckons you, for she is the keeper of Eden, and you will surely find your place in Elysium.

About the Author:

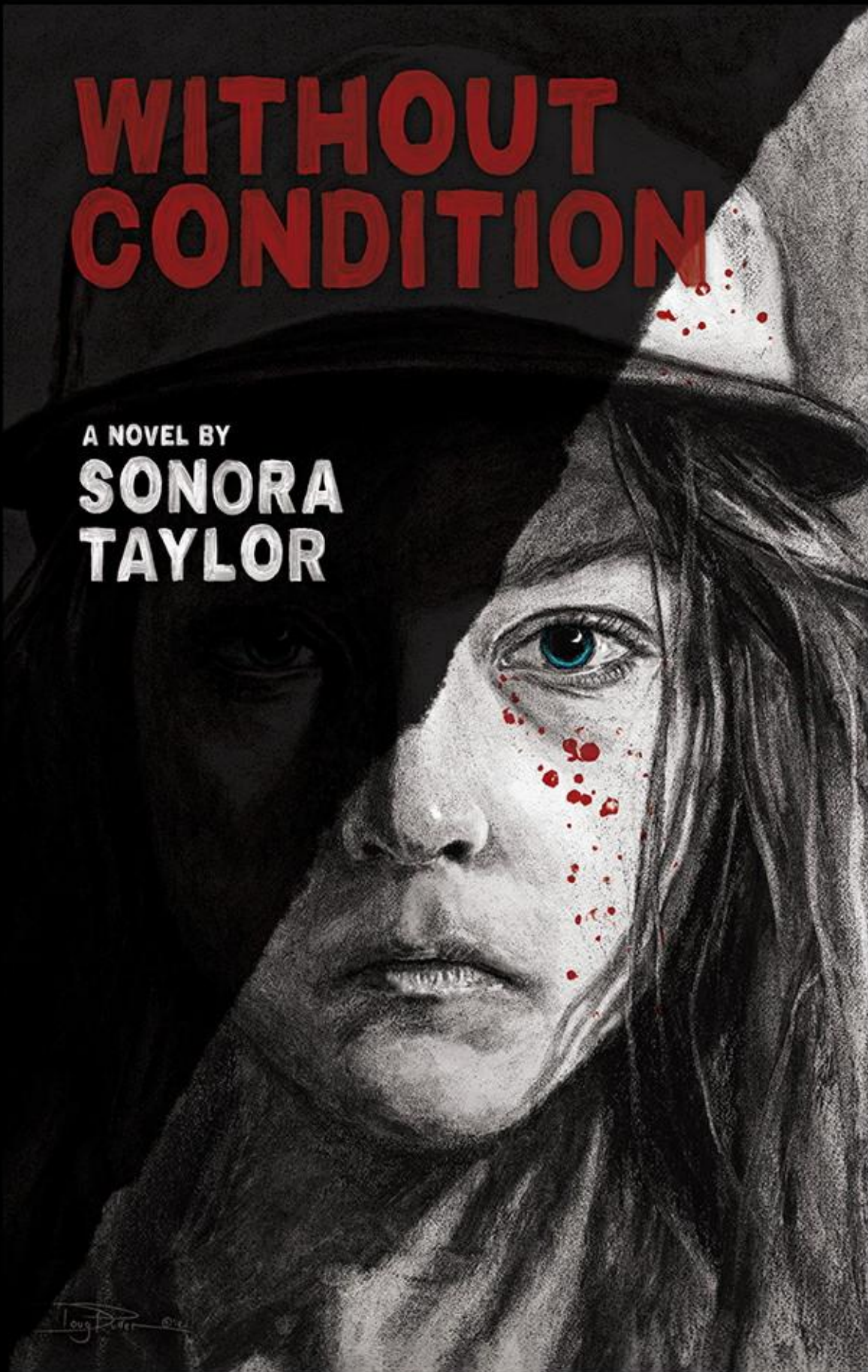
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WITHOUT CONDITION

A NOVEL BY
**SONORA
TAYLOR**



Available on Amazon

Hunger is a dark sensation and I wear it everywhere. The snake at my belly writhes. Someone says it's dinnertime, but I'm already full from last night's dark meat. Mom made mutton again and goat hairs got stuck in my teeth. I think I'm allergic to arsenic, I'm breaking out in elderberries. This is not my venom, but the chimera festering within. She's growing and I know soon my body won't contain her.

Momma and I gut another goat—in a series of misunderstood cravings. She tells me it's OK, but I feel the presence of worry in the downward curves of her face. She bleaches my nightgown, tries to wash her hands of it, while I stir the mutton. It's putrid and the steam stifles my focus. I want to throw up in it, avert consuming it, but Momma makes me eat my kills. Every one of them. I cut the peppers, let the sting of them soak into my skin, travel up my arms, and down into my legs. My belly burns, but I need more heat. I add peppers from Momma's garden, look up to meet her eyes. I smile, but she tensions.

Silence is disorienting; it makes me dizzy. Or, it's the mutton bubbling at the table before me, I can't tell between. Momma is scowling at me. She hasn't touched her spoon. Her toes are folding inward, she's tearing pieces of carpet under the table. I can tell she's contemplating too, but it's not the mutton. After a nauseating dinner, I know the drill, but tonight, I don't want to be bound. I need to sleep with my hands free, put my eyes to the back of my head. The moon growls loudly over the hedges.

"Momma, please. Not tonight." I beg, but I'm already defeated.

She grunts as she tightens each strap. "Momma, it's too tight," but she just looks at me and pulls until I squeal.

"We cannot risk anymore livestock. Your father is still gone to the woods and won't be back until the Full Moon. You will stay here until then," she says before forcing her body swiftly out the door.

I beg, "Momma, wait!" I scream until my throat desiccates. "Momma, don't leave me! Momma!" I jolt my body, shaking the bed madly until I can feel the leather straps pull at my appendages.

Momma feeds me left over mutton with a tall spoon and leaves me after. I no longer struggle through tantrums and blood fits. I piss and shit and cry in my bed. She changes the sheets every morning. I can feel the Full Moon coming. The snake moves throughout my innards. She butts her head from beneath my flesh. I eat the mutton, piss and shit, and cry in my bed. The snake writhes. I sweat.

It's raining, every drop of water lands heavily, mixes with the black and red, and cold. My nightgown is torn and Momma's head lies half in my lap with no body. My teeth ache with a metal taste. Father is approaching. His cries are muffled by rain and delusion. I fall back into the black.

The bed is dry, I shift my legs freely. I see Momma in a white haze, but she disappears quickly and Father's downtrodden face comes at me like a bolt of lightning, his expressions buried beneath his grief and fear. "OK?" he asks with his lowered eyes. I don't feel the snake writhing. "OK," I nod.

A young woman sits beside my father, black robes curtaining her body, curtailed at the bosom to reveal her apatite flesh. He found her in the woods, Father says she has no voice, but I can hear her body singing. He says she'll stay with us, he'll put her up in my room if I don't mind, and he forces a smile. I crank my neck to the side. "Momma?" her severed head merely dream.

"Will you tell me what has happened?" he asks. "Will you tell me where her body stray, where her mortality met its end?"

I lock my jaw. No words can tell without their memory and all I taste is blood. Father scrubs his face with disappointment. The young woman sits in the corner with sympathetic eyes. I feel them rolling in my belly.

I picture Momma in her floral apron, scrubbing bleach out of my nightgown, forcing heavy sighs into smiles. The bedroom door creaks open. I shift and the young woman's eyes nearly touch mine. I shudder breath between her fingers at my mouth. She traces my lips, fingertip sliding atop my skin, down my neck. My hair comes undone with the ribbon at my chest. She circles my breasts through my nightgown. "Take me," I say with breathless conviction.

She releases the latch of her black robes and they fall to the floor. Her skin is green and yellow, translucent. Her nipple collides with my mouth. She pulls the nightgown over my head and sits atop me. Her fingers slip in me, flicking lightly at the wet dream between my thighs. She feels like velvet brushing beneath.

Father leaves to the woods again. I call the young woman Mab and we touch each other's insides every day. She points at my breasts, she creates a heart with her hands, I can tell she loves them. I love her ass, as she bends it up over the sheets, as I put my mouth to it. We soften corn husks and tie them over phallic objects, place them inside each other's roses, and scream to The Moon.

I look into the vanity mirror, flesh excited with life and then some. Death. The bite marks in my chest, black and spreading. They itch, I don't scratch—the ground outside shakes violently. Three horses approach bearing men in tall blue hoods. I greet them in my best gown, chiffon white with red and gold rose embroidery.

"Are you creature or witch?" asks one of the men demanding.

"Does it matter?" I say. "You're thirsty and I'm so, so wet."

The men exchange smiles, and I with Mab. We lead them inside the cottage, fire burning within, peppers oozing from the pot atop the stove.

"Delicious," the three men say, simultaneously.

I am swimming through all of their senses, limbs tightly woven together. I feel every hot breath, every jounce of ecstatic relief. Mab enfolds me in her indelible danger, black robes cloaking me, dimensionally changing me. Black antlers protrude from my head as I cum, the man melting beneath me. My tongue slenders and splits down the center, teeth become all gnash and gnarly. I slide through the puddle of blue hoods and black blood, eating one man's flesh, ripping the throat out of the other. Mab laughs through my chest, coughs up something hard and angry, black snake slithering in and out my body.

I rub myself in the hot wet mess.

Father returns to the cottage, pulls a bouquet of dead rabbits out of his sack by their ears and flattens their bodies out on the kitchen table.

"Smells delicious!" he says. "What're you making?"

"Mutton," I say, as I brush off my stark white apron.

About the Author:

Courtney Leigh is the author of the chapbook, 'the unrequited <3 of red riding hood & her lycan lover' (Dancing Girl Press, 2016). She is The Bowhunter of White Stag Publishing and a Kitchen Witch for Crimson Sage Apothecary.

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She slowly opens her eyes, her vision swimming in a kaleidoscope of green, brown, and blue-black.

Her measured breaths come in and out of lips that she tries to wet, but she can't manage it. Her tongue lies lazily along the roof of her mouth, unwilling to move at the demand of her thought. She's lying on her back, but that doesn't seem right. Hadn't she been on her feet when she was . . . ?

Was what? She can't recollect; though consciousness is returning, the memory of what she'd been doing and where she'd been doing it is slow on the uptake. She tries to turn her head next, to take in her surroundings as her vision grows crisper, simple colors turning gradually into vague, tall shapes. But she fails at this, too, and that's when her breathing starts to pick up a quicker pace.

It becomes ragged and worried when she tries to move her arms and wiggle her feet—and to no avail.

Her eyes go wide with fright as a word comes slamming, sudden and terrible, through the fog of her mind: paralyzed. Because that's exactly what she is—paralyzed, unable to twitch even a single, solitary muscle. The realization makes her want to cry out in sheer fear, but all she can manage is a weak moan that barely escapes her throat.

While the rest of her body may refuse to work, her senses start to kick back into clarity. She latches onto every detail that comes to her, working desperately to piece together just what the hell is happening. The tall, blurry things towering over her are trees. Spruces, to be precise—a whole flank of them, their thousands of needles alight in a quarter moon's glow and rustling in a soft breeze. They grow up from the earth a few yards away, on the opposite side of a two-lane road. She can see this all because her head is propped up against something; the jagged feel of it along the base of her skull leads her to think it's some kind of rock.

That wet smell of earth that comes with a rainfall finds her nose, and that makes sense, because the road before her looks slick and shimmery. And she feels a little wet, too. Her eyes flit down to look at her outstretched body—and it makes her want to cry out again.

She's wearing her light blue exercise tights and matching top. Her legs are spread-eagled, arms lying lazily at her sides. Her skin is chilled to paleness and her clothes are lightly soaked. But unlike the road, it's not water that she's covered in. It's something red, and it's sleeked along her bare stomach and sprinkled across her top. She moans again, knowing what that red is, and knowing that it must be hers.

She urges herself to move, mentally screaming at her legs to so much as shake, but they stay still.

Then the pieces start to snap together: her legs; the road; her clothes. And just like that, her memory unlatches its padlock. She'd been jogging, like she did every Tuesday and Thursday evening, taking Trenton Lane. It was a scenic stretch of road out by her country residence and it didn't see much traffic, making it perfect for her bits of exercise.

It'd been drizzling since before she'd made it home from work, and the dirt and mulch on the shoulder of the blacktop had been soggy. It clung to the bottoms of her sneakers like thick gum. An earthy musk had hung in the air of the woods, and she'd relished breathing it in. She was going to try for a round-trip to the viaduct out by Benson River—about a three mile run.

She'd put her earbuds in and set her iPod to shuffle. Music always helped her when she ran, the pumping of her blood and the beat of the tunes helping to smooth out the stresses of the day. 'XO' by EDEN had just started playing when . . .

But this is where her recollection grows fuzzy.

She remembers going down a slight dip in the lane—then her feet were off the ground. There'd been some force that came up from behind her, something she'd never seen nor heard coming. And there was a flash of pain, and then . . .

There was the impression of something else, but her memory can't quite pull it from the haze. Some shadow, looming over her as she spun in the air. But there was nothing else; nothing but coming to, here and now.

Another bolt of fear shoots through her thoughts as the pieces keep connecting. Her laying here, her paralysis, the blood—she was hit by a car. Had to be. Some bastard who wasn't even paying attention—talking on a phone or falling asleep at the wheel—had driven right onto the shoulder of the road and hit her from behind. Sent her flying through the air, leaving her here to—

Another flash of terror sweeps over her. If she'd been hit, where was the driver? Why weren't they beside her, asking her if she was okay and calling for help? Where was their car even at?

Her eyes burn with tears as she thinks back to those *Law and Order*-type shows she's seen before—the episodes about hit and run cases, where some poor soul gets run over and is left to die, forsaken and alone, cold and—

A noise pulls her out of her doomed contemplation, and it ignites some hope. It's the soft purring of an engine, coming from off to her right. And it's growing louder. Soon she can hear the crunch of rubber against blacktop, and then the glow of headlights starts to creep along the bit of road in front of her.

She thrusts all of her will and desperation out into the universe, hoping it will somehow sway the car coming her way to see her and stop, that the people in it can help her and get her out of this awful situation. When she hears the screech of tires and sees the nose of a Prius lurching into her periphery, she figures the universe heard her, and she's beyond grateful for it.

"Oh my god!" she hears a man say. A car door opens and then slams shut, the engine still running. A bearded hipster-type comes dashing into her vision and over to her, stooping down beside her right shoulder. His hair's done up in a bun and his youthful face is a grimace of horror, his eyes darting from her bloodied belly to her face. She looks up at him, her eyes begging for what her lips can't.

After a moment of consideration, the young man rises, hunching over her on crooked knees and pulling a phone from his pocket. He extends a hand out to her, indicating all will be well, though the tremor in his voice doesn't support the notion.

"I'm gonna get you help, miss! You'll be all right! Just— just stay calm!"

He flicks his phone on and starts to dial, and she dares to hope a little bit more, watching as he lifts the phone towards his ear. But then something happens. Someone appears behind the young man's shoulder—some other guy in a dark hoodie, pulled so far over his head that only the lower half of his face is really visible, the rest obscured in shadow. He's looking at the young man—and he's smiling.

The sheer oddity of that smile doesn't even have the chance to sink in before Hoodie Guy's gloved hand comes shooting out, a wicked-sharp knife in his grasp. He sneaks it around Hipster's neck and brings its edge up to the skin beneath his Adam's apple; and then he pulls it across. Hipster's flesh splits open instantly and red floods down his cardigan-covered chest. His eyes go wide as he starts choking, the phone falling out of his hand and landing beside her head, his dialing only half-complete.

Hipster's hands go for his throat as he falls to his knees, and Hoodie Guy hovers over him, a chuckle breaking through that sick smile.

She starts to hyperventilate as she watches the whole macabre deed, and her leg finally twitches as Hipster's blood starts to trickle onto it, warm against her tights. Hipster pitches forward, his body falling across her hips. She hears him choking as he buries his face in the mulch; within seconds, he stops wheezing, and he moves no more.

She looks up to Hoodie Guy, a squeal that aches to be a wail seeping out of her. She wants to get up and flee, and though her back gives a hitch and her fingers begin to curl, it's still not enough.

"Sleeping Beauty wakes," Hoodie Guy says with whimsy. He holds the knife out to her, showing off how the blood slides along the blade and beads up at the point. "Welcome to the party."

He crouches down, slowly looking over Hipster, as an art critic would a Van Gogh.

"I gave you too much earlier. Knocked you right out. Should have known. You're a bit smaller than the others have been."

His grating words—and that persisting smile—ring a bell in the back of her mind, and her memory unlatches its last lock, much to her dismay.

It comes back to her like a slap in the face: she was jogging; EDEN was getting to his chorus. And from out of the darkness, someone leapt out at her, grabbing her from behind and whipping her about in his clutches. She screamed and started swatting at her attacker, spinning her head about to get a look at who it was. And she had seen *him*—Hoodie Guy, that smile glowering at her from within his hood, the looming shadow she'd half-remembered. And then he'd brought a syringe of something down towards her, sticking it into the crook of her neck—the flash of pain.

She kept thrashing and trying to fight back until her limbs went light, her head began to grow fuzzy, and unconsciousness claimed her.

But if she hadn't been hit by a car, what had he done to her to cause all the blood . . . ?

"You missed the first one," Hoodie Guy says, as though leeching off her train of thought. "Some old biddy. She seemed nice. Considerate. Didn't do her much good, though. Didn't do him any favors, either, huh?"

Hoodie Guy turns the knife around in his hand and brings it swinging down, burying it in the small of Hipster's back. Then he stands, walking around to her other side, taking quick note of how her foot is starting to bob in her desperate efforts. He positions himself over Hipster, grabbing hold of his arms and hauling his body off of her, still talking to her as he does so.

"It's funny, how caring people can actually be. Watch the news, hit up Facebook, and you'd think the world's just war, crime, and political screw-overs. But there's good. There are people who want to help. Especially nice young ladies like yourself, hurt on the side of a dark road."

Hoodie Guy gets the dead man's feet off of her and then drops him. He crouches down, slipping his hand into Hipster's back pocket and pulling out his wallet. He opens it, giving it a quick once-over, and then puts it in the pocket of his hoodie. He looks back to her, his grin returning.

"But I don't want to help, as you probably noticed. And tricking the ones that do? Well, it puts a smile on my face. And I've found that live bait works better than dead ones. Seems to hold people's attention a bit more when I sneak up and . . ." He shrugs and flicks a finger across his throat.

She moans again, managing to bend her left knee. Hoodie Guy notices this and gets back up, reaching into his other pocket. He pulls out a syringe, already filled with a yellow liquid, and hunkers over her. She can turn her head now, and she does, but all it accomplishes is giving Hoodie Guy a clear shot at her neck.

She feels the needle's bite and cringes beneath it.

"I'm not giving you as much this time. Just enough to keep you awake and keep you my little rag doll."

He sets his hand on her head and turns her back to face him. She can't look away, because whatever he's given her is already working. Her body isn't hers again, and she can't wipe away the tears that continue to fall.

"Now, I want you to stay here," Hoodie Guy says, standing up again. "We should have just enough time to hide the stiff and move the car before someone else comes along. You want my advice? Inhabit the role. Try to accept it."

He smiles again and then turns away, bringing his attention back to the dead man. From over his shoulder, he adds:

"We could be at this all night!"

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. A full list of his previous publications may be found at his author's site, if you are so inclined to know:

Author's page: <http://wintersauthor.azurewebsites.net/>

Sprinkled in with the Sugar | *Michael D. Davis*

I must say it was rather easy. I had most of the things I needed on hand before I even decided anything. The wine glass I used had been gathering dust for years, I don't even remember where we got it. The pot I broke it into was just one I don't use anymore, no special reason. To grind the shards down into tiny sprinkles of light I used a variety of items. Then I just mixed them into the frosting. We always have cupcakes for my son's birthday parties, that is if his father doesn't eat them all first.

Tethered to a Chatterbox | *Michael D. Davis*

Is it too horrible to say I want to be alone? Alone, nothing more, with my thoughts and no one else's. But he's always here, always around, chattering in my ear without end like a demented windsock. I want to kill him, mute him, make him stop, then I'll finally be alone. I'm going to have to be careful though, very careful with things being so complicated, one wrong move and I may die as well. But I have to try. He's talking again, I'm going to do it. However, it's going to be hard since we share a neck.

To Make and Care for A Teddy Bear | *Michael D. Davis*

It was after her mother died, I decided to do something special. I didn't have to but I wanted to. I have made stuffed animals in the past and this was no different. It's a teddy bear I'm making that I wish will bring her company in the night. I've stuffed it to the brim and sewed up the seams. Now it's in a box at her front door waiting to give her a hug and love her forever. I hope it will remind her of her mother since it's made of her mother's skin and has her mother's eyes.

Staring is Caring | *Michael D. Davis*

It seems like every day he sits across from me, just to stare. He is a slithery slimy stick-thin man with eyes that pierce into your deepest tissues. He wears a bowler hat, suit and a mustache trying to look like a gentleman. But it is his shadowed razor eyes that sets you on edge. They are watery blue but somehow darker than the midnight sky. His eyes hold your attention, eating at your soul with every look and blink. I don't know which one I hate more the left one, the right one or the one in the middle.

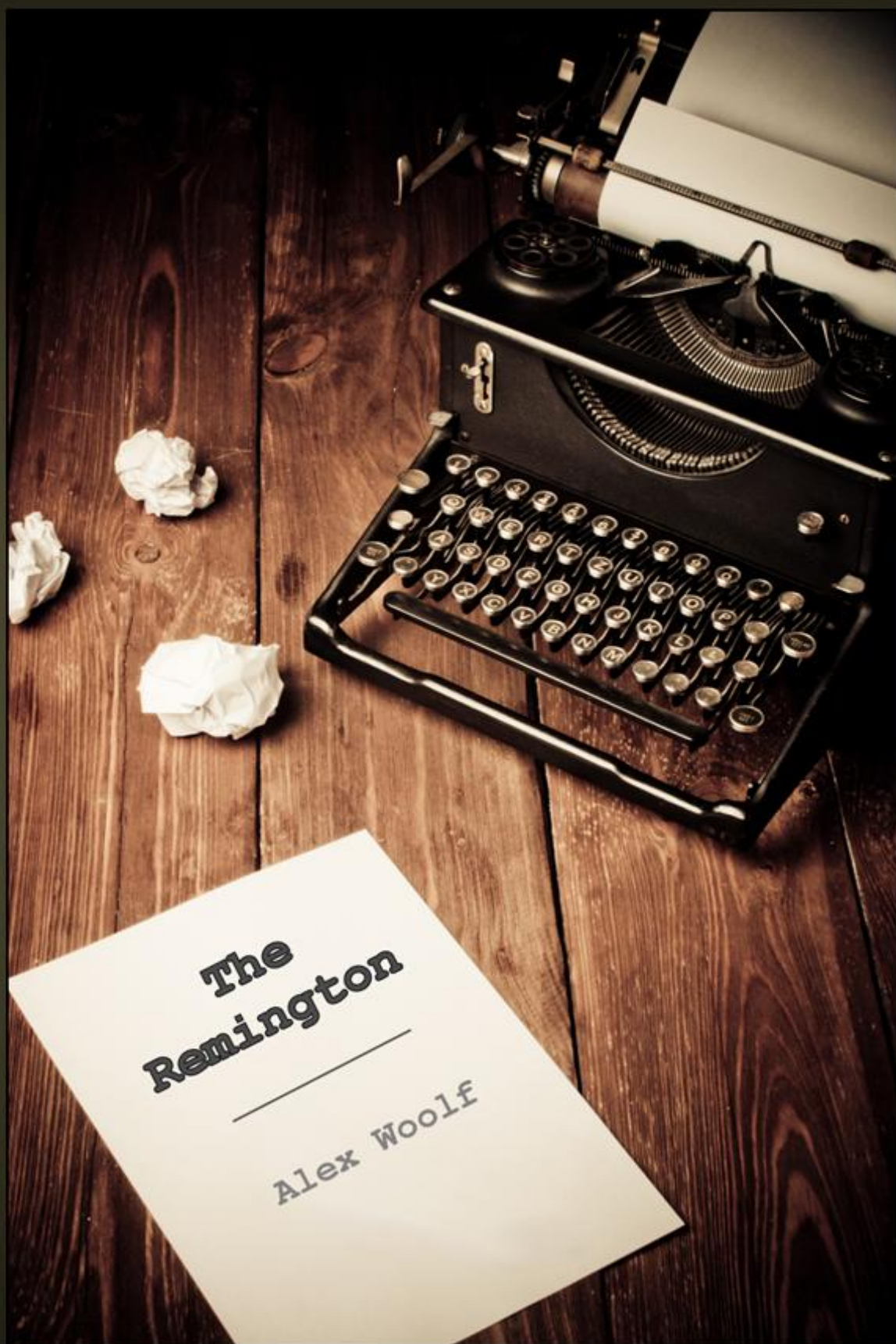
About the Author:

Michael D. Davis was born and raised in a small town in the heart of Iowa. Having written over thirty short stories, ranging in genre from comedy to horror from flash fiction to novella he continues in his accursed pursuit of a career in the written word.

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"...A splendidly comic tale that taps away at the keys to the creative process, whilst juggling parallel plots with a brilliantly deft touch..."



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Okay Miss Cooper, let's go back to the beginning. Exactly when did this thing start?

About three or four months ago. As you probably know from my file, I'm an aspiring hack. I pen articles for whoever'll pay me. It was late one night and I was at my computer, trying to make a deadline. I must have paused at some point and reached for my coffee mug, when I felt something brush the back of my hand. It was hardly anything, the feather touch of a cat's tail. But it was enough to make me freeze. I'm sure that was the start. I can't remember anything happening before that.

Did it feel hot or cold?

Hard to say. There was no particular temperature to it. Perhaps it was warm. It felt like a male touch, though. Even then I felt its maleness. There was something... exploratory about it, seductive, soft yet brazen, like a man brushing up against you, y'know, accidentally on purpose, trying to get your attention.

And what did you do?

Nothing. I got on with my article. I assumed it was some sort of communication error between my nerve endings and my brain. Something, maybe a fly, or a draft from the open window, that had been misinterpreted. But the next time it happened, I couldn't dismiss it so easily. That was a few nights later. I was in the kitchen, sitting at the table with soup bubbling on the stove, glass of merlot by my elbow, doing a sudoku, when I felt a stroking on my knuckles.

Was it hot or cold?

You do like your temperatures don't you, Doc? It was warm I suppose. More important than anything physical though was its emotional quality... it was tender, reassuring, almost avuncular. You'll be okay, it seemed to say. This loneliness will go.

And what did you do?

What do you think? I jumped up, jerked my hand away, then kept bashing at the place that had been touched, like I was trying to knock away an insect or leech that had clamped itself there. For ages, I kept rubbing the back of my hand like a mad person, rubbing it with my other hand or against my clothes. It kept happening though. I'd be hanging up the laundry, doing the dishes, watching TV, when I'd feel this touch against my skin. I'm almost sure it happened while I was sleeping, too. Mostly it touched my hand. Occasionally my arm. Once, while I was in the bath, I felt it against my cheek. At first I was totally spooked. I would run from the room screaming. It was so creepy and terrifying to be touched by something you couldn't see. But then, gradually, it became... less so. See, I never felt... threatened. The thing, whatever it was, was reaching out to me from somewhere – somewhere beyond sight or sound – but I never felt it wanted to hurt me. Strange to say, but it seemed protective, loving even. It was all really bizarre, and the most bizarre thing about it was that, after a while, I didn't mind. I know this sounds mad, but I actually began to look forward to these little touches. It made me feel... less alone.

Soon I began to notice different kinds of touch, each with their own meaning, almost like a rudimentary language. There was the soft brush that came upon me like a greeting, a gentle enquiry into how I was feeling. Then there was the lighthearted tickle that would make me blush or laugh. Soon after that I'd feel the gentle squeeze of affection, and the firm hand denoting loyalty. Occasionally I would receive a caress that seemed almost wistful or melancholy, as if it longed for something more from this – this thing, that began to seem to both of us like... a relationship.

A relationship?

Yes. It happened quite gradually. And as it did, the touches came to seem more like human contact. They began to acquire a solidity, a texture. I could feel the texture of skin. You were asking earlier about temperature. Well now I could feel real warmth, the warmth of living flesh. Blood warmth. We began to enjoy a kind of intimacy. The unique and wonderful intimacy of clasped hands. I felt it, you see, as a hand, with actual fingers, exploring and intertwining with my own.

You experienced this touch only as a hand? Not as any other body part?

No. Just a hand. A single hand. But it went everywhere. Not immediately. I'm not the sort to let a strange hand wander as it pleases. It took time, weeks maybe. Like any physical relationship, there had to be a build-up of trust, of understanding, on both sides. Because I sensed from the start that it also wanted to take things slowly, that this relationship was as strange and new to the hand as it was to me. It was a right hand – I worked that out fairly quickly. And for a long time, it just held my left. I'd feel the dry warmth of its palm, and its thumb gently nuzzling me above my wrist, and I'd nuzzle it back, and it felt incredibly comforting. There was no need for conversation or meals or any of those human activities that so often get in the way of true intimacy. There was just this endless nuzzling, this nestling in

the warm, cosy hollow of this hand, this male hand, that would eventually send me into a drowsy, very pleasant kind of trance.

Over the next few weeks, the hand began to explore further afield, and by then I was happy for it to do so. Eager even. For we knew each other by this time, the hand and I. We were on an adventure, and excited to see where it would lead. Part of the wonder, the thrill, was that I couldn't see the hand that was exploring me, so had no idea where it would go next. It spent ages, maybe an hour, on part of my lower thigh, before travelling downwards to explore my knee, ankle and foot. Briefly, its warmth materialized on the curve of my waist and then, quite unexpectedly, it was on my breast, fondling and gently squeezing, my nipples growing hard under its attentions. And then it stopped and withdrew, leaving me breathless and somewhat scared. That was that for a while. We both felt we'd gone about as far as we were comfortable with.

Did you ever feel this hand while you were out of the house?

No, and I was quite relieved about that. As I'm sure you know, Doctor, I was supplementing my income from journalism with a job as a part-time teaching assistant in a primary school. It would have been distracting to say the least if the hand was to come upon me while I was with the children. The hand was a home thing, a private thing. Of course I didn't tell any of my work colleagues about it. How could I? What would they think? But that didn't stop me, during quiet moments in the staff room, from fantasizing about its sensitive touch on different parts of my body. Actually I was in the middle of one such fantasy, and so may have been looking a little flushed, when Gerry first spoke to me.

You mean Gerald Harrison?

Yes. He was, as I'm sure you know, a teacher at the school where I worked, but not someone I'd taken much notice of before that day. He wasn't handsome, and his manner was awkward, but he had, I soon discovered, a good heart. He told me that a few of the teachers were going out for a drink that evening, and would I like to join them. This was the first time I'd been invited out for anything, and I immediately said yes. The social, I soon worked out, was a ruse. The only other member of our party was Mrs. Finstanley, the special needs coordinator, and she soon made her excuses. Gerry turned out to be a lot less awkward after a few drinks. He had a self-deprecating manner, a professorial vagueness in the way he expressed himself, that I found charming. I returned home, feeling merry and a little drunk. The hand, it turned out, was waiting for me on the sofa, and it was – how can I put it? – a little cold.

You mean its temperature?

No, I'm talking about its attitude. It registered its presence with a squeeze, and not a gentle one. Being in a playful mood, I picked it up, something I'd never done before, and placed it against my cool cheek, trying to warm myself up. The hand was inert, unresponsive. So I began to kiss it – a kiss on its back and on each of its fingers. This seemed to do the trick, for I noticed the fingers curling with pleasure at the pressure of my lips. I wasn't shy that night. For the first time in our relationship, I took control, and I went for it. We had sex.

You had... sex?

Yes. I won't go into details. I'm sure you can imagine the process. All I'll say is that the hand knew exactly what to do. This could not have been its first time. It was strange not to have a body to hold or a face to look at. I needed someone to imagine during our lovemaking, a man to go with the hand, so to speak, and so I visualised someone, but it wasn't Gerry or any of my ex-boyfriends. It wasn't someone I could ever describe... After that night, things changed between me and the hand. Our relationship became less of a fragile, tentative thing of wonder, and more of a conventional romance, full of mutual expectation and understanding. It also felt a lot more equal, with each of us, at different times, taking control. We cuddled, we kissed, we made love, we nuzzled. Sometimes we just hung out, not even touching, but close. And so it went on, for another month. I was happy during this period, though this was probably down to not thinking too much about what I was doing. The hand, you see, is a creature of pure sensation. It doesn't think or plan or regret, it just is, and when you're with it for long enough, you become a bit like that, too. If I'd had a proper talk with myself during those weeks, or maybe had a confidante I could open up to about this, if the words had ever actually been expressed – *you, Rachel Cooper, are having a relationship with an invisible hand* – then I might have come to my senses sooner, and this whole tragedy could have been avoided. At some level, I must have known the absurdity, the wrongness, of what I was doing, because when the moment of my awakening finally came, it seemed so obvious.

You're talking about the night in question?

Yes. The night of my second date with Gerry. For one reason or another, Gerry and I hadn't managed another date since our first one. We were both keen, but busy. I had magazine deadlines that tied me up most evenings, and Gerry had family matters to deal with – a sickly sister. But finally we found an evening when we were both free. Gerry booked us a table at my favourite Italian restaurant. During the meal, I listened to him, but more to the sound of his

voice than the actual words. I *looked* at him, too – enjoyed the changing colour of his eyes as he grew more voluble. It was wonderful, I realized, to listen to a man and to look at his face, as he spoke to me. Much as I loved the hand, it was, in the end, just one part of a body, and not even a visible one at that. I'd been lonely before I met Gerry. I had craved companionship, and for a while the hand had filled the void in my life. But the hand could never be enough for me in the long term. I was a human being, with a mind and a heart, with eyes and ears, and I could only ever be fully satisfied by another human being. By the time I reached this conclusion, I was on my third glass of wine, and so wasn't really thinking about details such as how I was going to break this news to my five-fingered lover, or what kind of reaction I might expect from it. As it happened, no breaking of the news would be required on my part. Gerry forced the issue by walking me to my door, then inviting himself in for coffee. I was nervous, but felt it was probably a good thing for the hand to learn the truth sooner rather than later. The hand and I would always be friends, lovers even, but it couldn't have me exclusively.

I sat next to Gerry on the sofa as he sipped his coffee. I couldn't feel the hand. It seemed to have made itself scarce. I assumed that, in its own wise and sensitive way, the hand had intuited the situation and decided to give me some space. I was relieved. Perhaps this would all work out quite amicably after all. At some point, Gerry put down his coffee and placed his hand on mine – on my left, as it happened. He kissed me, and I kissed him back. It was all very sweet and pleasant, until he suddenly let go of me and started making gurgling noises. Drawing back, I saw that he had both his hands at his throat and was pulling at something there. He'd gone a very strange colour. "Hand!" I shouted. "Let him go!" It was the first time I'd ever spoken to the hand, and it didn't listen. Next thing, Gerry was dead.

The hand killed him?

Yes.

Thank you, Miss Cooper.

Is that all?

Yes.

Tell me, Doctor, do you believe any of this?

I've been called in here by the police to make an assessment of your mental state. I'll make my report to them.

But do you believe me?

"So what's your verdict, Doctor Corrigan?" asked DC Brown a short while later.

"She's not delusional," Corrigan replied. "Her story is internally consistent and rational, even if utterly implausible. It's been carefully worked out in advance. She's clearly a talented writer, and knows how to construct a narrative.

"So she killed him?"

"If you're sure there was no one else in the house that evening?"

"We've established that."

"Then yes, she definitely killed him."

"And you're prepared to state that in court."

"I am."

"Thank you, Doctor."

The two men shook hands, and Doctor Corrigan departed the police station. It was as he was walking towards his car that he began to feel an increasing tightness around his neck.

About the Author:

Alex Woolf writes children's books for a living, and horror stories for fun. A big fan of the 1946 classic, *The Beast with Five Fingers*, Alex hopes his little tale might be seen as a worthy addition to the niche genre of hand-based horror.

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Amazon page: [Alex Woolf](#)

Victoria slammed the heavy door behind her as she stomped into the narrow alley behind Luigi's. With fingers trembling in the frigid night air, it took her two tries before she was able to light her cigarette. She jerked her coat zipper up to her neck and huddled against the closed door, sucking on the cigarette as if it were her own personal heater. As she exhaled, her breath steamed into the cold air, braided itself into the discarded smoke, and danced off into the night.

"Oof!" she stumbled backwards as the door behind her opened with a jolt and a rush of warmth.

"Look, you don't have to fall into my arms. I told you I'm ready when you are for that date." Alonzo winked at her, keeping his strong hands on her waist long after she had righted herself.

Damn, he smelled nice. Like pine trees, and chocolate, and...

She took a step back, mumbling, "That shit doesn't work on me". She searched his deep brown, flecked with gold on the edges, eyes. *God, he was gorgeous.* She looked down at the cigarette between her fingers and cleared her throat. "Go try that smooth shit out on one of your other girls."

Alonzo held his hands up in mock defeat, "Well, if you won't go out with me, can you at least gimme a light?" He extracted a pack of cigarettes from the black apron around his narrow waist and tapped them on his palm.

"So, did you hear what happened in Florida?" he asked as the lighter clicked shut with a flick of his wrist.

"The Mars shuttle? Yeah, they said everyone was dead."

"I heard they were blue." He took a drag off his cigarette. When he returned her lighter, his fingers brushed against hers, sending lightning bolts up her arm.

"Blue? Like...a smurf?"

"Yeah, but just their faces."

"Weird, do-"

The door to the restaurant jerked open and a thin woman poked her head out, "Guys, are you coming back to work anytime this year? You only get five minutes for a break, you know."

"Calm your tits, Amanda, we're coming," Alonzo winked at Victoria before following the hostess back into the restaurant. She rubbed her cigarette out on the brick wall and shoved the remaining half back into the pack before going in.

Halfway through the dinner rush, when Victoria had just come through the kitchen doors with a tray full of Chianti-braised short ribs and potato gnocchi, a blood-curdling scream came from the patio. Patrons froze with their forks and glasses halfway to their mouths. The bartender halted in the middle of pouring a double of scotch, the amber drops unnoticed as they splashed out of the small glass and onto the bar below. Amanda stood in front of the seating chart with the dry-erase marker poised in midair, threatening to dry out and render itself useless.

A young man burst through the front doors, his long leather jacket flapping behind him in the wind like a cape, before collapsing in front of the hostess stand and breaking the spell. Alonzo looked over his own food-laden tray and made eye contact with Victoria.

Before the young man fell to the floor, everyone in the restaurant had seen his face.

Covered in sores, some seeping pus through jagged broken skin, others on the verge of bursting, the guy's face was a bright blue landmine.

A little boy, not a day over four years old, was standing just inside the front door next to a man and a woman waiting for their seat, his hands holding each of theirs. He stared up at them through wayward strands of orange-red hair, eyes wide while they both clawed at their faces.

The chaos around them intensified. Pedestrians from outside were running into the restaurant, while patrons and servers were running out. Most had no idea where they were going or what they were running from. An elderly woman clawing at her cheeks bumped into Victoria, causing her to drop her tray onto the table behind her, narrowly missing the middle-aged couple who had sprung up from their seats. Alonzo ran towards her, gripped her elbow, and pulled her towards the rear of the restaurant where the door to the wine cellar stood open like a beacon in the fog.

As the heavy wooden door slammed shut, it was as if someone had taken a dimmer switch to the insanity only a few feet away. Muffled screams whispered through the door into the cellar, and they could no longer hear chairs and tables falling over as bodies and furniture crashed together. Once Victoria's eyes adjusted to the dim interior, she saw waiters, cooks, the bussers, and a couple of strange faces that she assumed were diners huddled together. All eyes were on the large door, vibrating from a steady pounding of fists on the other side.

Leon leaned against a large cabinet and pushed, not noticing as his chef's hat fell to the floor. James, the bartender, leaned against it with him and together they managed to slide the heavy cabinet in front of the door. Two wine bottles rolled off the top shelf and crashed to the floor, throwing shards of glass and liquid across the ceramic tile. Reds. Heavy scents of caramel, black currant, and wafts of something earthy permeated the air.

The small crowd in the wine cellar moved towards the far wall. As far away as they could get from the screams on the other side, the broken glass on the floor, and the sticky sweet aromas filling the small space. They huddled against the wall of bottles, speaking only in whispers, not wanting to reveal their hiding place to whatever terrors lurked on the other side.

"What is that?"

"You think it's like Florida?"

"They said everyone was *dead* when the shuttle came back."

Victoria remained silent, barely noticing the warmth from Alonzo's hand as he held hers tightly.

Alonzo jerked his free hand towards the back of the room, gesturing for everyone to shut up, as he leaned against the hard door. The edges of the cabinet dug into his hip while he strained to press his ear against the smooth wooden surface.

Silence filled the space as echoes of screams faded off into the distance. Alonzo braced himself, released Victoria's hand, and pushed against the cabinet blocking the door.

"No! Don't open it!" An older woman with short white hair, perfectly coifed, screamed at him. Drawn butter dripped from her chin onto a lobster bib still tied around her neck. A small red-headed little boy stood next to her, his eyes wide with wonder.

"I'm just going to peek, see what's going on." Alonzo paused, staring into Victoria's eyes. She nodded. With a groan, he moved the cabinet a few inches to the side. "See, I can't even open the door all the way. We're fine. Just a few more inches".

He leaned into the small gap as the crowd held their breath behind him. The back of his head cocked to one side, then the other before he pulled himself back into the room.

"Nothing. There's no one out there." When Alonzo turned around, all eyes were on him, and the bib-adorned woman was crying.

"What? What's wrong?"

Victoria reached towards him before pulling her hands together against her chest and taking a step back. "Zo, your face..."

"What? What's wrong with my face?"

Bright blue patches had spread across his forehead and were inching down his nose.

The blue skin festered and sizzled as it spread across his cheeks.

"Get it off!" He cried, scraping at his face with his fingernails, but the rash ate its way across his skin, devouring everything in its path. Angry pink flesh shone through the blue ooze and dark blood. That, too, dissolved, leaving a bright white cheekbone to poke through into the soft light of the wine cellar. With a final, gut-wrenching wail, he collapsed on the floor at Victoria's feet as the blue fizzled out, its job now complete.

She dropped to her feet and put a hand on his chest. *It wasn't possible, he couldn't be...gone. He was just holding her hand not five minutes before.*

Victoria rubbed the back of her hand against her face, smearing the tears across her cheek. She stood back up and turned around to face the small crowd. They were all staring, at her, their eyes wide with fear.

"What?"

She could feel a white-hot pain inching across her forehead. As one, the crowd pressed against each other, unable to get away from Victoria, and what was left of Alonzo.

All but a small red-headed little boy, who stood away from the others, eyes twinkling with mischief, and a grin slowly spreading across his cherubic face.

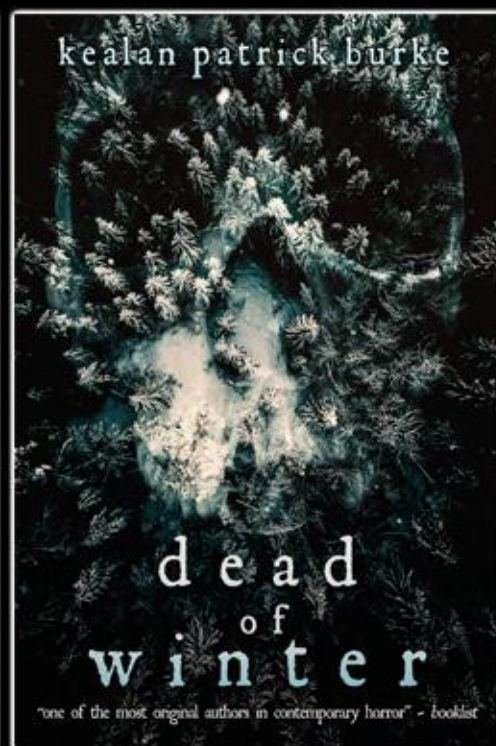
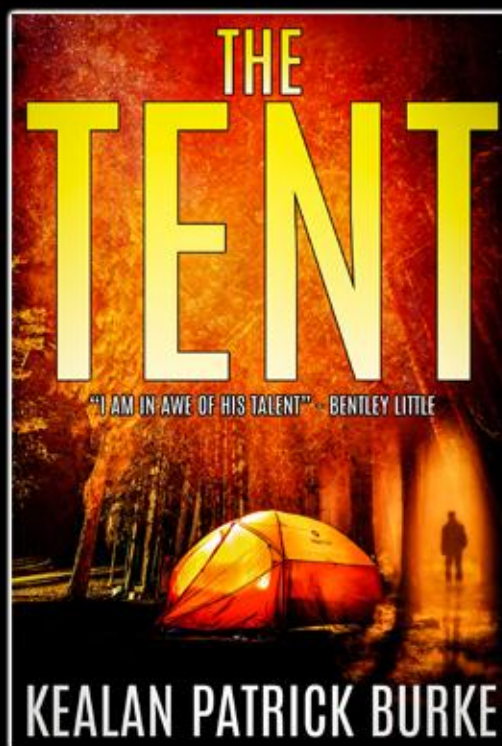
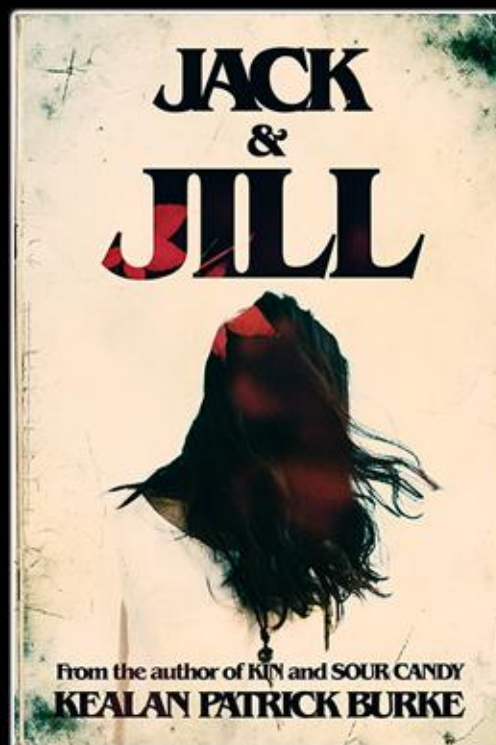
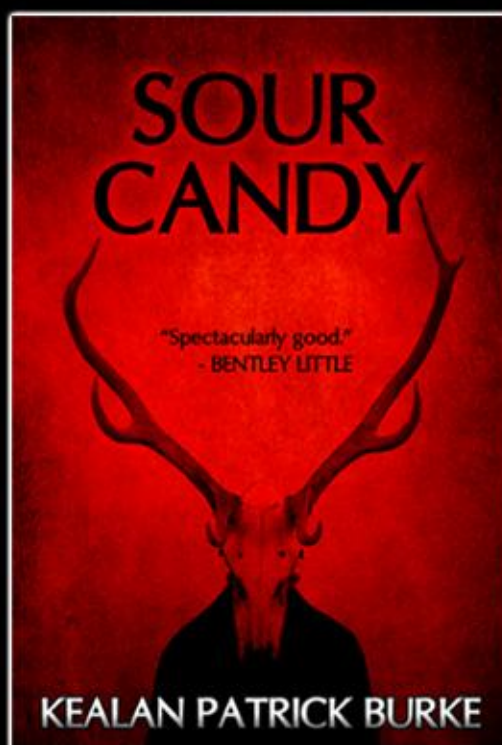
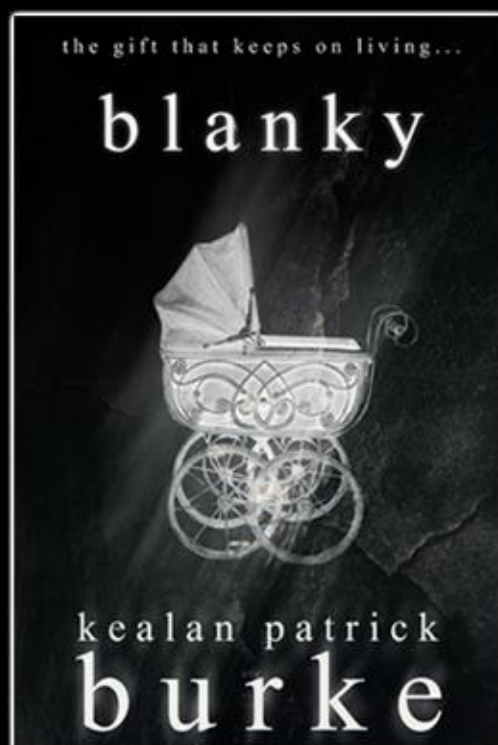
About the Author:

Holly Rae Garcia is a professional photographer for a chemical company on the Texas Coast. Her short story, Flap, will be published in July of 2019 for The Bookends Review Online Journal. Her micro fiction, No Longer Missing, has been published for the 81 Words Project. Holly is currently in the beta phase of her first novel, an adult psychological thriller.

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BOOKS BY KEALAN PATRICK BURKE



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"Some people talk about others out of concern, but your gossiping is malicious," Tessie said, frowning at Becky the Blabbermouth. "You've been saying things that make me look bad even though they're not true."

Becky denied everything, despite the presence of the people she'd blab-gabbed to. Of course, her lies surprised no one and were the main reason she was considered the bane of the office.

The staff sometimes called her a rat behind her back. She even resembled one, with small, beady eyes which shifted back and forth, a pointed chin under a round face, and a smattering of whiskers above her upper lip. Scurrying rather than walking, she often dangled her hands limply in front of her chest, and her protruding ears were said jokingly to double as satellite dishes, which rotated to pick up things that didn't concern her.

Staying on constant lookout for proverbial fires—anything she could snoop into and exaggerate—her life revolved around drama and intrigue, most existing only in her mind. She seemed convinced beyond all reason that the barest hint of smoke denoted a 10-alarm fire, and that fire existed where smoke did not. If she couldn't find a real issue, she invented one. Her constant blithering and blathering outside the scope of reality had been responsible for numerous problems.

Her lies caused Garland to lose out on the promotion he'd worked long and hard for. She'd hinted he'd stolen design ideas, despite his concept being unique and fully his.

Her lies had Ted's wife, Marge, thinking he'd been unfaithful with a girlfriend. In fact, the phone call Becky had overheard him making was to a boutique concerning a gift for his wife, *not* about cheating.

Her lies led to elderly Leisa being investigated for drug activity. Becky had reported that the heart medicine Leisa dropped by accident was actually an illegal drug she planned to sell.

Garland, Ted, and Leisa weren't Becky's only victims. They were merely the topmost layer of frost on the tip of the iceberg.

Tessie had become the focus of malicious yapping three days prior, after she'd missed work. The Blab Queen had noticed and followed her usual pattern. When Tessie returned today, her coworkers had unexpected things to say to her. One congratulated her on expecting, a second for winning the lottery. Two offered condolences, one regarding her abortion, the second over her boyfriend dumping her.

Taking a deep breath now, Tessie pursued her confrontation. "I *know* you said negative things about me because more than one person told me." Noting Becky's wide eyes, nose twitches, and sniffles—her innocent act—Tessie clenched her jaw but maintained her cool. "I'm not pregnant. Never have been. I haven't had an abortion. My boyfriend didn't dump me. I wasn't even in a relationship with anyone. I certainly haven't won the lottery, although I'd love to and at least that's pleasant compared to the other junk."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Becky said. "Maybe you're upset about your—uh—recent problems." Darting a knowing look around the gathered staff, she hinted at hidden negatives.

"Recent problems?" Tessie repeated. "I was *sick*!" She quickly fished around in her purse. "Hah!" Holding the sheet she'd looked for, she handed it to Sarah, who was her boss and staunchest supporter. "Here's my proof, not that I need any. As I told you, I had strep. And you can show that to whomever you want to."

Sarah skimmed the hospital discharge paper and passed it to another employee who, in turn, handed it to another until it had circulated the office. Becky—her claim of disinterest contrasting with her avidly-gleaming eyes—couldn't get her grubby paws on it despite trying to grab it several times. Everyone withheld the sheet from her on purpose until all of them had seen it first.

Finally holding the page, Becky examined it closely, even checking the back.

Tessie wondered if the Mistress of Mayhem believed she'd find damaging information hidden on the flip side.

"Where's the rest?" Becky demanded.

"Rest?" Sarah responded before Tessie could.

"Yeah. The lab results. Drug screen. Medicines."

Tone biting, Jada interjected, "You *need* more for some reason?" She also had personal cause to resent Becky. Two months before, Jada had been on the phone with her mother, sharing how her son with cerebral palsy had rolled out of bed and bumped his head. Eavesdropping—as usual—Becky had reported child abuse to Child Protective Services. Although CPS invalidated the report and everything turned out fine, everyone knew Jada remained furious that her son had been put through questioning and needless stress.

"Yeah. I want—." Noting numerous eyes on her, Becky shut up.

"*Is Sneaky Schemer plotting more poisonous lies?*" Tessie wondered. She seethed but made herself breathe slowly—in, out, in, out—and kept her tone mild. "Drug screen? Lab results? You mean the test showing I had *strep*!"

Shrugging, Becky walked away, the discharge paper still clutched in her hand.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Tessie asked, but Becky didn't slow down or look back. "*Becky!* You're holding something that belongs to me." Tessie spoke each word as though dropping a lead weight. "I'd like it back right now." She wouldn't trust Becky with her dog's poop, much less that sheet with her social security number and emergency contacts on it.

Garland stepped out of his office. "Did I hear you have something that's not yours?" Closest to the office troublemaker, he plucked the paper from her fingers. "This, perhaps?" Raising his voice, he added, "Why don't you step into my office, Becky? Sarah, would you join us, please."

Afterward, Becky shot an evil look toward Garland's door and stomped into the bathroom. She was furious about being chastised, and it was all that goody-two-shoes Tessie's fault. No way was she as squeaky clean as she pretended. Her hospital form might've been confiscated, but Becky had another plan, and thought Ramona, her pal in Human Resources, might help her.

Yanking her cell phone from her pocket, she peeked under stall doors to be sure she was alone, then locked the bathroom's outer door so no one could enter. Cell phones weren't allowed during business hours. In fact, she'd reported several people for breaking that particular rule.

After ending her call to Ramona, Becky gloated and hissed, "Let's see how you like *that*, Tessie!"

Becky peed but huffed in frustration the minute she turned to look at the toilet. Why didn't the company get ones that flushed automatically? The owners made tons of money, so cost wasn't an issue. Weren't automatic toilets more sanitary? People didn't have to touch the handles and chance getting pee, shit, and germs on themselves. She ignored the fact she never washed her own hands, spreading germs as freely as roaches and bunnies reproduced.

The commode quivered behind her. With her back to it, she didn't notice, but she did hear a low, deep sound—guttural like a dog's growl. Turning, she glanced around the stall. Nothing. The growl grew louder and seemed to come from in front of her. She peered behind the trash can and toilet. Nothing. Was something in another stall? Had someone brought a dog to work?

Becky gasped when the toilet lid she'd shut popped open, then closed. The toilet moved and she whimpered. Backing up, she bumped into the stall door and whirled, her frantic fingers fighting the latch. Finally yanking the door open, she moved toward the sinks, but something tugged on her skirt from behind. Glancing backward, she shrieked.

The commode had sprouted ceramic paws and advanced one slow, menacing step at a time. It walked like her brother's aggressive Pittweiler did before attacking another dog.

The lid popped open, closed, did it again and again like a hungry mouth, and the toilet continued to move toward her.

Becky shrieked again—louder. Stumbling toward the outer door, she couldn't open the lock. It was stuck. Terrified, she looked behind herself and thought her heart would thump out of her chest. The toilet had grown to her height and now leaned forward, the bowl sporting long jagged teeth. She knew the massive, horror-show Pac Man was coming for her. Worse, more toilets had come to life and were coming out of other stalls. "*Help,*" Becky wailed. "*They're gonna eat me!*"

When Becky barreled out of the bathroom and down the hall, screaming like a maniac, the staff looked on wide-eyed. Some giggled. The torn hole in the back of Becky's skirt revealed her granny-panties, which displayed a matching hole and naked flesh. However, everyone forgot the sight of her pale backside when a toilet as tall as a donkey pursued her.

"*Help!*" Becky screeched.

Garland came out of his office to investigate all the commotion. Once he saw the woman being chased, he pursed his lips, retreated into his office, and locked the door. He grabbed his phone and dialed a number he knew by heart. "We got another one!"

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas, and thinks she was born with a book in her hands. She writes fantasy, horror/thriller, romance, children's stories, and sci-fi. She likes traveling, music, photography, movies, and interesting tales. Gabriella loves forests, mountains, and back roads which might lead who knows where. She has a weakness for lasagna, garlic bread, tacos, cheese, and chocolate, but not necessarily in that order.

Facebook: [Gabriella Balcom - Lone Star Author](#)

The rain pelted heavily on my back as I ran, searching for the closest place of refuge through the haze of water clouding my vision. The storm had come without warning, and I shuddered at the cold.

The Conqueror Inn was the closest in sight, and the worn metal sign swayed angrily in the gusts sweeping across the pavement. The warm lights from within beckoned in promise of refuge in the tempest, and I was the moth unable to resist the call.

I pushed through the heavy wooden door, relief flooding me at the warm air. The door slipped from my soaked hand and shut with a loud bang and a few patrons glanced up, calm expressions only showing faint annoyance at my violent entrance. I stretched aching limbs as icy rivulets raced down my spine, then removed my scarf to pat down my hair with the already soaked material. My eyes alighted on an empty table across the room, the fireplace next to it offering the next step in my recovery. The weather had warned of mild showers and cool temperatures, not the raging storm that had engulfed me on my way to the psychologist.

With a sigh, I slumped into the leather seat and inhaled the scent of old leather and wood, then looked up as a figure loomed over me. A waitress. Haloed by light from the lantern behind her, huffed in irritation. I cleared my throat and tried not to stare. She was dressed in clothes that belonged to another time entirely.

Is this a renaissance thing?

She took my order of ale with a plastered-on smile, fatigue as evident on her face as I was sure mine mirrored.

Only five other people were scattered across the room, one couple's lively conversation managing to rise above the tempest outside. All were dressed strangely, as though they took part in a medieval festival of some sort. The place had a vintage essence to it, only oil lamps illuminating each table from above, not including the corner to my left.

Apart for the occasional flicker of light from neighboring flames, that table was shrouded in darkness. An odd movement captured my attention, and I let my eyes adjust, waiting for the right flame to illuminate the empty table and settle the feeling of being watched.

The more I stared, however, the more I realized there was someone there, a man, a thick beard, and eyes glinting at me.

I jolted upright, and a deep, slow chuckle emanated from the dark.

"Did I scare you?" the man purred.

Embarrassment washed over me and I decided to keep quiet, unwilling to admit it.

A hand appeared, and a flame flashed until a cigarette was lit, the first plume of smoke spiraling into nothing.

"So quiet. Tell me, do you always run in the rain?" His voice was velvet, gruff and smooth all at once, and my instincts already screamed in fear.

Suddenly nervous, I cleared my throat and wiped my hands on my jacket, wishing I was home. Safe.

"Do you always sit in the dark?" I finally replied, the high tone of my voice betraying my nerves.

At first, no answer came, only the slow, breathy release of smoke. I gave up searching for his face and chose to stare out to the room instead, fingers rhythmically tapping the table. My eyes met those of the barkeep, who gave a nervous glance in the direction of the dark table before turning away and disappearing through a door.

"Some like it in the dark."

Shuddering and moving slightly closer to the fire, I opened my mouth to answer, but my brain could conjure up no suitable answer. He chuckled, but it sounded much too deep.

"Have you ever just sat in a quiet room, closed your eyes, and felt that deafening silence like a far-off scream?"

I swallowed hard.

"What-"

"That's how they talk. How they play with their next victim. What you hear then, my friend, is the echo of a hunt," he said, teeth snapping together at the last word.

Heart rattling, I squirmed in my seat in an attempt to ease the unease seeping into my bones, but his fixed gaze from the dark held me prisoner.

"W-who are *they*?"

A chair creaked with the act of someone leaning forward.

"They have no name. But they live in the cracks between worlds, waiting. Watching for someone to get close enough. To listen."

It was suddenly too quiet and I glanced around. Mouths opened and closed, and water hammered the earth outside, but I heard nothing.

My body started fighting to breathe, as though all oxygen was suddenly sucked from the room.

My gaze went back to the table, and the man's face was in the light, flames dancing in his predator eyes and a malicious grin contorting his features.

His lips curled into a grin, slowly revealing needle-like teeth.

Run.

Within seconds, I was in a dead sprint outside that only ended when my apartment door firmly locked behind me. My lungs desperately sucked in with air in large gulps, my mind reassuring itself that I was simply spooked by a simple story.

The next day, out of curiosity, I retraced my steps to where I found the Inn, but Denny's Dry Cleaners was in its place. Stupid relief washed over me. Must have been a nightmare. While I stared into the small shop, I saw lightning spread through the rapidly gathering clouds reflected in the window.

Another storm?

My eyes narrowed.

There.

With each strike, *The Conqueror Inn* briefly flashed in the dry cleaner's place, the man from last night watching him from the other side of the window in promise of malice. This time no lanterns lit the inside. Glass is thin.

Some like it in the dark.

The sign screeched loudly on rusted hinges as the wind picked up and grey clouds cast deep shadows.

When the first drops fell, I was already running.

About the Author:

Alisa Willemse is an avid writer and artist based in the city of Pretoria, South-Africa. She adores writing flash fiction, short stories, and poetic prose, but suspense and horror have always been of special interest. She especially draws on nature and psychology for inspiration and seeks to transport the reader into the world that resides in her mind with mere words.

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The Amulet | Greg Fewer

Income from the estate no longer supported Lady Agnes, but seeing the gold amulet in her great-great-grandmother's portrait, she recalled the story that it adorned her corpse. Agnes resolved to seize the amulet for herself.

Crowbar in hand, Agnes unlocked the family crypt's wrought iron gate and pushed it inwards, the metal screeching in protest. Finding the coffin, she peeled back the lead lining and prised off the lid. Gaggling at the stench, Agnes ripped the amulet from the fleshy corpse's neck and scrutinised it, but a cold hand grasped her wrist, a voice hissing "No, dear – that's mine!"

About the Author:

Greg Fewer has had flash fiction published in *Cuento Magazine*, *Page & Spine*, *Trembling With Fear* and *Workshop* (@TETWorkshop). The Amulet was originally published in *Trembling With Fear* in December 2018.

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The hotel had been derelict for more than twenty years. Sited on a hillside at the edge of the Tyrolean mountain village, facing South into both the summer and the winter sun it should have been a goldmine for its owners, but over the years things had gone wrong. Accidents, key staff leaving suddenly, outbreaks of food poisoning, plumbing and heating failures, had all contributed to its poor reputation and lack of bookings. Finally, the owners had declared bankruptcy, and abandoned it.

Now the hotel brooded on its hillside. Through smashed windows passers-by could see the walls sprayed with graffiti, the empty indoor swimming pool piled with rubbish. The unkempt garden was currently covered with eighteen inches of snow, as was the roof, icicles hung from the blocked gutters in stalactitic clusters.

It was a Friday afternoon when Conrad, the surveyor, drove up and parked his Audi TT in the hotel's empty car park. He approached the front doors with the glove from his right-hand dangling from his mouth as he struggled to extract the hotel keys from the zipped pocket of his puffer jacket. Carrying his iPad and ultrasonic tape measure under his left arm, he unlocked the doors and made his way inside. There would still be enough light left to complete the initial survey for the new owner's architect. He would only need a couple of hours to take the necessary measurements and make rough sketches.

Conrad had always been sensitive to 'atmospheres,' and as soon as he stepped over the threshold, he felt uncomfortable. Several times, as he walked around the upper floor, he heard small noises that made him look back over his shoulder, there was never anything to be seen but he became progressively more jumpy. He continued to take his measurements and sketch the layout but he worked more quickly. His final task was to inspect the first-floor sun balcony. Holding up his iPad he poked his head out of a broken picture window to take some photographs, but as he withdrew it a large piece of glass that had been attached to the upper part of the frame, fell and smashed onto the floor just in front of him, it had nearly decapitated him. He decided to leave immediately. Anyway, he had enough information to make a start on the formal drawings back at his office in Innsbruck, after the weekend.

Conrad made his second visit a week later, this time his task was to measure and sketch the ground floor. He was consulting his digital tape measure, and wasn't paying full attention to his footing, when he stepped on a rotten patch of flooring and fell through up to his armpits, dangling above the water-filled cellar. As he struggled to clamber back up, he imagined lying in the cold stinking water, possibly with a broken leg. Nobody at the office would miss him until the next Monday as this was to be the last stop on his way home, and he lived alone. He would have died of hypothermia before they found him. The shock of his near miss unnerved him. He decided it was time to leave, he hurried down the corridor, locked the main doors as he left and drove away.

The hotel brooded on its hillside.

A week later, Conrad made his last visit. He expected it to be brief, there was no need to go inside, he just needed to measure the garden boundaries and the external dimensions of the main structure. He was working at the back of the building when he heard a faint sound above him and saw a flurry of snow as it drifted down in front of him. He looked up at just the right moment for the falling icicle, that had detached itself from the gutter two storeys above him, to plunge into his right eye, burst through the thin spheroid bone at the back of the socket, pass through the pulpy tissue of his brain, and stop as it struck the occipital plate at the back of his skull.

Conrad's body locked rigidly, fingers extended, large muscles trembling. After a few seconds he fell forward, lay twitching in the snow and was eventually still. The icicle inside Conrad's head slowly melted and dripped away. There was a fresh fall of snow and the police didn't find Conrad's frozen body for several days.

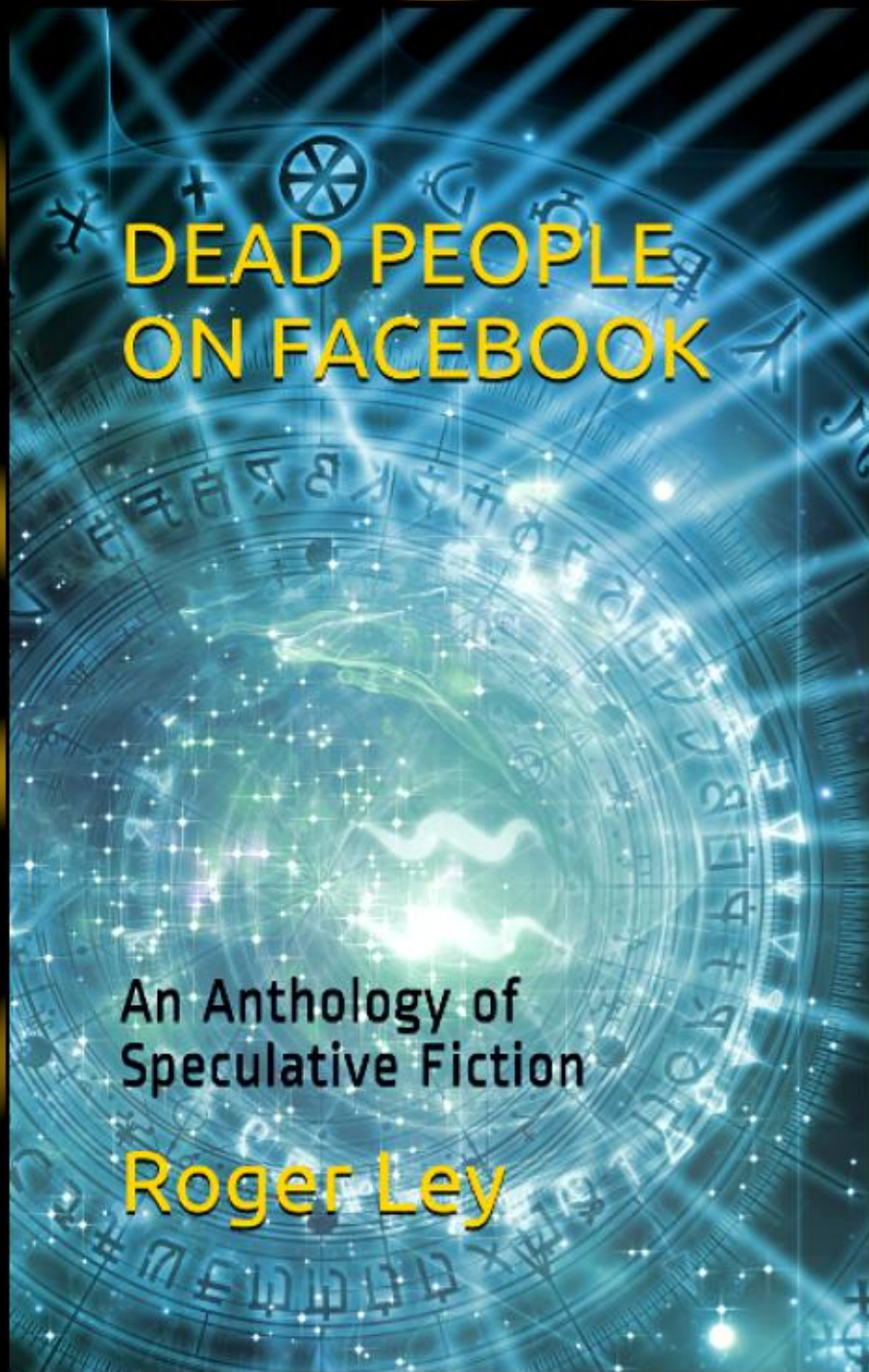
In the morgue, after the body had thawed, the pathologist examined the wound. There was no evidence of shock effects to the tissue from the passage of a bullet, no cuts from a sharp-edged implement, say a knife or ice axe. In the end she could only state the cause of death as 'penetration of the brain by a blunt object approximately 15mm in diameter.' There was no evidence of foul play, no defensive wounds, no evidence of a struggle, no weapon and no suspects to interview. After a few weeks the police halted their investigations, the coroner recorded Conrad's death as 'unnatural' and released the body. His boss and a few workmates attended the sad little funeral, he had no close relatives.

The hotel continued to brood silently on its hillside.

Two weeks later, Conrad's newly promoted deputy arrived at the hotel, intent on completing the survey. Oscar parked his Volkswagen in the car park, he didn't think the measurements would take long, but by the time he'd finished snow had started falling heavily, so he decided to wait inside the hotel. He knew that the snow ploughs would drive through as soon as the snow stopped and, with luck, he'd be able to follow one back to the main road to Innsbruck.

He unlocked the front doors and stepped inside.

*Most of the stories in this book were published, podcast or broadcast in the year 2018.
It is a collection of stories featuring various speculative genres: fantasy, horror,
humour and science fiction; there is also a little magic and one romance.*



Available on Amazon!

Martin Riley was pleased to be finally putting his financial affairs in order. He'd been meaning to get around to it ever since he and Estella had married. Her pregnancy had been the final push to make the appointment with the solicitor. It was a very simple Will, there was the house, some savings, his pension and life insurance, but no trusts or shares, it was all very easy. Ms. Salmon, the paralegal, was pleasant and efficient. Towards the end of the final consultation she asked him if he'd considered making a Living Will.

"A Living Will, what's that?" he asked as he finished signing the paperwork.

"It's a legal document in which you can specify what actions you want taken if you're no longer able to make decisions for yourself, due to illness or incapacity," she said.

"Oh, end of life treatment, Do not resuscitate, and all that sort of thing," said Martin.

He thought that most people his age would probably think it was too soon to bother, but his father used to say, "You never know the moment," and it seemed efficient to deal with all these issues at the same time.

"Good idea," he said.

"I'll take you through to the other office, Mary will give you the form and take a Brain State Copy, it'll only take about ten minutes." Martin had never heard of a Brain State Copy, but Ms. Salmon told him that it was a new technology that had just become available, it was revolutionising biometric identification and authorization in many different areas.

Ms. Salmon took Martin across the corridor and introduced him to Mary.

Mary led him to a technical looking chair and carefully arranged a complicated mesh cap over his head, it had a lot of wires leading from the control box.

"Just relax, Mr. Riley," she said, she pressed the start button and then went back to her desk to continue with her typing. Martin lay back and relaxed with his eyes closed, he felt no strange sensations, the hardware didn't make any noise and quite soon Mary told him the process was complete. She removed the mesh cap from his head.

Martin left the lawyer's offices and walked across the road to the Krispy Kreme outlet, he ordered a coffee and a salted caramel doughnut to celebrate the achievement of removing another of the endless, mundane tasks that seemed to dog his adult life. Months later he read that the Brain State Copy technology had been withdrawn because of some sort of human rights issue but thought no more about it.

Martin's life continued, his marriage to Estella lasted for twenty years, they had two sons, Hank and Cliff. Estella had an affair with a colleague, Martin had an affair with another colleague, and they divorced but remained on speaking terms. Neither married again. Martin continued to work as a government scientist, retiring at the age of seventy when he took up new interests, golf, Bridge, amateur dramatics. He enjoyed the lack of responsibility. As he grew older, he had various ailments but they were dealt with by the ever-advancing medical science of the twenty-first century.

Eventually, at the age of ninety-eight, despite the stents, the auxiliary heart, the lab grown replacement kidney and the cocktail of blood pressure, cholesterol and arthritis drugs, medical science still couldn't overcome the basic problem of growing old. Everything seemed to be wearing out at the same time. Martin entered a nursing home and after about a year of slow decline he was bedridden.

A month later, he was hooked up to a life support machine that ventilated his lungs, cleaned his blood, and kept him fed and watered. Dosed with pain killers and sedatives, he lay drifting between sleep and wakefulness, sometimes staring at the reflections that played on his ceiling as sunlight bounced off the small ornamental pool outside his window.

Estella, now an old lady herself but in better shape than her ex, visited Martin to say good bye. The Doctor explained that as his decline was irreversible the machine would soon be switched off, there was just the formality of gaining authorization.

"One of his sons could do it," offered Estella.

The doctor smiled, he would make that decision in his patient's best interest, unless the patient had made a Living Will. He scrolled through the medical notes on the life support machine's display and tapped one of the options.

Martin woke in a strange place, a place he wasn't familiar with. He didn't feel right at all. He was in a hospital room, stationed next to a bed which was occupied by an old man that he didn't recognize. He couldn't feel his arms or legs, or indeed anything. He was aware of various valves, pumps, filters and displays, and after a little experimentation he found he could pan and zoom his field of vision. There was a middle-aged man and an old woman standing on the other side of the bed.

"Where am I?" he asked, his voice not sounding like his own.

"It's best not to talk to them," said the Doctor to Estella. He addressed the display screen, "Can you confirm that you are an upload of a Brain State Copy of Mr Martin Riley?"

"I'm Martin Riley."

"Could you confirm your date of birth please?"

Martin did. "What do you mean by a Brain State Copy?" he asked.

"I am Doctor Ernest Forbes, Martin Riley's physician, and you are software which is now in control of Mr Riley's life support unit."

"I don't feel like software, I feel like me. Who is that lady standing by the bed?"

"That is Mr Riley's ex-wife."

"Ex-wife, we've only been married for a few months and she's so old."

The Doctor sighed, "It's always like this," he said to Estella over his shoulder. "The confusion, the explanations." He addressed the machine again, "You have control of my patient's life support and under the terms of his living will you have the legal right to terminate his care. Do you wish to do that?"

"What, kill him?" Martin asked.

"The man is a husk, his brain is barely functioning, he can't eat, drink, walk or talk, and he has authorized you to make the final decision about the withdrawal of his end of life care. Please consult your files for verification," said the Doctor.

"It's all right," said Estella. "There's nothing left of him, nothing left of the man I knew. You'll be doing him a favour."

Martin accessed his processor and examined the patient's digital notes. He found it easy to make his decision. The old man's heartbeat stopped, the peaks and troughs on the display flatlined, his breathing stopped and various alarms began to sound, but Martin silenced them. The two humans and the occupant of the life support machine watched as the old man was given his release.

"So, what now?" asked Martin. "What happens to me now? Where am I going to live?"

The Doctor reached across to the screen and pressed the reset icon. There was a diminishing wail which ended abruptly as the processor began its reboot cycle.

"It always ends badly," he said. He took Estella's elbow and led her out of the room. "Old fashioned software, we don't use it now, it's too distressing, too life-like," he said as he gently escorted Estella down the corridor. "The new brain state copies aren't self-aware and don't resist deletion." *Like lost souls screaming their way down to Purgatory*, he thought, and shuddered.

He'd been spared the responsibility of terminating his patient's life, but he still felt as if he'd just killed somebody.

Author the Author:

Roger Ley's stories have appeared in about twenty ezines in the last year, some have also been broadcast and podcast. He has published three books: "Dead People on Facebook" is a recently released collection of flash fiction stories in various speculative genres including Steampunk, Horror, Sci Fi, Time travel, a little magic and one Romance. "Chronoscape" is a science fiction novel about time and alternate realities. "A Horse in the Morning" is a collection of comic autobiographical stories.

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Requiem in Orbit | *Nick Johnson*

The pillars of fire ignited the sky spreading an ebony cloud of death that quickly engulfed the glowing blue and green orb floating in the infinity of space. All over the planet, the bright clusters of lights that had once stood as a testament to the power of man were smothered by darkness. To the men and women watching from their observatory on the edge of the cosmos the lights dotting the surface of the Earth were more than just the burning glow of civilization, the illumination emitted by billions of lives. These lights were a reminder of their homes, of their families, of their lives, and in only a matter of minutes, it was all gone.

For the astronauts on board the international space station, the burning red flurry of atomic explosions was like a silent fireworks show. They were deaf to the Earth shaking roar of the blasts, the howl of the scorching nuclear winds that were carrying the screams of billions across the dying world, and just like a fireworks show the pyrotechnics eventually stopped, and everything went dark. They floated in silence. The only sound from their communications equipment was the static transmitted by a dead world.

The gravity of the apocalypse instantly crushed the brave souls of the cosmonauts. Everyone was dead, and everything was gone forever. There was no way home. The space station they inhabited that once symbolized the accomplishments of an entire species had become their titanium tomb, and while their families were instantly incinerated on the ground below they would be subject to the slow death of starvation. In due time the cold specter of desperation would find its way into the hearts and souls of the astronauts. The once revered and respected men and women would try in vain to delay their descent into oblivion by consuming the only things they had left, each other.

About the Author:

Nick's work has been printed by a number of publishers around the world including; Skive magazine, Grey Wolf, Third Flatiron Publishing, and the award-winning Crooked Cat Publishing in the United Kingdom. His stories are his attempt to address the sickness called the human condition.

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The Room | *Melanie Smith*

He sits alone in the middle of his room, in the chair with the worn red fabric that is stained and alive with rot. He sits there when there is light, then no light, then light again, over and over. Everyday there is a knock at the door, always unanswered. Envelopes, newspapers, pieces of paper that hint at the outside world, all block the gap between the blackened wood and the threadbare green carpet. The paper grows into a heap. The pile is high now, a mountainous landscape of ignored communications, but he pays them no mind, there are more important things to attend to. Most days the walls speak to him, he does not always like it, but he listens; the voices have become his friends. When it is quiet he misses them. "We don't always like our friends," he says to himself in a calm, low voice, "but they are still our friends." Sometimes the walls whisper, sometimes they shout. He prefers the whispers, he always prefers the whispers. Sometimes he whispers back; it sounds like a snake. He killed a snake once—a long time ago—cut out its tongue and buried it deep in the ground. But the whispers never stopped.

About the Author:

Melanie Smith lives in Wales with her family. She writes fantasy and dark fiction for children, teens and adults. She is currently writing her second novel, a YA horror set in Wales, as well as undertaking an MA in Creative Writing. She has a love of folklore, myth and legend. If she's not reading or writing dark tales, she is usually watching them. You can find her on

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Tickle. Tickle. Tickle.

It started in my fingertips, reminding me of the onset of frostbite I experienced once when I was a kid, not amusing, not pleasant, an itching tickle from the inside out that you can't do anything about. It moved toward my palms in each digit, seeping as surely and silently as the blood oozing from my nails. Three of them had torn completely away from my flesh, hanging backwards at varying angles, one snapped lengthwise.

In the dark, I could barely see them, slightly more than shadows wriggling inches from my eyes. Were it not for the tender tickling, I could be able to disassociate from them, pretend they weren't mine, imagine them as someone else's. I dropped them to my sides, the sensation in them turning to a throbbing torment, I looked up.

Up. Up. Up.

Perhaps a halo it might have been, that circle of light far above me, and I might have been an angel were it not that I was fully aware I was a demon, a demon that had mangled his fingertips trying to crawl out of a long dried up well. And I needed to get up there. They just smelled so good. Oh, yes. I could smell them even all the way down here, beyond the mildew and the rot, I could smell them. And the more they scampered and searched to find their way out, the more they stank. Sweet, salty, savory, spicy, I licked my lips.

Like Hansel and Gretel had shoved a witch into her own oven, my despicable little darlings had pushed me down my own well. Outwitted but for a moment, I'd tumbled *down, down, down* the stone shaft to these dreary, dark depths, but they hadn't killed me. The fall hadn't done its intended dirty deed and there were no flames to consume me, however they might have imagined Hell being at the bottom of my well. How they had escaped their iron cages, I did not know, but I would figure it out and I would make sure that any future darlings would not be able to do so. First, I had to get out and up there and teach them their lesson.

Only a moment did I look around me at the blackness before I realized my folly. Destroyed fingertips, a foolish move done in foggy, concussed desperation. Back against the stones, legs straight out, feet firmly planted. Inch by inch I would crawl from this tunnel tomb. As I made my sluggish, quiet, excruciating way, I could hear them scurry and scramble, chirping like anxious rats in their delirious little kid chatter. And their stench, growing, thickening, how it made me drool. Muscles burning, the halo expanded until practically consuming me, and perhaps it actually did to whatever may have been looking up from below as I crawled out of the well.

I saw the siblings for the first time as they innocently frolicked on the playground of South Street Early Learning Center and fell in love with them instantly. I had to have them. I foamed at the corners of my mouth at the anticipation. Discreetly, I wiped the froth away and smeared it on the thighs of my jeans. Twins, they were practically identical were it not for the fact they were differing genders, one boy, one girl. His blond hair was cropped short, hers were long curling tresses flowing like golden rapids over her shoulders and down her back. They were pastel white with bright blushing cheeks and pink, perpetually pursed lips. Even from across the way, I could see the brilliance of their emerald eyes glinting in the sunshine.

Typically, my rule was to not use my workplace as a hunting ground. Such a misstep had been the end of many of my own siblings. It was best to not even hunt in the entire township within which you lived, but to sport elsewhere and as far away as possible.

"Don't shop local," my father used to say.

You had to be ever mindful of the details that if overlooked got the most experienced predator caught. There were exceptions to every rule, and if I was particularly careful, mindful of all the gory Ps and bloodstained Qs, I could pull it off and in the end be all the more satisfied for my troubles. Being caught wasn't an option. My kind didn't fare well in prison. Human bondage was for humans.

I watched and I waited and I bided my time. Their habits were pretty much as any other family's was. Their mother dropped them off and picked them up on South street, not as early as some, but never late. She didn't seem to like any of the crossing guards, a nattering gaggle of middle-aged hens who were there for reasons other than merely to help the children. The bored residents of small towns all across the country were all the same, judgmental gossipmongers actively seeking anything about which they could blather. As long as I masqueraded as one of them, I wasn't in their crosshairs. Thus I came to know quite a bit about the twins' home life. An absent father and a socially acceptable drunk for a mother. The children were often left to their own devices much to the chagrin of their neighbors on Hickory Street. Not all gossip was imaginary. This would be an easy hunt.

Silence, complete, fell upon my underground hollow as I curled to erect standing. I saw them immediately, both my devious little darlings, muted and frozen, eyes as wide as saucers as they watched me escape what they'd intended to be my doom. Their insipid skin paled all the more, draining in their terror of any color at all. They turned gray when I smiled, a grin I had practiced in the mirror for hours and hours, perfecting the ear-to-ear maniacal glee I wanted to express. In it, I wanted my intentions articulated, my devilish desires conveyed, the demon I was deliciously discernable. I wanted to scare the hell out of them.

Indeed, I did.

Both wet themselves. His jeans darkened and his smell soured. Her dress yellowed, stench worsening. Their thick, buttery piss spilled over their bare feet and pooled on the smooth stone floor. "*Filthy, filthy, filthy* little darlings," I hissed at them. I took a step. "You can't escape." Another step. "I'm going to get you." A quickened stride. "And I'm going to eat you." I snatched them up, one in each hand, the tips of my fingers exploded, blood spurting like flames into their hair. Hauling them into the air, my already aching back screamed in opposition to the terribly unwise toil. Trailing an arch of warm urine from their feet, I flung them across my subterranean cavity. No screams, but a clattering cacophony rang high as they crashed into the rusty iron cages from whence they'd escaped.

His head split open just above his left eye, the orb rolled to the side detoured by the trauma. Bone exposed, crimson juice seeped down over his face as he sat up and wobbled from his disorientation. Tickles and tingles and an overwhelming desire boiled inside me. His stink became mouthwatering, the aroma of a holiday feast for only me. I drooled all the more. I was on him in an instant, my lips pressed against the swollen edges of his wound, my tongue forcing inside to taste, to drag across the smooth skull.

But I didn't take my eyes off her, the girl who had managed to take her tumble without a scratch. Her face was contorted in shock as she scuttled, as a crab might, away from me. *You're next, my dear little darling, darling, darling*, I would have said had my mouth not been full of her brother's blood. The bone crumbled at my bite. A fresh taste spilled over my tongue, I wiggled it, reveled in the slime of his cranial fluids. The folds of his brain swelled out as if puckering lips longing to kiss me. I kissed back, deep, frenzied. Chewing. Swallowing.

I watched them for weeks, roaming badgers, cherubic in appearance, impish of character. When they thought no one was looking, they stole, vandalized, and bullied the small kids. Not entirely innocent, but hardly the high school hellions that ran wild all over town. If only the older ones were my taste, I'd slowly rid the valley of its teenage terrorists. Alas, my hungers were specific and satiated by those not unlike the children I taught. There was a profound satisfaction in deceiving all the adults around me. I was a bachelor, but dated. I lived alone, but socialized. I avoided the tropes of the quite, lonely guy no one claimed to suspect of any nefarious deeds, but actually did and gossiped about it endlessly.

Oddly simple, strangely quite it was taking them. They'd wandered alone, as usual, into the woods on the hillside at the end of Hickory where the houses were empty and few could see from the roads and homes below. An offering of dollar store candy was all it took to get them into my car as night began to fall. It was a tried and true method, however clichéd it might be.

I'm not entirely sure it's all about the addictive sweets, children like the attention of adults, especially those with negligent parents, and the world's innumerable predators take advantage of that with great success. They didn't object to anything, not when I drove out of town, not when I took them on that jaunt up to the Kinzua Dam, not even when deep inside the blackening national forest I asked them if they wanted to explore a cave I'd found and played in as a child. In fact, they'd eagerly agreed.

I keep them in rusted cages, ancient stained iron things from an age I could not remember, built by brethren I'd never met. The locks were just as old, the skeleton keys of which were monstrous things I kept on the corroded corpse of fetters from another time and place. None before had escaped them, but the roaming little badger twins had managed to break free all the same, and I would determine how and improve the way I stored my succulent dearests. Oh, so very flavorful they all were, sweetened by the candy and cakes I stuffed them with. All of them would eat, greedily, consuming the sugary confections until they were bloated and sick to their stomachs and still they would eat even more.

Frontal lobe gone, the boy wasn't going anywhere. I tossed him aside, letting him twitch and gargle on bile, and my attention to his sister. She wouldn't be so easily sampled. She would squirm. She'd possibly fight. She might scream. I crept toward her, widening my demon smile, breathing in her despair and recognizing the heavy rank of her shitting herself. Her brother had defecated too, not from horror, but the natural deathbed voiding of his bowels. You get used to

the messy consequences of slaughtering your own meat. However nurturing she may be, Nature was also a sordid mother with a particularly grotesque sense of humor. I know this for a fact, I've met her. We don't get along.

Her back against the cold stone, the girl could go nowhere. As I crawled upon her, the terror drained from her tear-filled eyes and was replaced with the look of a creature accepting its fate. There was no struggle, no wriggling about. She didn't fight me as I stuck my anguished fingers into her mouth, deep, making her gag.

There was no scream when I ripped her jaw off, the flesh stretching unimaginably far before snapping back with a wet slapping sound followed by a bubbling and pitiful choking. Arteries severed below each cheek squirted their cherry torrents into my face. I salivated yet more at the sight of the convulsing raggedy ingress of the esophagus and bowed down to kiss it as I'd kissed the brother's brain. Wet. Warm. Quivering. Delicious, so very delicious.

Oh, my darlings, how I love thee.

About the Author:

Joshua Skye is the author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in anthologies such as *Monster Brawl* and *Childhood Nightmares*.

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The Zombie Equal Rights Order (ZERO) | David Lewis Pogson

I've nothing against Zombies. Some use my local. We don't mix because they're fairly boring- not much conversation. They sit in the corner drinking Bloody Marys and eating rare meat. They provide the odd laugh. Like when they stagger in front of the dartboard and get an arrow in the head. Mostly they keep to themselves.

Pete hates them. He swore that if ZERO was added to the Human Rights Act then he'd migrate to Australia. Zombies aren't allowed there. They can't get enough points to qualify for jobs. The laugh is that Pete couldn't go as he didn't have enough points either. Over here they're entitled to benefits and get synthetic blood through the NHS. They work... as extras for films, in the army as they've no fear of dying. The premises cleaning industry would collapse without them.

They're good for the economy. The pub trade has revived since they've allowed them in. They accept minimum wage, don't care about zero-hours contracts, don't mind crap housing or overcrowding. ZERO made sense.

However, the crime rate's up. It's not the Zombies. They're no trouble if they're fed regularly. They're the victims. They suffer from a loophole in ZERO: any human can defend himself against Zombie attack if threatened. It's the law of unintended consequences. The Legislators failed to appreciate their inability to present credible witness evidence in Court to secure convictions. Now, it's open-season on Zombies because every half-witted youth can be coached by his Solicitor on how to give better evidence than any Zombie.

As I say, I've nothing against them but why miss out on some great sport just because of that?

"You coming Pete? They'll be leaving soon. We'll wait in the alley. Careful, don't expose that baseball bat under your coat as you go."

About the Author:

David Lewis Pogson is fiction writer for ACES 'The Terrier' magazine, living in North Lancashire, England. He has been published in a variety of media. Winner of the Cumbria Local History Federation Prize, the Freerange Theatre Company's Playframe Short Story and Microcosmsfic.com Flash Fiction competitions.

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The doorbell rang at approximately five minutes to noon on October 15th, 2006, just as Mr. Alexander Stevens was finishing a late breakfast. He was an old sort who didn't like to sleep late, but a cramp in his stomach had kept him up most of the night. He brushed some crumbs from his shirt as he rose from the table to answer the door. Two smartly dressed individuals greeted him with smiles. One man and one woman, both in their early thirties by the looks of things. They were each wearing identical dark grey suits, with a white shirt and grey tie.

"May I help you?" asked Stevens.

"We're here to forgive you," said the man.

"I beg your pardon?"

"We've been sent to forgive you," said the woman, smiling.

It dawned on Stevens, and he smiled. He had lived on this street for the past forty years of his life, but he couldn't remember the last time he had encountered any religious types. He was a lapsed catholic himself, but he greatly admired people of faith. The woman held a small leather case, which he presumed was full of reading material they hoped to leave with him. "I'm sorry," said Stevens, "but I'm not interested. Please enjoy the rest of your day."

Stevens closed the door and went back to the kitchen. The doorbell rang again. Stevens admired people of faith, but he couldn't abide pushy people. His late wife, Clara, had been pushy, and it awakened a terrible impatience in him.

"What is it?" he asked as he answered the door.

"We've come to forgive you," said the man.

"I understand, but I've told you I'm not interested."

"You should let us talk to you," said the woman.

"I'm sorry?" replied Stevens, resenting her tone.

"It would be better for you to talk to us now," repeated the woman with a smile. "Or we'll have to come back later."

"Excuse me?"

"These things are more easily done in the day," said the man.

Stevens didn't like the way this conversation was going. "Look, I've been polite, but I'm asking you to leave now."

"We're here to forgive you," said the woman.

"Enough!" snapped Stevens. He didn't like to shout, but the pain in his stomach was acting up again. "I haven't the time for this. I'm very busy. Please don't come back here. Goodbye."

Stevens slammed the door closed, bracing himself against it. "Very well," he heard the man say. "Doorbells for day. Knocks for the night."

Stevens spent the rest of the day in his garden, which always cheered him up. The weather was cool and crisp, and the changing leaves of the apple tree at the back of his garden were beautiful to behold. The pain in his stomach was still there, but it had calmed down a little, and didn't distract him from his book, which he managed to finish just as the sun went down and he lost the light.

When he retired to the living room, it had begun to get colder, so he lit a fire and sat down before it, watching the flickering of the light in the dimly lit room, until he fell into a deep sleep.

He was awakened by a terrible pain in his stomach. It was as though something was grumbling around in his gut. He felt as though he might need to take himself to the toilet, but he wasn't sure if he could get out of his seat. For a moment he had a horrible feeling that he might foul himself in his own living room. He clutched the armrest tightly as the pain seemed to ebb and subside, and he breathed deeply, laughing in relief at having held his own bowels.

Then came a knock at the door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Stevens checked his watch. 11:30pm.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

He picked himself out of his chair and walked to the front door, but did not open it.

"Who is it?" he called through the door.

"We're here to forgive you," came the man's voice.

Stevens remembered now.

"I told you not to come back here."

"We've been sent to forgive you," said the woman.

"Forgive me for what?" asked Stevens. "Who are you?"

"Your forgiveness is sought by a young woman whom you used to know," said the man.

"I don't know any young women," said Stevens. "If you don't leave now, I'll call the police."

The pain in his stomach began to rumble again.

"We're going to come in, Mr. Stevens," said the woman.

"You most certainly will not!" replied Stevens. "I've asked you to go! Now go!"

The pain was sharp now. He doubled over in agony, and crouched by the door.

"We're going to come in, Mr. Stevens," said the woman again.

Stevens tried to get up but couldn't. The pain was too intense. Again, he was afraid that he might foul himself. Stevens bit his bottom lip so hard he began to bleed, trying to hold himself in. He breathed slow and deep, and the pain began to dull. All was quiet now. Perhaps they had gone away. He picked himself off the ground and listened closely. There wasn't a sound. He breathed a sigh of relief, but then another thought struck him.

Had he remembered to lock the back door?

Stevens turned and struggled down the hall to the kitchen. There they stood, those smiles still on their faces, with the back door wide open behind them.

The pain seized hold of Stevens again, and he clutched his stomach. "Get out," he said, trying to shout, but restrained by the pain. "Get out of my house."

"It's alright, Mr. Stevens," said the man, walking close. "This will soon be over."

Stevens backed away as the man tried to touch him. The harsh light of the kitchen reflected oddly against his skin, making him look waxy and pale.

"Get away," gasped Stevens. "Get away!"

"There's no point in fighting, Mr. Stevens," said the man, and then gestured to Stevens' belly. "The truth will out, as they say."

Stevens was seized by the worst pain he ever felt. It was like something punched him from within. He cried out in pain.

"Bring him to the living room," said the woman. "Make him as comfortable as possible."

"No," gasped Stevens, trying to move away. "Don't touch me. Don't touch me."

Stevens was powerless to resist even the most gentle coaxing of the man who took him by the arm and walked him to the living room, sitting him down in his chair by the fire.

"What do you want?" asked Stevens.

"We want to forgive you," said the man. "We were asked to forgive you."

"By who?" asked Stevens, clutching his stomach against another wave of pain. "Who asked you?"

The man looked to the woman, who stood behind the chair.

"You know," said the woman, and then looked from Stevens to the man, who nodded, and brought his hand to his own face. He put his fingers under his upper lip, and pulled at the skin which he slipped back over his face, as if he were removing a mask. Stevens screamed as the face which the man removed revealed teeth which went up beyond where his nose and then his eyes should have been, but there was no nose and there were no eyes. There were only teeth. A full face of massive teeth.

"Oh Jesus!" cried Stevens, and the pain struck his stomach again. He clasped his hands to his gut.

The woman moved around Stevens' chair, and she was just like the man, unmasked, a face of teeth.

"Oh God," said Stevens.

The woman placed the small leather case in the man's waiting hands, and then she opened it and reached inside, removing a small scalpel, its sharpness glinting in the firelight.

"Oh no," gasped Stevens. "No! No! No!"

He tried to get up, but he couldn't. His pain wouldn't let him. The woman clacked her teeth together, and on her command the man placed the case on the ground, and then moved to hold Stevens down.

"Please!" screamed Stevens. "Please don't! Oh dear God, please don't!"

The man clacked at the woman, and she clacked back. The man held Stevens by the shoulders tight into the chair, while the woman unbuttoned his shirt, exposing the old, pale skin beneath.

"Don't!" pleaded Stevens. "Don't! Don't do this!"

The woman felt around Stevens' stomach. Her touch was gentle, but probing and violating. Stevens whimpered like a child and then screamed as he felt something push against the inside of his stomach.

"What is that?" Stevens cried. "What is that?"

The woman took her hand away and then sliced the scalpel into the side of Stevens' gut. He screamed in agony but the man held him tight. The woman cut into him, opening his stomach from under his left rib, moving right through to the right.

"Oh dear God! Jesus!" cried Stevens.

Then the woman backed away. Stevens tried to bring his hands to the open mass in his stomach but he was restrained. He could feel something moving inside of him. Two paws clawed from his stomach, followed by a head that was covered in blood.

"Oh God!" cried Stevens. "Oh God!"

The whole slimy mass fell from Stevens' stomach onto the ground. The thing picked itself off the floor, and shook itself. Some of the excess blood and filth came away from its fur. It let out a small, soft meow as it looked around the living room.

"Oh my God," whimpered Stevens, his voice growing weaker. "Oh my God."

The bloody cat moved to Stevens and then jumped onto his lap and placed her two front paws on his chest, looking in close at him. Stevens stared deep into the cat's eyes, and finally his fear subsided. Finally he understood. He began to laugh, and then began to cry.

"I'm sorry," said Stevens. "I'm sorry."

The cat let out another meow, and then leaned in close to Stevens. She began to knead his chest with her two paws, and then curled herself up on his lap. Stevens ran his hand through her blood soaked fur and continued to weep. He could feel he had been forgiven.

When the two left the house they were sure to leave the front door open so that the cat would not be stuck inside after Stevens had died. They walked all night, and by the time dawn came they had put on fresh masks, and were making their way to another house. It was Monday, 16th October 2006, and it looked like it was going to be a beautiful day.

They approached their next house and rang the bell.

Doorbells for day. Knocks for the night.

About the Author:

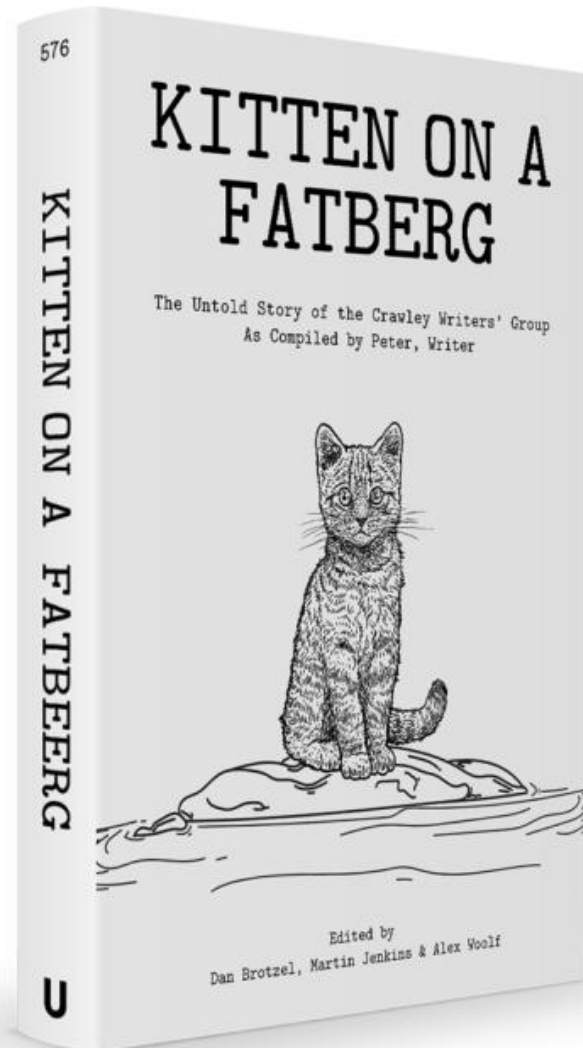
A writer of short stories, poetry and screenplays, Tony Flynn is fantastically afraid of most everything and therefore has a particular fondness for the horror genre. This is Tony's fourth publication with the Sirens Call eZine, following *Where the Lost Ones Dwell* (issue #11), *The Shadowman* (issue #22) and *Playground* (issue # 39).

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KITTEN ON A FATBERG

They've all got a book in them. Unfortunately.



The story of seven very eccentric writers - written by three quite odd ones. Includes a cosplay stalker, an exploding sheep's head, and an alien mothership invasion. A unique collaborative project that is set to revolutionise the way we all think about olives.

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He arrived on Sunday, after a winter of sleep and snow. A jester with clear blue eyes, pale lithe hands and white flowers in them. He smiled and said, "I come in peace. I ply my trade with buffooneries and riddles, and the joking tambourine accompanies my laughter. Enjoy my gifts, you beautiful city, and the good time I bring." He bowed in reverence, with the beauty of an angel. And it was Sunday.

On Monday Florence woke up at the song of hundred birds, colourful plumes of fast-winged spirits. Sun bathed the city roofs and its rays made the Cathedral's spires shine and glow. Here it comes an unforgettable season, people rejoiced. For the jester had promised.

On Tuesday boys chased girls in the streets, calling them funny names like the jester had told them. Naked shoulders in the sunshine heat, naked feet on the humid lawn, great expectations and longing hearts. They laughed and laughed, they played and played again. And they were happy.

On Wednesday the artist began his most amazing painting, of a pale young man with white flowers in his hands. He gave him the beauty of an angel, blue starlight in his eyes. Which flowers are they, jester - but the model stood up and walked. "Wait," the artist said, I haven't finished yet. "You won't," replied the jester.

On Thursday the lords in their high palaces wanted to declare the war to end all wars, for a never-ending peace. Money to buy armies to buy weapons to buy yet more power. To earn yet more money for the richest city of Christianity. But the smiling jester told them to wait, for a war was no longer needed. And so they waited.

On Friday he invited the people of Florence to celebrate and party. He went down to the streets, taking their hands and dancing around, drinking red wine and eating warm bread. They made rhymes and ballades together, singing the praise of loving souls, of kindred spirits, believing in eternity, sizing the fleeting day. Like yesterday never was, like tomorrow would never come.

In peace I came, he said, and kissed people of all ages, sex and races, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, filthy and elegant, nobles and peasants. He caressed Lady Beatrice's soft cheek, and brushed children's head with his delicate fingers.

It was late at night when his Lady came to him. So scared she had been, the week spent burning in secret, yet hesitant on her steps. Are you wise enough to befriend a fool? Are you foolish enough to believe what he says? But not that night – that night she believed, and her feet followed him under an immaculate moonlight. His skin was whiter than the moon itself, and his touch as gentle as butterfly's wings, bestowing pleasure and divine wisdom. "What's your name, my Lord," she whispered in awe.

"One you don't want to hear."

When Florence rose from slumber on Saturday afternoon there were no songs, no flowers, and all birds were gone. A hot sticky rain was dripping on their faces and insects crawled on their wet skin. Sunlight had disappeared under a blanket of fog and clouds masked the Cathedral's spires. In thousands they were dying, without mourning of the living, abandoned in fear, desperate beyond despair.

As a ghost in the darkness, a cart with its sinister bell sound came over, slowly parading in the streets. The jester strolled along, clear blue eyes shining in compassion, and face covered by a beak-like mask, white as his hands. Soothing sick people, whispering words to their moribund ears, caressing their gaping buboes.

He visited taverns, churches and houses, a silent shadow of doom. And on the red linens of their beds he threw the asphodels of the Black Death, his voice crystalline and sweet, the touch suave of an Angel of Plague.

About the Author:

Russell Hemmell is a French-Italian transplant in Scotland, passionate about astrophysics, history, and speculative fiction. Recent work in *Aurealis*, *The Grievous Angel*, *Third Flatiron*, and others.

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There is nothing like the smell of Santeria. It is a distinct smell that jolts me into my body the second I find myself enveloped in it: one that suggests cleanliness—in every respect—but with a little magic mixed in. Not easily reproduced, you won't find it anywhere but homes or other places, such as my *botanica*—a Santeria supply store—where regular *orisha* worship happens. It is the intoxicating blend of lavender-scented Fabuloso All-Purpose Cleaner, stale cigar smoke (used for various offerings to our dead and these African gods), burning candle wax, and subtle, earthy hints of animal sacrifice from the past, offered for the sake of continued prosperity, spiritual protection, and other vital blessings from the divine. You won't find it anywhere else. No, it is not common fare, much like the smell of ozone immediately after a lightning strike: it is a *right time, right place* kind of thing. But why wax nostalgic (besides the fact that my own home hasn't smelled like that for a long time)? It will be *Dia de Los Muertos* tomorrow and there is much work to do.

My *boveda* or spiritual ancestor shrine has gone neglected for months now, squatting in my cramped dining room, cold and lifeless like the spirits it was erected to appease. A thick layer of dust has powdered the picture frames of my dearly departed, making their rectangular glasses dulled and cloudy. I look at the faces of my maternal and paternal grandparents and find that details that were once fine have phased into each other, as if viewed through a thin curtain of gauze: I can't clearly see them and they—likely—can hardly see me. That is how it feels, anyway. The white tablecloth on top of the table is dingy, looking yellowed and stained from months of occasional sprinklings of *agua de florida* cologne and errant flakes of cigar ash. The water glasses (nine of them to be exact—one large brandy snifter and four pairs of others in decreasing sizes) seem almost opaque, now, with their contents having long evaporated, leaving behind striated bands of hard mineral and chlorine, plus the occasional dead fly, who's selfless sacrifice was likely not met with much appreciation by my dead Aunt Minne or Popo Estrangel, my mother's father. Various religious statues call for immediate attention with frozen countenances that glare, annoyed that my Swiffer hasn't seen the light of day for some weeks, now. Then there is the funky, asymmetrical glass jar on the back right-corner that I use to collect their change. The dead love money (especially mine). This fact has always suggested to me that hunger—in all shapes and forms—lingers, even after the final curtain closes. Makes sense, if you think about it. We gorge ourselves on life, cleave to it when we feel it slip away, and then after we die we...

The statues—mostly Catholic saints—each have their own specific meaning and purpose on my *boveda*. St. Lazarus provides protection from illness. St. Teresa keeps death at bay. St. Michael and The Sacred Heart of Jesus, which are significantly larger than the other figures, are prominent, flanking either side of the spiritual table, drawing in—and out—energies of protection and—at the same time—mercy: the two things I find myself increasingly in need of these days. At the back of the table, there is a repurposed hutch from an old secretary desk with eight cubbies of varying sizes, where nine silver, metallic ceramic skulls reside that represent my dead, who have passed on (the number nine is the number of the dead in Santeria). They usually shine, quite brightly, in the warm, yellow glow of the dining room's hanging light fixture, but they look tarnished, as of late, save the eye sockets, which seem to plead for attention, glistening, as if wet with tears. A large resin crucifix rests in the half-full, murky water glass (the largest one) that rests in the center of the altar. It sounds sacrilegious, but it isn't, as placing it so calls upon heavenly power to help control the spirits that are attracted (or attached) to the shrine, allowing positive ones to do what they need to do for my well-being, while keeping the negative ones tightly on a leash. Some smaller, but equally as important, fetishes also haunt the altar space, representing spirit guides of mine: African warriors and wise women, a golden bust of an Egyptian sarcophagus, a Native American boy playing a drum, and four steel Hands of Fatima that recently made their way into the mix after a rather nasty spirit settled into my house last year—for a month or so—and created all kinds of chaos and havoc, tormenting me with nightmares—not to mention a ton of bad luck—and my dogs with physical attacks, ultimately resulting in one of them, Argyle, being inexplicably and permanently crippled (but that is another story). Various accents, which I have collected over the years, also add to the *ache* (power) of the *boveda*: a multi-colored beaded offering bowl, strands of similarly patterned Czech glass beads, a brass censer atop a wooden base for incenses, a pentacle and athame (from my Wicca days), a deck of Rider-Waite tarot cards in a green velvet pouch with a silver dollar kept inside, and a giant rosary—more appropriate to hang on a wall, actually—made of large wooden beads, dyed red and rose-scented. Looking at all of it in its diminished grandeur, I am reminded of how much I have asked my *egun* (ancestors) for over the years and can't help but feel a little ashamed of my non-committal, reactive (not proactive) attitude in terms of their veneration, as well as their regular care and feeding.

This year's *Dia* will be different. It has to be. It's going to take more than a refreshed *boveda* and fresh flowers to fix what is going wrong in my life right now; a bowl of fruit and some seven-day candles just won't cut it. Business at

the botanica is slow, money is tight—beyond tight—and all my plans seem to fall apart before they can even get started. The nightmares have come back—a couple of times, anyway—and the dogs grow more and more anxious every day, ready to jump out of their skins at the slightest startle. My *madrina*, an old Cuban woman well into her 70s that brought me into the religion and orisha priesthood, told me last night that we all have a spiritual army at our disposal that desperately wants to help us in times of need, meaning our ancestors. She said with enough faith one could command legions of them to do one's bidding, using as little as a few puffs of cigar smoke and a glass of water. While a powerful statement, that isn't how things roll for me. Her prescription for what ails me was far from that simple. "This year, your *muertos* need to eat and eat well! They need strength to help you and you need a lot of it. When they are happy, you will be happy. When they are not, you won't," she advised, searching my eyes for an anticipated twinge of panic and they didn't fail her. I knew—right then and there—what she meant, making my stomach feel as if it had dropped straight down into my Jockey underwear. That feeling may have very well dissuaded me from going through with tonight's festivities if things were so dire at present. *Eyebale* is a messy business, regardless of how smooth one is with their knife (blood sacrifice always is, which is why I have always had such a distaste for it. Thank God I only do birds). Regardless of that fact, my egun eat tonight at midnight. I give thanks to my egun tonight at midnight. I—hopefully—change things around tonight at midnight. What else can you do when blood wants blood?

About the Author:

David Estringel is a poet and writer, whose work has appeared in publications like *Digging through the Fat*, *Haiku Journal*, *Foxhole Magazine*, *The Basil O'Flaherty*, *Three Line Poetry*, *Agony Opera*. He is a Contributing Editor (fiction) at *Red Fez*, Lead Editor/columnist at *The Good Men Project*, editor/writer at *The Elixir Magazine*, and columnist at *Channillo*.

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Victoria's Song | Terry Miller

In the hallowed halls, music played. So eloquently did her fingers glide over the keys, only she had been dead many moons; her body buried.

Victoria's song roamed the night, knowing no boundaries of walls nor doors. Its notes lulled the visitors to sleep in their private chambers. In dreams, she led them down darkening corridors; deeper, darker still. She led them until complete darkness overtook them. The voices of the others were so near, but they could not touch; could not find one another in the infinite blackness.

Victoria's song echoed between the walls, the castle was hers alone.

About the Author:

Terry Miller is an author and 2017 Rhysling Award-nominated poet residing in Portsmouth, OH, USA. He has self-published a dark poetry collection on Amazon and one short story to date. His work has also appeared in *Sanitarium*, *Devolution Z*, *Jitter Press*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Unholy Night in Deathlehem*, and the 2017 Rhysling Anthology from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association.

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Cold as a buried coffin, Roger Morris knocked back his thermos of coffee. His muscles ached after the grueling twelve-hour shift at the lumberyard. At fifty-five, he doubted his body could withstand the punishment for another year. Shit hours, a so-so wage, plenty to complain about, yet the thought of changing jobs at his age sounded horrible. He checked his watch.

His stomach growled. *11:35pm. I could go for a pizza. Wonder if anything's open in town.*

His peanut butter cracker lunch barely got him through the day. Life as a divorcee made him lazy. Cooking for one seemed wasteful, so he tended to eat fast food on a near daily basis. Caught in the vicious cycle, he climbed into his '98 Sentra and drove toward the main drag.

His brain fixated on a sit-down restaurant. The long work day soured his mood and he lacked the patience for dining in the driver's seat. While it felt great to sit, fatigue set in, and his mind wandered.

Drive-thru. What a concept. I bet one day somebody left a hot apple pie on the sill and thought, 'I wish I could walk up to a window and get food.'

Roger came to a stop and waited for the green arrow. He looked down Washington Avenue, weighing his options. If the pizzerias failed him, a corner dive bar might satisfy his hunger. Although human interaction could kill his appetite. He wanted a cushy booth by a window next to no one. Plain and simple.

The light changed and the rust bucket rattled onto the main street. Roger glanced left and right, searching for a lighted establishment, preferably Italian. Red Open signs flashed here and there as he took in the names: Szechuan Kitchen, Henry's Hibachi, Steak 'N Stuff, Taco World. The farther he drove, the more the choices thinned out. The road darkened. Apartment buildings doubled. Alleys tripled. Roger grew worried as his stomach sickened.

Where the hell do people eat late at night?

As he decided to pull a U-turn, a brightly lit business caught his eye. An orange neon sign in the shape of a headstone flashed "Pallbearer's Pizza" with the tag line *A slice of heaven buried with goodness!* Roger's gut whined like a pleading child as he pulled into the lot and parked. Elated after nearly giving up hope, he hopped out of the car and walked briskly to the entrance. Colorful decals covered the all-glass facade boasting **Always Fresh, Handmade, 2 for \$10, Open 'til 2am, Local Ingredients, and Voted Best Graveside Service.** While Roger thought the theme peculiar, the originality sparked his interest, and the extended hours of operation helped.

I bet they do a great business during Halloween.

He entered the parlor and the aroma of pizza hit him full force. His belly rumbled and his eyes widened. The decor lived up to the restaurant's name. Coffins imprinted the checkered tiles. Red cushioned pews served as booths with granite slabs for tabletops. Black-and-white funeral portraits hung on the slate walls. And though the furnishings seemed cold, the place felt warmer than a wood burning stove.

Roger snickered. *The pizza better be good 'cause the ambiance sure is fucked.*

The counter, deserted as the establishment, gave him time to peruse the menu. His brow furrowed at the pizza names — Pallbearer Pepperoni, Hawaiian Hearse, The Mourner, Cremains & Cheese, Vigil Veggie. And then his eyes landed on the simple advertisement: **Meat Lover's! 1/2 Off!** Oddly, the only item lacking a funerary reference.

"Welcome to Pallbearer's! What's your poison?"

Roger jumped at the loud voice in an otherwise silent store. A husky, middle-aged man rounded the corner. Dressed in a suit and soiled apron, he played the part of Executive Cemetery Chef. The dark circles beneath his eyes seemed to indicate many an all-nighter while the balding and wrinkles agreed wholeheartedly. He stood behind the register and flashed a toothless grin.

Roger cleared his throat, sweat forming on his brow. He swore someone cranked the thermostat higher. "Uh, hi there. I think I'll try a small Meat Lover's."

The chef nodded, mouth freezing to a rictus grin. "Excellent choice! That pizza is half price today! Anything to drink?"

Roger swallowed hard, parched. "What do you have?" As the words left his lips, he regretted the question.

"Coffin Cola, Lite Bier, Bury Juice, water, and The Embalmer, our signature hurricane soda beverage."

"I'll...just have water."

"That will be \$6.50."

Roger handed him a ten dollar bill. The chef passed over the change and receipt. He then crouched beneath the counter and fetched a bottle of Dasani.

He nodded at the empty dining room and smiled. "Take a load off. I'll bring your order out when it's ready."

With a "Thank you," Roger grabbed his beverage and sat at a window booth. He watched the chef disappear down a stairwell near the counter, in all likelihood to a subterranean kitchen. Roger saw no other doors in the place, only walls, so his assumption seemed valid. While odd, it paled in comparison to his table. His brow knitted as he eyed the grave slab. Professionally etched, it clearly belonged to someone's plot.

PALMINTERI

ANTONIO LUCA

March 10, 1942 - June 22, 2013

In Loving Memory

Roger shivered. *That's not creepy at all. Fucking cemetery picnic over here. I sure hope the pizza isn't this sad.*

A half hour passed with no dinner service. Roger grew impatient. How long did it take to cook a small pizza for a single customer? Maybe delivery orders drowned the kitchen. Doubtful. Roger failed to hear a phone ring once. Besides some peculiar banging, the restaurant was quiet as a...

Starved and irritated, Roger slid out of the booth. "Fuck this."

He crossed the dining room over to the kitchen doorway. He paused, gazing down the dimly lit stairwell. His nose expected to smell pizza, but instead a charred scent wafted from below. His stomach growled. Maybe the Meat Lover's took longer to cook due to the preparation involved.

A half hour? No fucking way.

He listened intently. No clanging of utensils, only a constant *whoosh*, probably from a wood fire stove. "Excuse me? How much longer on my pizza?"

His question ignored, he considered asking it again louder. He also thought about leaving, but with \$3.50 to his name he'd be lucky to afford a gas station hot dog. "Sir? It's been thirty minutes! Is my pizza done yet?"

No response.

Roger took the steps halfway down and stopped. "Hey! Pizza man? I'd like to speak to a manager!"

Fallen on deaf ears, the whirl of an appliance motor joined the *whoosh*. A wave of heat made Roger's brow trickle sweat. Still, he refused to leave without a full refund. Hell, he'd be happy with a take-and-bake at this point. His adrenaline rushed. His stomach rumbled and jittered. In his defense, he never saw an Employees Only sign. Encouraged, he descended the last steps.

His eyes watered in the haze of heat and smoke. He coughed, rubbed his eyes. Alone, he stood in a kitchen... or the afterthought thereof. A red-stained table served as a prepping station. Roger's half-done pizza sat beside a bloody cleaver and meat grinder. What protruded from the top of the appliance killed his appetite. His head swam as his knees weakened. His gut lurched. A deboned human leg dangled over the metal flesh mincer.

Meat Lover's. Oh God! What the fuck is going on here?

Black smoke burned his eyes. He looked right, expecting to see the wood fire stove, but instead his stomach churned. A cremation chamber worked overtime, flames blanketing a charred body.

Roger's anxiety took hold. "No. No fucking way. Manager! I want to speak to a manager!"

The cemetery chef rounded the far counter. His apron blood-splattered with a meat mallet in hand, he whistled while swaying, adding theme music to the leisure kitchen. He stopped in his tracks upon noticing Roger.

"Huh? What's this? You looking for your pizza? It takes a good two and half, three hours to burn a body, buddy!" He gestured at the retort and grinned. "You're gonna have to wait your turn!"

Roger stared blankly, shocked. He pointed at the half-ground leg. "What the fuck is that? What's in the grinder?"

The chef approached cautiously. "Your toppings. What else?"

Though he knew the answer, he vomited on the discolored tile. *This isn't happening. I... I'm getting the fuck out of here!*

He turned to bolt upstairs. Something hit his head hard, and when he fell to his knees he saw the mallet topple on the steps. He felt the blood trickle down his nape seconds after contact. Regardless, his brain screamed retreat. He staggered as he stood and lunged for the railing.

The chef snatched the cleaver off the table as he gave chase. "Hey! Where are you going? You get what you pay for!"

Roger scrambled up the stairwell. He heard the butcher knife swipe past his ear. He grasped at the railings like ski poles, taking the steps by twos. He prayed for customers in the dining room, someone to call for help. No way this sadistic fuck was staying open for business. Over Roger's dead body.

He tripped on the last step, slipping on the linoleum. He regained his footing and looked up. His heart sank. The parlor sat empty.

Roger set his sights on the entrance. He cried out as his left shoulder blade screamed in pain. Instinctively, he thrashed back, skull cracking skull. He glimpsed the cemetery chef wrenching the cleaver free and tumbling down the stairwell. Roger gasped and ran for the doors.

He burst into the night, welcoming the chill. His initial plan involved sprinting to the parking lot and burning rubber. Then he spotted an oncoming car and knew he needed to flag down help. He charged into the street, waving his arms wildly. Had the motorist not been asleep at the wheel, he might've stopped. Instead the pizza delivery car slammed into Roger, launching his body a good ten yards across the opposite lane. The now alert driver lost control on impact and smashed into a light pole.

The car burned, silent as the block; no horn or alarm blared incessantly. The buildings remained dark; not one light turned on in a window, curious of the outside cacophony. And still desertion plagued the street.

The cemetery chef hobbled from the shadows and paused at the curb. He looked both ways down the block. Satisfied at the lack of onlookers, he staggered up the street. He spotted Roger's body bleeding out in the gutter, head cracked open, limbs twisted and splayed.

The chef shrugged. "You get what you pay for."

Grunting, he dragged Roger's body back to Pallbearer's Pizza, eager to finally have fresh ingredients for his Meat Lover's delight.

About the Author:

S.D. Hintz has professionally published 3 novels, 4 novellas, and over 30 short stories. He is the former Editor-in-Chief of KHP Publishers, co-founder of Skullvines Press, and extremely active on social media.

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The noise started low enough to permeate my dream without bursting the skin. It was an enjoyable, run of the mill sort of dream, filled with nothing to cling to yet saturated with an overall feeling of pleasantness. Then all in it changed. Darkness crept in and hung like a cloud in the air as I slowly became aware of the low rumble coming from the East. The pitch changed and the noise became clearer to my subconscious, speeding up and tuning towards something recognizable. In my dream, I pinpoint it as the wail of a dying beast, the sound pushing my ease towards the void.

The scream tugs at the edge of consciousness, permeating multiple levels of sleep until my brain recognizes it in its veracity and immediately categorizes it as an intrusion, outside of the parameters of a construct of my own subconscious. It acts. A primeval defense mechanism is initiated and the adrenaline forces me through several layers of sleep until I breach the surface like a freediver coming up for air.

I gasp and gulp as if I have never had the pleasure, my eyes dart from side to side looking for a non-existent threat. My heart beats through my chest wall with a force so strong I can taste it. The wail continues for a moment before receding into the night.

My brain hurts as I search for a memory but get nothing but Error 404: File Not Found. My rational mind questions the authenticity of the scream as I look to her, still fast asleep to my right. She stirs as if my stare prodded her a little too hard.

Bad dream?

She doesn't even open her eyes.

No...I mean...maybe.

It's one or the other.

Go back to sleep.

I throw my feet onto the cold bedroom floor.

She mutters prickly words I pretend not to hear.

I regret taking off my slippers the night before and placing them carefully beneath the chair, toes facing the bed, in a perfect line with each of its back legs. The way *she* likes it.

Even in my mind I over pronounce the word *she* and instantly hate myself.

I make my way to the kitchen and pour myself a drink that I don't deserve and gulp it down like it might be taken from me. I pour another and drink it as fast as the first, each swallow a stroke on the back of the head from a mother I never knew.

The noise again, sharp and sweet. A scream. A wail. Terror takes me. My skin puckers with fear and confusion. It overwhelms my senses and I begin to shake. The glass slips from my quivering grasp and smashes on the stone kitchen floor.

Brown, tepid liquid splashes on tile. A metal comb rests innocently on the floor, engulfed. I bend down, fingers stretched towards it. My body numbs as I touch its cold surface.

I examine the comb and find it unfamiliar not only in look but in situation. I turn it over in my fingers, again and again. I feel its cold sting yet find nothing to tie it to me.

Then I hear it. A voice that I cannot ignore singing a tune that I wish to know. The honey glazed harmony slips through the cracks of my skin and burrows into my soul. I look to the direction of the sound and see nothing but patio doors with curtains drawn as if to hide this prize from my view.

I step forward slowly and open the curtains. The night greets me with its unfamiliarity. Keys rattle. Doors whoosh on barren sliders. Sounds seep.

My eyes scan the dark horizon but see nothing in the black but the place at the end of the world where trees brush sky. I move towards the sound like a blind man, the Irish Winter's touch bristling against my skin. My fingers tingle with pain and delight, my nose aflutter with a wanting ache. I step towards my new found destiny, my mind building paths I cannot see.

Down the length of the garden and through the trees, by the arch, jumping across broken slabs like a child's game of hopscotch, I follow her call. The gentle sandpaper swish of the river lapping at the rocks as it passes is a promise of unbroken touch. It merges with her song and gifts it a fullness of sound that touches my heart and pulls me deeper into the darkness.

Then I see her, sitting in a blanch of moonlight that finds her and her alone. The path remains black but my ambition is clear. She sings to me, her head tilted towards the stream, her hand brushing the silver comb I swore I left on the countertop through soft golden hair, glistening in mourning contrast to her green dress. My breath quickens and my heart pounds once more, her keening taking a hold of the remnants of Milesian blood, tainted and watered with progression.

A connection is established and I feel her in me. We are one. Her call is fractured information down copper wire. I understand her woe. Harder her feast has become with fast travelled progeny, less frequent, her hold softened by centuries of breeding.

Faster and faster, our breaths and hearts unite in a fear I cannot sense, no shadow over thought, no mist to take my mind from me. Clarity guides my steps towards her and as I approach she turns to me and even when its true face bursts from the softness, still I feel no fear. I feel only pain.

My scream tugs at the edge of consciousness...

About the Author:

Chris Wright is from Bangor, Northern Ireland. His work has featured in several publications such as The Bangor Literary Journal, The Wellington Street Review, The Belfast Telegraph, and Broadsheet. Chris is a Politics Graduate from Queens University, Belfast and is currently working on his second novel.

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It was the appearance of the eyeball that held his attention. The optic nerve was still attached, stretched out glistening like threads of wet coloured cotton. The iris was an attractive pale green, which he recognized was similar to the colour of his study. Dr. Samuel Mason, FRCS, RCOphth, should have been undisturbed by the isolated sphere which stared blankly at him. However, the fact that it rested upon the leaves of his plate of Lollo Rosso salad in his dining room was a little more disconcerting.

So, it had started happening again.

He suddenly felt very hot. Beads of perspiration caressed his top lip and his breathing had become uneven. He pressed his fingers to his temples, trying to rationalize what was going on. His wife, Angie, came into the dining room, carrying a casserole dish. She only needed to take one look at her husband.

"Good God, Sam, you're white as a sheet. Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'll be fine. Fine. Not sure ...suddenly feel light headed."

He went upstairs to the bathroom, locked the door behind him and hit a speed dial on his phone.

"Yes?"

"Tony, it's Sam. It's started again."

"OK, come to my office tomorrow and we'll talk some more."

Sam Mason went back down to dinner with his wife.

"I suppose you still think I'm taking too much on, don't you?" he said.

"Well, I've been telling you to slow down for ages. I think you do far too much in theatre these days."

Sam smiled. "You're just remembering your days as a theatre sister." He held her hand gently. "There's far more technology to help us now."

"Even so, staring into eyeballs every day must get monotonous."

Sam laughed. "But that's my speciality. Anyway, I could stare into *your* eyes forever." So saying, the dinner was soon forgotten.

The following day Sam Mason finished his surgery early and headed across town to where Tony had his practice, a leafy suburb where the smart set lived. It was a rich hunting ground for an established psychiatrist.

Dr. Anthony Denning and Sam had studied medicine together. Tony was now prospering as a therapist, providing sessions for the idle rich with plenty of time on their hands to worry about the inconsequential's of life. At first he had assessed Sam's symptoms as stress-related brought on by an onerous workload at the hospital.

"Thanks for this, Tony. I really appreciate it."

"That's OK. I've seen my last patient of the day." He consulted a few notes laid on his desk and shook his head in exasperation. "It's over three weeks since the last time, Sam. I really thought we'd seen an end to it."

Tony seemed totally baffled as he spoke, but for Sam, sitting the other side of the desk in the consulting room, it was as though Tony had become bored by the whole business.

"How could it be an end to it? There were real body parts last time. Good God, Tony, you think I've been planting them myself, don't you? Why the hell would I do that? I came to you as a friend only to confirm I *wasn't* going mad. And now you clearly think that I am."

Sam felt the pounding in his head again and pushed a clenched fist against his temple to try and alleviate the feeling that his brain was about to explode. Tony adopted a conciliatory tone.

"Look, Sam, there are different forms of psychosis. It does not mean you're going crazy. Stress can do all sorts of things —"

"Don't give me that bedside claptrap! I've been a doctor for twenty years too, in case you've forgotten. As a junior house doctor I was doing eighteen hour shifts when I hardly had time to go for a shit, but I never had this happen. What I do now is a breeze compared to those days." Sam was aware he had raised his voice and he was now breathing heavy. Classic signs of stress. He stared at his friend and gave a wry smile. Quietly, he said:

"Sorry, Tony. Point taken."

It was in that moment that Sam had the feeling of suddenly being lifted slightly from his chair. A sensation of lightness, where everything about him became indistinct and distant. A panic set in, since this was the feeling he experienced on each occasion that the 'visions' had come about.

He tried desperately to focus. Tony was speaking but his voice seemed to have become muffled. The window of the office which looked out over the trees of Central Avenue had taken on an opaque, mottled yellow colour which seemed to be molten. Nothing was making sense. It was with a great effort of willpower that he managed to stand up. Tony was gesticulating but whatever he was saying was unheard by Sam.

And then there was nothing at all. Blackness.

He was not sure how long he had blacked out. He was slumped awkwardly in the consulting room chair, and he felt his shirt and jacket clinging to the perspiration of his body. He sat more upright and looked at the leafy branches of the trees outside the window. There was no sign of Tony. He squinted to try and sharpen his vision and rubbed his eyes to clear the blurriness which remained. As he did so, he became aware of the stickiness of his fingers which he saw were covered in blood.

What in hell's name was happening? Where's Tony? He walked to the other side of the desk. Tony was lying on the floor. Both eye sockets were empty. The bloodied gaping hollows presented a countenance of death. Sam retched and managed to keep the bile out of his mouth. He took great gulps of air, supporting himself on the desk. His thoughts were in riot and then the doctor in him surfaced. He knelt beside his friend and checked for a pulse. Nothing.

Sam had no idea how long he was kneeling beside his friend's body. His mind had become a separate entity in which reason groped around searching for a resting place. Slowly he regained focus. He must call someone, but who? The police? His wife? What would he say? He was the only one here and Dr. Anthony Denning lay dead at his feet. Murdered. The realization that he must have killed his friend came as a slow chilling tide rising through his body. He had done it; it was the only explanation. But why? What the hell was going on with him? As he desperately sought what to do, he saw Tony's notes on the desk. They were simply entitled 'Sam M.' He picked them up, leaving bloodied finger marks on the cover.

He read: *"Dr. Mason has presented a quasi- psychotic disposition – causation possibly stress occasioned by workload? Personality disorder or ontological insecurity? Hallucinations are not drug induced and latterly the imagined 'objects' have become real: reinforces theory of depleted self-esteem and need for attention. Early positives of schizophrenia? 7th May A.D.*

Sam stared at the document.

"What the f—! So, you *did* think I was going mad, you bastard!" A sudden rage gripped him and he kicked the corpse's head which rolled lifelessly from side to side. It was then that he vomited, the disgorged bile splattering the prone figure at his feet. Perversely he thought about how much of his DNA had been deposited, and he stumbled from the office not knowing where he was intending to go.

So many thoughts leaped about inside his head. What was causing this disorder? He was a doctor after all— surely he should have some idea what was happening to him. The next thought that ripped into his skull was that he was a murderer. Give himself up and get treatment? Institutionalized for how long? He punched the wall of the corridor and made for the staircase to the basement car park. His blue BMW sat isolated in the far bay. As he walked towards it, the security guard's voice addressed him.

"Oh, doctor... Sorry, sir, I thought you were Doctor Denning. I was just about to secure the garage for the night but noticed his and another car here. I take it the BMW's yours?"

"Erm...yes, yes it is."

"Fine. I'll pop up to Dr. Denning and see how long he's likely to be. He doesn't usually stay late."

"No. That's right. I'm an old friend of his and we were talking. I'm sure he'll be down directly."

The guard noticed the blood on Sam Mason's hands.

"Everything all right, sir?" said the guard, but his expression was asking very different questions.

Sam looked at his fingers.

"Oh, er...a huge nosebleed. Stress related apparently. My friend, Tony – Dr. Denning, is giving me some after-hours treatment. Should really clean myself up."

Sam groped into his jacket pocket and pulled out his handkerchief. As he did so, one of Tony's eyeballs fell to the floor. The security guard reeled backwards.

"Oh, God, what the fuck...What have you...?"

The pain started only slightly in Sam's temple but increased the more the guard shouted at him. The voice came from somewhere inside his head but it sounded like no voice he had heard before and yet it must have been his or part of him.

"He has seen you. He knows what you have done ...has seen you...seen you."

He wanted the pain to stop. He wanted the guard to stop shouting at him. Stop shouting. He lunged forward towards the man, whose voice was becoming hysterical. He stepped on the eyeball which exploded under the sole of his shoe sliding him forward into the guard's chest. The guard fell backwards and there was a discernible crack like the sound of a small firework exploding as his skull fractured against the concrete support of the car park.

"Silence. Good."

The blood from the guard's head seeped slowly over the concrete floor.

"He has seen you...seen you."

Sam Mason's face was expressionless as he bent towards the guard and swiftly and expertly pried the eyes from their sockets and placed them in his jacket pocket. He cleaned his fingers as best he could with his handkerchief and then walked towards his car. He drove for some miles out of town and finally parked up outside a bar. His mobile phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello, darling. What time do you think you'll be home?"

"Not sure. Something has come up I need to deal with. I'll call you later, OK?"

Sam got out of the car and threw his jacket with its awful contents onto the back seat, went into the bar and walked straight to the bathroom. He washed his hands as only a surgeon can; lots of soap—hands, wrists, forearms—again and again. It did not seem enough. He stared into the mirror above the washbasin. The normally cheerful face had been replaced with a mask he did not recognize. The mouth was downturned; his hair lay lank and flat against his scalp. But it was the eyes. They seemed to be bleeding from the tear ducts. Subconjunctival hemorrhage? No, this was external. There was no associated nosebleed. He tore a tissue from the dispenser and dabbed the corner of his eyes.

"Crying tears? Who for? You?"

He went out to the bar.

"Yes, sir. What can I get you?"

"A very large brandy, please."

Sam carried his drink to a remote corner of the bar, took a mouthful and let the sting of the liquid swirl around his mouth for a good while before swallowing deeply. It caused him to catch his breath as it coursed down his throat and it seemed to settle him a little. Sam seemed to withdraw further into the corner in which he sat. He was a murderer, coiled in the guilt of what had happened in the last hour. Had anyone found the bodies yet? Probably not, although the guard no doubt had to check in with his base every so often. It wouldn't be long. It was then that his cell phone flashed up a message from Angie: SAM PLEASE CALL ME URGENTLY. He had to go home. It was the only place where he could feel safe. He took a cab and asked to be dropped at the end of his street. Through the front window of his house he could see his wife sitting with a police officer. The officer went to the front door, saying:

"I'll just be outside. Let me know if you get a call, OK?"

Sam let himself in through the back door to the kitchen. He saw a jar of pickled onions on the worktop. He became fascinated by their spherical shape, bobbing about in the clear liquid. He took a fork from the drawer, stabbed one of the onions and popped it into his mouth and walked casually into the lounge.

"Hello, darling" he said, "I've been worried about you. All that crying. Can't be right."

"Put it right."

Angie froze, not knowing whether to call out or say anything. The man standing before her was not the man she knew as her husband: it was clear something dreadful must have happened to him.

Tears welled up in Angie's eyes. "Oh, Sam, what have you done?"

"Oh, no. What's all this?" He waved the fork in front of her face. "Your nicotinic and muscorinic receptors are working overtime. I can stop this. I'm a doctor!" Then he laughed.

"Stop the crying!"

"Sam, there's a police officer outside the house."

"Well, I know that. I'm not blind."

Angie's voice was steady, as she said, "Sam, I'm going to tell the officer that you're here. You need help." She stood slowly and made her way to the front door.

Sam Mason stood up to follow her. "You can't do that! Don't you understand? I can't see them. I won't see them!" So saying, he plunged the fork into his right eye and then into his left.

About the Author:

Wally Smith was born in Liverpool, UK, and writes short stories, novels and plays. He has three novels published, available on Amazon: *The Intricate Soul*, *Empirical Evidence* and *Shelf Life*. His plays have been performed at the LitFest and INK Festivals in the UK and in Australia. A lifelong supporter of Liverpool Football Club and wine drinker, he now enjoys his retirement in Suffolk.

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Past the voids in angled rifts of the geometrically slanted edges of our black universe, lay a world scattered to the opiate dust of space. It was a planetoid that could only be described as the 'arduous throne of a nuclear god' that sat upon the bones of a thousand dead races. A fragment in time, weighed down in ivory and bone, propped up by the veritable worship of the countless millions; who had tossed themselves at its marble base in awesome praise of the horrendous glory of that indescribable yellow horror. The Witches of Asher-Fell, that most harrowed of orders, warned travelers of its sinister glow.

The farthest visible star that could be seen was fourteen billion lightyears away at the beginning of time, an infinite and galling expense of thought that would have sent any sane person off on the brink of madness. There was no physical way for me to reach Ghould or prove its existence to those which I could reasonably call my friends or family with a sound logical word. Though, I would find a way. Through glades of deep swampy woods, I saw immense stones wrapped in moss, tiredly leaning into the dank waters. The witches had warned me, but I did not listen. Their femininity was divine, and their voices soft, carrying the legends of a thousand doomed souls who traveled this road before me.

'The Ghosts they howl, deep at night,
On ivory thrones out of sight.
This curse you'll pay, inside your dreams,
Forever lost, a voiceless scream.'

Like a drumbeat, I continued on, ignoring the witches counsel. I paid their curse no heed despite knowing this journey would surely be my end, and this being my last written testament before my voyage, I hoped these words would act as a last testament to those who also wished to find the throne at the place where the stars first learned to breathe fire.

It was a mystical realm that scarred me with wonder and beauty. An Eden of devastation marred with towering structures of blue basalt and glittering gems. By all accounts, it was alien in its hexagonal geometry with boulevards that stretched endlessly around each spire hovering in the explosive aurean skies. There was an eerie yellow mist that filled the air, a miasmic vapor that tickled my senses, coloring its atmosphere with the most peculiar shades of tainted gold and browns. While discontenting to the eyes, it sparked my primal urges with its abhorrent spectral radiance.

A kingdom of pure dread floating at the beginning of time, with cities built in the image of its master, only to fall into ruin from the unimaginable and placid fury that filled each environ with despicable majesty. Those grotesque bas-reliefs, carved with the faces of some cephalopodic and protoplasmic nuclear horror hung in the black mass of space, until on a fateful night over ten thousand of years ago, landing in the swamps of New Ashworth. Ancient man worshipped the towering monoliths that fell from the dying skies and built civilizations in their names, but with no possible sense or coherent ability to grasp its true origin.

I had taken this journey more times than I could recount in dreams and in memory, so much so that I felt as if I had bathed in the acidic pools that flowed outside of the hexagonally constructed boulevards, where teal liquids poured through marble aqueducts into fountains pooling in alluring bathes that frothed with the most tantalizing smell. I woke up some mornings with burns on my skin, despite what friends had told me of my previous night's encounters, I swore the ablations were from those teal pools, soaking in them while basking under the polluted starlight. I still remembered the warnings from the Old Witches, but I could not stop and felt ever closer.

This glimpse of a world in my nightmares, sparked my curiosity to trek across time and space, backwards to kneel at a throne where the weight of time dripped slowly riddled with the dead stars.

And so, in dreams I lived, cursed to remain a nightmarer at the beginning of time, blessed with the fury of Ad'Naigon's contemptible will. A ghost I had now become, doomed to wander, screaming voiceless, with no one to hear me except for those who dwelled in that swampy glade. The witches had warned me, but I did not listen, I would not listen. Their femininity was divine, and their voices soft, carrying the legends of a thousand doomed souls who traveled this road before me.

'I am the voice, deep at night,
On ivory thrones out of sight.
A curse to pay, inside my dreams,
Forever lost, a voiceless scream.'

About the Author:

Maxwell Gold is an emerging writer of weird fiction and dark fantasy short stories and prose fiction, with stories published in literary journals including; *Weirdbook Magazine* and *Hinnom Magazine*, and many others. His short story titled, *Cyber God* published in the fall issue of *Bete Noire Magazine*. Maxwell was born in Columbus, Ohio and studied philosophy and political science at the University of Toledo.

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Today just wasn't my day.

It started at the apartment pool. I don't go to splash around after a long day at work. I go to relax, float and drink. I have a tough job—I work at McDonald's. After eight hours of listening to kids whine about their Happy Meal toys, I'm done. I need to decompress. Last thing I want to see is another kid, so I go after dark when the little crapheads are in bed.

I really needed to relax today—worst day ever. The headsets were acting up at work so every order I took was garbled with static. Of course, I got a bunch of the orders wrong. I can't understand people over the stupid speakers on the best of days, which today wasn't. Long story short, it was hours of 'my fries are cold,' 'I've been waiting in line for 15 minutes,' and 'that's not the toy I wanted.' Whine, whine and frickin' whine. By the time I clocked out, I was ready to stick some heads in the fryer. Instead, I went home, cracked a beer and changed into my swim trunks. Nothing is better than a soak in the pool to clean the stench of grease out of my pores. Usually.

I was only in there like ten minutes when the gate opened up and these two brats wandered in with their mom. She was chatting away on her phone, not even looking at her kids. She just plodded up to the closest chair and plunked herself down. The two brats made a beeline for the pool and cannon balled in. There's a sign that clearly states *No Running*. If the brats could read, they didn't care. They both did a running launch at once, sending a tidal wave over my peaceful float.

"Hey!" I yelled. The stupid mom didn't even look up. Me and my beer were both doused. I wiped lukewarm chlorine water out of my eyes and glared at the nearest kid. He was dog paddling straight for me and clutched at the edge of my tube float.

"Can I use this?" He coughed water into my face and blinked through his dripping bangs.

"No," I said. "This is my float. You guys aren't supposed to run in here. Shouldn't you be in bed?"

The little kid struggled to stay afloat, still gripping the vinyl making us both spin and tilt. I twisted in the tube to get a better position and stabilize my beer. His nose was damp and crusty looking with a snot bubble poking out of his left nostril.

"Kid, this is my float. This is grown up time. Go bug your brother."

"But I don't know how to swim. I *need* this." He pulled harder, grabbed on with both hands and coughed in my face.

"Kid, go away. This is my float. I'm trying to relax."

I looked up at the mom. She was oblivious to the drama in the pool. She was sitting sideways on the lounge, almost with her back to us, deep in conversation. I bet she fed her kids Happy Meals all the time.

"Want to see my ouchie?"

I looked back to see the kid had gotten one of his scrawny little arms hooked through my tube. With the other hand he was pointing at his elbow. Hanging open was a nasty, waterlogged band aid. The edges were dark with kid grime and it looked like it had been stuck there awhile. Half of it had given up, the adhesive no match for whatever dirt the kid had subjected it to. It hung open, dark stained cotton pad exposed like a belly-up body. A large scab looked out at me, already turning mushy white from the soaking. He tugged at the band aid, loosening it more. My stomach lurched.

"No, take that away, kid. That's disgusting."

I tried to pry his arm off my float so I could paddle away. Pool time was over. He managed to pull the rest of the band aid free and held it out to me, resisting my efforts to get him off my float. The band aid dangled at me, just a few inches from my face. I turned back to get the mom's help.

"Ma'am! Your kid needs you..." That's what I started to say. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him flick his wrist up, tossing the nasty piece of plastic and gauze at my face. It hit my cheek and stuck like a germy, scabby leech. I didn't react well.

"Arghle...!"

I grabbed the kid's arm and heaved him off my tube. The little shit kept his grip on my float and it tipped with him. All I could think of was the disease crusted thing that was stuck to my face. I threw my beer hand up for balance. The bottle slipped from my grip and I heard it break against the concrete. There's actually a sign that says *No Glass* as well, but it wouldn't have been a problem if the kid was in bed like he should have been.

Down we both went. I heard glubbing and felt his little limbs thrashing around next to me. My legs hit the bottom and I struggled to stand up, scraping one of my toes in the process. I must have opened my mouth to yell, or

breathe in or maybe just in surprise and swallowed a mouthful of water. I splashed to the surface, swallowing pool. Something rushed in with the water and stuck in the back of my throat. I tasted rubber.

I hacked as soon as I hit air. Whatever was in my throat was stuck halfway. I think the kid was trying to cling to me but I shoved free and headed for poolside, still trying to clear my throat. My stomach was starting to heave as I realized I'd swallowed the kid's band aid. That was too much. I hurled.

Digested fish filet, fries and light beer spewed out into the blue water, floating across the surface like oil. I tried to twist out of it, lost my footing and took in more water. The inside of my nose was on fire. I was thrashing like a crazy person to get out and I think I may have kicked the kid. I resurfaced to see his mom had finally dropped the phone and was lumbering towards us.

Bad luck for us all, my bottle had smashed against the side of the pool and gotten glass everywhere. She stepped right into it, shrieked in pain and then fell into the mess with us. It must have been a big piece of glass because I heard it crunch between the cement and her foot as she twisted and came down. By now I'd reached the wide stairs on the shallow end and was crawling up, still heaving. I could still feel something in my throat. I puked again, but this time at least I'd made it to the edge.

I turned halfway to look behind me. The kid that had bugged me was crying and dog paddling toward the deep end. His mom was flopping around like a spandex encased whale trying to reach her foot with one hand. She was cut bad because in the pool lights I could see a red cloud staining the water around her. The other kid was clutching the pool edge like a little crab and screaming. I crawled free of the mess and flopped onto the warm pavement.

"Lady, I'll help you..." is what I was going to say, but I swear I tasted that band aid again. There was something on my tongue, probably just vomit, but the sensation and the flavor of scab and rubber was too much and my stomach decided to do another dump. I tried to get to my feet and at least get to the grass but I stepped on some of that damn glass myself. I felt the stab and looked down to see a thick shard of amber sticking up between my big and second toe. The blood just started bubbling out. I guess I scraped my toe on the bottom of the pool pretty bad too, because my big toenail was gone. There was a raw oval of open nail bed where a toenail should have been.

I just screamed and fell down on one knee to reach my foot. The piece of glass was from the bottom of the bottle and it was halfway through one toe. I swear I could feel it cutting into the bone. I tried to pull it out but my hands were shaking and it was slippery with blood. I know I tried to get up so I could hobble somewhere away, probably the hospital, but I stumbled and tripped. I crouched over my bleeding foot and just started crying.

My nose was stuffed up and I blew it out into my hand. Don't judge me. It's not like I had a tissue handy and I was already covered in more nasty than I'd ever seen. Whatever was stuck in there was lodged pretty good, so I plugged up one nose hole and blew it out, hard.

It finally flew free and I could breathe again. Through the tears I looked back down to see what I'd dislodged. There, on my poor mangled foot, was the band aid. I guess it had gotten stuck up in my nostril when I was vomiting and I blew it free, right over my missing toenail. I think I just took it all in for a few seconds, every grimy fiber of that used band aid imprinting in my mind. I think I even saw what looked like scab crumbs stuck to it with bile. I know I started screaming then...

...and that's the last thing I remember, Your Honor, I swear.

About the Author:

Angela Yuriko Smith's work is published in print and online publications, including Horror Writers Association's Poetry Showcase vols. 2-4 and Where the Stars Rise: Asian Science Fiction and Fantasy anthology.

Her novella, Bitter Suites, is a 2018 Bram Stoker Awards® finalist. Her first collection of poetry, In Favor of Pain, was nominated for an 2017 Elgin Award. All her books are available on Amazon.

Currently, she publishes Space and Time magazine, a 52 year old publication dedicated to fantasy, horror and science fiction.

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The girl is a streak of crimson running across the gravel of *Samson's Scrapyard*, streamers of red hair whipping behind her. She is a flare of colour, highly visible. Mammoth carcasses of burned out vehicles surround her, while the jaws of drunken JCBs snap at her flying feet. She is adept at tracking her way through the vehicular graveyard.

"I'm coming for you!" Liam shouts. He leaps from one upended car's corpse to the next; landing clumsily. "I'm gonna get you, Ruby! You shouldn't have messed with my gear."

Ruby glances over her shoulder; chest heaving. Her eyes scanning the wrecked vehicles for one of her hidey holes. The stolen rucksack banging on her bony shoulder blades. A chewed-out Mini beckons her. Crawling through the smashed back window, Ruby huddles into the ripped leather seats. Out of sight, she slows her breathing, forces herself to go quiet.

"Rue- Bee! Where are you?"

She pulls out her stolen supplies, several plastic packets of drugs slide out. Uninterested in them, Ruby grabs the sandwiches and *Monster* drink and gobbles her only meal of the day. She's so hungry it hurts.

"Damn!" Liam glances down at the trickle of blood seeping through his jeans; a metal shard skewers his right leg, protruding obscenely. *I'm kebab-bed*, he thinks. He hobbles, then stumbles. *The little cow's gonna regret pinching my gear and leading me on.*

"Ruby, c'mon girl. I need help. I'm bleeding." His voice wobbles and he's not entirely faking. Pain zigzags through his leg, shocking him with its bite.

In the scrapyard the metal hulks wheeze as the wind whistles inside their skeletons. Liam senses he is not alone. Something's out there with him. It's not Ruby. The hairs on the nape of his neck prickle. He's being watched. He bandages his wound —tight as he can bear it— with his bandanna. *Can whatever's out there smell blood?*

He can hear breathing, no it's snuffling. Hot, heavy, excited and whatever it is, it's closing in on him. Liam gazes around the yard. He's a long way from the front gates and his leg is going to prevent him climbing to safety. Cursing, Liam tries to jog, but his injured leg gives way. He watches his blood feed the dirt, leaving a scent trail for his pursuer. He can smell the thing now. Fetid, sour, unnameable. *What the hell are you? Where are you?*

He makes himself small, curling up into a ball, head tucked in, but . . . it comes at him— fast from behind a row of smashed-up white vans. He glimpses a long black snout, tiny eyes, smells the stink of its breath, glimpses the yawning jaws surrounding rows of yellowing canines and hears the crunch of bones. His. He screams. A long howl of agony, as his legs are torn from his torso. Above him a lean dark shape grunts and chews, eating its fill, spitting out bony fragments.

Snug inside the Mini's metal shell, Ruby sleeps. Her eyelids flicker as she dreams. The long days of trekking around shopping malls, always on the lookout for food, have worn her out. It's tough being the sole provider and support; feeding herself and her dependent. It's not as if she can claim for help off the state either. She's in a unique position.

The rain wakes her, pattering on the metal roof playing melodies and blending into Ruby's dreams, dragging her back to consciousness and awareness. She listens to the silence. Liam's voice has gone. She sniffs the rain-fresh air. She can't detect any trace of a living human in the immediate vicinity. She climbs out and drops down onto the damp earth.

Looking out at the shiny surfaces of the scrapyard, she sees miniature rainbows in the oily puddles and beauty in the angular sculptures. This abandoned scrapyard has been a fantastic hiding place for them both. She's brought a series of 'guests' here over the last few months. It's out of town and isolated. No one who comes here ever leaves.

She waits. A scuttling beneath the belly of a burned-out lorry draws her eye. A shape trots towards her, holding a pair of what used to be blue jeans in its teeth. Huge, black haired, muscular, with a long snout and tiny eyes, the creature nestles against her. Part wolf, part hyena, part...? Ruby had never been sure what else was in its DNA. It was not indigenous to this country though, she knew that. It was unique, a one off, she guessed.

They had found each other a couple of years ago, both runaways, both lost and frightened and young. The creature had fed her, found water for them, kept her warm at night and alive. She'd not have survived those first few months alone without it.

Now the creature has grown to full size, no longer a pup, much harder to hide, so Ruby returns the favour and brings it prey. They look out for each other, share a home of sorts. She's even given it a name. Everyone needs one - though she's changed hers from town to town. But Ruby likes this name – plucked from her memories of the Bible stories her mum had read to her, night after night, when she and her mother still lived together.

"Hello Samson." Ruby pats the matted fur, tickles behind the velvet ears, strokes the bloody snout beneath which long canines protrude. The creature rubs against her hand, fur bristling along its spine, eyes closing in joy.

"You caught him. Good boy. Enjoy your dinner?" A low vibration erupts from the sinewy neck. Ruby smiles. "Well done. Let's get you cleaned up."

The creature walks beside her, dogging her every step, skinny striped tail held high, haunches rippling. In the twilight the pair could be mistaken for a skinny teenager out for a walk with her large mongrel, breed unknown.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK, writes dark fiction, which has appeared on the Horror Tree site, in varied anthologies like *DeadCades*, *Women in Horror Annual 2* and her own collection, *Badlands*, available to buy on amazon.

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"It happens whenever I begin to fall asleep," Lydia says, her voice soft with exhaustion. "Now it happens whenever my eyes are closed for too long."

She gestures to a bottle of eye drops on the table. There is a tight, amused smile on her lips. It is almost empty. Her blue eyes are bloodshot, red rimmed with deep hanging bruises. Her face is drawn and skeletal, she's lost a lot of weight in the few days I have last seen her. Even with the drastic changes, she still looks like our mother, beautiful and cold.

"What has the doctor said?" I ask as I try not to stare.

Her kitchen is bright and warm, a reflection of what our mother never was. It's filled with knickknacks; all cat themed, and pictures hanging on the butter yellow walls. Pictures of Lydia at her high school ballet recital as the little mermaid, Lydia graduating from high school, and then college. There are pictures of Lydia with Mom in the garden, Lydia and Mom in Paris, always Lydia and Mom somewhere special. All the pictures of me have been taken down, all except one family portrait. I wonder where the pictures have gone.

"He checked my ears, blood, and all that. He said everything is fine and that I just needed some proper sleep," Lydia shakes her head with another little smile.

Even her hair seems different. Dry, brittle, and thin as it hangs in blonde wisps around her face. Does she know how bad it looks? All those expensive spa days meant nothing.

"You do need sleep," I reach out and touch her skin.

She feels hot, too much so, I wonder if she knows she has a fever. She jerks her hand away, presses it against her chest. I try not to let it offend me.

"I can't, Jennifer. I just can't."

She reaches for her eye drops. With care, she pulls down her bottom eye lid, first the right one and then the left, and squeezes a couple drops into each eye. She blinks, her eyelashes fluttering in frantic spasms like frightened moths.

"You can't go on like this. You're making yourself sick."

"You don't understand." She rubs her eyes.

"It can't be that bad, Lydia."

"It feels like I'm falling. Sinking into the darkness."

Her fingers are trembling as she picks up her mug. The black tea inside splashes against the sides, threatening to spill over.

"What darkness?"

"I don't know really. It's hard to explain. It's a feeling more than anything. A *feeling* of darkness," Lydia sighs.

"You know what Mom used to say," I want to help her, convince her to sleep. "Every pretty girl needs her beauty rest to shine the next day."

"I know it doesn't make any sense," she slams her mug down, the tea spreads across the table, filling the scars and cracks in Mom's old wooden farm table.

I love this table. I had loved it dearly growing up, but it had been willed, like everything else, to Lydia. Does she know that when I was eight and particularly angry at our mom, I carved my name on the underside of it with a box knife?

"Oh, Jennifer," she stands, knocking against the table with her hip.

Where has all her grace gone? Mom had always lectured me to try and be more like her, to try and stomp a little less, try to be less of an elephant and more of a swan. Lydia grabs a yellow towel and begins to soak up the tea.

"I'm sorry. I'm just so on edge."

"Well, obviously Lydia. You told me you haven't slept in days!" I rub my hand against my lips. "Nothing is going to happen to you if you fall asleep."

"The falling —"

"Is just a sensation. You're being ridiculous. The doctor missed something, like maybe a deep inner ear thing. Go to a different doctor tomorrow and get a second opinion. I'll even come with you. I promise you, you'll be fine."

She stands at the sink, staring out the window that looks out onto her garden, Mom's garden. She has always been slight, looking as though she would blow away in a rough gust of wind. But now, as the sunlight surrounds her in a bright halo, she looks almost ghostly. The edges of her body fade in with the light. Her tanned skin is bleached by the glare, her hair seems ablaze.

She turns her head to look at me. I can see she is trying to smile, being the same old Lydia and never believing that anyone knows better than her.

"Trust me, Lydia. Nothing will happen to you if you fall asleep."

"You always liked to pretend you knew everything. Even when we were little and both knew nothing of the big wide world around us. Remember when you told me you knew that brown sugar was made from pine cones?" She laughs a little, "I spent an afternoon grinding up as many as I could find and then tried to eat the mess I had made."

I stand and grab her arm. I am too rough and she winces. Embarrassed, I let go of her with a jerk. Dark marks mar her skin; admonishing me, shaming me. How can she bruise so easily? Only dying people bruise like that.

"The amazing Jennifer; always so sure. I wish I was as sure as you," Lydia leans against the counter as though it is too much effort to stand.

"Take a nap now," I take her arm again, handling her as though she is a child. "Take a nap while the sun is up, while I'm here. I'll watch over you. I promise I'll watch over you, I won't let you fall." I laugh, hoping she will laugh with me but knowing she won't.

"Jennifer," Her voice is as weak as her body.

"Come on now," I pull her with me into her living room.

It's so bright in there. Mom always had a thing for clinically white rooms where no specks or flaws could invade unseen. I guess Lydia has the same tastes. I always feel as though I'm back at the hospital when I visit. A wide patio door lets in all the light and allows a view of the backyard where we used to play. The old elm tree where papa had put a swing up for us has long since been chopped down. Lydia has kept all of Mom's porcelain figurines; they stand guard on the coffee table and on top of the television, their flat painted eyes ever vigilant.

"Onto the couch now," I say.

She is trying to squirm away; I push her down onto the cushions. She says nothing, just looks at the couch and back at me, her eyes wide and stupid looking. I grow angry at her fear. She never listens to me, she never has.

"Lay down, Lydia," I cringe at the harsh tone in my voice.

She lays down, awkward in her movements as though she has forgotten how to be comfortable.

"If I fall, I don't think you'll be able to catch me," she says, her eyes resting on my knees. "It's not that kind of falling."

I sit on the thick white carpet by the side of the couch and cross my arms. Her raw looking eyelids begin to slip down. Still she whispers.

"I can feel it starting, Jennifer. I can feel my edges starting to fall."

"Sleep, Lydia. We'll talk more when you wake up."

I watch the dust motes glitter in the light as they dance on the stirring air of her soft breath. I begin to relax but she speaks again.

"It was my mistake."

Her voice is cold and hard. I tense and wait for her to elaborate. She says nothing more. I reach out and hold her delicately veined hand. As children, Lydia had never hugged me. I'd always thought it strange. On television, I used to watch the children shows about normal families. The mothers and daughters always hugged, the sisters played hand in hand. They would squabble and make up with big cheesy grins. I've always been jealous; I've always wanted those hugs.

Her hand is so light and soft in mine. Even when Mom was dying in the hospital bed, blood flecking the white covers and pillow case, Lydia had never held my hand. She knows how anxious I feel in hospitals, ever since Papa died in one. At the side of Mom's bed, I asked her to hold my hand and she had pretended to not have heard me. Holding her hand now, I imagine how it would feel to crush the thin bones under the perfectly tanned skin.

I shudder and take my hand away, filled with disgust at my thoughts. Her lips move but I hear nothing. The shadows caused by the couch arm fall on her face and make it look as though her features are sinking into themselves. It's a frightening illusion, like a silk wrapped skull.

Her chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm. She's finally asleep. She's okay, as I knew she would be.

I watch her face. The shadows are still playing tricks. Her face looks deeper now, more concave. The shadows are stretching out farther; the sun must be hiding behind a cloud. The shadows cover her breasts and stomach and slinks down her legs and arms. Her whole body seems to be collapsing into itself.

I stare at the trickery of the shadows and the light, waiting for the sun to come back and brush away the darkness. But it worsens, the shadows grow deeper, and the illusion grows stronger.

I can scarcely breathe, so deeply am I taken by the horrible image of it all. Finally, I reach out and take her hand again in mine.

I feel it then.

It is a pulling sensation, originating from her skin and pulling at mine. Her fingers should be rounded but I can feel them becoming flat.

I see it now.

It is no trick of the light. The top of her hand, her wrist, and her arm are caving in. Even as I watch, her flesh drops inside itself.

I yank my hand away and fall back against the coffee table. Porcelain cats tumble with cheerful clinks against the glass table top. I see her nose collapse into her face and become a deep indentation. Her lips press, thin, and pull past her teeth. It's happening faster now. Her breasts become flat, then sink into pits.

I want to reach out and shake her awake, but I can't bring myself to touch her. I won't let myself touch her. I push up against the coffee table, trying to get away. A cat shatters under my left palm and bites into my skin.

Lydia grows flatter, her limbs fold into themselves. Her fingers shrink into her hands, her toes into her feet. Her arms and legs collapse up and up into the trunk of her body. There is no cracking of bones or spurt of blood, just a soft rustling like that of falling fabric. She is just a torso and a head now. Her cheekbones and jaw suck into her skull; her eyes disappear and leave hollows that stare. Her skull rolls inward to the neck. Her ribs pull in one by one, the flesh pulling up and away.

I watch the last of her disappear into itself. All that is left is her clothing, earrings, a couple of resin fillings, and a hair elastic. Of Lydia herself, there is nothing.

All this has happened in a few moments, a few minutes of quiet horror. Lydia neither woke nor stirred as she fell into herself; as she fell into whatever darkness she claimed she had felt.

I raise a hand to my face, the same hand which had held Lydia's. It feels dirty, tainted. I begin to shake. I stand and rush to the bathroom.

I retch into the toilet. I vomit and cough and cry until nothing is left. I take a deep breath and take control of myself. Standing at the sink, I scrub that hand with soap and water. I scrub it raw. Only when I see blood do I fall against the bathroom door and press my palms against my closed eyes. I try to breath, I try to steady myself. Lydia is gone.

My breath catches.

I feel it.

The falling.

I sense the darkness.

My eyes fly open and the feeling is gone. But it doesn't matter, it has me now. Whatever got Lydia has me now.

About the Author:

P.L. McMillan has a dark sense of humour and an even darker imagination. What a good scare can't fix, maybe horrible puns will.

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Featured Artist | *Francois Vaillancourt*

I started my career with design studies in Montreal and Paris, before starting in an advertising agency. I have been working in advertising for more than 25 years.

I have always pursued a parallel career, as an artist exhibiting my canvases and as an illustrator. I differentiate between the two, since as an artist, I'm not obligated to follow anyone else's guidelines, I only need to appease my own passion for artistry. However, as an illustrator, I have to visually transpose an author's universe. Moreover, my years of advertising help me to summarize in strong imagery from a long narrative.

I have always loved the world of horror, discovered in adolescence through the work of Stephen King. It's funny to note that I never thought I would marry my love of illustration with the possibility of transposing it to book covers until a few years ago.

It is thanks to Richard Chizmar, author and owner of Cemetery Dance, that I was able to access several authors for whom I have worked. Included in this list are Stephen King, Charlaine Harris, CJ Tudor, David Morrell, Brian Keene, Greg Gifune, to name a few.

My creation process is relatively simple. First of all, I read the story. I know that many illustrators work with a synopsis, but if possible, I prefer to completely read the story to immerse myself in the atmosphere and discover elements that seem visually interesting to me. Then I propose to the author different sketches and once the choice is made, I start the illustration. I consider that one of the benefits of my work is the exclusivity of being privileged to read the book long before publication!

Technically, I do my sketches on an iPad pro and then I make the final image with a Wacom graphics tablet. Digital work allows me to make corrections easily, integrate titles and adjust to different publication formats.

You can discover my work on the website www.francois-art.com, or on the Facebook page, [Francois-art](https://www.facebook.com/Francois-art).



This bug bite is really starting to get on my nerves. No matter what he did, Jeremiah couldn't stop scratching his bug bite. "What is going on? Is my skin this sensitive? Or...is this the West Nile virus?" Jeremiah said. For almost two weeks, that itch seemed to be the only thing on Jeremiah's brain. It overtook work, and spending time with family and friends; sleep was the worst.

At last the house was quiet. No annoying co-workers, mind splitting menial work, exhausting traffic. While his wife was in bed sleeping, Jeremiah took the time to relax and watch TV. But as he drifted off to sleep, the itching stirred him awake. "Damn mosquito bite." Jeremiah mumbled under his breath. Jeremiah scratched the bite as hard as he could, desperately finding some relief but not before tearing his skin. "Oh great. What the...?" A small ooze of blood trailed down his arm alongside a small worm that crept up from his skin. He immediately grabbed some tissue and wiped it away. "Gross." More blood started to flow and a smelly discharge started to come from his open wound with another white looking parasite. "What is that?" This time, Jeremiah squeezed the bite as hard as he could to remove the possible fungus before exposing more of the creatures that bore a resemblance to maggots.

Several began crawling down his arm and biting his flesh, leaving gaping wounds on his arm as if he was suffering third degree burns. The grisly sight horrified Jeremiah as he rushed to the kitchen to try and wash them off, but nothing seemed to work. He tried to scream for his wife, but nothing would come out. Jeremiah attempted to go upstairs to get his wife, but his legs gave way. The maggots began crawling further onto his arms and legs before reaching his torso and face, nibbling on his skin leaving marks and open wounds. "Help! Help me please!" Jeremiah tightly closed his eyes, praying for the pain to stop. When he opened his eyes, he was in darkness. "At least the itching stopped," he said. He attempted to move around but quickly became aware that he was in a confined space, such as a box. "What am I doing here? Did I fall asleep elsewhere?" Shifting his body, he also realized he was in a suit with no room to move anymore than a few inches. Muffled voices and sobs could be heard above him, expressing more confusion. But before Jeremiah could piece things together, his arm started itching again. He couldn't see but he could *feel* them crawling all over his body, ravaging on his skin like a starving man, they were eating him alive. *Oh my God...* the cries above sounded familiar, a woman's voice, his wife. "I miss him so much. He was a good man. It was such a shame that he drank too much, fell and broke his neck. I didn't think his alcoholism went this far." Jeremiah laid in shock and horror at the comment from his wife and recognized the second voice as his close friend, it dawned upon him that he died and was now buried. He was too far gone for them to hear him; but not without making one last attempt at screaming for help before the maggots went for his throat and eyelids, tearing through his skin inch by inch before there was nothing left.

About the Author:

Lover of writing words that become horror stories, reading, coffee, rock music, and video games while residing in Florida as a college student. Tabitha Thompson's work is featured in publications such as Sirens Call Publications, JEA Press, and Mocha Memoirs Press. When she's not writing, she spends her time watching TV, reading books, spending time with loved ones, and people watching; always inspired, always creating.

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"Why can't you stay in one place, why can't you stop? What is wrong with you?" my mother used to ask every time I phoned her, or she did until one day she had a stroke and never spoke to me again. My brothers and sisters (two of each), most of my friends, still live in the New York City area. They're happy and fulfilled and I'm glad for them. They and their children and grandchildren live day to day and believe in free will. But ever since I first met Rosa, I've perceived the full scope of my life from fertilization to decay as one long, exhausting attempt to be the last one left on the dance floor.

I was only nine years old when my older brothers brought me along with them to explore abandoned, derelict buildings in a neighboring area of Queens. I was scared. They were full of energy and stupid. For a full two hours I kept whining, "I want to go home." I didn't stop until the three of us stepped single-file through an empty doorway into the lobby of what was once a grand, old hotel. I remember feeling as if the breath had been knocked out of me. We wandered from deep shadow to flashing sunlight, our sneakers crunching on debris; glass, plaster, broken bottles, human trash. Graffiti in many languages painted the classical columns, crown molding, elaborate lintels and frescoed walls. We wandered into the remains of a vast ballroom and all three of us said, "Wow," at the same time. Even with all the junk and dust and sharp slivers of mirror from the massive looking-glass panels that ran smashed and cracked along one side of the room, the place was impressive. We could almost hear the music, see couples swaying and turning. I immediately walked into the middle of the parquet wood floor, and extended my hands as if I was holding a girl, then began two-stepping up and back, to the side, and around. I could barely hear my brothers laughing in the background.

I lifted my chin and gazed straight up at the ceiling; there were gaping holes and wires hanging down. I knew instantly that there once had been crystal chandeliers glistening above me. As I hummed a tune and circled, my eyes caught on one patch of scrawled letters. I paused, lowered my arms. "Rosa," I read and said out loud. "Rosa, Rosa, Rosa...." The name was repeated dozens of times.

My brothers bounded to my side, punching me, hugged me. "Let's go," one of them ordered.

"No, I can't," I answered. I pointed with one index-finger. "Look," I said, and swung the finger like a compass needle, stopping each time I found those four letters R-O-S-A. "Rosa, Rosa, Rosa..." I repeated.

"Come on, weirdo," my oldest brother demanded. He grabbed me at the crook of one elbow.

I wrenched myself free. "Rosa," I cried. As I stared into the rectangle of an empty window I saw a grown woman—the outline of a grown woman—framed by the glaring light that formed a nimbus around her figure like the rays of a star. She had short, wavy hair and her face was so sad. Her eyes were black smudges. Her skirt was long and almost sheer. She floated towards me, gesturing as if to embrace me. I felt the heat rise up my neck, into my face. I winced, and squatted down, hugging my knees. I began to rock. I dimly heard my brothers screaming. I vaguely recall being dragged away. "Keep moving," I heard a woman's voice, soft but insistent. "Keep moving, stay on your feet."

I don't remember how I got home. At the dinner table that evening, my brothers sat slouching, unable to eat, their faces pale and eyes wide. The two of them made me promise never to say a word to anyone. "About what?" I asked. "Rosa?" That night she talked to me in my dreams. She came to me and we strolled hand-in-hand through the ballroom and she told me about her life, and the man who forced her to compete in the marathon dance contest. It was 1934, and she made me hear him shouting at her, "Keep awake, you cunt, keep moving." She made me feel his bruising fists, smell his sweat. She let me experience her pain as she lost consciousness and slipped into a lifeless heap, hanging limp—head lolling—from her boyfriend's clutch while he continued to dance, pulling her with him like a broken doll as he waltzed.

When I woke the next morning, I was changed. From that moment on, I couldn't stop the dance, I was the forever dancer. I tried to fit in with the strange, static, ordinary world. I learned to pause for fifteen minutes each hour to rest, with Rosa's sweet breath on my breath, her mind in my mind, her heart beating for the both of us, her gentle reminder when time was up, "Keep moving, stay on your feet."

I was diagnosed with ADHD by one doctor. Schizophrenia by another. They pricked me and stung me and filled me with drugs, tied me down on steel framed beds in white wards with yellow cinderblock walls. Sometimes they removed their restraints, observing me instead as I twirled and two-stepped, swayed and dipped along corridors and around rooms. When I was sixteen, I escaped, down streets, highways, dirt roads, across fields and over hills, leaping, turning, resting for fifteen minutes every hour.

And each night—during a quarter-hour of blessed sleep—I hold Rosa in my arms, her head resting on my breast as we rock back and forth making spirals and circles in the dust, gazing at the Milky Way sweeping the sky, the mountains and pastures glazed by blue moonlight.

About the Author:

Rivka Jacobs lives 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* and the *Women of Darkness* anthology. In the last few years she's placed stories with *The Sirens Call Publications* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Fantastic Floridas*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

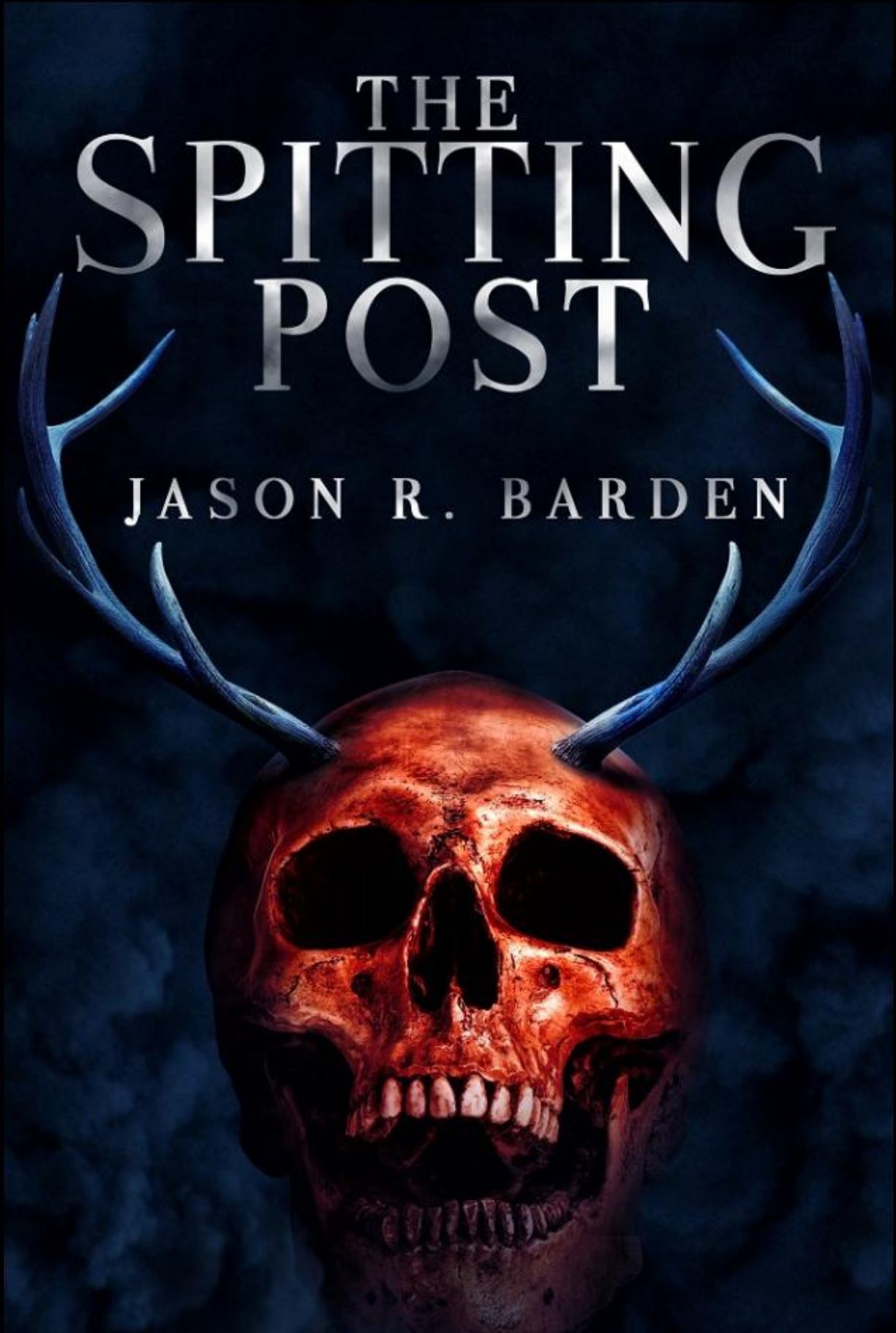
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What he thought was a dream was a twisted nightmare through a
demented world of macabre misfortune.

THE SPITTING POST

JASON R. BARDEN



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The flicker of the desk candle leaned far to the left before flashing upward. An additional invisible force subsequently pressed down on the flame, spreading it out before the small fire repeated its dance. An intense dark figure perched himself inches away, forcing the flame's obedience. The room which surrounded him offered no warmth from its cold barren, stone walls. Solitary living sustained this being for most of its life. But today, his isolated existence bore emptiness of a different kind, threatening his future.

The figure's bright red eyes squinted hard with tears falling upon its pale, nearly translucent face. The skin covering his high cheekbones resembled a taut multi-layered sheet stretched to its limits. Long straight black hair draped alongside the space where ears might show, tracing a path down toward a masculine but quivering chin. His lips alternated between nervous pursing and a trembling grimace, while candled heat lit the tip of his nose and around his lips, offering a rapid, comfortable embrace and the unfortunate cruel departure of its warmth.

A Christian cross stood alongside the candle, bearing the stare of this troubled being. The flutter from outside creatures created an uneven rhythm, to which nothing could sing nor dance. The necklace he wore hung perfectly still, respecting its place and infinite value. The tinted glass vial hanging from the chain held a few drops of blood from his previous victims, shielding its crimson contents from the naked helplessness of the open air. His fingers lightly caressed the vial as if it might harbor an answer to his plight.

Outside of this stone domicile, moonlight escaped behind the clouds, taking its bright offering with it, suggesting the dark night would remain for many hours and allow him to search for answers. His emotions surged, leading to a white-knuckled hold on the table, with his hot stare bearing down on the Cross.

"The blood I have consumed over many generations once gave me life. And now, it is poison! Tell me why?"

Several more tears streamed down his face, rinsing his angry discourse away temporarily, and his grip weakened. Hunger made his energy surge and wane in dramatic fashion—and without warning.

He acquiesced to self-pity by pouring the last of a nearby wine bottle into a long slender glass chalice. Light from the hot candle traced the glass rim, giving it a halo effect, thus making it seem innocent. He knew ingestion of red wine would also destroy him, and for a reason he could not understand. This reality forced his hand early in his long life and he discovered that human blood sustained him—at least, until now. What created his central motivation? He feared death more than any open physical pain. Death meant nothingness, a permanent absence of emotion, and a frozen reality.

"What changed?" he demanded, throwing the wine chalice against the cold hard wall, its fragile particles tinkling across the stone floor, the wine splattering the walls.

"And when?" he demanded of the Jesus figure. "This has to be your doing!"

His long, thinning fingertip traced the letters spelling 'death' down the center of the Jesus figure. A trance took hold of him until he began to pound the nearby wall.

"You're a trinket, a false hope! Your existence has been disproved thousands of times!"

His eyes came within an inch of the Jesus figurine as if to stare it down and beckon retaliation.

Moonlight split the darkness and added to the candle flame size for a brief moment as if to enhance his tirade.

"If you are this great almighty force in the universe, answer me! Or shall I physically die and attempt the spiritual life which you have presumed claimed anyone can do?"

Hollow emptiness filled the air, and the force of his breathing scattered the candled flame.

"You are interfering with my destiny!"

He shuddered from a voice reverberating somewhere in the room. The voice somehow passed through him, making him twist and turn, searching for the one who spoke out.

"Where are you?"

A shadow hovered over the flickering flame and vanished.

"Answer me!" he said, with pounding fists on the table, nearly knocking the Cross to the floor.

He screamed, his knuckles whitened while fiercely cupping the sides of his head. In between bouts of yelling, a faint accusatory whisper entered his consciousness.

"Your master has left you," it said.

"What master have I served? No master has abandoned me! I serve no one! For five hundred years I have observed human fallibility. Not one human has been saved by your prophetic declarations and ambivalent promises! Not *one*!"

When the moon fully descended out of sight, the flutter of night creatures suddenly stopped.

A slight glimmer of light took form from across the table.

"You are hungry for truth," the partially lit form said.

The flame between them intensified and grew to several times its usual size, flaring Damien's nostrils.

"Speak!"

"You do know me," the light communicated, offering a brighter shimmer around the Cross.

"No, I do not."

"The life you have isn't the life you believe you must hold on to... Damien."

"How do you know my name? No one has uttered it for at least five hundred years."

"Your name is your birthright, Damien."

"I suppose your rant is to change my mind?"

"No, but you know the truth, Damien."

"The truth? The fact that you're neither a human nor a creature of any substance. Why should any being capable of reasoned thought consider the likes of you?"

"All humans harbor the truth inside their darkness, aching for enlightened revelation."

"I am no human! It is no wonder the blood I have drunk from humans for many years sustains my reality. The truth you reference redeems no one!"

"Truth has nothing to do with the physical senses, Damien. This is true for humans as well."

"The truth is a nothing notion! You chastise me with word games as I lay dying before you. And from this open wound called hunger!"

"Truth must bleed from within, especially to feed upon, Damien."

"No. You hung to die, with blood pouring from you. Is that supposed to inspire me?"

"You must bleed truth from within."

"What makes you think I want to listen to *you*?"

"Bleed truth. My truth. Feed upon it. And you will rise."

"What exactly is YOUR truth?"

The shimmering lighted figure departed into the black of night. Silence renewed itself as the hours passed.

Damien's body wilted. Crimson nourishment would finish him. He consumed almost too much from his last several victims to hasten his death. Damien decided to crush the glass vial hanging from his necklace, tearing his fingertips apart.

"Why does human blood no longer give me life?" Damien demanded of the candle, which decided to dwindle into a single flat spot of intense orange heat.

"This is what you mean, isn't it?" Damien demanded, spreading his split fingertips to the open air above him.

His thoughts took him in a downward spiral as he paced around, using the last of his physical and emotional energy. He collapsed into a heap aside the table, tearing at the floor, making his fingers bleed more.

"Where is this truth? Here? Spilling from me?"

Damien paused between exasperations, staring the cross down with a fire rising in his eyes.

"I, I refuse to die."

In a moment of rage, he grabbed the cross and employed the sharp edge to gash his wrist and inner forearm open.

"Rinse me of my inner poison!"

The splitting of skin spread easily as if waiting for this release. Black liquid poured out of Damien, spreading across the floor.

"Is this what must I do to live?"

Damien managed to stand, with his remaining energy and collapsed into his chair. He picked up a quill to write upon an open page of a leather-bound journal using his own blood as ink.

It addressed his final written message to anyone who might discover his remains.

Bleed truth, it said...

Exhaustion caused Damien's head to hit the table. His lips finished his declaration inside a faint whisper.

"Feed me, please."

A dark shadow covered the scene, blanketing everything with an intense calm.

Once the sun arose the next morning, birds chirped their glorious song among the branches of surrounding trees. The renewed warmth of day cast new light upon the Catholic Church Sacristy through the stained glass window, exposing Damien's destiny within it.

Three bells rang out from the mysteriously vacant church tower and immediately fell silent.

About the Author:

Bill Bistak (a.k.a. BDSScott), pen name) is a gothic horror author hailing from Toronto, Ontario, Canada (originally born in Ohio). Having spent a half a century studying human behavior in various health professional roles, he stays up late, casting new word permutations, plots and characters into storied glory.

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Everyone asked me why I was having it done. It wasn't necessary, but the doctor suggested doing it. If anything was going on inside of me, the doctor would discover it, and I wanted to know. Lately, too many strange and unsettling conditions have surfaced, and I didn't want any more surprises. If this procedure was a waste of time, then at least it would give me a peace of mind, and I could move on to the next thing.

The nurses prepared me for the procedure, getting me set up in the bed with the electrodes placed on my chest, and finding a vein was easy this time. Still, the needle hurt, at least for a moment, and then the I.V. was set up. The anesthesiologist walked into the room and chatted with the nurses, and then we had a brief conversation. The doctor walked in a few minutes later, and he was all smiles and jokes. And then he got straight to business.

"This is a routine procedure," the doctor said. "I'll be in and out, and you'll be out."

"For how long," I asked.

"Well, the procedure is eight minutes long, but waking up from the Propofol varies for each individual. Either way, I'll see you soon."

"See you soon," and the room began to blur around me.

The darkness felt like a spider web, and at first, it lingered across my skin. Then, it began to tighten, digging into my flesh. I tried to push it away as I stumbled forward, but the web refused to break. It tried to hold me still, and I started to panic, feeling trapped. I couldn't see anything, but I could feel the web. Its touch made me feel cold, sick, and I knew that I was not alone. The web was vibrating as if something were scurrying across its threads, and I opened my mouth to scream. But then something ran across me, and I shuddered. My body convulsed, and my eyes rolled upward. Did I just die?

"Wake up," the nurse snapped at me. She looked concerned, following my panicked gaze across the recovery room. "You okay?"

"Yeah," but my body still shook. "I'm just cold."

"I'll get you a blanket," and the nurse pushed a curtain aside, disappearing a moment later.

I struggled to sit up in the bed. The pain in my arm reminded me of the needle, and I flinched. I hated those I.V.'s especially if I really looked at them, and I watched a little blood pool against the clear tape. I hoped the nurse would remove the needle soon, and then when I touched my arm, it felt sticky. It reminded me of the web, but that was just a dream. It was a weird dream, but it felt so real. And I shuddered, and as I shook, the nurse re-appeared, placing the blanket around me.

"Here you go. Do you feel well enough to move into the chair?"

"Sure," and the nurse helped me into the chair. "Could you take out the needle?"

"Sure," the nurse said. "Then, the doctor would like you to eat something. How about a buttered roll and apple juice?"

"Sounds good," and I flinched as the nurse pulled out the needle.

"Oh, you're a bleeder," the nurse said. "Here. Hold the gauze pad down for a moment," and I did as I was told.

"Okay. I got it," and she placed a band-aid over the gauze. "I'll go get you that roll and juice," and again, she disappeared on the other side of the curtain.

The doctor pushed the curtain aside a moment later. He smiled at me, and I tried to smile back. Then once more, he got down to business. Everything was fine. He still took a few biopsies, but he wasn't too concerned. And he told me to get some rest, which I knew I would. I always took long naps after being given that Propofol stuff because it really knocked me out, and then the doctor wanted to know if I had any questions.

"Were there any complications with the procedure," I asked.

"No. Everything was fine."

"I didn't almost die?"

"Die? No. The procedure was exactly eight minutes, and then you woke up here. Why would you ask that?"

"I don't know," I said. "Strange dream, I guess."

"Well, that Propofol stuff could be a little strong. Anyway, I'll let your ride know that you are awake and that you could leave in a few minutes."

"Sounds good. Thank you."

"You're very welcome," and the doctor patted me on the shoulder. "Go home, and get some rest."

"I will," and I watched the doctor push past the curtain. He greeted the nurse, who was just returning with my roll and juice. "Thank you," and I took a long sip of the juice, savoring its flavor. It never tasted so good before, and then I only ate half the roll. "Can I go now," I asked as the nurse hovered close by.

"I'll walk you out," the nurse said, and she guided me into the hallway. "Take care," and she returned to the recovery room.

"Ready," my ride asked.

"Ready," I said, and I realized that I was anxious to get home. I didn't feel safe here, but maybe that was because of the weird dream. "How was the wait," I asked my ride.

"Short," my ride said.

My ride was a friend from work. My other friend bailed last minute, and I thought that I would have to postpone the procedure. Then, my friend from work offered to drive me, and he wasn't working today anyway. I offered to pay him gas money, but he declined it. And as he drove me home, I leaned back in the car seat and stared out the window, wondering what had attacked me.

"See you at work tomorrow," my ride said as he pulled the car up outside my apartment building.

"See you tomorrow," I replied.

"Get some rest. You look tired."

I exited the car and watched my ride drive off. I rarely had friends from work. My father always said that if you wanted a friend at work to just get a dog instead, but I was allergic to dogs. And my father was wrong. There were some people that I considered friends where I worked, and I walked into the apartment building.

Once in my apartment, I didn't waste any time. I dropped my stuff on the kitchen table. I kicked off my sneakers. I quickly went to the bathroom, and then I got into the bed. My bed never felt so good before, and I pulled the covers up around me. And I fell fast asleep.

The darkness returned. I felt myself standing still, trying to see through the black. I felt awake and not dreaming, and my body was suspended in the air. I was still in the web, and the web tightened around my wrists and ankles. I struggled to move, and finally I flipped onto my back. My body shuddered, and the web shook. Something was crawling up the threads again, and whatever it was touched my feet. And ice picks raced up my body, and then I could no longer feel my feet. I looked down into the darkness, and everything below the knees was gone.

Something nipped at my fingers, and I shook. I almost enjoyed the sensation, but it was chased with a horrifying sting. Again, when I looked down at my left hand, it was gone, and I was about to pull my right hand up when something wrapped its mouth around it. And I convulsed. My eyes rolled upward, and then I felt something heavy sitting on my chest. I didn't want to look, but I did. Nothing looked back, and I could feel it pushing against me. As it pushed into me, a series of cold waves rushed through me. It didn't feel like pain. It was just cold. My heart thundered in my chest. Something was eating me alive. I couldn't see it. I couldn't push it off me. I couldn't fight it, and part of my body welcomed the cold sensations as I convulsed and heaved under the pressure. Then, its breath melted into my face.

"Clear!"

"Shock him again!"

"Clear!"

"Again!"

"Doctor, he's gone," a nurse screamed.

"I don't understand," the doctor said. "How could he just die?"

"I don't know," another nurse cried.

"What did I do?" The doctor stared at all the terrified faces of his staff. "What did I do? It was just a routine procedure. That's it. Routine." The doctor stared down at the body, placing a shaken hand on the shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry," and he hurried out of the room.

The room fell quiet. The anesthesiologist slumped into a nearby chair. A nurse burst into tears and cried in the corner. The other nurses just stared at their feet. Finally, one of them looked up at the dark heart machine and then over at the body. She forced herself to walk over to the bed and lift up the white cover, placing it over my face. She started to cry, and she said, "It was only eight minutes."

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a published Horror and Science-Fiction Author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications and Dark Helix Press, and her short stories have also been featured on Tall Tale TV. She recently self-published a Dystopian Short Story Collection on Amazon called, Better Off Here.

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I'm strapped into a dentist's chair, alone in the pristine white room. It's empty except for a pistol sitting on a table in the corner. The door opens behind me and three people wearing black track suits, gloves, and ski masks file in and stop at the chair.

"You know the rules," a familiar voice says from behind my field of vision. "You have one minute per round. Round one is crushing, round two is cutting, round three is piercing, and rounds four and beyond are open. You must stay below the neck for the first three rounds. Do nothing to cause immediate death. Good luck."

The group exits and the door clicks shut. I'm alone again. I wonder what I look like in nothing but a pair of white shorts. No one would ever mistake me for an athlete, but I did my best to stay in shape for a middle-aged guy. When are they going to start? Maybe anticipation is part of it. I close my eyes, imagining the unseen world inside my body. Blood flows through my veins, roaring in my ears as cells rush by, searching for a hidden key that feels barely out of reach one moment then nonexistent the next. None of it matters anymore. I ride a red blood cell in to my heart, the staccato rhythm faster than normal.

I open my eyes, straining against the binds to look around the room. A bead of sweat trails down my body as I pull my wrists and jerk but I'm not going anywhere. "No." I expel a long breath. "I can do this."

The first person reenters the room and it begins. He stares at me, a two-pound sledgehammer gripped in his right hand. Seconds tick by but I didn't think to start counting so I have no idea how long it's been. It feels —

He steps forward, resting the cold metal of the hammer against my right tibia. I keep my gaze locked with him. His arm pulls back. My body tenses and I close my eyes.

I scream when the hammer touches me. There is no pain. My body must have shut down in shock. I don't want to see it but I open my eyes. Instead of a mangled leg I'm greeted with the smile of a man who knows he's won. He moves out of my line of sight.

I shriek as my right shoulder is driven down. A slurping crunch reverberates through me. Agony erupts through my shoulder as I try to calm my ragged breaths. I'm not sure it will help, but it's the only thing I can control at the moment. I peer as best I can at my broken shoulder. It hangs lower than it should. I sob and tears soon follow. It will get worse but I have to do this. My life is no longer about me.

The second person approaches, an aluminum baseball bat extending one arm. He's smaller, and unlike the first, his gloves are off. Maybe he is a she; her hands look more —

She swings the bat up then in a downward arc. She hits above my left knee, and my body strains against the leather straps as it tries to move with the blow. Dark spots explode in my vision, but it's not the incandescent pain of my shoulder.

"Shit!" she barks and storms by.

I'm sure my leg is at least fractured. It throbs in time with my heartbeat. I wonder what they are doing in the other room right now. I must look a mess right now, I wonder if that helps or hampers me right now? Not that I'll ever know.

A flash of movement off to my right draws my attention and I wail as my broken shoulder is assaulted again. Bones splinter and my arm hangs useless—yet oddly in place thanks to my strapped wrists.

If my head could fall forward, it would; instead I try to sink further into the chair. "Fuuuuck." I sigh. I made it through round one. The gun sits on the table, dark standing out against the white. It can all be over in a moment. I only have to say the word.

The third assailant enters to begin round two. He holds a large combat knife and steps close. He is bigger than the other two and my body trembles. He puts the knife where my left shoulder meets my chest and draws down at an angle toward my hip. The blade splits my skin, slow and smooth. Warm blood seeps down my chest. He stops inches above my waist. The knife twists so the point is ready to push in. He leans closer, his lips almost touching my ear. "Next time I see you..." he whispers as the point starts to plunge through sinew and muscle. He steps back and leaves.

"I won't be so nice," the woman says. Her voice sounds familiar. Maybe it's just my mind playing tricks on me.

Using a roll of duct tape, she wraps my fingers together just above the knuckles. Though my wrists are tied, I still have full movement of my hands. I spread my fingers and the tape pops free. She grabs my hand, squeezing my fingers tight. I try to open them but it's futile in my depleted condition. Tape replaces her grip. She slams my hand against the chair and binds me tighter, my left hand trapped. I'm waning. Have I fought long enough to have a minute elapse before she can finish? She drops the tape and pulls a barber's razor from her pocket, snapping it open. She presses the edge to my pinkie and draws across my knuckles deep and fast. I yell as she reaches into her other pocket. She opens her hand to show me white granules in her palm before she tips them over my hand, spilling the salt onto me. Her hand covers mine, mashing the salt. My body jerks and flails against the restraints.

She's out of my sight moments later. I hear a high five behind me. My left hand is on fire, overriding the pain everywhere else. The first person, also brandishes a knife, although his is of the pocket variety. He glances at my injured hand and cuts the tape then jerks it free, jarring me. I wince and gasp in reply.

He crouches and undoes the belt-style latch that holds my ankle in place. I kick but I'm so weak that he simply grabs my ankle to hold my leg straight. He slices my Achilles. Blood pours from me. My now-constant moans turn to whimpers. He doesn't bother rebinding me before he silently leaves the room.

My body is a mess, broken and bloodied. My senses dull, my body shutting down. Or maybe this is what happens; I'm starting to slip away. I won't have to give. I'll close my eyes between rounds and never open them again.

That's it. Close your eyes. Perfect.

"Fuck!" My eyes pop open. I jerk my right hand, which only sends another shooting pain up my arm. The man watches me struggle, his knife driven through my right hand, stuck in the chair. I scream and twist in my seat. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

He's gone, leaving the knife behind. I look away then back, then away and back. Any movement causes the blade to shift and cut again.

I'm fixated on the knife and trying to stay still when she enters the room. She's holding a soldering iron. Our eyes meet and something about her still nags at me. She puts the tip against my thigh and presses down. Searing heat burns my flesh. An acrid scent fills the room. It takes a moment for me to notice my own screams.

"Say it!" she yells over me. "Say it! End this!"

All I do is shriek louder, my throat becoming raw. An ear-piercing buzzer blares, adding to the cacophony. "Next time..." she snarls. She rips the soldering iron free, bits of stringy flesh attached, and tosses it behind her before storming out.

Round three is almost over. He's holding bolt cutters but goes straight for the gun. "You've got one minute," he says. "You can end your suffering or you can wonder what I'm going to do with these." He holds the bolt cutters up, his back to me. "Don't be stupid. There is nothing to be gained. It's gone on long enough. Don't make me."

My body starts to spasm, every movement causing another jolt of pain causing another spasm, causing another jolt of pain. A wave of wetness hits me when I piss myself. My head spins and I close my eyes, trying to stop the world. He's probably right. What more is there to be gained? How many more —

The buzzer sounds again, louder in the quiet room. He turns around, shaking his head. He picks up the tape and repeats the process used on my left hand on my knifed right. My fingers hang over the edge and I try to move them but can't tell if my body is responding.

He opens the bolt cutters and I look away. At a snapping crunch, I vomit. My head falls limp as I lock up with each heave. Bile shreds my throat. I can't find the willpower to lift my eyelids.

The next buzzer is too much and I throw up again. It's followed by the sound of tape ripping. My head is forced aside and hands press against my face, putting pressure against my eye as it's pulled open. My other opens of its own accord and the ski-masked woman fills my vision. She leans in, a large sewing needle in her hand. With all my strength I twist in my chair and shut my eyes. Nothing happens as the needle inches closer.

"I give," I rasp. "End it. Please."

She stops. "What did you say?"

"I give. Please."

She takes the gun from the table and returns. She pulls the mask up, finally letting me see who she is, place the voice that had been—I chuckle feebly. She's no one, no one I've ever seen. She raises the gun.

I hope it was worth it.

The techs continue their work as a man in an exquisite gray suit turns from the wall full of monitors. "Eight hundred fifty-two million views and change. We'll cut you your check, Miss Smithson."

She doesn't turn her attention from the main feed and what's left of her brother on the screen. He was only given a month to live. No, a month to waste away...

"It looks like he made the right call," the suit says. "One dollar per view instead of one hundred million guaranteed. He was right to bet on himself."

"He didn't. He bet on the depravity of humanity."

About the Author:

Mark Steinwachs is a former roadie that has retired to shop life as General Manager of Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Years of traveling the road on tour buses, plus time in the United States Marine Corps, and as rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique set of experiences to draw on for his stories.

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Poetry

Dignity and Honor | *Charles A. Gramlich*

He dresses her savagely,
with ghosts in his abacus eyes.
Heels of starshine, methane leggings.
He weaves her dress from entropy
and hangs a necklace of quasars
around her neck.

This is not enough to make him happy.
Still too much of her inside.

He replaces her irises with nebulae,
carves her cheekbones into escarpments,
her cheeks into moondust hollows.
Kohl for her eyes comes from Mercury's
sun-burned sands,
the gloss on her lips from shattered comets.
He names her lust.

It is good that he leaves her with dignity.

She clothes him in the regalia
of blood-dampened nights—
because he is not beast enough for her.
Boots of narwhal ivory,
armor of sabretooth and mammoth
with the hair still on.

Still, she frowns.
Too much of him remains.

She sets swords in his eyes,
cuts his mouth wider to show
the flint-sharpened teeth.
The ocher for his skin she draws
from the burnt earth beneath bone fires.
He is become a totem of nightmare,
a god of war and fuck.

But at least he has his honor.

Raging

Wearing the Visage of Skulls
In the Hollows
Of His Face

He sings
On his knees
For Love
Of the
Darkborne

Eyes of rheum
Snake-lidded
Brambles for hair

Beneath a goblin Mars
He scores his teeth on brick
He hones his tongue on chert

Garmented in sweat & pollen
He pleads a swift passage
From whip to welt

A wretched crown
Jaws of iron
Rip scalded words

From lips
That sting hope
For glory
And the
Blackened

And his soul
Wakes from the grave
Armed with smoke and honey

Reaping

About the Author:

Charles Gramlich writes from the piney woods of south Louisiana. He has authored the Talera fantasy series and the SF novel Under the Ember Star. His stories have been collected in, Bitter Steel, Midnight in Rosary, and In the Language of Scorpions. He also writes westerns as Tyler Boone. His books are available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

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The Weather There | *Grove Koger*

The dead call
late at night but never
have much to say.

How're the kids?
How's the wife?
How's the dog?

The weather there
is always cloudy, it seems.
It may rain, but then again
maybe not.

The dead always call
late at night, and I
don't have much to say to them
either. The silence
is a little awkward.
Finally. I tell them I'll
see them soon and
hang up.

About the Author:

Grove Koger is the author of *When the Going Was Good: A Guide to the 99 Best Narratives of Travel, Exploration, and Adventure* (Scarecrow Press, 2002) and Assistant Editor of *Art Patron Magazine* and *Deus Loci: The Lawrence Durrell Journal*. He has also published fiction, nonfiction and poetry in a number of periodicals.

Amazon author page: [Grove Koger](#)

Blog: <https://worldenoughblog.wordpress.com>

The Girl who Loved Spiders | *Russell Hemmell*

I eat flies and weave a silk web for a living,
you chase spiders at night.

When you work at your desk, slim and radiant,
I look admiringly
at the colour-dripping paintbrush dancing under your fingers.

You create worlds as smooth
as the palace of leaves that's my home
- a thousand gleaming castles
gorgeous enticing carapace-tingling.

One night, I will creep closer.

Fear, Fear Not | *Russell Hemmell*

Horror stories are not to be feared
because they only tell what can be made up
not what's lurking behind the scenes.

Be afraid of the legend maker, instead
of the dark that lives inside
in the places where you don't look.

Don't reject evil,
when you're lost in the haunted palace,
let the evil reject you,
by showing it a light it can't handle.

A firefly dream | *Russell Hemmell*

I see them tottering ahead
like a stomping army of wooden legs
- restless
- needy
- unaware
creatures without a destiny
and full of illusions.

They come and go
under the stunned glances of squirrels and sprites
feeding on the green flesh of forgotten trees
and poisoned rivers.

I don't fear what they are
- gene-swapping spiders or human slaves -
I don't care what they do
- stealing my dawn and condemning my species -
I'm not any different.

Shunning the day and bathing in moonlight
thrusting my path inside thistles and lilies
- I extend my wings
to brush their lithe bodies falling like petals
awaiting
like each one of them
to be reborn.

About the Author:

Russell Hemmell is a French-Italian transplant in Scotland, passionate about astrophysics, history, and speculative fiction. Recent work in *Aurealis*, *The Grievous Angel*, *Third Flatiron*, and others.

Blog: earthianhivemind.net

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**We all wear masks. Some are hard to take off.
Especially if they are forced upon us...**

MASK: SHADOW



JOSEPH VANBUREN

**Soundtrack and book available on Amazon in
ebook, paperback, or Kindle Unlimited**

The Man in the Ceiling | *Brian Rosenberger*

He sticks his head through the hole,
Made courtesy of his crowbar.
“Is anybody there?”
Every day, the same question,
Echoing with no answer.
The occupants speechless
And fleshless in places.
Faceless, Headless. Quiet.
It’s been quieter everywhere since the Change.
Sure the screams get annoying.
You get use to it.
There’s less and less of that now.
The occupants are oblivious to the noise,
Resting comfortably on their blood soaked recliners
Or slumber lazily on the floor.
“Is anybody there?”
We, the squatters in the apartment below,
Wait patiently, quietly.
We hear the hunger, the desperation
In our upstairs neighbor’s voice.
Sooner or later, he’ll pay us a visit,
Or we’ll visit him.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worms Turns* and three poetry collections. He is also a featured contributor to the Pro-Wrestling literary collection, *Three-Way Dance*, available from Gimmick Press.

Amazon Page: [Brian Rosenberger](#)

Facebook: [He Who Suffers](#)

Walk With Me | *Stephanie Ellis*

Here comes the candle to light you to bed
Won't you take my hand and walk with me?
Watch the flickering flame as it leads us on
To the terrors I know that await me.
Step-by-step we move into the void,
Where I know the light will forsake me.
Please don't let me go as we climb the stairs
And the darkness seeks to embrace me,
A draught whispers to the candle which bows in response
As it starts to expire and betrays me.
Though you still hold me, I know I am lost
We are walking the path that will claim me.
Here is death's door, locked and barred
But it is the one I must open,
We cross the threshold that all souls must take
And yours is the one I have chosen.
There lies the axe that will chop off your head,
Don't run, you cannot escape me,
Here comes the candle to light you to bed,
Won't you take my hand and die with me?

The Deceiver | *Stephanie Ellis*

Listen, listen carefully
Hidden in the bark-womb of the bellied tree
Is the story unborn and this is my not telling
My unsaying of those not yet and those to be
The skeleton of words disintegrating, distorting
The message, as I speak ambiguously

Listen, listen carefully
Listen to its bones break as I rip it apart
See the skin of the tale flayed and draped
Curtains to my stage, splayed prose
Wrapped around an audience
Forested by spiked-rib trees and tree-spiked ribs

Listen, listen carefully
Listen to the ending I give, its silent finality
I am the Crowned Deceiver
Unwriting my book with truthful lies
As I sit on my cold stone throne, the Horned One
Master of Ceremonies on this underworld night

This floorboard creaks

... if you step on it just so

Playing different notes
Depending upon its visitor

I listen as it speaks
Loud during the day, soft at night
When the cruel comfort of company
Corrupts my sleep

Then, the deathwatch murmurs of the wooden pause
Disturb these dark hours, these dead hours
And I hide in my shadowland self
Where I dream and dream and dream

... oh please let me dream

Whilst outside

... the floorboard creaks

About the Author:

Stephanie Ellis writes dark speculative fiction, finding success in a variety of magazines and anthologies, the latest being *Asylum of Shadows* as part of Demain Publishing's Short Sharp Shocks! series and *The Way of the Mother* in Nosetouch Press, *The Fiends in the Furrows* anthology. Her own collection of short stories has been published in *The Reckoning* and her dark verse has been gathered in *Dark is my Playground*. She is co-editor and contributor to *The Infernal Clock*, a fledgling press which has produced three anthologies to-date. She is also co-editor of *Trembling With Fear*, HorrorTree.com's online magazine. She is also an affiliate member of the HWA.

Amazon Author Page: [Stephanie Ellis](#)

Twitter: [@el_stevie](#)

Night Visitations: Les Incubes | *Alexis Child*

The hunter raids dens
Collecting nocturnal emissions
From skins of willing prey
In the gathering darkness
Shapes himself a body with horns
Thrust upwards in defiance of heaven
Endowed with motion and icy seed
Rouses sleeping females
Excited as an awakening city
Riding among the leaders in charge
Restless and bored is the devil these days

The physician suggests trickery
Chimera, the invention
Of hysterical women
Prone to perverted imaginations
The church is concerned
About the nature of women
What incubi inject
Into witches womb's
Little, to no concern about nuns
Devoted to the expression of gratitude
I shan't deny giving in
Devils need direct encouragement

Witch Hammer | *Alexis Child*

Psychic demons conjure
Desires of contorted control
Sadistically despotic visions
Seeds of ignorance sown
Desire of innocents' blood
Forges a mist of terrors
Wood to ash, flesh to bone
Witch hunters' black plague
The devil's own

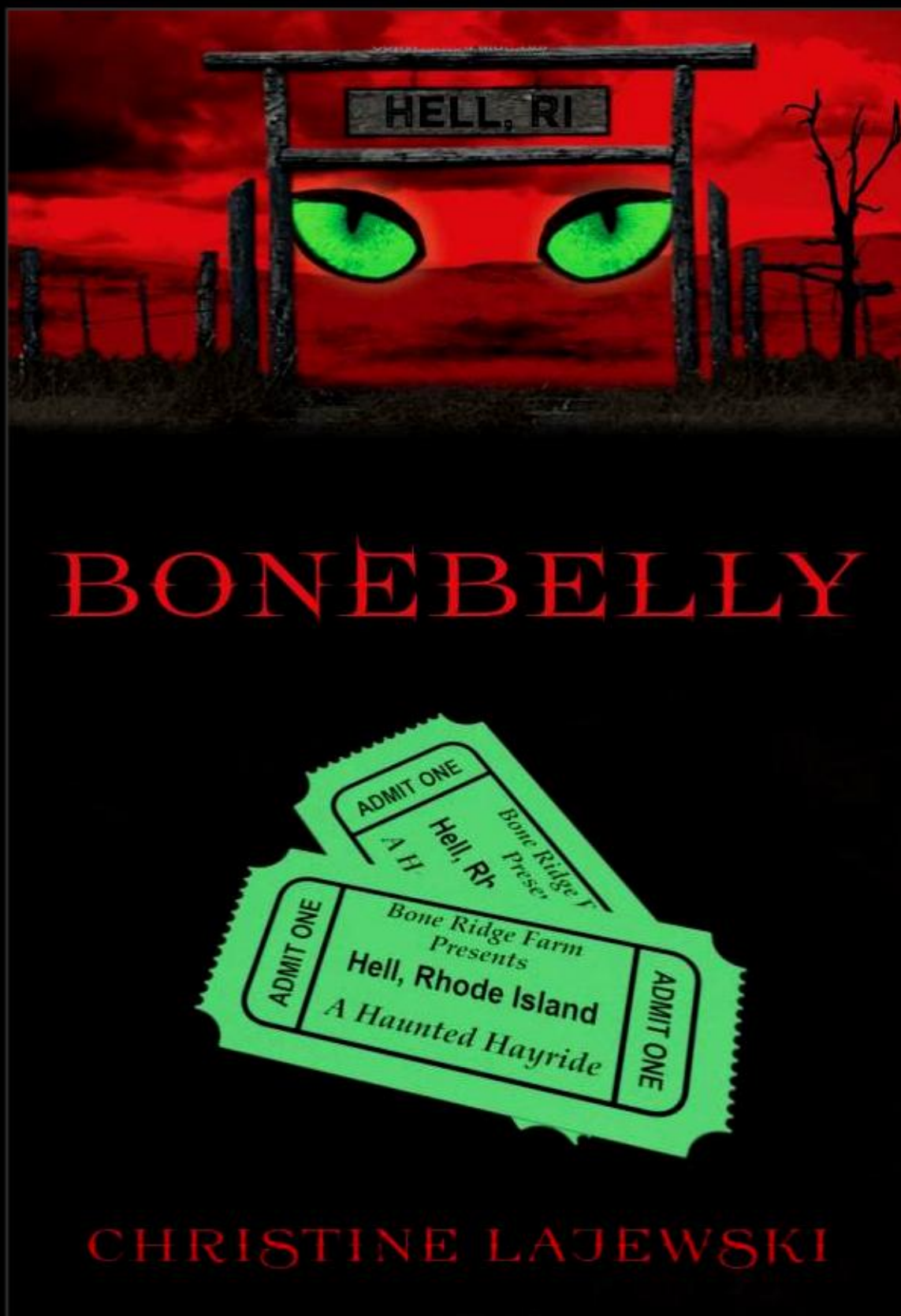
About the Author:

Alexis Child hails from Toronto, Canada where horror in its purest form is a calculated crime against both the aspirations of the soul and affections of the heart. She once lived with a Calico-cat child sleuthing all that went bump in the night, and is haunted by the memory of her cat. Her fiction and poetry have been featured in numerous online and print publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—DEVIL IN THE CLOCK—is available on Amazon.

Website: <http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/alexischild/>

Facebook: [alexis.child.7587](https://www.facebook.com/alexis.child.7587)

HELL IS IN RHODE ISLAND, WHERE IT'S FUN TO BE SCARED.



Available on Amazon and Divertir Publishing.

Download the first 60 pages free at www.divertirpublishing.com/books/bb.html

You will always know
when they are coming
the air is vibrating with electricity
as before a thunderstorm
your water glass is rippling with tears
as in a scene in Jurassic Park

Then you hear the song
in the beginning low an enthralling
slowly changing
getting louder and louder
evoking strange feelings
dizziness and nausea
increasing to pure panic
filling your mind
with horrible perverted visions
sensations of unknown smells and feelings

Paralyzed your float around
in the realm of outer fear
in a place of unknown insanity
tearing your soul apart
until the dawn finally liberates you

It doesn't matter if you hide
deep down in your cellar
cover your ears and eyes
you will always hear them
it doesn't matter if you
run outside with your gun
shooting at the dark
they will not be there
but still they are everywhere
these ancient creatures
lonely walking the earth

When the night falls
you can hear the Sirens calls
their strange songs
of cosmic horrors
and ultimate fear
they have returned
and they will stay here forever.

About the Author:

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

Blog: <http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se>

Facebook: [gameart](#)

Stars fall
against the murk
of the night sky,
a rain of fireflies,
dying in mid-flight,
hurtling,
heralding,
upon gentle heads blow,
cruel truths.
Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts.

Listen to the harmony,
that inaudible peal
(Ong),
that sets heavenly bodies to spin,
amidst everchanging kaleidoscopes
of the Void's sacred geometries,
pulling,
tugging at Fate,
with the waxing
and waning
of single points of light.
Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts.

We,
the kings and queens
of planets and moons,
tread upon paths
of celestial dust
wishing, searching
to join hands in communion
with the witnesses
to our ignorant freefall into The Bottomless.
Nothing lasts. Nothing lasts.

About the Author:

David Estringel is a poet and writer, whose work has appeared in publications like *Digging through the Fat*, *Haiku Journal*, *Foxhole Magazine*, *The Basil O'Flaherty*, *Three Line Poetry*, *Agony Opera*. He is a Contributing Editor (fiction) at *Red Fez*, Lead Editor/columnist at *The Good Men Project*, editor/writer at *The Elixir Magazine*, and columnist at *Channillo*.

Website: davidastringel.com

Twitter: [@The_Booky_Man](https://twitter.com/The_Booky_Man)

Surgeon | *Michelle Joy Gallagher*

Grievous Injury
Sever and amputate
Transpose and intubate
The lungs are full,
Pool of blood and
Adrenaline.
Head rush,
Rise and fall,
Rise and fall
The chest wall
and the heart within.
Blurred vision
of the concussed,
Trussed,
Stitched and
Bandaged.
Veins tell needles
Little secrets.
Brutal scalpels,
Gory details.
Bones set,
The gauzy mess,
The evidence of
Letting you in.

Sever | *Michelle Joy Gallagher*

You'll take your
Pound of flesh
Spine bent,
Veins spent,
Your suppliant
And Siren
Singing you to
Everlasting sleep.
To taste,
To trace
Blood back
To the shipwreck.
A return
To an eternal
Never.
Sever and
Sever again,
A love already
Dismembered.

You | Michelle Joy Gallagher

You are unmarked
Refrigerated train cars
You are the light switch
With null return
And within the once dimly lit
Implement,
You are the broken filament.
You are the tide that
Tempt the shore with
Slow caress
To leave it undressed
At the behest of siren Luna.,
You are horror of Slaughterhouse,
Cattle chute, hammer,
the Gore that comes after.
Joke veiled cruelty,
Disaster and aftermath,
an empty funeral pyre
crackling laughter
as it waits.

Coffin | Michelle Joy Gallagher

Wounds wept
and hope slept
In the stitches
Sewn to keep the
Sickness in.
Thoughts make
Brutal butchers,
Memories, the
Bloated corpses
Lain in vulgar
Poses.
My heart,
a corrupt and
Crudely built coffin
Waiting to be
Filled.

Skeleton | Michelle Joy Gallagher

You built me a skeleton
Knit the skin around
And it still itches in the stitches
on the healing grounds.
The sinking of blade
into flesh to excise.
There's a battle in the
Rattle of lungs,
The borrowed wings
Fluttering futilely
Against shallow breaths
in the hollow depths
Where death shakes
The bruised ribs that
imprison it.

About the Author:

Michelle Joy Gallagher is the mother of 3, poet and author from Sacramento, CA. Most recently appearing in *The Rejected #1* and *#2* by Stan Konopka (Source Point Press) and *Café Macabre* edited by Leah Lederman, She loves to play with the elasticity of language, especially combining visceral imagery with emotional response.

Facebook: [Aphelia](#)

Twitter: [@Aphelia](#)

The Devil | Jonel Abellanosa

Sure, he exists. Ask him who doesn't
need to wonder why he sins, him who
if not suspicious writes about Jesus.
The Trickster doesn't have to dissemble.

Ask the righteous one. The "Centipede"
burrowed under his skin. No need for
science, nor evidence. Ask him who thinks
he owns the unicorn. No one else steals.

Thinking hard, Socrates harder. If he sins,
it's the temptation, not him. Never his fault,
the Dragon wilier than his best guesswork,
Shape shifter turning into what pleases him.

Slander justified, the Enemy no doubt
a defamer. If he hasn't shattered it all, he
needs just one reflection. He'll see what's
reshaping into what he's becoming.

About the Author:

Jonel Abellanosa lives in Cebu City, the Philippines, his poetry nominated for the Pushcart, Best of the Net and Dwarf Stars awards. His collections include "Songs from My Mind's Tree," and "Multiverse" (*Clare Songbirds Publishing House*), "50 Acrostic Poems," forthcoming from *Cyberwit*. His speculative poetry collection, "Pan's Saxophone," is forthcoming from *Weasel Press*.

Crawling Through the Cracked Shell | *Jason R. Barden*

Coming into consciousness, the intense pain of knowing
Desiring to stretch forward, twisted time is slowing
Submerged in thick sludge, surrounded by quicksand
Desiring to grow, feed, devour, and expand
Absorbing my own yoke just to exist in my cell
I must break free and tear through the shell
Find an exit into this outside world of dread
The horror and pure agony that lie straight ahead
Upwards there is a crack in the thick inner lining
Mixed in with slime, tangled and intertwining
Choking on the fear and anxiety of the unknown
Or the dreaded loneliness of being alone
Am I the monster or is it hidden in the outside
Should I remain in here alone and try to hide
Out there it is full of violence, death, and blood
I am hatching and it hurts as if I am encased in mud
Peering out and the vast world I see
Is exactly how I thought it would be
Wretched and uncaring, will I survive
Chaotic and cruel, eat or be eaten alive

About the Author:

Jason R. Barden began writing poetry around the age of thirteen. At age thirty-three, he transitioned into dark fantasy and horror fiction. His first novel *The Spitting Post* is available at Amazon and other online retailers. In addition to writing, he enjoys hiking and photography.

Twitter: [@JBardenLobotomy](https://twitter.com/JBardenLobotomy)



She Was Only Ten | Heather EM Barrett

She Was Only Ten

Her name was Julia Grant,
It states on the memorial, that she was only ten,
Blown to smithereens, she was,
One Tuesday in September 1859, that's when.

Nineteen girls and women, from Birmingham,
Working class wenches burnt alive,
Thirty-eight grafters hands, would do no more,
For the industrialist to thrive.

She should have played in sweet fresh air,
Chased rabbits round a hill,
Danced like a princess, in youthful dreams,
Not sweated in some little back-street mill.

She was a child, you greedy swines,
But did that even matter?
Her small frame put to cinders,
As she toiled to make you fatter.

Women's work suited to small fast hands,
For pittance, they scratched this living,
And died making gun-parts in this land,
Fulminate of mercury, so volatile, so unforgiving.

Oh Medea Britannia!
The cat that slew her kittens, young,
You sacrificed these poor daughters,
To make your rich sons, strong.

Kew Oaks | Heather EM Barrett

The aching overness,
Purpose of day spent,
While afternoon casts,
Such long shadows.
Unease.
Quiet doubts hum,
Wasps in the bones!
The taste of strawberries,
Now inky as old pennies.
Bird song and chatter,
Tuned out.
Rising drum beat inside.
Stirring!

Awareness shifting, left,
Down lawned vistas.
Overblown, heavy,
All this leaf!
Distances away,
Black, Fixed,
Ever so stout,
The Kew Oaks.
Shadows pool by their roots.
Games of light,
Duppies,
Slights of nature's hand,
I can't decide,
From this far away!
Across the gardens and down there,
By the water's edge,
Something goes its way.
I neither like nor understand.

To Shadows Cast | *Heather EM Barrett*

The nether-world of bygone days,
A mind's lost hinterlands,
He is stood back to the radiator,
Eyes to the grey skies beyond the window.
Ice-bergs roll around a glass,
Sinking ships in his dreams,
Under oblivion's cognac waves.
Fingers ever so cold,
But memories warm as posset,
Whispers of milky sweetness,
Suckling for better times,
Gently braised in rosy hues,
Days of pride and of purpose,
Nights of perfumed skin
And sun-dried sheets.
Songs filled with words of love,
Filling hearts with life,
Before it was all boxed away.
Recollections to corners cling,
Like cobwebs gathered in once spotless rooms.
He raises a toast,
To shadows cast.

A Peculiar Song | *Heather EM Barrett*

Things in the head,
Memories which shame,
Opinions that startle,
They must remain
Outside,
Of polite conscience,
And civilized rationale,
Like mad relatives,
Locked in old attics.
We can't be hearing those,
Any time soon.
So we tell ourselves,
Their rattling chains,
Are just the tick of clocks,
The vibrations of the piano,
The settling of the floorboards.
We say of the matter,
No more.
"Screams, my dear?
Not at all,
That was the horn of a distant train,
A peculiar song from a bird!"

About the Author:

Heather lives in the UK and is a member of the Oldbury Writing Group. Her style is short horror fiction and poetry, based around the Midlands where she resides. She is a fan of Japanese horror movies, the gothic and the Beatnik writers. Her inspiration comes from finding the slightly twisted elements to everyday banality.

Twitter: [@vereskmoooon](https://twitter.com/vereskmoooon)

Let You Go | *Holly Rae Garcia*

I'll let you go.
When the fun is done,
And it's time to move on.
When you've had enough,
Or maybe too much.

I'll let you go.

You'll go home,
Bolting the doors
And checking the windows
A grateful wife will comfort you.
Together you'll be strong enough,
Or you'll be haunted by it all
And want to end it.
These things vary.

When I let you go.

But we both know I won't.

Let you go.

About the Author:

Holly Rae Garcia is a professional photographer for a chemical company on the Texas Coast. Her short story, Flap, will be published in July of 2019 for The Bookends Review Online Journal. Her micro fiction, No Longer Missing, has been published for the 81 Words Project. Holly is currently in the beta phase of her first novel, an adult psychological thriller.

Website: www.HollyRaeGarcia.com

Twitter: [@HollyRaeGarcia](https://twitter.com/HollyRaeGarcia)

Bump in the Night | *Joseph VanBuren*

The sound.
He opens his eyes to see
only darkness
and springs upright
in a cocoon of night.

The sound again,
like a knocking at the door
of his consciousness.
He breathes
in rapid bursts,
no longer dreaming
of devilish deeds done
just hours ago.

The sound again,
the drumming in darkness
with rhythm now rendered
as he wipes the sweat from his brow
with his blood-stained hands.

And as he shakes the haze of slumber,
he realizes the dreaded sound
is the beating of the heart in his chest
of drawers.

From Ashes She Has Risen | *Joseph VanBuren*

From ashes she has risen,
to sing nocturnal songs.
A dark and ghastly vision
to those that did her wrong.

Her body in the shallows;
her spirit free to roam.
She slips into the shadows
and finds her way back home.

To speak of violent purpose,
to think of mortal pain,
can only scratch the surface
of this, her earthly reign.

And in this path of vengeance
her wrath will never cease,
until they pay their penance;
then she can rest in peace.

Within This Darkened Forest | *Joseph VanBuren*

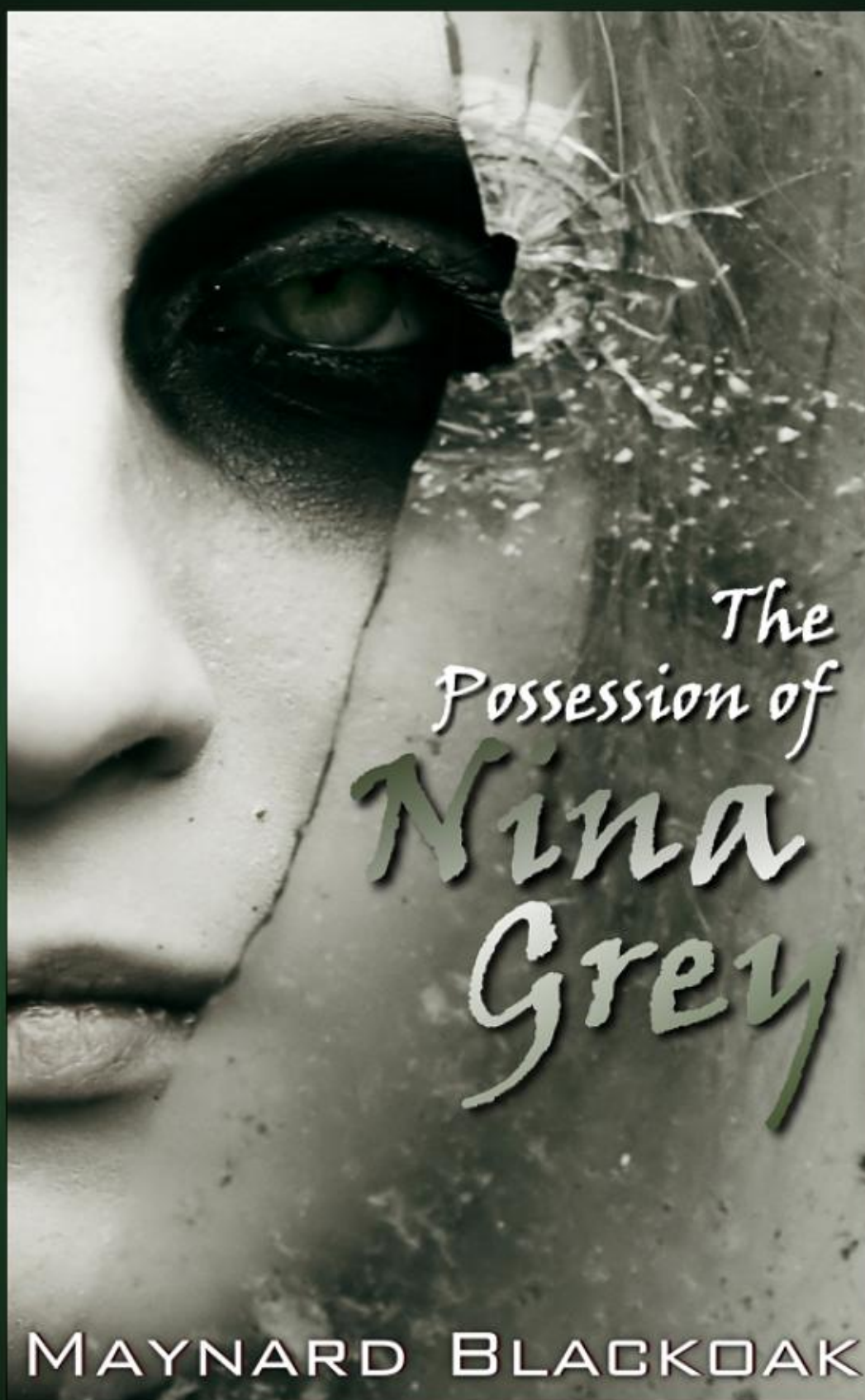
Within this darkened forest,
lost in searching for self,
I stumbled upon the remains
of an old mansion,
unreached by Luna's silvery kiss,
the scars of time
concealed by Nature's shadow.
Yet ravens swoop to pluck out eyes,
the site was gypsy crystal.
With such nocturnal clarity
did appear in the darkness
first the eyes,
then gradually,
faintly taking shape in ghastly glow,
the outlines of figures
standing in the mansion's every window.
And sure as I beheld each graven face,
so was my presence observed in that place.
In locking gazes with the dead,
with heartbeat pounding in my head,
my breath fell frozen in my chest
until both dread and relief allowed release.
The apparitions in windows darkened.
I recognized them all,
for every one was I,
and a sudden lucidity embraced my mind's eye.
The one I sought dwelled inside
the mansion's ruined walls,
the rickety skeleton speaking
of doors to be opened
and rooms available
and the impending collapse of the entire structure,
of the ruins I stumbled upon, hidden
within this darkened forest.

About the Author:

Joseph VanBuren is a multimedia storyteller who creates dark tales about broken pasts, hopeless futures, and the present struggle of love and light. He is the scrambled brains behind Sykophunk Productions and *Masks*, a trilogy of poetry books with soundtracks.

Wordpress: <https://othershadows.wordpress.com/>

Twitter: [@does333](https://twitter.com/does333)



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Monster | *Andressa Osta*

The sharp blade on your skin
The crazed man with a crazed grin
The tip now on it, through it
And blood your body spits.

Straight into his mouth he gulps
Before he beats you to a pulp
The tender flesh will soon rot
The flesh of a girl the world forgot.

He hacks and slices and dices
Eating flesh one of his vices
Chunks get stuck in his teeth
Better hope you have bequeathed.

With slim bones he picks at meat.
A child's body ingested is a feat.
And for this monster's greatest treat
He souvenirs the little feet.

About the Author:

Andressa Osta is a poet trying her hand at horror for the first time. She was born and raised in Brazil, moving to New England for schooling as a Mental Health Therapist. She typically enjoys writing anything that will challenge her to break out of her comfort zone.

Facebook: [Andis Writing Wonderland](#)

Blog: [Writing Wonderland](#)

Web of Lies | S. E. Cyborski

Come into my parlor, little fly,
Come join my web of lies.
I promise you, it will be exquisite.
It will be an experience
You could never get anywhere else.

Come into my web of lies, little fly,
Come join my menagerie.
I promise I won't eat you here.
Well, maybe just a taste
But it will be pleasant for you.

Come here, little fly, come to me.
Come to my voice and my lure.
I promise you everything you're craving
If you'll just let yourself have.
Join me and give yourself to me.

Dark Temptation | S. E. Cyborski

Slip-slide of crimson blood
Rushing over my fingers.
Temptation calls to me,
A siren's lure, singing.
Reluctantly, at least at first,
I surrender to the song.

Power, control, and desire
Pounding throughout my head.
Forget the hard path and
Take the easy way around.
Bury your hands in flesh,
Drink deeply of the blood.

A grimace stretches my lips,
White teeth stained scarlet.
Temptation coos in my ear,
Rumbling with dark pleasures.
Surrounded by red and black,
I exult in the slick, coppery tang.

Voice | S. E. Cyborski

I hear a voice that isn't there.
One as insubstantial as air.
It speaks with theatrical flair
And comes seemingly from everywhere.

I hear a voice that isn't there.
It brings a terror I can't compare
And soon I find I no longer care,
My last resort has failed, prayer.

I hear a voice that isn't there.
It gets closer and closer, beware.
It's right behind you now, just there
Goodbye, goodbye, we are a lost pair.

Reflection | S. E. Cyborski

Out of the corner of my eye
I see movement.
I gasp, startled, and turn
To see a mirror.
It was only my reflection,
Just a trick.
Glass, light, and quicksilver,
An illusion.

I smile at myself and wave,
heart slowing.
There was no other life here
Just myself.
Until I see that other me
Lift her hands.
She steps forward in the mirror
As I step back.

She takes one step for each I do
Until she's free.
She climbs from the glass surface
whole and real.
And suddenly I feel the strong pull
Into the mirror.
As she walks away, humming tunelessly,
I am the reflection.

About the Author:

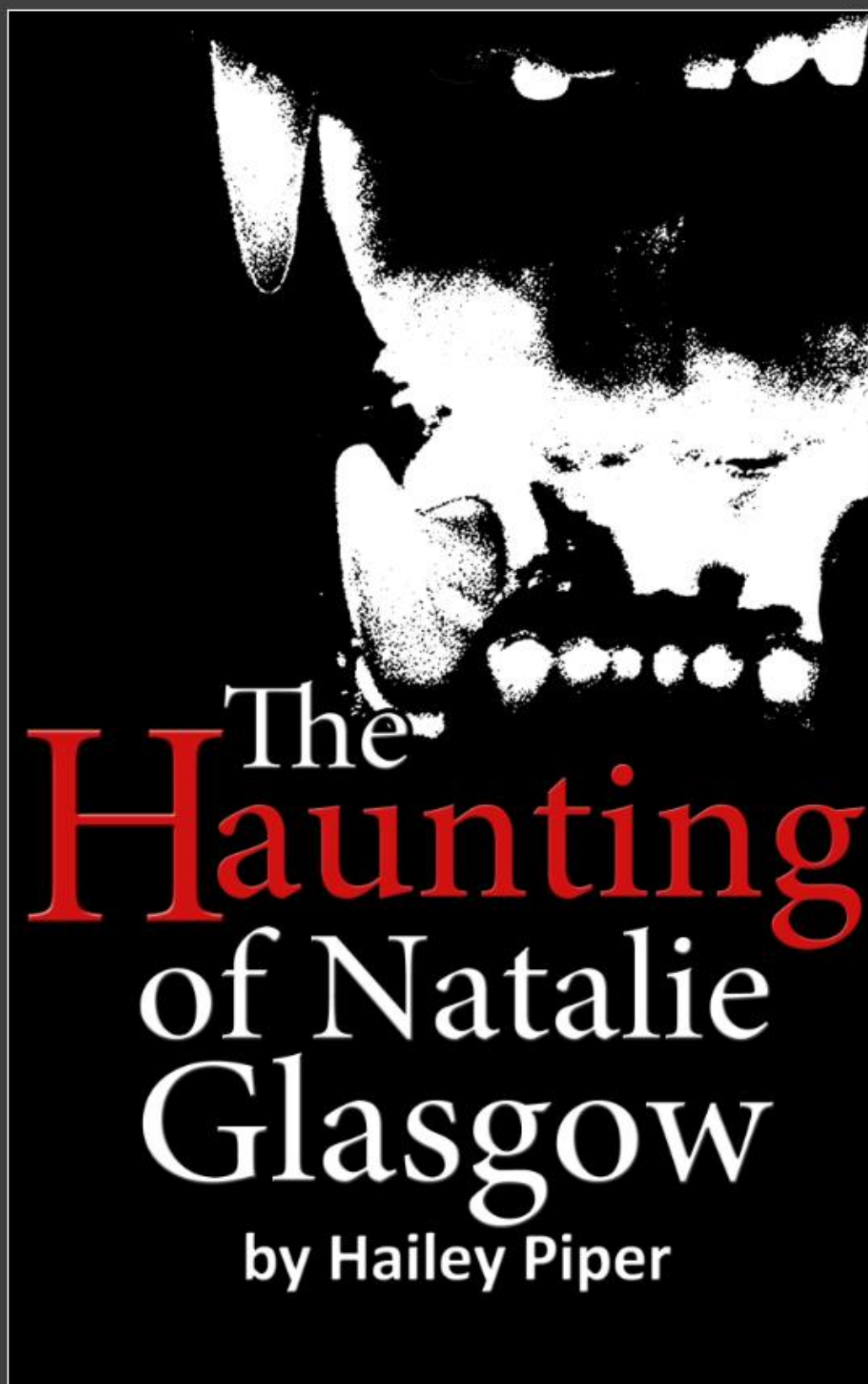
S. E. Cyborski is an author and poet of several different genres. Her main loves are science fiction and urban fantasy. She has published several books on Amazon Kindle and is working on a second collection of monster stories and urban legends featuring women who love women.

Blog: secyborski.tumblr.com

Twitter: [@secyborski](https://twitter.com/secyborski)

"One of the most original possession tales I have read. Ever."

- Steve Stred, The Girl Who Hid in the Trees



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Uncanny Spirit World | *George Lee Grimsley*

The historical elements of horror
An old coin pulled from my pocket
A story to be told
Of soldiers and scoundrels old
Does thou ghosts and spirits
Hide in the unluckiest of such kindred places
If darkness should dwell from the lower realms of the heart
Should we never part
A share and I cannot say
What is in store within this clouded day
A poesy of subtle charm
At night they return
To haunt our very souls
Dearest not tell
A single soul
such as
That there are ghosts among us
A tip of the top hat
Should they disappear
within its dark hiding hole

About the Author:

George Lee Grimsley is a writer, poet, screenwriter, and playwright from Weir Texas. He is now published 6 times including literary works as well as competing in the Austin film festival 2017 short screenplay. His hobbies are writing, watching movies, theater, and fishing. He is currently enrolled in online school, one workshop or course at a time, one step at a time.

Facebook: [George Grimsley](#)

Twitter: [@GeorgeLeeG](#)

The Dark Trail of Red | *Linda Lee Rice*

He wanted me to be his bride,
as he dressed me in all white ruffles
amidst the Winter's deep chill
in the icy cavern beneath the tomb

My pleas to be freed from this fate,
fell on deaf ears and unseeing eyes
and it did not release his hold on me,
nor melt his frozen dead heart

The blade was near, razor sharp
so, I carved his heart out of his chest
and placed it on the alter rock,
lethargic blood dripped to the ground

In the snowbound land, I wander
trying to find my way back home,
wearing my wedding dress, I blend in
except for the dark trail of red

Lost in Insanity | *Linda Lee Rice*

The rain is beating a mad tattoo of sound
against the weathered roof and aging shingles
inside, the walls drip tears of pain, sorrow
puddles into lost hopes and sad dreams

Lightning flashes in the decaying gloom
enhances the peeling wall paper,
brick walls decorated with black moss
crumbling plaster cracks in patterns of veins

Haunting whispers are heard in the darkness
gather in the corners of abandoned rooms,
wisplike mists are barely seen, tethered
the lost souls that will never be found

Lost in insanity, reality not an option
too far gone down the path of destruction,
wandering blindly the trails of no return
as the roots twist and turn, binding all within

Moonlight Madness | *Linda Lee Rice*

The moon has risen in all its silver glory
as tendrils of fog creep across
the humps and trails of the marsh,
hide the path from unwary eyes

As the cold mist rises, wraps around my feet
leaves a trace of its icy touch, caresses lightly,
shivers touch my spine like a cat's paw
as the night sounds cease, all is deathly still

A scratching is heard, faint, hard to locate
the sound of dirt pattering, soil loosening
scrabbling noises, a sound of wet suction
as if something is trying to pull free from the earth

As I step backward my ankle is clutched,
bone yet familiar in its frantic iron grasp
I look down into the hollow sockets, blazing
with the undying love of the forsaken

He's come back to me.....

The Monster | *Linda Lee Rice*

Pulsating jagged cracks of eliminated light
sparked the coils within the laboratory
of the dilapidated castle, high on the hill
Frankenstein's Castle where nightmares began

Lightening ripped across the wind-swept sky
while thunder raged like a caged beast,
sheets of rain poured down, drenched
the lifeless body on the heisted gurney

Through the skylight, up into the elements
the gurney held its treasured burden,
as it swung and swayed with each gust
a bolt from the storm struck the cabled wire

The insane doctor reeled the gurney down,
a hand moved, twitched and then was still
another movement and then a labored breath
a moan of agony, his creature lived!

Made from the parts of dead men,
murderer, thief, rapist, the dregs of humanity
sewn together like a patchwork quilt

with no rhyme nor reason, only fervor

The creature sat up slowly, stared down
at what he had become, at what he was
he turned his head slowly, looked at his creator
while through twisted lips he whispered...

Who..is...the...monster... here?

The Window Behind Me | *Linda Lee Rice*

The deceptive darkness, it surrounds me
seeps into the corners of the room
spreads like ink, stains what it touches
leaves behind despair and desperation

The world has changed since the fog,
people have become something...else...
snuffling along the ground, hunting
in packs, those who are unlike them

I have found this shelter, but I'm afraid
sitting quietly within this room,
hiding from lies waiting outside
in the post-fog world that now is

As I write this, I realize I am not alone
I turn to see what I have feared most,
blank eyes stare as faces wrinkle
rise up, sniff the air, all turn as one

They have found me...

About the Author:

Linda Lee Rice aka Ruzicka has poetry published in Twilight Times, Dark Krypt, Fables, Descending Darkness, Writing Village, Spine and Page, Muses Gallery, Bloodbond, Lycan Valley Press Publishers, Alban Lake, Highland Park Poetry, Rosette Maleficarum, and the June Cotner anthology, "House Blessings" and "Garden Blessings, Siren's Call Publications. She has short stories published in The Grit, and Reminisce, Haunted Encounters: Friends and Family. Plus, a personal essay at Mamalode and Haunted Encounters: Friends and Family. She is also a freelance writer.

Facebook: [Linda Lee Rice](#)

Some Advice | *Eddie Fogler*

Run, little one
Run
Your life is just ahead
waiting to be claimed
Your death is in pursuit
long lumbering strides
keeping a patient pace.
Run, pretty one
Run
Do not tire. Do not stop.
If you do
Disappear
Leave trembling sounds out
Hide alone.
Death hears the weak.
Run, tender one
Run
Ignore the wounds
ignore the blood
push through the mob of pain
Focus on the inevitable
Death sees it too.
Run, little one
Run
Death is coming
And I love the hunt.

About the Author:

Originally from Ohio, Eddie Fogler currently lives in Cambodia with his husband and two spoiled dogs. While overseas, he received his MFA in Writing from Lindenwood University. His work has been featured in *From Whispers to Roars* and *Haunted Waters Press*. You can see his antics on Instagram.

Instagram: [@eddiewriterthings](https://www.instagram.com/eddiewriterthings)

Facebook: www.facebook.com/eddiewriterthings

The World at Your Fingertips | K.T. Slattery

Your skeletal face grins at me
Skin long since devoured
By flesh eaters with
Kinder hearts than yours
No tissue or meat left behind
Except for those eyes-
Flickering with odious desire

Your long dead right arm extends
Lengthening impossibly
Metacarpals spread widely
They sprout like old spuds

Your cadaverous reach extends
Further again
Spearing hearts wearing innocent name tags
HI! MY NAME IS...

You bear no such tag
Your name is EVIL and
It is written in those eyes

You remove your arm
Planting it in the bloody soil
I am stricken by
The magnitude of your sway

I awake
Aftershocks of fear
Reaching as far as my newly painted
Blood red toenails

Heart beating wildly
No relief in this cold dark room
I never met you...
But you have touched me too

A Siren with No Need for a Voice | K.T. Slattery

Unparalleled beauty her draw
Around every corner a new wonder
Even her stone bowels can entice
So strong her bewitching facade
The locals know, but they never breathe a word

Her preferred victims
The innocent, the naïve
Those whose souls sparkle with wanderlust
When she ensnares them and devours
Her enchantments shine brighter still
The locals know, and they smugly look the other way

She artfully inters her iniquitous rot in her people
The shining sun shows only smiles and fond welcomes
But shadowed corners hold perils
Even Poe would not put to pen
And when her victims are alone, they will pounce
The locals know, and they revel in their power

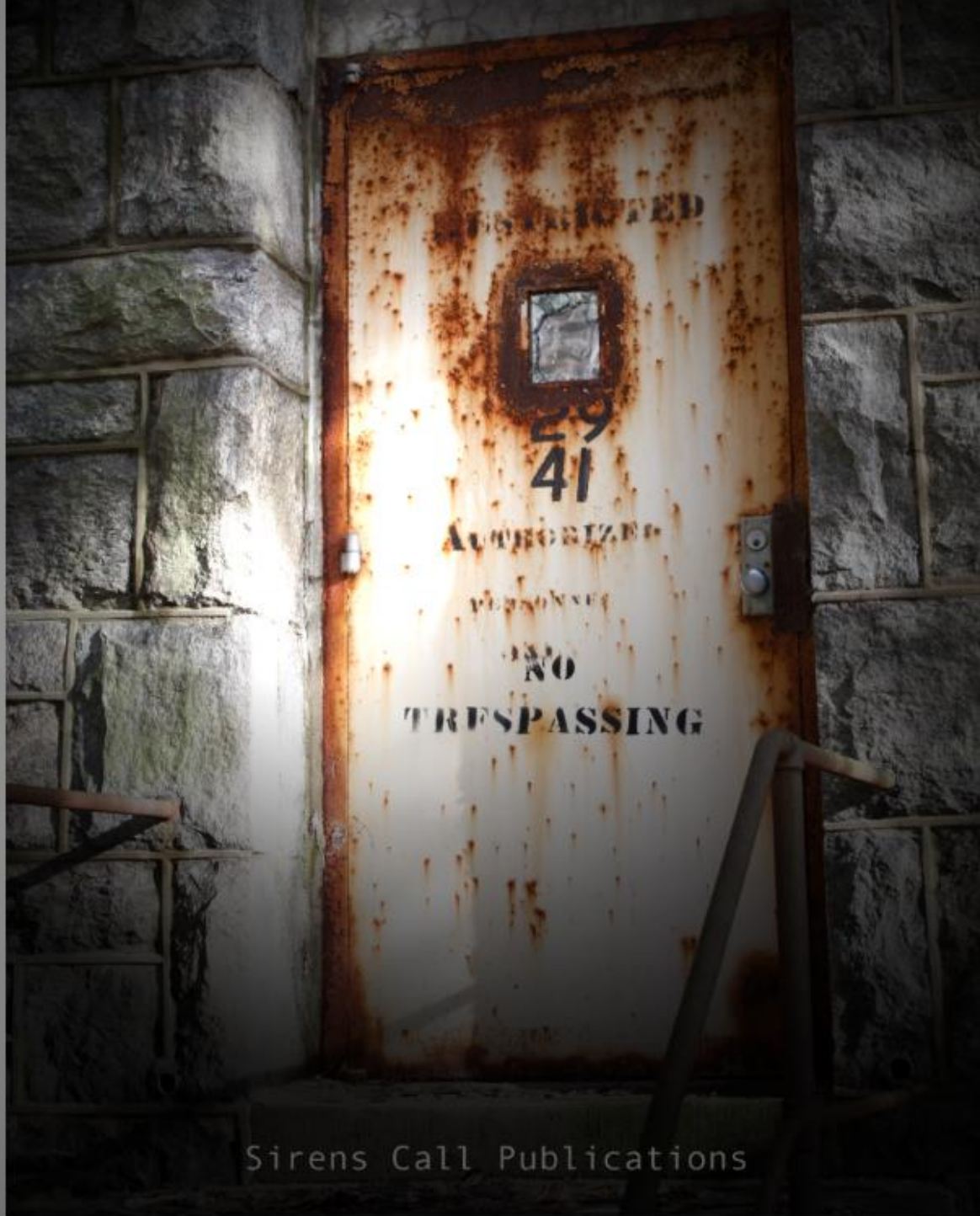
About the Author:

K.T. Slattery was born in Memphis, Tennessee, and grew up just across the state line in Mississippi. A graduate of Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, she now lives in the West of Ireland with her husband and an ever-increasing amount of rescue pets. When she is not throwing a ball, she can be found painting, writing, or exploring the ruins of ancient Ireland.

Twitter: [@KTSlattery1](https://twitter.com/KTSlattery1)

Mental Ward

STORIES FROM THE ASYLUM



Sirens Call Publications

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Kobo, and iTunes

Out they come in an orderly
Fashion, moving onto the parking lots
Of every Walmart, Walgreens,
Safeway and Kroger in the nation,
And markets of similar situation
Across the entire world. They squint
In the uncommon sunlight; or giggle
At the rain; marvel with the wind;
Catch, when they think they are unseen,
Snowflakes on talon-tense tongues.
They wait in lines, fidgeting
Perhaps, most looking down, geometric,
Aligned into blocks. A trustee
For each section counts heads,
Comments on who was fastest coming
Out, who would not have made it
If this were not simply a drill.
Each it seems has a touch of smoke,
Fingers folded in to avoid feral flame.

As they go back in
They march more than meander,
Solemn, almost happy for direction.
They have already forgotten this brief
Exposure to the living present above ground,
The miracle of parking lots,
The awe of shoppers who have not seen
This metrical show before.

Your companion sees you gape
And explains: Hell is holding
A fire drill – it is part
Of the punishment. Do not dare to think
Of separating just from evil,
Silly from pointless. Prepare yourself,
Later is sooner than you think.

Only One of the Many Ways | *Ken Poyner*

When you began to skin the cat
You understood it would likely be debilitating
For the cat. But to blunt the emotion
You have third-party directions, a manual
Entitled “The Skinning of Cats”, with
Cautions in the Introduction, a list
Of preferred implements and cheats, items
To arrange before starting your task. Then, with
Black and white line illustrations, the exact
How-to begins. The precise and practical
Text allows you to focus on the process,
Not the unhappy subject. You have no time
For reflection: from the book there is always
The next act, a procedure to perfect,
A coordination you must strain to achieve.
It goes hauntingly well; you remain
Detached. And when at last
You have come to the end of the guide,
You rearrange your instruments smartly into
Their original ready state – and to the cat
Say, only eight more: we might be done tonight.

About the Author:

Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in “Analog”, “Asimov’s”, “Café Irreal”, and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class powerlifting career.

Website: <http://www.kpoyner.com>

Facebook: [Ken Poyner](#)

As I Must | Jack Wolfe Frost

They come for me, in the middle of night,
As I knew they would,
They come to kill, they come to fight,
As I knew they could,

How they found me I know but not,
Assassins, rogues, killers, the lot,
They heed the call,
Faces on the wall,
I know them all,
I'll see them fall.

Once my men, I trained them hard,
Once called friends,
I made them scarred,
Devoted to the cause,
Devoted to truth,
Devoted...
To Lies.

So now they come to kill a rebel,
As I knew they would,
I killed each one, they are of the devil,
As I knew I could.

And now they are gone, dead to the last man,
I take the fight now to the Clan,
As I know I can...
To win,
As I know...
I must.

About the Author:

Jack Wolfe Frost is the Eternal Dark Rebel; he rebels against everything which may have the word "rules" or "behave" within it. Born in Sheffield, UK, in 1956; he first started writing in 1982, as a hobby - Now older and wiser, he still seeks to break rules - and has had numerous poems and short stories published. Jack Now lives In Clarksville, Tennessee.

Blog: <https://jackjfrost.wordpress.com/>

Twitter: [@JackWolfeWriter](https://twitter.com/JackWolfeWriter)



weathered talons
break through the clouds,
just to pluck more color
from my carcass,

i hear
the vulture whimper and know
there will never be enough carrion
to solve the problem,

a downpour of insects,
summoned, mostly devils horses,
crowd all the broken orifices,
and, as blood pools sweetly beneath me,

their fluorescent green feelers
vibrate a volatile symphony,
driving the rawness of my hips,
deeper into asphalt,

the rain now
a muddled swoon of maladies,
infested with rotten kisses—
a resuscitative elixir,

brewing lasting convulsions
upon decaying, sacred bones,
catering to the feast
of our dying love.

through flowers
of dead nettle aglow,
the empress searches
a forest floor
to ensure her muse's
immortal protection--
her fingers and lips
search the lorn,
collecting stinkhorn
that will blissfully salvage them,
her barefooted
dirty soul
flourishes in tinctures
that wreak,
a tasteless aphrodisiac,
blood now pumping, generously,
through reticulated veins
the stains in their kisses,
marking sediments
of reincarnation.

About the Author:

Eliana Vanessa is originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina and moved to New Orleans, Louisiana at a young age. Her poems have been selected for display via a community project called St Tammany Poetry on the Streets, and she recently participated in the Jane Austen Festival (2017, 2018, 2019, upcoming) as part of a panel of other selected poets. Eliana Vanessa's work appears in Siren's Call, The Horrorzine, The Rye Whiskey Review, The Ramingo's Porch, Fearless Magazine, and the anthology, Masks Still Aren't Enough.

Facebook: [Eliana Vanessa](#)

"You go" Lucy giggled nervously and pushed Emma forward towards to the double doors.

"No, you go first" Emma replied, shoving Lucy to the side.

The looming blue doors of the girls' toilets, paintwork old and chipped and the window panes smeared with years' worth of grime. None of the girls at Guildford Primary liked using this bathroom. The Legend of White Nancy ran wild in each child's head.

Peering around the door with nervous tension, Emma tentatively crept into the dark and stale smelling bathroom. The lights flickered with the threat of extinguishing, and shadows danced darkly on the walls. The mirrors over the long row of now off-white porcelain sinks were grubby with the fingerprints of children and stray splashes of water from the taps. The unnaturally cold air allowed Emma to see her own breath. An atmosphere of death loomed large in each stall and every corner.

Lucy, being Lucy, pushed Emma in and held the door firm, stopping her from escaping. Emma screamed and pleaded, banging on the dirty panes and kicking the doors with her black buckle-up shoes, scuffing and scratching her new footwear.

Cruelly laughing, Lucy released the door and ran inside pushing Emma further in. "Don't be a baby, it isn't real," Lucy mocking Emma's obvious fear.

"White Nancy... White Nancy..." Lucy sniggered. "See, nothing".

"Stop it, that isn't funny," Emma whelped.

"It's not real loser," Lucy snarled.

The atmosphere changed, a wave of electricity rippled through the air along with the stench of sulphur. With a united crack, all the bathroom stall doors slammed shut and began to vibrate. The strip lighting tubes all exploded raining down debris on the girls. The mirrors all shattered, glass falling to the sticky linoleum with a nerve scratching smash.

Emma screamed and ran for the door, while Lucy, looking smaller than she ever had, followed suit.

Dark wet tentacles arose from each toilet bowl; the sound of sloshing water and wet smacking temporarily froze Lucy, just for a second, who turned to look. That second was one second too much; two of the tentacles reached her and encompassed her, dragging her back towards the farthest cubicle.

Emma managed to get out, the door slamming behind her. She has no idea what had happened to Lucy.

Tentacles holding her tightly around each limb, not allowing any moving bar the involuntary twitches of her body, a fifth tentacle arose from the pit of sewage that were the remains of the toilet bowl. The long and thin protrusion escaping from whatever hell it belonged, caressing Lucy's face with the intent of evil.

She tried to scream, but the air just caught in her throat. She couldn't see where, or what the tentacles belonged to, but she knew she didn't want to know. She recited over and over in her head about how sorry she was for saying White Nancy wasn't real. She begged and pleaded with her now red eyes as they filled with tears. The colour drained from her cheeks.

The viscous appendage felt its way all over her face, twisting itself around her neck and pulling her head back. Lucy could feel a warm liquid down her leg. She sobbed as she realized that she had wet herself in her fear.

With an unrelenting blast of energy another two tentacled appendages rose up. Their target set, as they aimed directly at Lucy's face and ferociously pierced both of her eyes.

The beast, this creature from the toilets, the fabled White Nancy, sunk itself wholly into Lucy. It filled her entire being while relentlessly taking over her mind and devouring her soul.

Strolling into 2b without a care, Lucy scanned the smaller than average desks, infant and reception age children, they only needed tiny chairs and low tables. She was in search of her friend... Lucy's friend, Emma.

Lucy would do for now, she was an adequate vessel, a malleable mind with a cruel streak. Emma though, Emma was something else, she was a pure soul. You would think all children were pure, but they are not. It is a rarity, one in every ten generations if that. The purest, the cleanest of souls. That is what this thing, this demon, desired. It needed a fresh soul free from sin, one that has not been tainted by the sins of earth.

To live, this beast must devour Emma.

Ringling through a week's worth of groceries for Mrs. Glenister, a local lady who pops in every Monday without fail at 1pm to buy far too much food for the week ahead, Emma had been telling her, and her colleague Becci at the next register, about this girl Lucy, her now ex- friend.

"Oh, come on Em, seriously!" Becci smirked, "This isn't one of those Science Fiction Horror movies y'know right?"

"I never it was, I said it was like Body Snatchers just," Emma replied with a sideways glance at Becci. "It's just creepy is all, it's like she isn't, well, human."

"Oh, believe me," Mrs. Glenister replied to Becci, "I have known a few who I would swear were not human. Wrong'uns, they are a plentiful as ants at a picnic," she nodded on her way out laden down with re-useable grocery bags.

Emma Hollister has always been a fan of the weird and the wonderful. A Trekkie from when she was a kid, developing into a full-on Sci-Fi obsession before being melded with her other passion, Horror. She didn't have a lot of friends growing up, or into her teenage years and even her early adulthood for that matter. She had a few people she considered close. One girl in-particular she had classed as her best friend.

Lucy Knight – the worst kind of person.

It had been a long time coming if Emma was honest with herself. For the last few years, if not longer, she felt less and less herself around Lucy. She always returned home from an evening with Lucy feeling extra miserable about herself, and proceeded to wonder why her life was not as good as Lucy's appeared to be.

Lucy's answer: It was all Emma's fault. She spent too much money on frivolous things such as books and DVD's she didn't apply herself and get a better job. She still lived at home with her parents. Lucy was the queen of the negative spin. The thing was Emma was happy with her life. Rather than going out to get wasted on the weekend, she would buy ten books. Rather than working long hours and being stressed to the hilt 24/7, she was happy in her low maintenance and crappy paid job. It wasn't perfect, but it allowed Emma to enjoy herself, and more importantly, to live the life she wanted.

Emma was about to learn that Lucy was not just a bad friend, but something way worse.

It started as a lot of friendships do. Emma and Lucy first met in Primary School. They were in the same class all through primary, and then they continued through high school together. It was only college that they were first separated, Emma went to the 'posher' college – as it was considered in the town. Whereas Lucy went to the state college. Emma then went on to graduate university with a degree in Art History while Lucy started working in a job she only pretended to like. Emma is putting herself through her master's degree in philosophy, working the evening shifts and weekends at the local grocery store. Lucy is still in the job she pretends to like, bouncing through the departments like a ping pong ball gone wild.

Emma has had her problems; in debt from tuition, rent and the occasional, well maybe too occasional, treat. A string of bad boyfriends and like many hadn't always made the best decisions in her life, but she has lived. She has learned right and wrong, Emma is a survivor, she is strong and intelligent, kind with a beautiful soul. It's those things that attracted her fiancé to her. It's also those things that Lucy appears to despise.

Emma first noticed the cracks in their friendship just after she met her fiancé, Connor. Lucy was always happy keeping Emma on long leash, calling on her only if she had no one else to go to. That changed when Connor came on the scene. Lucy was finding any excuse possible to call Emma and to see her. Claiming she was neglecting her and being a bad friend. She tried everything she could to break Emma down. She hated

that Emma had someone else now in her life. She wanted this relationship to end, and she wanted Emma back 'in her place', where she could be boxed up, pigeon holed and controlled.

Lucy needed the control, for if she was to one day take Emma as her host, she must fully own her.

It was the lack of control that began to break the decade's long façade down, Lucy's true face began to show. Emma was horrified that she has been blinded this whole time.

Now she can see.

Lucy changed that day in the bathroom at Guildford Primary.

She was no longer Lucy.

She may look like Lucy and talk like Lucy... Lucy died 20 years ago in that bathroom.

Laying on her burnt-orange recliner couch Emma took a sip of white wine, her end of week treat, and took her mind back to her days at primary school. Guildford Primary, a local school for children of three to eleven years old. Both boys and girls attended. Situated in a busy village, it was the local hub for parents to meet and chat about their little ones. Probably the only time some of them got some adult conversation.

That day, the one where Emma and Lucy went into the girl's toilets, the ones on the edge of the school property, the ones no one ever used, she took herself back to then. She remembered how scared she felt when Lucy locked her in. She remembered Lucy mocking the spirit of White Nancy and telling her that she was being a baby. She remembered the sickening crash when the lights exploded, and the mirrors smashed. What she didn't know, was what had happened to Lucy.

Emma had gotten out. She had run the fastest and got through the doors just in time. The thick dirty doors had locked shut behind her, and in a haze of fear and desperation to not be told off, she ran to the indoor toilets and cleaned herself up. She went to her room and pretended nothing had happened. She had convinced herself that it was all Lucy's doing, she was playing a cruel prank and she would burst into the class laughing and telling Emma how silly she was any minute.

Lucy did in fact come to class. It was the weekly after lunch reading group. They would all pick a book from the shelves and spend the afternoon reading the stories of Enid Blyton. She walked towards Emma with intent, but not to chastise or to mock, no, this was something else. She sat down next to her and apologized for scaring her, promising to never do such a hideous thing again.

Naively Emma believed Lucy, of course what else would she believe? That a demon had inhabited her body, with the desire to eventually inhabit Lucy? Of course not, that kind of thing only happens in scary grown up horror films and books. She put it all to the back of her mind, selecting her favorite Famous Five book; Lucy sat with Emma and read for the rest of the afternoon, not quite understanding why she felt so uneasy.

That uneasy feeling returned. The hairs on Emma's arms stood at attention. She could feel, her stomach clench, the threat that she was facing. She knew people would just think she was crazy, that she had just watched one horror film to many, but that sick feeling in the pit of her stomach just wouldn't leave her.

Neither would the eyes watching her from above – Lucy's eyes.

About the Author:

Lesley-Ann Campbell is born and raised in Southport, Merseyside. She still lives there today with her husband Andy. Horror is her passion; she loves reading, watching and writing horror. She finds inspiration from authors such as Tim Waggoner, Hunter Shea and John F. Leonard. She is currently working on her first novel and a range of short horror stories that she hopes to publish as a collection.

Website: <https://horrorhousewife.net/>

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Muriel Pentworth sat in the single shelter house of Bridgewater Park, eating her lunch, enjoying the beautiful view. It was early October and—from where she was sitting—she could see a wide hill, lush with trees still holding their summer green. It had been unseasonably warm all week long and, rather than listen to Jeff Tibble expound on everything and nothing, she had escaped to the park. It was only a ten-minute drive away from the law firm of Maier, Hooey, and Deardurff, where she was currently employed as a temp secretary.

“What a buffoon,” she said out loud, to no one, as she stirred up slices of peach from the bottom of her yogurt container. She was thinking about Jeff Tibble, who worked in the office as a paralegal. Jeff was twenty-six or thereabouts—the same age as Muriel—and she could tell every time he looked at her or talked to her that he had the hots for her. It was a common occurrence. She was a good-looking woman, with intense green eyes and long reddish hair framing an angular, freckled face. Men were always asking her out and she liked their attentions. But Jeff Tibble was beginning to get on her last nerve. It wasn’t so much the way he looked: portly body, piggish brown eyes that gleamed and leered at her every time she got within a five-foot radius of him. No. She just couldn’t stand his conceited arrogance. He was one of those people that her dad used to scornfully call a story topper. Like, if you were to tell him that you had once caught a fish that was a foot long, he would immediately have to counter and boast that he had reeled in a sample TWO feet long, AND he had done it with his bare hands! She had been telling one of the other secretaries in the office about a vacation she had taken last year to St. Thomas and Jeff immediately had had to put his two cents about the fabulous summer he spent in Provence, drinking wine and cycling through the countryside.

Yawn.

Strangely, the rest of the office staff seemed enamored with this bore. They laughed at his stupid jokes; they hung on every word of his pointless stories. There were two other secretaries in the office—Aileen and Jessica—and they thought Jeff was just the cutest thing.

Either I’m missing something or those girls need to get out and meet some decent men, Muriel thought.

This morning had been a true test of her ability to maintain an even strain. Everywhere she had turned, it seemed Jeff was already there, waiting for her. She had gone to the water cooler to get a drink of water and there he was. To tell her about the microbrews he bottled in his basement. She had been busy typing a brief for Stephen Maier—an important case that was coming up—and suddenly, she had turned with a start to see him smiling a disturbing smile at her.

“You know, you really should let me type that up for you, Muriel, darling,” he had said. “I type one hundred and ten words a minute, no mistakes. I was the fastest typist ever tested in my high school.”

“Who cares!” she had wanted to scream at him. “Get the hell away from me.” Instead, she had smiled as diplomatically as she could and had told him thank you but she could probably manage. Even though she was, of course, his inferior in all respects.

“I think Jeff likes you, Muriel,” Aileen had said to her in a singsong voice. As if that were the greatest thing that could possibly happen to her.

Thank God this was only a temp position and she would be gone next week. She didn’t think she could stand another minute of Jeff Tibble’s attention.

His story topping.

As she sat there, morosely eating her yogurt, and wondering exactly what time it was—she had forgotten her phone—she looked up to notice that someone was descending the stone steps that flanked one of the Indian ceremonial mounds in the park. The park had originally been the sacred meeting place of an ancient Indian tribe. A place where it was said their crafty medicine men gathered to smoke and conjure up spirits and demons. The mounds were fifteen feet in height, and there were about eight or so of them snaking across the expanse of Bridgewater Park. The person started toward where she was sitting in the shelter house. She noticed—with immediate distaste—that it was Jeff Tibble.

Come to boast further, undoubtedly.

“How the hell did he find me here?” she whispered. She hadn’t told anyone where she was going for lunch.

Maybe he followed me here, she thought. And a ball of fear started to grow in her stomach. That was all she needed: some psycho stalker.

He waddled up to where she was sitting.

He really is quite horrible, she thought, scowling at him

He returned the scowl with his patented, lecherous smile.

"Just wanted to see what you were having for lunch," he said.

"Yogurt," she said, with invective, waving her spoon at him. "As if it is any concern of yours."

"I can top that. Guess what I am having for lunch," he replied.

"I wouldn't know and I wouldn't care," she said, getting up from the bench where she was sitting and trying very hard not to look at him.

"I'm having temp," he said.

And then, he licked his lips in a horrible way.

"Very funny," she said, trying to get past him.

That was it. She was going to see Mr. Maier as soon as she got back to the office, tell him what Jeff had said to her. She was going to have Jeff up on sexual harassment charges so fast, it was going to make his fat little story topping head spin.

"No, really, I'm having temp."

And his voice, rather than the wheezy tenor she had been enduring all week, came out in a sonorous gurgle--like the death rattle of a thousand men. Something started moving under his face. Like there was something living under his skin and it was trying desperately to burrow out. And then... his face blew off. It was a mask: an elaborate puffy, piggish mask. And Jeff's real face was an obsidian visage of striated muscles from which bloodshot eyeballs fiercely protruded. He looked like one of those mummies that they pull out of Irish peat bogs every now and then, their skin turned to leather by the tannic acid in the bogs. Except bog men don't have wings...and a pair of pinioned wings started to rip their way through Jeff Tibble the former's shirt. And bog men don't have fangs...and a pair of fangs started to grow from Jeff Tibble the former's canine teeth..

"I can scream louder than you," Jeff Tibble said. As Madeline Pentworth began to scream.

About the Author:

Michael S. Walker is a writer living in Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of two published novels: 7-22, a YA fantasy novel, and *The Vampire Henry*, a literary horror novel. He has also seen his fiction and poetry published in many magazines, including *Adelaide Literary*, *PIF*, and *Fiction Southeast*.

Facebook: [Michael S. Walker](#)

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Anrietta Mellowalk, LMHC | Andressa Osta

Ding.

The microwave finished nuking the therapist's lunch. She opened it and took out a tupperware full of grey matter. She opened the top and vapor escaped. Taking it to the table, Anrietta sat by herself. With a fork only, she sliced through the cerebellum and blew on it before taking a bite. Owning her own mental health office for supernaturals was difficult. She counted herself lucky for her receptionist, Vicky, whose wings glowed red when she was angry. It was a pixie thing.

Today had been busy, she'd seen many clients. Larry Loup, who suffered from moon mania, had come in with stories of the full moon causing a mood swing. Or Eric Vassil, her sanguiphilia-suffering patient, had another relapse this week and bitten a human right in the middle of a Wal-Mart parking lot.

As she took the final bite of the cerebral matter, she soaked the tupperware and head to her office waving at Vicky as she walked past. She took a few minutes to type up quick notes on her patients before opening the door to her office and welcoming in her next client.

"Hi Mr. Goalem, feel free to come in." And watched as he walked in on all four limbs, shutting the door behind her.

About the Author:

Andressa Osta is a poet trying her hand at horror for the first time. She was born and raised in Brazil, moving to New England for schooling as a Mental Health Therapist. She typically enjoys writing anything that will challenge her to break out of her comfort zone.

Facebook: [Andis Writing Wonderland](#)

Blog: [Writing Wonderland](#)

MICTLAN



G. Graves

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Ragan gasped when she looked out her window. A blanket of snow covered the field that lay beyond her house. It stretched as far as the blackened trees that made up the surrounding woods.

Before her mother could wake and ask her to do her morning chores, Ragan pulled on her snow boots and winter coat. She ran outside and was struck immediately by stillness. Everything around her was quiet. She heard no birds, no wind, no rustling grass. The stillness was peaceful. The stillness was something she wanted to absorb.

The blackened wood stood covered in snow. Normally Ragan avoided the forest. Her mother told her not to play there at night, and Ragan kept that warning as a fear that kept her out during the day. But something about this day, and how peaceful the snow was on the empty branches, beckoned Ragan to take part in nature's serenity. She walked past their yard and into the woods, the footprints in the snow the only noise she left behind.

The sky, already gray with cloud cover, took on the color of steel when blotted out by the trees. Ragan looked around her, ever watchful of a wolf or a strange man, or other monsters that her mother warned her were within the woods. All Ragan saw, though, were trees. All Ragan heard was silence.

She took a breath and took in the cold. The chill pierced her lungs and stung her nostrils, but the pain she felt gave a slight sense of pleasure. She noticed a snowbank unbroken by paw prints. She felt an urge to lie in it, perhaps to make a snow angel and leave her mark in this winter sanctuary. She lay down and felt the coldness wrap its arms around her like an icy blanket. She heard her own breathing as she laid her head in the snow, loud and patterned. In then out, in then out, like waves on the beach or snow in the wind.

Ragan closed her eyes and held her breath. She heard an exhale beneath her, a staggered purr that wasn't her own.

Ragan opened her eyes and saw the snow surrounding her body. It seemed to grow beside her. She realized she was sinking, the dirt giving way to her body like a pool of water. A tree root meandered over her body, as if trapping her in its sleep. She gasped and felt a rush of cold stab her throat and her lungs. Her scream froze before it escaped her lips. All she heard as she sank below the snow was the gentle sound of breathing: in, then out. In, then out.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *Without Condition*, *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, *Please Give*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in Camden Park Press' *Quoth the Raven*, *The Sirens Call*, *Mercurial Stories*, and the horror podcast *Tales to Terrify*. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

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Magical Moment | Patrick J. Wynn

Sitting in the wheel chair Curt could feel the arthritis scream in his knees, hips and hands. The pain was severe and deep but he gritted his teeth and dealt with it. He tried taking a deep breath to steady himself but it just brought on a coughing fit that continued on as his family came into the room. They surrounded his wheelchair and many of them smiled down and laid a soft gentle hand on a shoulder or arm. He nodded up at the well wishes and turned as all eyes fell to the door. A young beaming girl strolled into the room, in her arms she carried a tiny wiggling bundle. She moved directly to Curt and bent down, he smiled and raised his arms just a little to receive the newest member of the family. The young girl leaned down and ever so gently placed the tiny thing in Curt's arms. The family let out a collective sigh as the oldest and youngest finally met.

Curt pulled the tiny child in close and leaned down placing a kiss on the smooth soft forehead. He then breathed deep drawing in the wonderful smell all little ones have, he continued on taking in all he could. When his lungs were full he held it then slowly let it go then drew in more. As the second deep breath filled him he giggled just a little then handed the now gray wrinkled object in his arms back to its mother. She stepped back as Curt rose from the wheel chair and spread his arms with a smile spread widely across his face. The family around him knelt down in a circle and bowed to the floor. Curt continued to stretch as the pain in his knees, hands and hips faded. As the young mother carried the dead gray thing from the room Curt bent to another young girl at his feet.

"Come let's make another as I will be hungry soon." He grinned as he led her away.

Pregnant | Patrick J. Wynn

The pain hit as she wobbled her way to the bathroom. At first she stopped and grabbed at her large belly and the pain slowly passed, she stood in the hallway breathing deeply trying to keep her head clear but then the second wave hit dropping her to her knees. She screamed long and loud faint howls from distant dogs were her only answer. As the pain once again faded she grabbed for the bathroom door handle and tried to pull herself up, thinking of her phone sitting on the coffee table but as she managed to get one foot under her the pain washed over her again and the world faded in and out. She fell to her back and tried to scoot her way to the phone but the pain was no longer fading. Tears flow down her cheeks and her lip bled from biting down. She could feel it trying to push its way out and screamed in horror. At the moment she wasn't sure if she was more afraid of what was trying to get out or the memories of what had visited her all those months ago.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of stories that range from the weird to horror. His works have been published in Trembling with Fear, Sirens Call and Short Horror Stories. His short story collections can be found on Amazon books and his Facebook page.

Ascended Being | Kerry E.B. Black

Tamira Starr spoke with a dreamy cadence to her enlightenment group. "I'm on the road to enlightenment." She waved her hands over her head, making her resemble a time-lapse film of a blooming flower. Her bangle bracelets clanked like wind chimes caught in a light spring breeze. "After my quest, you mayn't even recognize me."

Her favorite pupil, Rob, who headed the community's yoga group, pushed his lower lip out in a pout. "What's that mean, exactly?"

Tamira stifled a smile as she watched his root chakra blaze orange. He'd always had a bit of a crush on her.

She pushed such thoughts aside and explained, "I'll ascend, which means my understanding will expand. Like the ancient masters, I'll speak without words, and I'll add something invaluable to not only our little clan, but to the whole world."

Class concluded, and Tamira drifted to her quest. She performed the ceremonies and walked the path until, with a burst of glory, she emerged transformed and transcended. With her feet, she danced the rhythm of the winds and communicated complex theories. Her back bore gossamer wings that hummed confidence, capacity, and grace. Intricate vision penetrated mysteries.

With a single-minded zeal, she smelled the honey of life and knew how to collect it. She launched into the new day, ready to contribute to the cosmos when Rob burst into her abode.

"Tamira? Where are you? The shop's bills are due, and I don't know where you keep the checkbook."

Tamira stretched her wings and expanded her senses. "Here, Rob," she buzzed, "I'll show you where to find what you seek."

He couldn't hear her new voice. He swung his hands about to brush her away. "Ugh, I'm allergic to stings," he yelled. He rolled a 'New Alignment' magazine into a tube and swung.

His aim landed squarely upon Tamira. Her frame crushed upon itself. Air gushed from lungs. Pulsed light blinded. Within her tiny frame, her heart burst with an audible pop, pouring lifeblood through her like an avenging flood. As she tumbled to her death, she hummed. "Foolish man didn't recognize me at all."

About the Author:

Kerry E.B. Black writes from the land of Romero's zombies where people bleed black and gold.

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Experience K.A. Masters' debut novel...



The Morning Tree

A fairy tale with a dark twist

K. A. MASTERS

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The Tower, standing proud against the crystalline chill of the dark ocean, had weathered the test of time. Bricks barely holding firm, the mortar crumbling, and a pure white light shone from a single window atop the slick stone. The Tower had kept the darkness at bay since the beginning. The darkness, in its eternal patience, waited for the time when its raging seas would welcome the falling masonry. At the moment when all other light had died, it shook against its cage of chalk and raged for The Tower to submit its final spark.

As he emerged from skeletal trees that groped upward like dead hands, he saw the light atop The Tower. It was the first light he had seen in many years, perhaps the only light left still burning. He headed towards it, moth-like, and hoped for some kind of refuge against the dark that followed behind him.

The stonework of The Tower was grey and arthritic. Wind whistled through gaps like breath through old teeth. Clear of moss or lichen, devoid of any scrabbling insects, he looked up to the solitary, abandoned white light. The great brass doorknocker, fashioned into the image of a bird and barely visible in the waning light, froze the blood in the traveller's palm as he knocked.

At first there was nothing. Then, from behind the door came the sound of someone fumbling with the latch. The door swung inwards and a pair of ashen eyes looked out at him through the crack, wrinkled and aged. The keeper of The Tower clutched a swinging lantern in his shaking hand and the candlelight gave the man's face the appearance of a dead mortician. "You're the last one."

"There are others?" enquired the traveller.

The keeper opened the door wider. "There were many, long ago. Come inside before the dark comes in with you."

Inside The Tower, the traveller stood in a small, comfortable living space. A fire burned in a brick hearth and the traveller was warm for the first time he could remember. Antique paintings of cities long since desolate hung on the walls. Hundreds of crumbling books lined dusty shelves, and a large table in the centre of the room was set for two. A small doorway was open at the side of the room and through it the traveller could see a stairway that, presumably, leads up to the top of The Tower.

The keeper put the lantern down by the fire. He pulled the traveller's chair out, opened a bottle of wine that smelled a fine age, and began to pour.

"Excuse me," said the traveller as he took his seat, "but what is your name?"

"Name?" the keeper's voice was no more than a wheeze. "What use are names anymore? I have forgotten my name, but how long ago it was since I remembered it I can't recall."

The silence was broken only by the crackle of the fire, the crash of the waves, and the hum of the darkness outside.

"You said I was the last one," said the traveller as he drank from the grubby glass, "but you haven't told me how you knew that I was the last."

"I just knew."

"But how exactly did you know? Who told you?"

It was at that moment, as if they were overheard, that the banging started.

Each boom rattled the glass in the traveller's hand. A precise, rhythmical, *bang! bang! bang!*, like the ocean throwing its fist against the cliff. The fire spluttered and shadows leapt into life, jumping like acrobats across the walls before dispersing again as the noise subsided.

The two men looked to the ceiling, blank and expressionless, trying to see through to the noise above.

"The darkness," the keeper said quickly. "It does that."

The traveller was not convinced. The banging had not sounded like something trying to get in, but get out. "What's at the top of The Tower?" the traveller asked the keeper, who shook his head in dismissal.

"Nothing."

"Yet there is a light burning; I saw it from outside. And someone is banging above us."

"You imagined it," the keeper said. "The ocean plays many tricks and you must be strong to resist it. Resist, my friend, and drink up."

Once more the traveller was unconvinced. He sensed deception in the old keeper, trickery behind his wrinkled eyes that widened as the two held their stare. He felt no malevolence in the man and did not think that he was in any danger, but there was something that the man was hiding. Something physical, and held captive.

The banging started up once more. It shook the traveller's bones and when he looked to his host once more he saw the keeper's eyes flinch. The traveller's gaze found a peg on the wall just behind the keeper, where a large set of rusted keys hung. The traveller, with senses refined to a predator's precision over an eternity of wandering through the coming darkness, saw his chance in that worried look. He tossed the wine in the keeper's face and rushed from the table. The keeper, wearied by many years inside the old Tower, had barely regained his senses by the time the keys were in the traveller's hand.

"No!" the keeper shouted. "Don't go up there!"

"Why?" asked the traveller as he stopped on the bottom step of the staircase. "With the emptiness pressing in on all corners, when swallowed by the final darkness, what can you possibly fear?"

"It is for our own good," the keeper pleaded, ignoring the question. He got up from the table. His bare feet scuffed over cool stone as he limped to the traveller. "It's all we have left. Please, for the sake of all that once was, do not go up those stairs!"

The traveller's heart fluttered. The old man was sincere – he could see it in his eyes. He wanted to believe him, wanted to trust his fellow man...

And yet he had hidden something. For the good of them both, or just for himself, the keeper had tried to make him believe that he was slipping into the darkness' maddening clutches. There were many things that had fled the world but mortal curiosity was still holding its ground.

Up the staircase the traveller ran. Locked doors on either side of him winked past, each with a face etched onto the wood. None of these doors were shaking their frames, however, and so the traveller kept climbing, ignoring them. He climbed and climbed, ascending to the hells. He could hear the keeper behind him, slowly clambering after him.

"Don't open it," the keeper bellowed up through The Tower, "don't let it out!"

But the traveller didn't hear him anymore. There was distress in those bangs, something mournful. When he reached the final landing at long last he saw three large padlocks holding the last door shut. Faint light spilled in dusty rays from the cracks around the frame.

The traveller couldn't help himself. He no longer felt in control of his own body, but at the service of whatever was in that room. He felt through the keys and sprang open the first padlock.

Bang!

"Please, no!"

The traveller fumbled pathetically with the keys as he searched for the next one. There it was! The second lock clicked open.

Bang!

"Don't do it. It is all that is left."

The traveller found the final key. He slotted it into the lock. He turned it slowly, mechanically, fearfully.

Bang!

The door flew open in a violent gust. Wind rushed down past the traveller, past the keeper, into the main room at the base of The Tower. It snuffed out the fire and toppled the lantern. The Tower's front door was sent crashing into the tombstone trees, ripped from its hinges.

Blinded by the dazzling white light, the traveller shielded his eyes. He saw nothing except the silhouette of a large white bird. The bird fixed him with a gleaming, radiant eye, before it spread its wings and cawed with a melancholy, hollow cry.

The traveller felt an invisible hand clutch his heart. He felt his blood begin to bubble and boil beneath his skin. He cried. He wished he had never come here. Why couldn't someone else have freed it?

Over the head of the traveller, past the defeated gaze of the keeper, out of the door and into the darkness it flew. It soared with a majesty long forgotten into the desolate sky where it ripped apart the clouds before being consumed again.

The Tower was plunged into darkness. The traveller slumped down in the doorframe, lost and alone. Why couldn't someone else have set the final light of the world free? What sin had he committed for it to be him that had to undertake such an awful task?

The keeper, out of breath and out of hope, took the final steps to stand beside him. "Come," he said warmly, though it gave the traveller little comfort. "Let us watch the ocean beckon us. As beings of light. One final time."

The keeper helped the traveller to his feet and they stepped inside the room. They looked from the window out over the dark mist that was sweeping towards them like a crashing wave. Neither of them heard the footsteps enter The Tower from the trees, ascend the stairs, and open the door behind them.

The Tower, standing tall against the crystalline chill of the dark ocean, had weathered the test of time. Bricks barely holding firm, mortar crumbling, three shadows standing at the top window, The Tower had kept the darkness at bay for as long as time could remember. The darkness, in its eternal patience, had waited for the time when its raging seas would welcome the falling masonry in its black embrace. And at the moment when the last light had departed from the world, the darkness laughed as The Tower turned itself over to the waters and toppled into the ocean.

About the Author:

Kieran Judge is an MA Creative Writing student at Aberystwyth University. He writes articles and reviews online at TheFilmMagazine.com, HorrorAddicts.net, and for the Facebook-based review page, Horror Reviews By The Collective. His fiction has appeared on The Short Humour Site and in Sirens Call #41, and is slated to appear in Lovecraftiana, Dark Fire Fiction, and a H. G. Wells Tribute anthology later in 2019.

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"So how does that make you feel?"

Ah, the inevitable question from a psychiatrist. It wasn't out of choice that I came to see Dr. Mann. It was desperation. My anxiety was crippling my ability to be a vampire.

I could tell that Dr. Mann didn't believe that I was Nosferatu, but he seemed to believe that I believed it. Plus, he was willing to see me after hours.

"Well, it makes me feel like a failure as a monster. And hungry."

Dr. Mann adjusted his bifocals, crossed his legs and began scribbling in his black and white composition notebook.

"Can you expand on that? Give me an example of a time when your anxiety has taken over your day to day activities."

My hands began to shake slightly at even the memory of these past events. I was not sure where this session would end up, or even if it would provide any relief. I was already here. I paid my sixty-five bucks an hour, so I figured what the hell.

"In my mortal human life, before I was turned, I suffered from terrible social anxiety. I barely left the house except for groceries. My work as a freelance book reviewer allowed me to work from home. Medication was an option that would have required regular visits to a shrink, and staying at home was just easier. Besides, I didn't own a car. The bodega where I bought my provisions was only a block away. It wasn't the greatest life, but I was managing.

Then, after an unfortunate episode involving Indian curry delivery, I ran out of toilet paper. It was late, almost midnight. The bodega was a 24-hour joint and no one was on the street at that hour on a weeknight. Let's face it. I really needed that toilet paper.

Of course, it was that night when I ran into a vampire. One thing led to another. You know how it goes."

Dr. Mann raised one bushy eyebrow without even looking up from his scribbling. "Continue," he said.

"As you know, there is only so long you can hold out before you have to make a kill. I was horrified. Not at the idea of taking a life as much as the idea of the human *contact* it would involve. The vampirism eventually took over and I had to try. I was so hungry.

I walked along the trail in the town park for a long while until I spied a heavy-set woman. She walked with the stumble of a drunk, and I could smell her hair a mile away. It was matted from months of neglect and had formed into almost a bouffant. Figuring she was a vagrant and wouldn't be missed, I began to stalk her from behind."

Dr. Mann cleared his throat.

"That's when the old anxiety hit like a shovel to the face. My hunger drew me onward, walking now just a few steps behind the lady. She hadn't the faintest clue I was even there. It would have been so easy. But my hands started trembling. My breathing became labored.

Just a step behind her now, I could see her fleshy neck, her artery pulsing, underneath all that hair. There was a new sensation then. All this anxiety, it was starting to change me."

"You mean metaphorically?" asked Dr. Mann.

"No, dude. I turned into a bat."

Dr. Mann let out a bark of laughter and immediately covered his mouth, pretending it was a cough. "I apologize. Please continue." He stopped scribbling now. I had his interest.

"I couldn't believe it. Here I was, a vampire, immortal and powerful, but I was trapped for eternity as a Nervous Nelly."

Another muffled cough.

"The worst part wasn't that I couldn't control my form. The worst part was that I had never been a bat before. I couldn't figure out how to work my wings. I almost immediately became entangled in that woman's giant, matted hair. The more I tried to get free, the deeper my predicament. She began screaming, the ragged scream of the old and drunk. There was nothing I could do. I was along for the ride.

She ran to my bodega, my safe zone, hollering like a cat in heat, arms failing around. The shop keep called the police. Well, I won't bore you with the rest. Suffice to say, I spent three days and two nights in a wildlife rehab until I calmed down enough to pop back into my humanoid form and get the hell out of there."

Dr. Mann seemed to be having a coughing fit.

"Anything else?" he asked once he recovered.

"Well yah. That's why I'm here, doc. It happens *every time*. I've been living off cold blood bags that I stole from the clinic for weeks now. I need help."

There goes the scribbling again. "How do you think I can help you?"

"I don't know, meds maybe? Just two days ago, I found one of my neighbors had left her window unlocked as she slept. She was hot, too. I had watched her strut around the neighborhood even before I was turned. I thought it would be easy. I mean, she was sleeping for Christ's sake. As I approached her bed and looked down at her white bosoms softly moving with her breath, the porcelain skin of her throat, it happened again."

"You transformed into a bat," he said nodding, as if he understood.

"Nope. Smoke. Green misty smoke. What's worse is that she had one of those air purifiers, and it was on the highest setting. "

Dr. Mann actually gasped this time. I think he was really enjoying this.

"Well, that really freaked me out. She slept on like a baby and I got purified right into the middle of that damn machine. After she left for work the next day, I relaxed enough to burst out of the purifier amidst a shrapnel of plastic and HEPA filters. She was really going to be confused when she got home and saw that mess."

The doctor didn't even try to hide the laughter this time.

"Doc, I don't feel that you're taking this seriously. Can't I get PTSD from something like that?"

"I certainly think something is wrong with you." He reached over to the side table next to his chair and grabbed his appointment book. "How's Wednesday evening for you?"

About the Author:

Susan Snyder is a writer of horror short fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in the Horror Writers Association Poetry Showcase, Jitter Press, Illumen, and Disturbed Digest. Upcoming publications include a piece in the relaunch of Gallows Hill magazine and an upcoming anthology from Madness Heart Press. She lives in Austin, Texas with her black cat and currently works for an international tour operator.

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Eating Habits | Jacek Wilkos

Jerry was returning to his crypt after a solid dinner. The picture of a vampire in contemporary literature has made it much easier to get blood. Tonight the girls were pushing straight under his fangs.

Flying through the park, he noticed a funny walking man. *Probably drunk*, he thought. He was already full, but decided to take the opportunity. He dived, changed his form, and bit the drunkard's neck. After the first sip he felt that something was wrong. The meal turned his eyeless head.

'Braaaaaain!'

Jerry escaped frightened, not knowing that today he will drastically change his eating habits.

About the Author:

Jacek Wilkos is an engineer from Poland. He lives with his wife and daughter in a beautiful city of Cracow. He writes mostly horror drabbles. His fiction in Polish can be read on Szortal, Niedobre literki, Horror Online. Lately he started translating his stories into English with the hope of publishing them.



TAKERS OF LIGHT

DANIEL LOUBIER

Available on Amazon!

Martha existed merely for that: to exist.

"Martha," they'd say, they being him and her and he and she and all of them, but mostly her mother. "*Maaaaartha*, darling. What are you going to do with your life? Your existence is most depressing, Martha. Oh, Martha. Get out of that bed, will you child?"

And Martha would roll onto her side, making sure to face away from the doorway that framed her American mother with a fake British accent and hot rollers and musk ordered from Avon. Away from the clock that read noon. Away from the civilized household with forks and knives and spoons with all of their usage. Away from a father with the self-proclaimed title of 'gentleman' because he kisses the hand of every woman he meets before taking them to bed. Away from a hopeless sister with five different mirrors and a fear of carbs. Away from the maids and the butlers and the cooks and the falsehood of those who proclaim true love. She would face away from it all and look out her window.

Martha had never left the gates. They stood, an entryway to heaven. This analogy plagued Martha so that she feared the eternal afterlife, merely for that: the eternity of it all. With life comes sleep, and with sleep comes dreams. The forever sleep leaves a body, leaving behind sleep, keeping a soul. And her soul was quite unsatisfied.

"The eyes are the window to the soul," a phrase Martha heard often while learning her Bible on sleepy Sunday mornings as a child. She once asked Miss Claudette what you would see if the soul were empty.

"Why, my child, you would be looking into the eyes of Satan."

Martha didn't sleep for a month, afraid she was the Devil in flesh. It was only when she asked her mother about it that she was reassured as to her human existence. "Ohhhh, *Maaaaarthhha*, darling," she had said. "*Maaaaarthhhaaa*. Your father and I are too high bred to have created a child that comes from so far below."

Martha would lay in bed—especially early morning when the light was just right—staring out the window. In those moments, she'd feel something. Across the lawn, she could see nothing but green. Artificial, too-good-to-be-true green. Each blade of grass matched so perfectly in size, shape, and color. She hadn't a clue why, but it hurt her eyes and that hurt her heart.

Then Martha would look beyond. The gold of the gates, majestic in their fifteen-foot stature, were bars to a barren land. A land of trees browning beyond their health. A land plagued by dying earth and unknown wildlife. Pebbles and rocks and boulders. Crumbling homes made of stone and wood. An apocalyptic scent wafting onto the Privileged Lands when the sun got too hot.

And people. People who were surrounded by death and managed to find a way to live. People who could not, under any circumstances, enter the manor of the wealthy. The 'others,' as her mother liked to call them, as if they were a small piece on a pie chart and not a group of living, breathing, suffering, yet surviving human beings.

It was in one of her staring fits—albeit the date or time or year of age—that she found her soul. It was not within Martha; she found it outside of that window. Beyond the gates, with people she'd never met. And in that unknown moment she understood: her eyes were not the window to her soul; it was, ironically, her bedroom window.

The dreams started when Martha was sleeping, but soon her mind would carry her away even in her waking hours. The dreams all began the same: she would be walking through the yard in a freshly bleached nightgown, toward the only entryway of the gate. Her steps contained no signs of hesitance. She was a young woman, determined. Fearless. Without boundaries. Martha gave herself permission to pass the threshold because in her dreams, she needn't ask another soul.

It was at the gate that the dreams would always change. Sometimes, she'd be greeted by a barbaric man with a skirt made of leaves and a carved wooden spear. He was a cliché neanderthal in all respects. He'd grunt at her, trying to communicate. And the strangest part of it all was that somehow she understood. He wanted her to take his hand, and she did. From behind the bushes came more uncivilized men

and women, covering their manhood and womanhood with dress made from nature. They would run to the gate and close it shut and join hands and make a circle around Martha. It didn't make any sense, but somehow Martha knew for sure that these were her people.

The people changed each time she'd dream. Sometimes they were in flowered dresses and bandanas and smiles. Other times there'd be suits and a lingering smell of generic cleaner. There was even one time when the humans weren't humans at all; they were simply colorful blobs without figure or sound, but she still woke feeling the same way: Martha was one of them, and she was welcomed.

One night, the dream ended as she woke. She opened her eyes, sure that she was awake for she had gone from dream to reality almost every night for as long as she could remember. The dream was done, but voices continued to echo through her skull. "Maaaaarthhhaaa..." she heard. "Maaaaarthhhaaa." The voices sang as her mother's did, but not with the same tone of annoyance. It was as if they were calling to her to wake from her own reality and enter into theirs.

"Maaaaarthhhaaa..." they continued to call. These voices contained all of the maternal tenderness she'd craved her entire life. All the familial intonations, the jovial vibrancy of a voice belonging to a friend. To friends.

She lay in bed listening, first, letting the voices sooth her like a lullaby. But soon the tune morphed from Mozart to Bach, the beauty of the glorious tune overwhelming the ear, maddening its listener as the squeal of a broken record. Martha knew in her heart that she must follow the music and all of its warm insanity to the source. The way to stop it would be to join it.

Martha hadn't used her feet much, but neither did she eat often. So her feet and frame of stature were delicate like glass, only in addition to her bleached white nightgown and Swedish nature, the analogy should stand as the stained glass of a church window. To simplify, Martha appeared utterly angelic.

She stumbled a bit as she stood, not quite sure when the last time she'd used her muscles were. It was as if she were gaining her sea legs, only there wasn't an ocean for miles to blame. Soon enough, the infantile movements wore off, and she traveled through her childhood again with each step she gained. It took her approximately three minutes to walk to the stairs, although they were not more than thirty feet from the threshold of her bedroom. She looked down the steps with a new sense of determination, knowing that the threshold of the gates was strong and smooth, not a single inch higher than leveled ground.

Martha held tightly onto the banister, the garland that snaked the oak feeling awkward in her hands as it looked awkward for the month of July. She awkwardly squatted down, until the thin red carpet touched her bottom. Using both of her arms and all of her might, she inched herself forward with the combined forces of her pelvis and her legs. There weren't more than twenty steps, but by the end of the voyage, Martha needed a break.

She regrouped for ten minutes, resting on the bottom step. She listened, but not a sound was heard. Everyone, everywhere, in every inch of the house, slept as if they were dead. Or carefree. There isn't much of a difference between being dead and carefree, as both do not tend to exist for the living.

After catching her first breath, the second, and the seven-hundredth, Martha knew she could handle the rest. She walked to the front door, which seemed all too simple. But the Privileged were as simple as they were lazy, and the lock clicked open, and the door clicked open, and Martha's feet went click, click, click on the stone path that led through the grass.

She closed her eyes and counted to ten.

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10.

And opened.

And she closed her eyes and counted to ten. 1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10.

And opened.

Martha repeated this process, calming her nerves all the way to the gate. It only took her fifteen sets of ten to reach the golden gate, and one extra '1. 2. 3.' By this point, Martha's nerves were exhausted, and in their place, adrenaline surged. She had made it. Nobody had stopped her. Nothing had happened. And most importantly, the voices were here.

She reached a shaking hand toward the metal rod that held closed the gate. When hand met element, the gold began to glow. Martha had been long-awaited. Martha was special. Martha had been chosen.

She lifted the rod, entrenched in her new, holy power. The minute it was released, an unearthly force sprung forward, pushing the gates away from Martha and into the Forbidden Land. She stepped forward, as a Messiah greeting her people for the first time.

Nobody appeared at first, but then came one. A girl. About Martha's age, Martha's height, and Martha's small frame. She had eyes like Martha, those straight from a Margaret Keane painting. Blue and large and lovely and sad. And her hair was like Martha's, wispy and light as if her child hairs had never grown. She could, in fact, be a sister of Martha's if she had not known any better.

Then others joined, boys and girls, men and women. Some different in size and complexion, but all looking quite like Martha. It was the First Martha that was not Martha that said it first. "Maaaaarthhaa." And then another. And another. Until each person joined in the harmony that became a symphony that soon sounded like one amplified voice.

They circled Martha, the chant soaking her veins with the power that comes with acceptance, one that brings on a vomit-worthy joy. The so-happy-I-could-die type of feeling. Martha felt like she could die.

The circle tightened until Martha was the pit of a giant plum. A big, giant, human plum. And she enjoyed the contact, the level of warmth different on each new set of skin. All she'd felt her whole life were cold hands, the ones you feel when the doctor checks your heart. She embraced the warmth, embraced the strangers, embraced her status as prodigal daughter.

She even embraced the warmth of her own blood when shock prevented her from feeling the wound.

It wasn't until Martha sensed her feet were not touching the ground that she noticed it: a wooden spear had pierced her abdomen, and her sisters and brothers carried her toward the trees. Through them, she could see a blazing fire, a fire much warmer than the skin and her fresh blood.

Martha began to struggle, but it was a worthless fight. She did not have her window to look to for escape. This was her window, in front of her. And as they staked her body above the fire and began to rotate her flesh, she stared each and every one of them in the eye.

She did not scream. She did not cry. This was Martha's fate.

And for the first time in, well...a very long time, her people would have a proper meal.

About the Author:

Amanda Todisco is a writer and filmmaker from Boston, MA. Her films are available on multiple platforms, including Amazon Prime. She spends her free time reading and watching television with her three over-sized dogs.

Simon, wrapped in thorns, burst from the bramble forest and dove off the cliff. Creeper vines trailed behind like ribbons as he plummeted towards the ocean. Words for flight spells raced in his brain, but fear overwhelmed his years of witchcraft. Instead of wasting it on incantations, he held his breath and slammed into the black water. Simon's body remained on the surface for seconds before slowly sinking like a doomed creature in a prehistoric tar pit.

Unafraid, he floated as if in utero. Oxygen appeared unnecessary in this place. After the troubles in the forest, the temptation to rest called him, but he couldn't yield. Time continued its sprint.

He must return to her. *Return to Claire.* Limbs flailed as Simon struggled to the surface of the viscous liquid until his head burst into the air. His tongue forced the gooey water from his mouth. It fell to the sea in globules creating slow expanding ripples.

Lazy waves bobbed him up and down. *What now?* The shifting water pushed him over a crest, and he spied an empty rowboat. The vessel remained still like a painting, and Simon gave chase. Sticky dark web-like trails stretched between his body and the sea as he pulled himself onto the boat. The ebony molasses slid off his skin, including his scalp. He had shaved his head bald to emulate his idol and successful occultist, Aleister Crowley. Claire loved it. Black drops fled into the cracks between the wooden boards like children fleeing to their mother.

Simon gazed at the purple sky. Neither sunset nor sunrise generated the hue. The atmosphere's molecules seemed to take on the unnatural tint instead of the usual blue. A plum colored sun several shades darker than the rest of the heavens hung high above him. The forest canopy had hidden the distant sphere now revealed to Simon by the open ocean. Stolen purple light reflected off the sea, reminding him of polished obsidian.

A three hundred and sixty-degree turn revealed scenery devoid of anything save the sun and three black specks circling above. Even the forest and cliff had disappeared. Simon assumed the specks were seabirds, but couldn't be sure. Without land in sight or a compass, rowing in the sun's direction made as much sense as anything else.

Memories faded fast in the purple twilight. How had he oriented himself in the forest? Was he running to or from something in the thorns? Moreover, how had he arrived *here* in this world? *I'm not in Kansas anymore, Toto.*

Simon stopped rowing. Previous attempts at breaching dimensional barriers failed spectacularly. His felt the obsession to transcend the line between life and death interwoven in the fabric of his being. Claire had stopped him midway through their one attempt to shatter the barrier. She refused to help him a second time. "Dead is dead. No coming back," Claire said through tears.

Incomplete pictures of himself dabbling in pills, Haitian zombie powders, and asphyxiation filled his head. Maybe his current whereabouts proved he had accomplished interdimensional travel without Claire's magic. *If only his peers could see him now. Charlatan? BAH!* If he crossed one way, he could pass back to Earth.

Or to life.

Or to wherever he and Claire called home.

A bright light flashed to Simon's left, cutting him from his thoughts. A yellow orb the size of a fortuneteller's crystal ball floated ten feet away.

As he rowed closer, moving images appeared in the ball. Simon's mouth dropped. *Claire.* Even with his partial memories, he recognized her purple hair. Purple as the sky above. The straightened hair had been cut shoulder length except for the left side of her head, which she shaved. Claire sat at the kitchen table flicking through papers with official-looking letterhead. Legal documents? Insurance? *Who cares?*

Sorrow had turned her deep brown eyes into red puddles. She lowered her head to the table, and her locks fell over her bare arms.

Simon smiled and straightened his body. The orb served as a connection with Earth. He could try to crack and enter it, though this would require a dangerous amount of psychic energy. Perhaps he should search for open gates elsewhere.

As Simon weighed the risk, a memory fired into his brain. Claire broke her arm after falling down the ladder in their rental home. Where was her cast?

The ER doctors assumed he'd injured his girlfriend, and he had, but not in a jealous rage or alcoholic outburst. She served as the source of Simon's magic energy, a living ley line. The only catch lay in Claire's resulting seizure fits whenever he cast a spell. The stronger the magic, the worse the seizure.

He remembered the rite in question (likely a prosperity spell to pay the rent) occurred in the cramped attic. Circumstances dictated they sit close to the ladder. Most of the floor remained open for the chalk drawings and candles. Claire's convulsions knocked her down the trapdoor. When she hit the lower level, their connection terminated. What a waste.

The casting happened just days ago. Didn't it? Memories didn't fade—the purple twilight plucked the recollections from his brain and devoured them.

The clock ticked away.

Deafening screeches broke the silence, and a burning sensation emanated from his shoulder. Three ebony birds the size of horses circled above him. *Dark specks no more*, Simon thought. They glided on broad wings like vultures but possessed black fanged beaks dripping gelatinous drool. Most disturbing was their lack of eyes.

An adult life spent obsessing over the occult kept Simon from panicking. He recognized the monstrous avians from one of his tomes. Without eyesight, these demons hunted astral travelers by the scent of their souls. As the creatures dove near him and pulled away, he saw his blood on one of their talons. It had sliced him with such surgical precision he barely registered the strike except for the resulting pain.

Simon stood tall in defiance and recited a fire hex. Spells were etched deep into recesses of his brain once reserved for information like his home address and parents' faces. One of the abominations exploded into flames and then dust. The remaining two birds ascended into the sky, reverting to specks once more.

Simon smiled and turned to the orb. Claire lay on the floor, clutching her head. His smile dissolved.

Remember, spells supersede discomfort.

Claire was his rechargeable battery. She always recovered.

Simon resumed his course to the sun.

I'm coming home baby. Nothing can stop me.

Time passed, though Simon struggled to recollect if it consisted of hours or days. The deep claw marks on his shoulder served as evidence of an attack he had since forgotten. Only seascape and sky as far as the eye could see.

The oars sliced through the sludge water with surprising ease, and his arms never tired of rowing. The sun didn't move across the sky, but had swollen fivefold in size and faded from plum to what Claire would call lavender.

Two dark specks circled the sun, but Simon couldn't make out their naggingly familiar shapes. *Probably birds.*

Another flash signaled the appearance of a second orb, though it shone only half as bright as the first. Simon detoured to the sphere, desperate for another view of Claire.

Claire sipped coffee from a mug and played on her phone. He recognized the kitchen table she sat at, but not the white cabinets behind her. Over Claire's objections, Simon had painted the cabinets black—he remembered the fight. Something else was different. *Her hair was brown!*

Furthermore, locks cascaded over her shoulders and down her back in thick ringlets. Simon tried to remember if she'd been blonde or redheaded, but neither fit the smooth ochre color of her skin. She looked uncharacteristically happy and content. Claire often joked they shared melancholy as their default emotion. They attracted each other like dark brooding magnets.

Screeches in the sky triggered déjà vu, allowing Simon time to duck and avoid the razor nails. The bird duo dive-bombed the boat. *He'd driven them away before. But how?* Simon swung an oar and cracked open one creature's head. It fell lifeless into the black water, resting on the surface. Green ichor oozed from its skull before it sank into the depths.

The remaining monster hovered in the air, squawking something in its language that Simon took to mean, "Damn you, Simon."

We're both alone now, birdy. Simon swung the oar again. Instead of catching the demon on the crown of its head, the creature grabbed the paddle in its beak. The beast set its talons on both port and starboard sides of the small boat, almost straddling Simon. The stench of urine and rotting flesh seeped from the bird, stinging Simon's eyes and throat.

Tug of war ensued, and the creature danced around the lip of the boat. Dark water sloshed onto both competitors, and they listed portside under the beast's weight. Simon threw himself back to steady the vessel, but it continued inching towards capsizing. He mumbled angry obscenities and let go of the oar.

The creature back flipped twice, and one wing hit the water. The greedy ocean swallowed more of the bird as it struggled to fly. Squawks filled the air. Only seconds passed before it submerged into the blackness.

Without pause, Simon furiously slapped the remaining oar at the water, but the boat only drifted in a circle. He growled. *I need a spell.*

Simon released the oar, resigning it to the blackness. He looked at the image of Claire and thanked the gods. Arcane words flowed from his lips to form a locomotion spell. Golden light surrounded the vessel. *Where to?* Simon thought. *Towards the sun? It's as good a direction as any.*

The front of the boat pointed to the sun like a compass needle to true north. Wasting magic on this spell wasn't prudent when he had the oars, but he couldn't float aimlessly forever.

Simon admired the purple sky. *Claire's hair had been purple.* He took one last look at her.

Claire's clenched hands had shattered the mug, and she shook in her chair. Blood flowed from her nose and mixed with the white foam of her mouth. *Is the blood normal?* The boat moved from the orb. *I'll hold you soon.*

Without rowing to keep him engaged, comfort and sleep fought to swallow Simon as readily as the ebony water. The sun swelled to a third of the sky. Bloated and gray, it almost touched the horizon. Simon had traveled incalculable amounts of time and distance but hadn't found home.

Though the sun changed in shape and color, it never rose or set. It offered no phase, tempo, or count. Neither did his body. The scalp remained clean-shaven, and the fingernails hadn't grown.

Both his memory and chance of returning home shrank with every minute spent in the purple twilight. By the time the third orb materialized out of thin air, he'd forgotten the boat ever had oars.

The third orb flickered, like a candle at the end of its wax. Simon feared this orb was the last. A morena woman stood in the kitchen. She was beauty. She was love.

She was pregnant!

Her round belly revealed the final days of pregnancy. Simon attempted to calculate the days, months, or years since they last slept together, but arithmetic required numbers, not wild estimations. In the orb, a man stepped into view, startling both Simon and the woman.

Simon narrowed his eyes. A clip-on ID badge swung from the mystery man's white button-down shirt as he draped his left arm around the woman and kissed her cheek. With his free hand, he pulled a rose from behind his back.

Simon laughed at the corny, conformist gesture. The interloper's appearance screamed 'office drone.' Simon never gifted her flowers, except black roses on Halloween. He waited with glee for the woman to laugh and throw the flower to the floor. Instead, she cradled the petals and drew it delicately to her nose.

Choking coughs escaped Simon, and he fought the sensation to vomit. She had betrayed Simon. For the entire length of his memory, he had journeyed to her, despite the temptation to yield. The blackness of the water had shown him the freedom of oblivion, and the impossible cool warmth of the sea air invited him to sleep. Simon battled the contentment of the purple twilight for her, while she moved on.

Simon shouted, "How could you—" He stopped. What was her name? He bit his fist. Who had forgotten who?

Nothing else mattered. He had to return to her—now. "I will be with you soon." No time to look for an open gate. Simon scowled as he prepared one last spell. The power required for teleportation to the kitchen exceeded what he usually drew from What's-Her-Name, but maybe if he also used the unborn child...

Sweat beaded on his forehead, as the enchantment left his lips. He'd be home soon. They'd be together. In love. Simon grabbed the orb with his hands on each side as if to crush it. *Break glass in case of emergency.* The veil between the purple twilight and the Earthly plane felt so thin.

Then he saw it.

The beautiful woman sang, rubbed her belly, and smiled. She smiled a smile unlike any he had ever seen.

The pair had tried for kids, but it never stuck.

Simon's hands shook. The orb's light poured from between his fingers. His chest heaved and teeth clenched.

She never refused Simon's request for magic energy. She always recovered from spells before, but would her baby?

Unbearable thoughts bored into Simon's soul. *Had the spells prevented any hope for children? Had his aspirations killed their happiness?*

A demon had possessed him. It snuck through his defenses once he opened himself to the occult. A devil named ambition. Now, after leaving Earth behind, power and fame shriveled to mundane. Only her love retained its worth.

He released the orb and fell backward into the boat. The deep, rapid breaths slowed, and his tense body relaxed.

Purple twilight wrung the last recollections from Simon like the final droplets of juice from crushed citrus fruit. *There's only one thing I want—to remember your name.* Simon recycled the locomotion spell's magic energy and fashioned a remembrance spell, sparing his living battery. The vessel's bright aura faded and it began to drift. The grey sun crowded out the purple sky. Simon lay motionless in the boat when a memory plucked from time by magic grew in his brain.

Claire.

I love that name.

Anger and anxiety faded along with what lay in Simon's head. She wasn't his battery. She wasn't even his Claire—not anymore. *I'll wait for you to come to me, Claire. Enjoy things until then.*

He closed his eyes.

I'll rest.

Simon's body floated apart like sand in the wind, leaving the boat adrift on an endless expanse of black glass.

About the Author:

Ryan Benson previously found employment as a professor in Boston, MA. He now resides outside of Atlanta, GA with his wife and children. Ryan keeps himself busy writing short fiction stories and a novel. *The Sirens Call Publications, Suspense Magazine, Trembling With Fear, ARTPOST, Short Fiction Break*, and the anthology *The Collapsar Directive* (Zombie Pirate Publishing) have published his work.

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But what's peculiar is the thought that rouses me from sleep: Mr. Jones died three months ago.

I was sad about the cat: I mean, really devastated, for about a week. But three months should be a more than adequate bereavement period for a pet, even a pet who means the world to you because you live alone. And I'd slept okay, after another evening of solitary drinking, and the bed was warm enough to cast me adrift. So why should that particular thought be enough to ruin everything, to lift my head from the pillow for me to squint at the glowing digits on the alarm clock?

4:47 am

Mr. Jones died three months ago.

And now there's nothing for it but to get up, because the alternative is to lie here waiting for it to be half past six.

I stumble into the bathroom, my eyes gritted with early morning sleep, and falter. An irregular shadow suspended from the shower rail makes my adrenaline spike. The first thing I can lay my hand on is a towel from the radiator, so that's what I use to lash out and knock the dangling object from its perch. It slaps into the bathtub and stays still; my breathing steadies as I recognize a face cloth. I manage a laugh under my breath, recalling what he always said I was like.

'It's always a drama with you, a theatrical production.' That was why he left me, not six months ago; at least that was his principal declared reason. I know I tend to exaggerate, but never to the extent that he thought. 'It's just a glass of wine, why do you do this? Why does everything have to be an issue? We all spill things.' I guess I can go a little over the top.

4:51 am

A noise from downstairs tells me I am sufficiently awake that I can't be dreaming. I didn't dream the furtive sound of Mr. Jones re-entering through the cat flap, and I can still hear him down there. But it can't be him.

A rattle suggests something has clipped the vase on the pine table in the hall, followed by a low accelerating rumble as the vase wobbles to a halt on its base. I peer over the banister into the mouth of darkness in the hallway. As my eyes adjust to the minimal light, it's what I don't see that worries me: a pit in the darkness, a hole from which I can't avert my gaze, the blackness staring right back at me. That single glimmering point of light can't be an eye, so I begin to pick my way down the stairs, each cautious step inching me away from the light.

Then, in the hall, the void lurches towards me, and I open my mouth in a scream that won't emerge.

4:54 am

The mass of darkness resolves itself into a bloated glimmering carapace. Poised in the dimness it looks like the embodiment of predatory aggression. There are too many eyes; eight grotesque hinged legs shifting against the black background of the hallway; two wriggling pedipalps that seem to grope in my direction, mimicking my own trembling movements. I even believe I can sense its desire for me to suffer, a retribution for all the spiders our species have killed over the millennia. Its inhumanly sensitive setae can detect each movement, each tiny breath I make. The intruder seeks to enfold me, its spinnerets desire to surround me in their sticky silk, to ensnare and devour me.

I stagger back and my body grazes the wall as I enter the kitchen, my palm slapping the switch. The strip light flutters into life, and I can grope for a weapon. I watch the intruder follow me in, ludicrous but unmistakable in the dazzling light. The jointed legs articulate swiftly, a complex cradle for the swollen black body as it carries itself steadily around the doorframe into my line of sight.

4:56 am

My mind is ready to switch off, but instinct sweeps my hands over the countertops to grasp for anything that could help. My hand finds the bread knife; thank God I didn't tidy up last night. I brandish it in front of me, praying its mere presence will deter the intruder. With every measured pace it takes towards me I swipe at the air. The creature hoists itself onto the marbled countertop, its multiple legs gripping the slick surface. It slips unhurriedly towards me and I retreat as far as the wall will permit.

I scream warnings and pleas, but it's the voice of a child in the grip of a bad dream and unable to wake up. I lash out in hacking motions with the knife, and the noises coming from my mouth are primitive, atavistic, unintelligible even to me. Then two jerking paces carry me to the creature and I slam the bread knife up to the hilt into the middle of its obese body.

The crunch of skin as it splits apart makes me retch. I stumble backwards, striking the tiled floor before I realize I have fallen. Fluid is spilling from the twitching corpse. The bile rises in my throat, and it takes a long time to steady myself and struggle upright as I keep my eyes pressed closed.

5:09 am

When I open my eyes, what I see makes me catch my breath. Under the bread knife, a smear of blood and the eviscerated remains of the beast are awaiting my inspection.

I stare at the remains of the creature completely bisected by the knife blade. The smear on the worktop is scarcely noticeable, a minute dribble like gravy. It was never just that; my intruder was immense, swollen, engorged. This can't be all that is left of it. It was better than that. I didn't exaggerate.

About the Author:

Lesley-Ann Campbell is born and raised in Southport, Merseyside. She still lives here today with her husband Andy. Horror is her passion; she loves reading, watching and writing horror. She finds inspiration from authors such as Tim Waggoner, Hunter Shea and John F. Leonard. She is currently working on her first novel and a range of short horror stories that she hopes to publish as a collection.

Blog: <https://horrorhousewife.net/>

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The first time that it happened I was on my way to school. That's when I noticed it, but who knows when it actually appeared. The lane that ran from the farm to the village was wet, it was always wet, the old pot-holed tarmac glistening with drizzle. It caught my eye the way it always did; the black boot placed upon the fence post. I had thought it odd and wondered how you could lose a boot in a country lane; it must be on purpose. Like the other rubbish strewn up and down the winding road. Even when the sign declaring 'No Fly Tipping' was erected, people still left their rubbish behind. People always do.

I made my fingers into a box and held them out in front of me, sizing that boot up to see how it would look in a photograph. I could print it in black and white like one of those pictures you see in fancy shop windows and give it a name. As I let that thought drift about, I looked down to the field below and that's when I noticed it, large and dark and moving. A pool of dark-red liquid. A perfectly formed circle.

Within hours the chatter began. Person to person. Household to household. It got louder and faster, growing like bacteria on a carcass. Idris Jones, the farmer who worked that field said that it was probably a fox or the like. Dave Jacobs, the local copper, said it must be some form of toxic waste, dumped illegally. Mrs. Pritchard, the postmistress, said it was as if the Devil himself had come out of the ground and left his bloody footprint on the land. There was something about her words that grabbed me, because they did not disappear the way most words did in this valley; the way *her* words usually did. Words rose out of mouths and vanished, sometimes before a sentence was even finished, that's how much they meant.

Not this time.

They came out of that old woman's mouth and they stuck to my skin. Even when I had washed and scrubbed and covered them with soap and lotion, they still remained. When I lie in bed at night, I could feel them moving. Crawling and squirming and burrowing in. Those words had a life of their own.

Three days later, after Idris Jones' sheep had all died, it happened again, this time in the field belonging to the dairy farmer. I had always disliked him. Sometimes you can smell something on a person, something bad. When they found him hanging from a tree the next day, I did not feel sorry.

Once again, words filled the village and snaked through the valley like poison through a vein. "It must be..." and "I always knew there was something about him..." and "Well, Gwen said that she heard from Pat that...". And so it went on. There was more life in the valley than there had been in twenty years, all of it birthed from pools of blood and dead sheep and a man hanging by his neck.

They talked of the meeting that was to be held to discuss the happenings. "Awful isn't it?" and "Everyone should be there," and "Terrible, tell me again." Then the postmistress dies after falling down the stairs and snapping her neck. Another neck claimed, and the thing was because *she* was dead, we had no way of knowing how it happened, or what she looked like when they found her, or who might have said what to whom. I pictured her mouth open as she lay crumpled at the bottom of the stairs, as if words were still trying to escape.

"You're not going to that meeting," my stepmother decreed. "Farms don't run themselves. No point in you being there, you have nothing to contribute." Her wicked girls smiled their wicked smiles as I slammed the door and made my way out to the barns. I had seen it first. *I should be there*. I'd never felt more certain of a thing. So, I went.

The road was particularly black that night. The rain beat down hard, and for a dark fleeting moment, I thought that maybe I would not even be able to make it on time. Until a car pulled up beside me and inside was Jack. He was a boy who came with warnings such as 'Leave the likes of him alone, and 'If you ever bring him or any of his sort around here, you'll be out on your ear!'

He smiled and beckoned me in. "Where are you going on a night like this?"

"To the meeting," I said, "but I'm not supposed to go."

His smile grew wide, and he said, "In that case I won't take no for an answer."

And so I ignored all of those warnings and listened to him and to the calm, dark place in my belly.

When we got there, he handed me a coat. "Nobody will know it's you," he said, and I took it, placed the dark material over my body, the hood over my head, and it felt good.

So many people. So many words. Up front sat a panel, fending off questions and jeers and angry voices. From the moment I walked in he did not take his eyes off me, the man in the center of that panel. Then he spoke.

Silence. Where everyone else's words disappeared, his did not. They caressed and pressed at unspeakable, unreachable parts of me, and time went by so slowly that before I knew it, Jack was whispering into my ear, "Quick, time to go, or your mother will find out."

"She's not my mother," I said, and turned and left, before Jack and his car disappeared into the darkness.

The next morning, I heard the commotion coming from the kitchen. There were phones ringing, and girls shrieking, and when I walked in they turned to me, yelling that it was all my fault, and I yelled back, "What? What is my fault?"

Then I saw the smoke and heard the screams of the animals from our barn as the flames claimed the buildings and everything in it. I grabbed my coat and bag, and left, as the sirens screamed past me, and the smell of smoke and charred flesh escaped up into the air.

The wet lane again. I picked up the boot from the fencepost. Seconds later, from nowhere, he appeared. The man from the meeting.

"Is it yours?" His voice was deep, and his eyes were dark.

"Maybe it belongs to the Devil," I said, glancing down at that red stain in the field, still wet and teeming.

"The Devil," he said, an eyebrow raised, and a crooked smile on his lips. "Do you know him?"

I did not mean to say these words, but still I found them wriggling out of my mouth. "Why don't you try it on?"

He held out his foot. I bent down on one knee and slipped it on like it was a custom-made glove yet, as he walked away, I saw on his feet he wore shoes the colour of rich-red wine.

Though much had happened, the days that passed melted away as any others. Except for this. The words of an old poem spilled out of a teacher's mouth at school. I listened, but they disappeared. Until these.

"Darkling, I listen." Then again. *Darkling I listen.* On the way home, as the wind and the rain claimed my clothes and hair and skin. *Darkling I listen.* As I washed the dishes that evening. *Darkling I listen.* And that night in my bed they were louder than ever.

When I awoke, the screams pierced the chill bedroom air. But it was not the screaming that roused me from sleep. I stepped barefoot onto the threadbare carpet and over to the window.

He stood below, dead center of the red pool that he commanded, his form pressed against the landscape like black ink on a canvas. It was as if he were real and everything else were not. The black, leafless trees, paper cut-outs. The fields, a green mist. Even the sky, dark and angry as it was, was a mere puff of smoke.

And his words.

They owned the air. They were made of muscle and blood and oceans and rock and earth and fire.

"Darkling. Darkling." And I listened.

I flew down the stairs, down the hallway and out of the front door. I closed it and locked it shut. As I walked out to take his hand I even twirled a dance, the likes of which I had not done since I was a very small girl.

A crimson wave rushed toward the house. Screaming. Their faces in the windows. Trapped.

"You must think me very wicked," I said, and it was neither a question, nor a statement, but something in between.

"If the shoe fits," he returned, as something wild and black danced in his eyes.

And it did. Perfectly.

About the Author:

Melanie lives in Wales, UK with her family. She writes fantasy and dark fiction for children, teens and adults. She is currently writing her second novel, a YA horror set in Wales, as well as undertaking an MA in Creative Writing. She has a love of folklore, myth and legend. If she's not reading or writing dark tales, she is usually watching them.

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Night Song | Terry Miller

Sara felt the breeze blowing through the screen of her bedroom window. Only covered with a sheet, the cool, night air was amazing. The sound of crickets carried her away, and her soft pillow cradled her drowsy head.

A thump shook the house, jerking Sara awake. Scratching sounds came from the outside as she slowly approached the window. The crickets' song had grown loud during her slumber.

Glass shattered inward, antennae curled around the inside frame. Sara screamed as she was dragged across the remaining jagged glass through the window to come face to face with the giant composer. CRUNCH!

Mr. Sandman, Bring Me a Scream | Terry Miller

The Sandman never came last night, nor the night before. Kiera guzzled coffee this morning just to make it through work, barely functioning.

One more night of hell. Kiera skipped work. She didn't even care. *They can fire me*, she thought. She just wished she could get a few hours sleep.

It was so warm under the covers. Kiera lay snug. Her mind was drifting. Above her, a shadowy figure lurched. Its jaws opened wide, a fine, salty grain poured down from its gaping mouth. Her eyes burned as she clawed at them relentlessly, screaming. Finally, the Sandman had come.

Something Inside | Terry Miller

Eyelids sealed shut, something squirming in my ears, and the smell of death climbing up my nostrils isn't exactly the way I wanted to wake up. I felt a stick in my arm and seconds later I was calm again. The gnawing at the tips of my fingers made me uneasy, the sensation of tiny legs scurrying from atop my arm tickled the epidermis.

I drifted in and out of consciousness, voices reduced to inaudible mumbles as the things in my ears burrowed deeper. No, not mumbles. Not voices. Not human. No, something else, something inside; tunneling. Something hungry, feeding.

Coffin Mates | Terry Miller

I had a dream that I walked amongst the dead. I awoke, my body shivering as if I brought the cold out with me. My limbs were stiff and the room was dark and damp. Attempting to move, I banged both my elbows; the sudden, numbing pain being anything but humorous.

Panicking, I found myself surrounded on every side, and the air I frantically breathed grew thin. Fingers clawed at my shirt, ripping it bottom to top. My stomach soured as rank breath exhaled onto my face. Something had followed me back, its frigid, bony fingers slipping under my skin.

About the Author:

Terry Miller is an author and 2017 Rhysling Award-nominated poet residing in Portsmouth, OH, USA. He has self-published a dark poetry collection on Amazon and one short story to date. His work has also appeared in Sanitarium, Devolution Z, Jitter Press, Poetry Quarterly, Unholy Night in Deathlehem, and the 2017 Rhysling Anthology from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Poetry Association.

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After I saw the procedure online, I did my research. I cut my toenails much too short and rounded. I wore tight, pointed shoes. Everything the websites advised not to do, I did. I wanted to feel my nail pried off, cut, and cauterized. I would refuse the lidocaine block of course. Oh yes, I wanted to fully experience every excruciating maneuver.

My toe throbbed as I stood outside the doctor's office. I added more weight to that foot. It was like an orgasm that just wouldn't quit. Part of me wanted to turn around and go home. Let it fester, let it swell up and turn red. But then, I pictured the blood in the video and propelled myself forward to sign in.

"Well, this nail is ingrown pretty deep. It definitely needs to be removed," the doctor said. I loved the way he held my foot in his smooth, strong hand. His thumb gently brushed the side of my arch as he inspected the violaceous swelling along the nail's edge. I trembled in response.

"I can't take much more, Doctor," I said biting my lower lip. "Do you have time to do it today?"

Within minutes I was moved to his procedure room with my foot strapped into a sort of stirrup. I was so turned on, my heart pounded, sweat beaded on my brow. The doctor looked at me and smiled reassuringly.

"Nothing to worry about, I won't start anything until I'm sure you're nice and numb," He said and patted my ankle. I jumped and held my hand out as he picked up the needle.

"No! Stop. I don't want you to numb it," I stammered. "Because, ah, it makes me shaky and um, well, I really don't feel pain that much."

Of course I feel pain, I just don't process it in the same way most people do.

I'm a foot fetishist, first and foremost. Not in a way that I get off on other people's feet but give me a foot rub over a vibrator any day. I don't know where that started but as I dove deeper into the world of foot play, I frequently needed more and more foot manipulation to orgasm. It wasn't long until I had tried just about everything I could with my feet and started dabbling in pain. Walking on hot coals, foot binding, toe clamps—the more torturous, the better. It was time for a *professional* to torture my foot in a way no one else could.

He stopped, syringe in hand, and stared at me. I think, at first, he was just trying to determine if I was joking, so I held his gaze right back until finally he set the needle back down.

"Well, I can't make you do anything you don't want to do, but I feel it's prudent to tell you that without anesthesia, this will be almost unbearable." He waited for me to rescind my decision. Blood pumped into my toe again and again.

"It's ok. I'm tough," I assured him, and wriggled my toes. He watched them a moment, then nodded, and turned to his stand.

"First, I need to tie a piece of suture around the base of your toe. This will help to keep it from getting too bloody and also, it may help dull the pain a bit as well."

I shook my head. What was wrong with this guy? I *wanted* to see a lot of blood. I *needed* to feel all of the pain.

"Do you have to?" I asked

"I do. I can't have you bleeding so much that I can't see what I am doing."

"Okay. Just don't tie it too tight." I squirmed a little with anticipation.

Tourniquet in place, he grabbed a sharp metal file and rammed it under my cuticle. The pain radiated up my leg straight to my middle. He slid the blade deep into the edges between my skin and the nail, spreading open the space. Then he used a thick pair of scissors that resembled wire cutters to split the nail down to its root. I squealed. I couldn't help it. It hurt so damn good. I watched the blood well up beneath the nail before spilling out of the gashes. It was thick and warm, like red semen.

"Doing ok?" he asked. His tight latex gloves slipped across my foot as he adjusted his grip. My panties were getting wet. I nodded. It was all I could do. If I had tried to speak, my voice would have cracked.

He didn't notice my sexual agitation. Instead he contemplated his tray of devices. The next tool to go to work on me looked like a small garden hoe. Doc used it to plow away the swollen tissue in my nail bed. Oh, it was terribly delicious. The pain was electric. Shocks ran through my body. My muscles stiffened in response to the torment. I moaned involuntarily. My mind was no longer coherent. I was on the verge of ecstasy.

He stopped. "We're almost done. Can you hang on?"

"Please," I said. "Don't stop."

Doc furrowed his brow but finished. My bloodied and swollen toe was cleaned and dressed. He was out of the room before I could thank him. His nurse came in shortly after babbling instructions. I couldn't listen. I was busy shoving my swollen, raw, thickly bandaged digit into my tight shoes.

"Oh, Honey, no. Don't do that. You're gonna have to put this little cover on your foot and go out without a shoe. That's gonna hurt," she said, reaching out to stop me.

"Oh, I hope it does." I smiled, pulled the laces tight, and winked. Her jaw dropped, and I couldn't help but think of a blow-up doll's gaping O-face. It was funny and I giggled a little. I took the papers from her frozen hands.

"Tell the doc I said thanks for a great time." I walked out without waiting for her response. I was truly spent. I needed a nap. I drove myself home wondering how I could ever top this—the best sexual experience of my life.

About the Author:

EV Knight is an author of horror and dark fantasy featuring strong female characters. She earned her MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University but also keeps her medical degree current so she can write her gory scenes accurately. She enjoys all things macabre and lives in the cold northern woods of Michigan.

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Can I Borrow Your Pain | *Les Talma*

"Can I borrow your pain?"

"What?"

"Just for a moment, I'll give it right back."

She seemed nice, so he said, "Sure, ok."

"Thanks," she smiled.

Then she reached into his heart.

Don't worry. It didn't hurt. There wasn't any blood. There was just a feeling of hazy vagueness...of a weight being lifted off.

There was bliss.

She filled her hands with all she could carry. She took a moment to watch it writhing around her fingers. It smelled like stale fruit.

She breathed it in deeply, then bit off a piece. She held the rest close to her chest.

His pain rumbled warmly in her belly and sank deeply into her heart. She filled herself with his frustrations, angers and fears. Her eyes lit up as she drank it all in. Her hands started to shake and her breathing got very heavy.

She closed her eyes in ecstasy. Then they opened and turned to look right at him. She smiled a bit.

It was a knowing smile that slowly faded into a look of sadness.

"Oh...I see. That is rough." She patted him on the shoulder. "I'm sorry about all that. But it'll be ok, you'll get through, don't worry."

She put her hand over his chest, "Anyway, here you go. Thanks."

The weight crashed down. Life felt heavy again. Bliss evaporated. He crashed to the ground.

"See you later," she sang. And she danced away, before he could stop her.

It was a few moments before he could find the strength to move. It was a few hours before he stopped shaking.

About the Author:

Les Talma lives in NY. He's drawn to quiet places, works in a library, and once did some of his best writing in a Dunkin' Donuts at 2 am in NJ. Now he looks for similar quiet and productive places. He likes horror movies, amusingly strange TV shows, comic books, and fairy tales that are dark and delicious. He scribbles things in notebooks; sometimes they end up as finished works. He's working on finishing a lot of things right now.

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The wind howled like the wayward cries of a madman as it came whipping down from the high mountains, flushing the valley with the bitter cold that all winters bring. Herds of Great Elk huddled together, eyes keeping vigilant against the creatures who stalked the night and the creatures who would try to steal the young they encircled within their ranks. Their great horns, wide enough to handle even the largest of bears or the nimblest of wolves held thin sheets of frost, icicles dangling from their shaggy coats which provided them some measure of protection from the primordial cold that seemed to seep through Wetterstein Mountains every winter's night.

The largest of the elk, a male stood twice as tall as a man, raised his head as, over the shrieking winds, he listened to the movements of the beast that the herd feared; a beast that stalked them for the past four nights. He snorted, drawing the other males' attention, shifting his horns to motion into the surrounding darkness. The woods were heavy with snow and ice, but the hoof-carved paths were still passable to those long of leg and strong of spirit. Unlike the strange fire-walkers of the stone forests dotting the mountains, the Great Elk could see well in the dark. Sitting at just the edge of his vision, was the horror that had stalked his herd.

A tall, hairless beast that stood not on four legs but two, like the fire-walkers. But unlike the frail little creatures, this being's arms reached the ground as it stood, stooped over a snow-covered boulder, watching the herd as a hungry wolf might. But this creature was far more dangerous than any wolf that the Great Elk had ever encountered; it moved with an almost unfathomable speed, sometimes using its gangly arms to grip a low branch and swing forward as it would race alongside the herd. Other times it would vanish from sight, leaving naught a trace of its existence save for the faint smell of the rotting flesh caught between its thin, black teeth in its vertical, flat maw that split the center of its head down the middle.

The herd could not sleep or rest because of this creature's relentless pursuit, keeping pace with their own, always allowing itself to be felt, if not seen. The last time the herd had relaxed, it had claimed two calves. Tortured cries of the calves had plagued them all night, forcing the Great Elk numerous times to keep the cows from going out into the darkness to save them.

He knew a trap when he heard one.

Just as dawn broke, the calves had fallen silent and upon further investigation, the herd had been most distraught to find both hanging from the trees.

Now the monster leaned back on the corded muscles of its haunches. It was slowly scooping snow into its right hand, thick digits ending in three barbed talons. The Great Elk could smell the rotting meat of its own, knowing that the smell was coming from the beast's own breath. It was taunting him...

Well, it would taunt him no longer!

The Great Elk burst into a sprint, head lowered in preparation of ramming the creature with its sharpened horns. Three young bucks were right beside him. A small tree shattered into splinters as the Great Elk's left horn caught it, severing it at shoulder height. Several more joined it as hundreds of pounds of solid muscle quickly closed in on the strange monster.

It stared at them with a lazy smile.

And then it was upon them, leaping over their sharpened horns and hardened skulls, slashing at the flanks of two of the brave young bucks that had charged along with him. The talons ignored his frozen shell of fur and thickened hide. The young buck didn't even shriek in pain, as the beast was immediately upon it, gripping his horns and twisting violently about, snapping his neck like so many dry twigs beneath a hoof. As he twisted the dislocated skull of the cooling corpse about, he rammed it into the chest of another young elk, causing the sharpened bits of the horn to pierce through his surprised brethren in a most horrid manner, a crimson spray of freezing mist rising and painting the gray monster's face.

The Great Elk watched in horror as the beast dispatched the last of his younger comrades, breaking its back with a mighty leap from the connected corpses of his younger brethren. The buck yelped in agony in sync with the sound of his upper spine snapping, just before it tore his head free from cords of thickened muscle and sinew. The monster tossed the head aside almost absentmindedly, stepped down from the collapsing body, staring balefully with all six yellow slits into the eyes of the Great Elk.

And for the first time in countless seasons, the greatest elk in the herd felt fear. And as he tried desperately to gore the offending monster as it somehow appeared beside him, he howled in anguish and frustration as he felt his front two legs snap, dropping him suddenly to the sloshy red snow with a sickening splat. Kicking and bucking in vain, all

he could do was wail and cry, doing his best to let the herd know he'd failed in his charge, did not keep them safe, and that they needed to run before they too became the creature's next meal.

As the warmth of life slowly gave way to the chill of winter, the cold snow pressed around the Great Elk's muzzle, stained red with his own blood, he could hear the crunching of the snow as the monster slowly lumbered its way around his body, until the great hooves stopped in the Elk's direct line of vision. The pain was intense, and from his vantage point on the ground he could only see one of his severed legs and up to the first joint of the creature's pale, muscled leg, but the Great Elk could sense the predatory eyes wandering over his body. Wondering where next would be the best to cut into, where the Great Elk had the juiciest selections of savory flesh, he could sample... yes, this beast was a predator, the Great Elk knew.

The Great Elk was to die, and he knew it because he'd been too sure of himself and his own strength. His younger brethren too had fallen prey to their own confidence; foolishly rushing the monster that had proven too strong for them, prove it was as cunning as any wolf and as strong as any bear. Their pride had led to their, and by extension the herds, destruction, this the Great Elk knew...

And then the Great Elk knew nothing.

About the Author:

Nicholas Paschall has been published in twenty-five magazines and anthologies at the time of this publication, with three novels to his name. His debut book, *The Father of Flesh*, was released by Darkwater Syndicate in 2017, with the sequel *Travails for Teyuna* appearing a year later. Stitched Smile Publications published his latest piece, a young adult ghost thriller called *Jack in the Box*. Visit him at his website for a weekly story, free for all seeking thrills and chills!

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Her Chaos Mouth | Charles A. Gramlich

She rises on limbs of frost and fire, from the wreckage of blind moons. Beneath her skin, the shades of scorpions squirm. And I flee from her through the feral mist, across the barren heather of purgatory to the twisted tower where Hell sleeps.

Trapped, I tremble and await. She greets me as a lover, offering gifts of pearls and putrescence. Through the ashes of fallen angels, she wades all the way to my mouth. Eyes fevered with fanes and talismans, lips dancing with the hunger of unspent kisses, she tangles her fingers like tantrums in my hair.

Her voice is the mistral; her breath a sirocco. She has warmed her hands in cauldrons of hearts, and my name whispers like a hunger in her throat. Crucified on the altar of need, I rage, she beguiles. I plead, she writhes. We have no orchestra and yet we waltz. Until:

When my eyes are drilled holes for night....

When I carry her bruises all the way to the bone....

I am left besotted...

and alone.

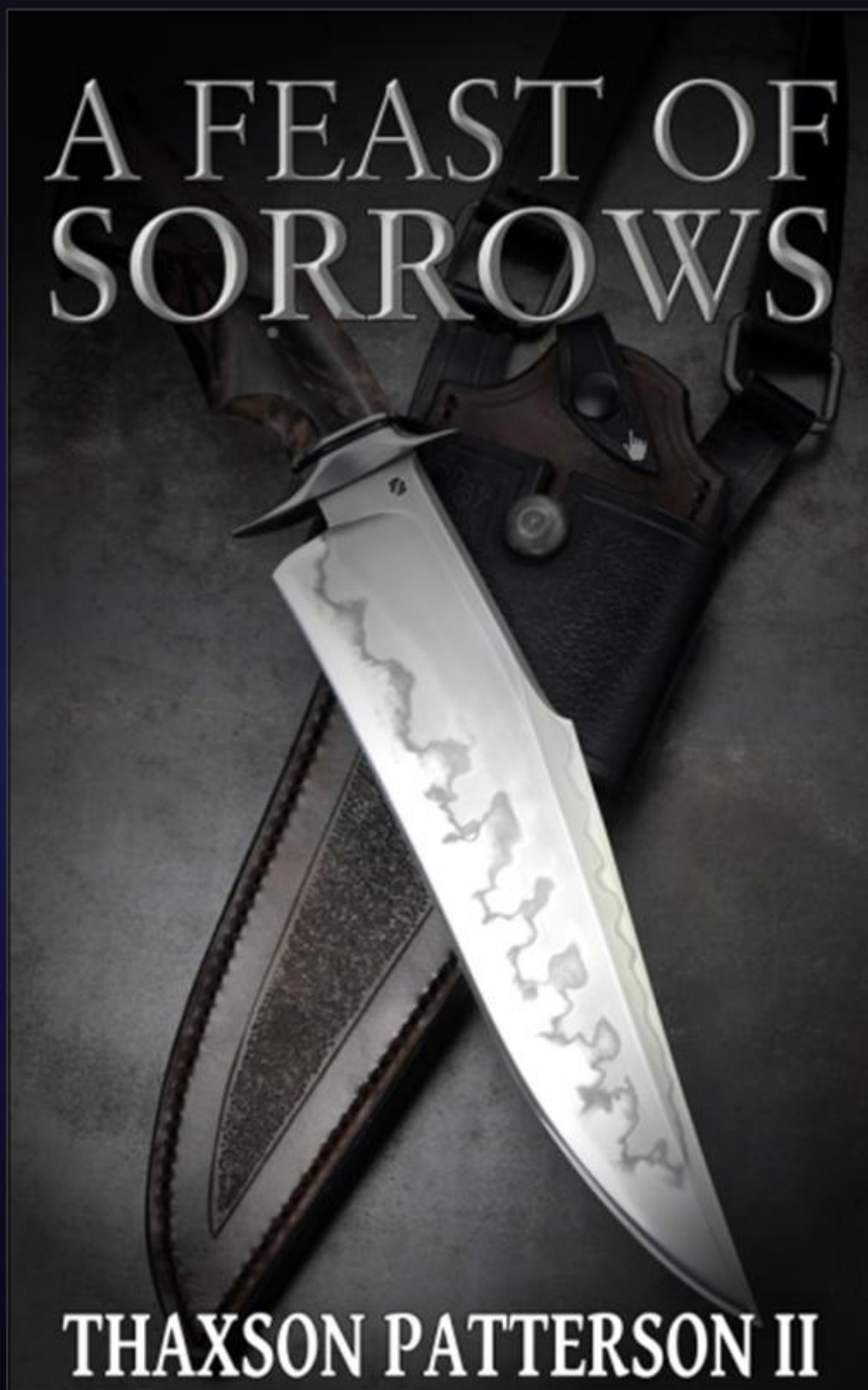
About the Author:

Charles Gramlich writes from the piney woods of south Louisiana. He has authored the Talera fantasy series and the SF novel *Under the Ember Star*. His stories have been collected in, *Bitter Steel*, *Midnight in Rosary*, and *In the Language of Scorpions*. He also writes westerns as Tyler Boone. His books are available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

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There are even worse things in the world
than serial killers...



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Beyond his locked bedroom door, Steve rips all three drone-delivered boxes open. Inside the first is a mass of black nanohair and a silky puddle of nanoflesh wrapped in gauze. He peels back the gauze, revealing a face, a scarlet sheet of nanoflesh, gleaming, heart-shaped, with an aquiline nose, arched brows and high cheekbones. His new doll-face. He lifts it up and out, lets it hang over his fingers, examines it, touches it to his cheek. It smells of dead rose petals mixed with the chemical bite of latex.

He is almost too excited to breathe at the prospect of full-time dollification. No more wearing a dollsuit that he has to strip off after four sweaty hours, wipe down, dry, hang up. No more hiding and no more pretending to fit in with other people's expectations.

Dollification Day. Ha! That's a catchy banner. In their small town creed, a banner like that would morph into a hunt-and-kill-it rallying cry. Doesn't matter that he sat next to those hunters in class six decades ago, or that he has returned home after half a century away to care for his mother.

He turns the nanoflesh face over and can just make out the tiny filaments which will weave into the top layers of his epidermis to create a smooth, breathable and responsive synthetic layer between himself and the world. He presses its soft interior to his cleansed face. The nanoflesh binds to his skin and stretches itself over nose, cheek, chin, forehead, ears, and around the sides of his head before self-sealing down the back of his skull. His breathing rushes as he takes the first steps away from a lifetime of lookalike dolling.

He retrieves the hair, a goth wig of blue-black glossy strands, and flips it over the top of his head. Its nanofilaments squirm through the nanoflesh and into his hair follicles, emptied of his own hair by hours of laser removal. It tickles as the synthetic nanofilaments integrate with his flesh.

The room is shadowy except for light streaming from the Hollywood mirror mounted between an overloaded wig rack and antique dresser stuffed with latex masks and vintage silicone bodysuits. He kicks a drawer, slamming shut his rubber-doll past. He can pack that low-tech junk away. Fill the dresser with new outfits, bags, belts and hats now that he's transforming from man to doll. Opposite the mirror, his bespoke doll box glistens from a fresh application of varnish. Made of cedar with glass on three sides and a mirror at the back it takes center stage among his collection of boxed dolls.

He leans into the mirror to examine his polished face. Only his eyes are the same, his lips outlined by the mask are pushed into a full pout. He breathes slowly through the tiny nose filter. He hears his mother's words in his head. "You'll find trouble."

And he had. Whenever he followed his heart, dressed and spoke and acted in ways that felt right, trouble of some sort knocked him down. The muscles in his back spasm and he blinks back a tear. He swivels to inspect the crimson bruises covering his spine.

Eight hours before, Steve'd been walloped by two guys with shaved heads and Grim Reaper tattoos. They'd dragged him into the dank, slimy alley behind Visionaries, yanked his latex shirt off and kicked him until the bar's security guards arrived.

"Because you refuse to fit in." She says over and over.

"Like I have a choice." He says to himself.

His mouth twitches whenever he thinks about the three years of electroshock aversion therapy or the priest exorcising the evil out of him and his brother through prayer and caning. Mom force-fed her brand of love, Steve toughed it out, and swallowed and nodded until she left him alone. He had hated himself for many years thanks to the aversion therapy. Despite all his mother's advice, he never did fit in, no matter how hard he practiced. But he learned to fake it for short, exhausting bursts. From today onwards Steve won't need to pretend anymore.

His older brother refused their mother again and again until his eyes hollowed and his ribs showed. Back then, Steve had boasted to his brother that he'd like to tie hypocrites in hessian bags and dump them off the bridge. His brother squinted but said nothing, maybe doubting his courage. Steve never got the chance to ask because his brother got dumped off that bridge by a gang of thugs who didn't like the way he 'pranced' they said. No one was charged for his murder. Reasonable provocation was the judicial excuse. The memory of it makes Steve want to crush the breath out of any fraud preaching love but practicing hate.

Now Steve has his mother dependent on him and being her caretaker is not something he ever thought he'd be doing. At ninety-six she could still be looking after herself with homebot care and drones delivering everything. But a triple-stroke stroke chewed through half her brain, gimped her leg, and dimmed her eyesight. As usual she's slumped in her exosuit in her favorite chair, live-streaming. Everything about her flaccid and bloated from sitting all day long. The

hospital released her seven months ago; she'll never live alone again. What choice did they have? Automated AgedCare meant sealing her in a VR pod, fed by one set of tubes, wastes carried away by another, and drugged to prevent hysteria or catatonia. He's all she's got.

His future stretches before him. Mother monitored and medicated by medbots; at least they don't judge. Both locked indoors for safety, reliant on deliveries and occasionally reaching out to another doll through a secure webcam. He believes in change, he can wait for the naysayers to catch up.

Steve hears her voice, and there's an unfamiliar tremble in it. "Steve," she says. "Can you bring my coffee and toast?"

An idea pricks him. The sour kind of idea that lurks in the frothing cauldron of his brain. Let the harpy whip herself into a frenzy. Her iron-willed mothering shackled his teen dabbling with dolling. Turn-about's only fair. Eye for an eye and all that. Teeth grinding, hands fisting, the lure of throttling her holds him in its thrall.

"Can you hear me Steve? Are you going to let me starve?"

And Steve sees himself stuffing her into a skinsuit—making her as elegant as she used to be. Sealing her inside it and gluing shut the ears and nose and mouth holes. To make sure she's lying still and peaceful, he gently squeezes the breath out of her, again. And the house is quiet.

She might not despise his masquerading, as she likes to call it, if she could be beautiful again. He slaps the idea away.

With a quick flick, he unlocks the door and says, "I'll be out in a moment."

Reaches for the second torn-open box. Inside, folded between layers of powdered gauze, is his new nanoflesh body—programmable to any color and pattern. He draws it out of the box, drapes it against his chest. The nanoflesh is cool, soft, polished to a ruby red sheen and is the same weight and texture as classic rubber. Perfect, from the neck up, he aches to transform the raw-boned rest of him.

A soft musk releases as he steps each foot into the skinsuit and it gently rolls upwards over his calves, thighs, groin, buttocks and torso creeping towards the neckline of the mask. The nanotech in the suit binds to his flesh, a warm second skin, cocooning him from the humdrum and the dreary. The bodysuit constricts heightening sensitivity all over, in particular it tightens around his waist and amplifies around his chest until he has a goddess-like silhouette. Steve's breathing jerks, shallow and fast at the tightness of permanent bondage. Heat rushes through him. He croons in delight. He is a living doll.

Steve hums while he paints the blending serum along the join between new face and body. His fingers permanently rough from years of yard work designed to scour his teenage soul clean. Very soon his hands will be flawless. But, they require a separate set of hand-masks and will be the last and final step.

"Steve?"

He sighs. Jerks his favorite maid's outfit off the rack. He quickly slips on the fitted black dress, white frilled apron, long white gloves and white lace-up boots. Each item helps transform him from Steve into Ruby, a Maid-Doll. A tireless caregiver for his mother, free from human feelings and human responsibilities. Tomorrow he can be a different type of doll only limited by his imagination and wallet.

Decades ago, before his mother got born-again, his brother and mother would watch *Mission Impossible* and dress-up as undercover agents busting criminal gangs and humiliating dictators. His mother told him he was a natural. He adored Lynda Day George, Lesley Ann Warren, and Barbara Bain transforming themselves. So brave, so good at defeating the baddies. Nothing stopped them. That's when Steve first thought of recreating himself and becoming unstoppable. Who wouldn't be bashed in the school toilets. But, he was always afraid to let others meet that other self.

For good reason. Dolling drove his mother to revivalism and later, a stroke. His brother who couldn't live while trapped inside a body he hated, broke all their hearts.

"You hear me?" Mother is still waiting.

Steve glides out of his room and over to her. Her cold blue-tinged fingers gripping the frayed arm of the chair. He reaches for her wrist, checks the exosuit's readout. Her pulse is unsteady. She sniffs.

"What's that smell?"

She shakes her head and turns half-blind eyes in his direction, grasping his forearm with both hands.

"You don't feel right. What've you done to yourself this time?"

"Nothing you need worry about. I like to take care of myself," he replies. "I'll pop the toast on and be back in a tick."

Calm hands pour coffee, add milk and sugar. He makes the toast and slathers it with butter and strawberry jam. The domestic chores soothe where only yesterday they frustrated.

He places the tray in front of her and hands her the warm mug of coffee.

He wonders what size suit she'd take and how hard it'd be to get her into it. His mother's face immaculately made-up, crease free. "Mom, I figured it all out. We're good."

When dollified, he is unshackled, set free of social expectations and restrictions. He can free his mother too. He could scan his mother's wedding photos and create a full nanoflesh bodysuit for his mother based on her twenty-five-year-old self.

When finished with her breakfast, she says "You look after me so well. My handsome boy. I do love you."

"Love back at you. Always. Forever." Steve reaches for her empty plate, but stops, puts his arm around her shoulder. Breathes in the lavender and geranium oils he massages into her shoulders every morning. She nods her head towards him, a sort of shrugging hug that's all her own. Lets his hand slide up her arm to cup her neck, her veined and softly wrinkled skin a reminder of all the years she's been on this planet, all the varied experiences she's had. She needs him, and he needs her.

The sourness that's been burbling in his thoughts for so long turns to ashes. The knot of pain held inside since his brother died releases. He smiles in contentment, they'll have so many moments of uncomplicated love. He can pamper her and be true to himself.

Steve kisses the top of her head, takes the plate and cup to the kitchen, and then returns to his room. Slides on the skin-suit-hands and applies sealant. He examines his reflection, nano-knitted flesh-head to foot in red, maid's outfit, double-D breasts and extra-long lashes. He is perfection. He's come a long way from licking plastic toys to being one. Finally, he feels the blissed-out state other people have talked about when the fall in love or win the lottery. A deep sense of peace and fulfillment seeps through him as he steps into his bespoke doll box and waits until his mother needs him.

About the Author:

Emma Munro lives with one wife and two cats in the Blue Mountains of Australia. Her stories have appeared in Hashtag Queer LGBTQ+ Vol. 1, Hello Horror, Pure Slush, Cosmos and Jersey Devil Press.

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Choice | Charles A. Gramlich

Either

When I lie in tatters, clothed in fever, the sainted ones gather at my bedside. Their mouths are torn with sorrow but they curve their lips like sabers. In grey, they dress me. They hollow my cheeks with ink.

I am painted and adorned—granted a moment of holy shine. How sweetly I am loved while the thorns of roses sting my eyes. In the corner where they leave me, I sit in shroud and scream.

When the Lords of Rain ply their talents, no one is immune. Surely not I. With a sigh and wince of pleasure, I drum like moths battering at windows for haven. And when I sleep, the plowed furrows of tears are etched into scars.

Or

When we crouch in ruined fields, my fingernails scrape like bronze blades along your thighs. Dressed in bones, I whisper lost words you dare not hear. Desolation drifts my eyes. I smell of fog and rot.

I lean upon a spear of woe, sharpen my teeth on your hurt. I am splinter; I am stone that bruises the heel. Show me your whitest throat. Offer me the perfume in your deepest heart.

When the Lords of Rain mark the fallow fields, you must sow or reap. You must be grain or scythe. Honey or venom, the choice is forced. The law burns on your lips like sweat. For the sky is empty and does not care.

About the Author:

Charles Gramlich writes from the piney woods of south Louisiana. He has authored the Talera fantasy series and the SF novel Under the Ember Star. His stories have been collected in, Bitter Steel, Midnight in Rosary, and In the Language of Scorpions. He also writes westerns as Tyler Boone. His books are available at Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

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Edwin handed his phone to Becca and said, "Here's my boss's address. Can you open up the Drivze app?"

"Drivze? What's Drivze?" said Becca as she scrolled through her boyfriend's phone.

"It's the directions app I just downloaded. It gives you turn by turn directions and alerts you to accidents, traffic, cops, even potholes. Drivze members report stuff as they see it. You can do the same."

Becca found the app and typed in the address. The map popped up and with it, a Lilliputian crowd of icons that represented other Drivze members. There were cars of different colors but there were also smiley faces, kittens, puppies and more. "Oh, isn't that cute," Becca marveled. "Is that you—the little zombie head?" It was a disembodied green head with yellow eyes and teeth, rolling smoothly along their plotted route. Becca giggled.

"Yeah, you like that?" Edwin grinned.

"You would choose that one. It's not too popular, though. I see mostly cars and kitties on the road." She began scrolling through the app's controls.

"What are you doing?" he asked, leaning towards Becca, trying to watch the road while checking what she was up to.

"Just looking," she said, smirking.

"You're changing my icon, aren't you?" Edwin was the more territorial half of this couple. He especially did not like people playing with his electronic toys. "What's that? A girl?"

Becca showed him she had indeed changed his zombie head to a little golden-haired girl. "You don't like it? Come on, it's adorable."

"Change it back. Now. Please."

"Okay. Changing it now."

"Show me."

Becca rolled her eyes and showed Edwin the zombie head. "You want voice directions?"

"No, they're annoying," Edwin replied. "Just read them off for me."

Edwin's company was close to their home just south of Boston, but his boss had bought a home with a vineyard in Foster, Rhode Island. He was holding a dinner party for his software engineers for the express purpose of showing off his winery. Dinner would include wine pairings from his newly launched label. Both Becca and Edwin were intrigued and were looking forward to the evening even though it meant a long drive along some of Rhode Island's older, more primitive turnpikes.

The route took them through small towns, farms and wildlife preserves with long stretches between traffic signals and even the ubiquitous Dunkin' Donuts establishments. There were scant street lights to ward off the encroaching dark. They still managed to hit what red lights there were. When they were stopped five miles outside of Foster, Becca said, "Hey, you're not the only zombie Drivzer anymore."

They couldn't help themselves; the couple glanced to their right. Their fellow Drivzers were also a couple. They drove a sedan so decayed, the body was rust held in place by flecks of paint. The man behind the steering wheel sported a beard, a man bun and heavy black frame glasses. His female companion had a gray hoodie that seemed almost molded to her head as she inspected the phone in her hand. Each sported skin of mottled violet and green. The man lunged at the driver's side window, his mossy hand plastered against the glass, his tongue lolling down to his chin as if he wanted to grab Becca and pull her right out of her vehicle. He left a slimy print as the hand slid down the pane.

"They look like real. . .," said Becca.

"Zombies. Shit!" Edwin cursed. He plunged the accelerator to the floor even as he doubted his own eyes. The tires screamed, their car lurched through the light and rapidly accelerated. The corroded vehicle surged forward in pursuit. As the couple raced through the last five miles to the Foster town limit, Edwin saw two other sets of headlights swing into line behind the first tracking vehicle. "What the hell!" he cried.

"There's two more zombie heads behind the first," cried Becca. "And we just drove past the turn for your boss's house."

"I don't know what's happening, but we need to lose these guys," said Edwin. He pulled a hard right onto the next side street. The headlights followed. He squealed into turn after turn until there was nothing but darkness behind them. They came out on one of the main roads. "Can you see where we are in relation to Ted's house?"

"Umm, not really," said Becca. "Let me turn on the sound." They were instructed to turn right. They were in the historic district of Foster and passed by the Grange, an old cemetery and the police station. There were two police cars parked in front and a single light burning in one window. "Looks closed up for the night. I think they roll up the sidewalks after dark around here," she commented.

"Son of a bitch," Edwin shouted. "They're back."

Becca turned her head to see the trio of headlights behind them and noted the three zombie heads on the screen. "Go back! The police station! Go back!" Drivze chirped as Edwin burned rubber on a sharp U-turn and shot past the first two

zombie cars. The third veered into his path. Edwin fishtailed on the soft shoulder to avoid a collision and streaked past the police station as he tried to regain control of his car. At the last moment, he jerked the steering wheel left to avoid piling into the stone cemetery wall. Zombie Car #3 was not so lucky. It crashed headlong into the stones and flipped over, a cloud of iron oxide rolling over the road. Drivez chirped again and a feminine voice admonished them to make a safe and legal U-turn.

Instead, Edwin took a sharp left. The paved road quickly gave way to rutted dirt and stones, sharp curves and finally a dead-end. He backed up to turn around.

"They found us," said Becca, and she showed the screen to Edwin. Two zombie heads were making their way along the curves behind of them.

Edwin snatched the phone away from Becca. "What the fuck! Is that me?" he shouted. On the screen was the little round head of the golden-haired girl hovering over a thin thread of side road. "You changed it back?"

"I was just fooling around," said Becca.

"What is wrong with you?" Edwin sputtered, his foot jammed against the brake pedal. "A little girl? Don't you get it?"

Becca was tearing up. This predicament couldn't be her fault. It couldn't. "What difference does it make?" she sniffled.

"Because little girls are tender and delicious." Edwin was screaming, spraying saliva on the windshield. "That's why they're following us! Change it! Change it now!"

Becca selected a nondescript smiley face. Headlights winked through the woods to their left. The zombie cars were making their way along the curves. "We should ditch our phones and run through the woods," Becca said.

Edwin shook his head. "No way. I have no idea where we are or how to get home." He floored the accelerator and swerved from side to side until he was about to plow head first into the pursuing vehicles. The zombie cars pulled to opposite sides of the road as Edwin's SUV streaked up the middle. The confused Drivez app warbled and protested.

At the road head, they could see flashing blue and red lights to their right. "Police," cried Becca with relief.

Edwin eased on to the main road while Becca focused on the whereabouts of the zombie cars. The icons on the map were immobile.

As they pulled alongside, the officer was facing the overturned wreck. Three somewhat shredded zombies were wriggling out of the broken windows while one leaned against the wall, clumsily punching an index finger at the brightly lit screen of some mobile device. Edwin lowered his window to warn the policeman but as the cop turned, the couple could see his face was already marbled with decay. A uniformed arm shot through the window and grabbed Edwin's shoulder. He tore the appendage out of its socket as he drove away.

The other cruiser was parked just past the police station. As the couple approached, the officer stepped into the road and abruptly threw his arm up over his head. Edwin didn't understand the gesture until the stop sticks punctured his tires and the SUV shuddered and crawled. The other zombie cars had found the wreck and parked alongside the cemetery. The green-faced cops and zombie Drivezers all turned and plodded towards the disabled vehicle.

Edwin and Becca bolted from the car. "The woods," said Becca, nodding toward the shadowy growth behind the cemetery and the police station. "Leave the phones."

Edwin hesitated, cradling his toy in his hand. Becca slapped it to the ground and smashed it under her heel. "We're swearing off the social network," she said. She grabbed her lover by his hand and dragged him into the dark and disconnected forest.

About the Author:

Christine Lajewski is a writer, retired alternative high school teacher, a naturalist at Massachusetts Audubon and a haunt actor. All these elements, along with summoning her inner hag, have found their way into her published works: *Jhator*, *Bonebelly* and *Erring on the Side of Calamity*. She hails from Flint, Michigan and currently lives in Norton, MA with dogs, koi and local wildlife. Her grown son and daughter live nearby, often acting as sounding boards for all the weirdness.

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Wolfgang slammed the door of his rust-ridden Camaro and ran toward the black brick building, torn varsity jacket flapping in the wind. His lolling tongue snapped back into his throat when Frank cuffed him—hard—at the door.

"Down, Wolfie. What'd I tell you."

"C'mon!" he said, rubbing his neck. "Just gimme some action, will ya?"

"Not until you pay down your tab."

"How about you pay it with all that doorman dough you've been rolling in?" he sneered.

"No."

"Aw, fuck all! Don't you remember what it's like working only one month a year?"

"I do. That's why I took the job."

Wolfgang stared at him and then pulled out a lighter.

"Don't wanna have to do it, big guy," he said.

"You're a real prick, you know that?"

"At least my prick is my own."

Frank lurched forward, arms outstretched, and Wolfgang flicked the lighter. The tiny flame drove him back.

"Hrrrrggghhhhhh!"

"I don't hear uncle!"

"HRRRRGGGHHHHHHH!"

"I'll get my pitchfork if I have to!"

"FINE GO IN!"

Wolfgang slid past him and into the strip club.

Girls sauntered this way and that, jiggling in topless enticement atop long legs in black spiderweb G-strings. Pretty Deadly's was lit up in orange neon across the mainstage where two naked blonde bombshells shimmied to sleaze-metal. He took his usual seat at the usual booth with the usual guys: Drak, Mums, and C.B.L.

"What's the good word, fellas?"

All three grunted into their drinks.

"Geez, who lived?"

Drak looked up from his Bloody Mary. "Shouldn't you be making wise-ass remarks to the underside of Frank's boot right now?"

"Whoa! I got us gigs at this joint, didn't I? Or would you rather spend all of October doing haunted hayrides and strip mall photo ops?"

"I hate this place," said C.B.L.

"Now why's that, Cee-bee?"

"You know why."

"Can't say I do."

C.B.L. flashed a damp twenty from the webs of his fingers at a cool looking brunette.

"Hey, Angelica. Lap dance?"

She rolled her eyes, turned on one high heel, and walked in the opposite direction, giving them full view of her slightly bouncing buttocks and, as their eyes traveled up the serpentine curve of her back, her two middle digits.

C.B.L. looked at Wolfgang. "See, you prick?"

"Ahhh what does she know? She's only been here a week. I'd love to howl at her moon sometime, though. You know what I mean? Aaaaah-whooooo!"

They regarded him dourly.

"Now what the fuck?" He swept his arm in a gesture of grandeur. "I mean look at it. It's all here, all year! Girls, booze, and good times in our *ambiance*! You just gotta go for it!"

"So what?" said Mums. "It's no good if we can't use it."

The others nodded and Wolfgang leaned in. "Whoa, whoa, whoa . . . what do you mean *can't*?"

Drak eyed Mums. "Well . . . we were talking."

"And?"

Drak lowered his voice. "We wanted to tell you something. You remember how—"

"Is it a money thing? You're not gonna turn traitor for a nine to five dope-a-day job like Frank, are you? I mean this," he circled his hands in the air, "doesn't cost much."

"Wolf," C.B.L. said.

"Besides, we're the godfathers, baby! Living legends in a place like this. Even in the off-season. That's the beauty of it!"

"Wolf," Mums said.

"Matter of fact you should've seen me slide past Frank! Heheh! Boy was he pissed! I had this line about his—"

"WOLF!" yelled Drak, growing to an immeasurable length of glaring shadow with red eyes that towered over the table.

The music cut out and the girls on stage stopped dancing.
 “Halloween’s over! Get lost, assholes!” someone yelled.
 Drak sank back into his seat as the music resumed and the laughter faded. The color drained from his eyes and filled his cheeks.
 “It’s not the money.”
 “Then what is it?”
 Drak fidgeted, his face growing redder. “It’s uh . . . I, I—”
 “I can’t get it up!” Mums blurted.
 Wolfgang’s tongue rolled out of his open mouth, and a string of saliva connected to his sleeve. It broke with his hysterics.
 “Hooooohahahaha! You can’t . . . can’t get . . . hahahahahahaha!” He pounded the table. “Oooh, oooh that’s too much!”
 “You try going forty-five hundred years without a woman, fuzzhead! Sorry I wasn’t running all over London and getting laid back in the ‘80s. I happened to be trapped under four inches of glass at the fucking Smithsonian!”
 “It’s not funny, Wolf,” C.B.L. said. “It’s a real problem, and it only makes it worse if we keep trying to insert ourselves in places like this. But the hayrides, photos with kids. It’s steady work. It’s wholesome work. That’s more our pace now.” He placed the twenty under his Budweiser. “Mums is right, we aren’t in our young-buck prime anymore. And you should stop acting like it.”
 “So what’s your limp-dick excuse, fish-face?”
 C.B.L. looked him dead in the eye. “It stinks. Like a swamp.”
 Wolfgang howled and doubled over with laughter.
 “Bite me,” C.B.L. said.
 “Now I gotta ask,” Wolfgang said between gasps as he turned to Drak, “what’s got your willie afraid of the dark?”
 “I don’t, uh, I don’t want to talk about it.”
 “C’mon, Draky!”
 “Well, uh, I . . . I took a test . . . and . . .”
 “And?”
 “I have hepatitis B.”
 “Oh,” Wolfgang said. He blinked. “I’m . . . sorry.”
 “It sucks. It really sucks.”
 “So . . .”
 “So I’m done with it. We’re done with it,” Drak straightened himself up. “The drinks and parties and girls and shows. Enough is enough. It was fun in the ‘80s, but it’s time we grow up and listen to what our bodies are telling us.”
 “Yeah,” said C.B.L., “and besides, Wolfie. When was the last time you got laid?”
 Wolfgang’s pupils constricted into narrow, predatory points. He grabbed C.B.L.’s Budweiser, chugged it, and slapped a stack of bills on the table. “Right now,” he growled. “Hey! Angelica! How much for some time in the Crypt?”
 She came over to the table, a thoughtful look on her striking, angular face. “Three-fifty, but with a face like yours . . . five hundred.”
 “Done and done!” He tucked the money into her G-string, gave her a spank, and followed her into the back room, grinning wolfishly at the table over his shoulder.
 He returned a few minutes later, shoulders slumped and grin gone.
 “So what’s the story, big shot?” C.B.L. asked.
 “Well, you know how these girls are. She starts teasing and getting me all hot, and just when it’s about to get going she pulls back and says it’s just a little more money to take it all the way home.”
 “So what’d you do?”
 “Pffft! What do you mean? I took my cash and got out of there. It’s not like we’re rolling in it working one month a year. Now how’s about we blow this dump?”
 At that moment, Frank came over and put a pair of pink electric clippers in front of Wolfgang.
 “From Angelica. She said she can get a much nicer pair with your money, and that you could use ‘em. She’s never seen a bush so hairy that she couldn’t find it!”

About the Author:

Andrew Punzo lives near Newark, New Jersey where he attends law school. His short fiction has appeared in the anthology *Mindscapes Unimagined* (2018), online in *Theme of Absence*, and will appear in the anthology *Crypt Gnats: Horror You’ve Been Itching to Read* in the spring of 2019. Andrew is an avid outdoorsman and enjoys reading a wide variety of fiction.

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I wake up, once again alone. Always alone. There is no light here, just four iron walls and my bed. I don't like to complain though, because He gets angry.

I try to move to my left, but the shackles bound to my wrists prevent me from doing so as they cut further into my skin. He tightened them too hard this time. My mouth is dry as I swallow whatever saliva I have left. The smell of meat fills my nostrils, my stomach growls and churns deep inside; the organs pulsate, hoping for any sign of food. I instinctively try to reach for my stomach, forgetting the shackles. A small hoarse yelp leaves my mouth into the cold, damp air, disappearing into the darkness. A warm liquid seeps down my arm as the metal around my wrist sinks further, leaving a gouge. It stings, but I bite my tongue, hard. I cannot let him hear me.

It's then that I hear it, the familiar sound of metal scraping and grinding from the other side of the wall. I lean towards the sound and shut my eyes. To this day, I don't know what that sound is, but it always occurs at the same time, before lunch. When I ask him about it, he tells me it's a machine that generates electricity and the sound is from the cogs turning.

My ears throb to the clashes of metal. If Tommy were here, he would put his hands over my ears, blocking out the sound. Recently, I have had to face the sounds alone. Although today I hear a sound I have never heard before. Somebody screams, the metal keeps grinding, the sounds ring in my ear of the high pitched scream over the low rusty metal scrapes. Is it Him? I strain my ears to find out who the scream is coming from. Is it Him? No, He has a much deeper voice. This scream comes from someone much younger.

All of a sudden, the screaming stops. The cogs stop turning. Silence. I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath up until this moment and let a gush of air out of my lungs as I steady my heart.

The slide on the right side of the wall screeches open, startled, I turn towards the wall. A bright blue eye stares through a hole in the wall. He's here. A tray slides through the bottom of the door. The thick door heaves open; an icy draft of air washes over my skin, my hairs stand on end. Heavy footsteps approach me; the vibrations pulsate through the floor. He's in front of me. The smell of iron is overwhelming, I stifle a gag.

He laughs, the ruckus sound echoes, striking the walls one by one, each one more tormenting than the last. It throws off my senses. His musty breath warms my skin as he loosens the irons. My arms fall limply down to my sides, my strength fades. He catches me; his arms grip my sides tightly. I can't move. Tears involuntarily run down my face, to escape all of the memories I wish I could forget. I wince as his stubby, clammy fingers brush my cheeks, with the lightest of touches. "Don't cry, only ugly girls cry."

I press my lips together until they feel numb, and blink furiously. "I don't care."

He constricts my face together with his hand, his strength unmatched to my own and jerks my head upwards. His lips rest on my ear, his words send uncomfortable ripples all over my skin. "Eat."

He suddenly releases his grip, my jaw aches from where he held me. I shake away the thoughts trying to take over my brain, like maggots eating away at my soul until there is nothing left, but a rotten apple core. I stare down at the tray in front of me, the meat has gone cold. I grip hold of my sides, shocked at how quickly the flesh has worn away from my bones.

His presence lingers at the edge of the room, watching me as I devour the plate of food, forcing large chunks of meat into my mouth. Barbecue sauce is smeared all over my mouth as I lick the tray clean. I push the tray in his corner of the room, trying to maintain the distance between us. I can feel him grinning. "Well done, you certainly were a hungry girl."

I was so ravenous I completely forgot about the scream. Now seems like as good a time as any to investigate while he is in a good mood. "Who was that who screamed?"

He hesitates before answering, "Nobody screamed. You heard the machine."

I know what I heard, I've screamed enough times to know what a scream sounds like. After being in darkness for so long, my hearing is strong. Although I know not to push Him further, as He doesn't like being wrong, and I still have questions. I need to see Tommy. He'll know what to do. "Where is Tommy?" My insides immediately jerk as my organs retreat inside myself. I should not have asked that. I hold my breath almost wishing he hadn't heard me. The thing about darkness is you can't be seen, but you are simultaneously exposed. There is nowhere to hide.

He sneers at the mention of Tommy's name. He never seemed to like my brother much. He starts to walk towards me. "You miss him, don't you?"

He reaches me and crouches so that his face is in line with mine. He holds my face in his rough hand.

I hold my breath, and mutter, "Yes."

He sighs, "Wrong answer."

He clenches my face harder in his hand, making my jaw ache. He asks again, this time spitting the words at me while clenching his teeth. "Do you want to see Tommy?"

I tense my fists as hard as I can so that my nails dig into my skin. I will be strong for Tommy. "Yes."

His hand lowers to my throat and rests there lightly for a moment. His voice breaks, is He...sad? "I will ask you one more time."

With a new found confidence, I gather up all my strength. I am not bound by bonds and I am going to see Tommy. I use all of my force to push in front of me, driving my fists into his chest. Though his strength is far greater than my own, and my fists do nothing except hit hard flesh. It's as if I had merely touched him.

He cackles and his hand around my neck tightens, my throat closes up. Instinctively I claw at his hands, struggling to unclasp them. I try to scream, but only air escapes. The more I move, the harder he presses. My head feels dizzy and I lose energy. My body goes limp.

He whispers in my ear, "Don't worry princess, you'll see him soon."

I must have fallen asleep from the lack of energy and open my eyes, still sitting on the floor where he left me. The door is shut, He has gone. I touch my neck, it feels sore. I whimper as I swallow, and it feels like I'm swallowing a hard ball down my throat. I look at my hands, they're not bound. Excited, I head for the door. My legs shake as I stand; I focus on resting one foot flat on the icy floor. Then I lift the other, like a robotic doll I gradually make it to the other side, concentrating on moving one leg at a time. I reach my arms out in front of me until they reach the wall. It is textured and filthy, creating a thick film of dust and dirt on my fingers. I scrape my fingers across the wall until the wall changes to being smooth and cold. I find a metal bar and push down on it firmly.

I heave open the door, hoping to see light, but I am still surrounded by darkness. I fumble down along a narrow corridor. Something wet drips from above onto my back and trickles down the bumps of my spine. The walls are made of the same material as that in my room. The air is cloying and humid, I swipe my soggy hair from my forehead. I continue down the corridor, tiptoeing as I go, in fear that I might see Him. For once I am thankful of the dark, for there is nowhere for me to turn, except forwards. As I continue, a pungent smell of rancid flesh fills my nostrils. Gagging, I lean against the wall and cover my mouth with my hand, but the smell is too strong. Trying not to puke I keep going until the wall changes direction.

Somewhere to the left of me is muffled crying. I freeze. I hold back from shouting his name in fear of being heard. I reach my hand to the left of me, the texture has changed, and it's smooth and cold, just like my door. I press my ear to it, and I hear sobs. "Tommy? Is that you?" The crying stops. For a while I stand there, my heart hammers into my chest.

Manacles rattle from behind the door, and a little girl's voice answers, "No." My heart drops; I so hoped it had been him. Nevertheless, I find the handle and try to push the door. It doesn't budge. He must have locked this one, but my own one hadn't been locked.

I call out to the girl, "I'm going to find my brother, and then I'll come get you."

I push on, until I see streaks of pale white light coming down from the roof. I run towards the light. The wall stops at a dead-end. I look up towards the ceiling where the light streaks through a metal grate. Rusty steps run down the wall underneath it. I cling on to each step, not caring about the sharp edges that carve into my palms and soles. I can almost smell the air. I push the grate from above my head, and lunge outside, my body falling onto muddy wet grass. I let it soak into my skin, healing my wounds. I feel exhausted as I breathe in the cool night air.

It's eerily quiet out here. From my memory, outside was supposed to be noisy, rustling leaves, birds, but here there's nothing, and I still haven't found Tommy. I roll over onto my back and look up at the moon shining above me; letting its beauty flood over me. The curved edges blur into one as water fills my eyes. I reach my hand up to the sky as if to touch it.

I sit up towards where I came from, facing the machine. Except, there's not just one machine, there's a dozen. They cover the expanse of the grass and surrounding it are numerous trees. I'd never seen the outside before. There are no cogs, only metal grates, massive butchering machines. The metal teeth glint in the moonlight; all of them grinning at me, letting me know I am next. I have only one thought, Tommy.

Suddenly, a black figure appears next to one of the machines, and then another and another until there are multiples of them surrounding the area. I immediately get up, turn around and run. All around me are spindly thin trees, forming shadows where the silver light can't touch. I have no idea where I am running to, or what I am running from. Black shadows fill the area around me; I don't look towards them, and only focus on what is ahead of me.

Figures stand in front of me; I have no choice but to change direction and head towards my left, interweaving between the trees as I let the leaves scratch and claw at my face and arms. I look up and I'm back where I started.

That's when I see Him. I freeze, there's nowhere I can run to. If I move he can see me, if I run, he can see me. His huge arms are carrying someone from out of the grate. He's shorter than I pictured him to be. As he walks closer in my direction, I see that the limp body in his arms is me. His bright blue eyes shine even from this distance, staring right through me. None of this makes any sense, I escaped. I'm here. He heads towards the machines with the girl, me, my body. I want to run over to him, to stop him, but my feet won't move.

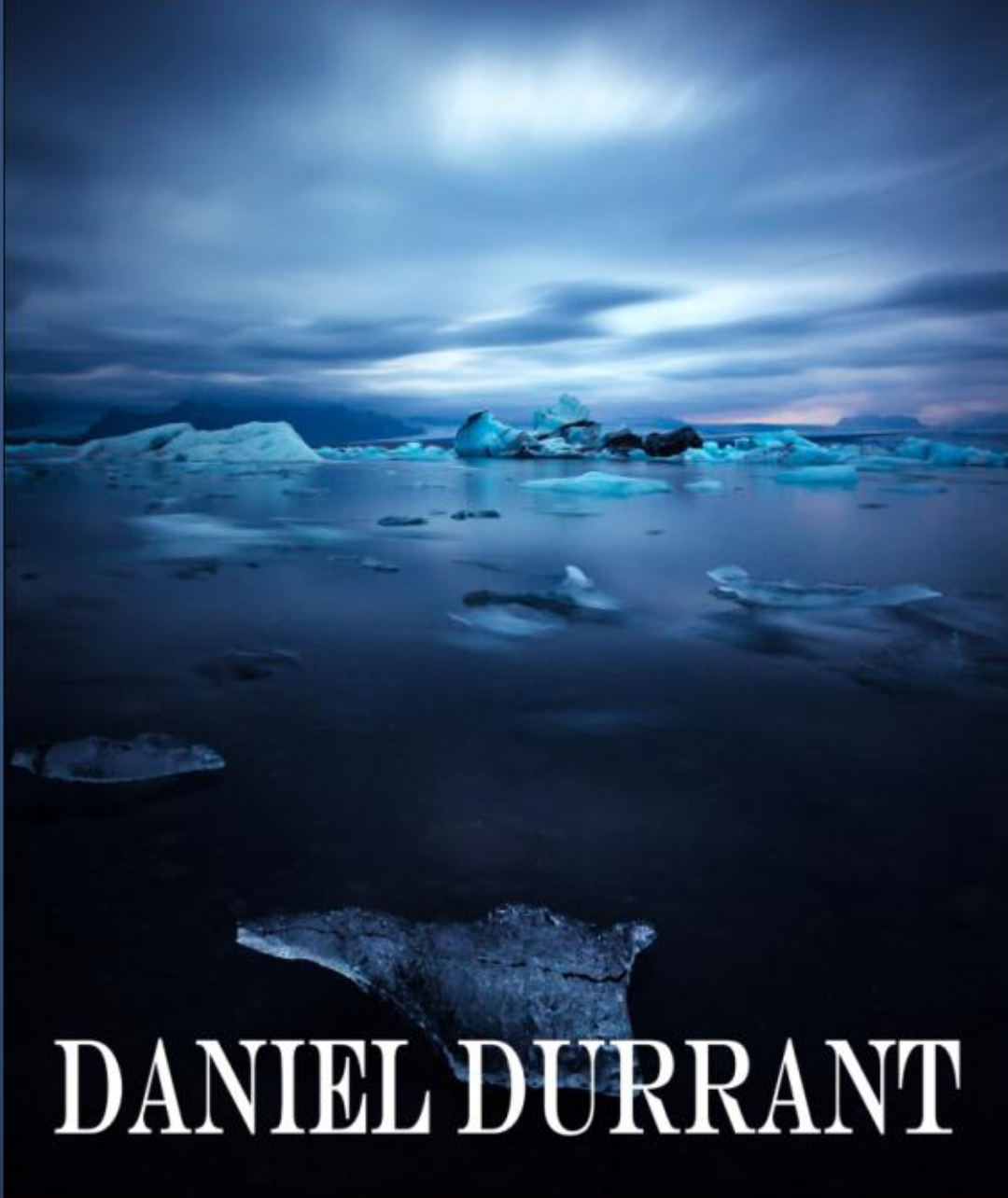
The machines grind. I wince at the piercing sound. The shadow figures are now all around me. The shadow figure on my right blocks my ears, and I look closer into its faceless void, only just noticing its eyes. They're a faded green, filled with sadness. Tommy's eyes. I found him.

About the Author:

Maria McCallion is twenty-one years old and resides in West Sussex, England. As a young child Maria made up elaborate stories in her head, which progressed to her writing short stories. Maria is currently in her final year of studying Creative and Professional Writing at Bangor University, and is going on to study a Masters in Media and Communications in London.

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CLIMATE CHANGE



DANIEL DURRANT

Available on Amazon !

Martin was clearing the attic of his dad's life—and wishing God would toss out what lingered inside the old bastard—when he opened the box. Jumbled, cobweb-coated human heads lay roll-eyed and gape-mouthed; their necks dangled shriveled roots. After his heart calmed, Martin descended the collapsible steps and walked to the living room. His dad hadn't moved, still planted in the recliner's groove.

"Why do you have a box of prop heads?"

His dad grunted.

Martin perched on the couch, waiting. Nothing. Of course not: an explanation would be considerate, human. No wonder his mom split and his sister was MIA. Who could deal with him? Beginning tomorrow, a corrupt—he hoped—nursing home. After that, the only reason to fly back here would be arranging the funeral. Martin leaned back, weary now he wasn't moving.

His dad turned. "I'm curious...always curious," the voice rasped, "why you all never fight? Take you: You cowed under, then ran off."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Another lull, filled with the old man's metronome rasping. "A fight keeps you going...but you, you quit: the effort, the responsibility—all of it. Left your sister. Let me win."

Martin draped his head over the couch back and allowed himself to entertain the tempting efficiency of burning the house down with the old man inside. He shut his eyes. No, he'd get through this, go back to Atlanta.

He woke when something stringy and wet flopped over his face. His father loomed above: Gashes gilled the man's neck; the edges, like cut dandelions, oozed a white paste that coated the tangled threads his father was clawing out. Each layer the old man wrapped onto Martin's head bled a rapid exhaustion that penetrated to the bones. Martin vomited a crushed sigh as his organs and torso collapsed. His arms and legs withered. His head tumbled to the cushions.

His father cradled him and started walking. Martin looked up at the ceiling gliding past, at an interrupting lintel followed by dusty, insect-specked light covers. His father's lacerations closed and the skin grew smoother, more elastic and flushed. Black started careening through the man's greyed hair like jubilant melanoma. The attic bounced closer with each the creak on the steps. Finally, Martin found the will to scream.

"Shut up, boy."

His father dropped him into the box, pulled out a handkerchief, and started wiping his neck. "Me, I'm fighting death. Won't go quiet. Minute I don't, I'm done." He bent over the box. "Who's getting put away now?"

Four dark rectangles, like falling blocks, shut out the light. Twine rasped against cardboard.

"Stay perfectly still," someone hissed.

"Don't make him angry," his sister whispered.

Martin waited, silent. He had time to think before his father opened the box again. Then what? Martin couldn't close his eyes, but lulled by the gentle breaths around him, he relaxed. He'd think clearer if he slept.

About the Author:

Ken Hueler teaches kung fu in the San Francisco Bay Area and, with fellow members of the Horror Writer's Association's local chapter, gets up to all sorts of adventures (only some involving margaritas). His work has appeared in *Weirdbook*, *Stupefying Stories*, *Black Petals*, and *Strangely Funny III*. He will be appearing in the charity anthology, *Tales for the Camp Fire* in May 2019.

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Website: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/18250994.Ken_Hueler

We made our home just after marriage, in a small stone cottage, at the road's crossing, just outside the village of Keeper Stop. Past our short iron gate, there was space enough for the garden that my wife, Elizabeth, tended daily. A quaint stone path led to a sturdy door, the path laid by my own hand. Though modest, we'd made our home comfortable for the two of us. In the main room, we had a few seats before the hearth and stove. We hung three paintings, given by an aunt or cousin on our wedding day a year past. Our bed was placed in the first of two smaller rooms. The second, it was our sanctuary.

Within our sanctuary sitting room, a small table stood near the one window. We'd sit beside it, share tea, and discuss the day as the sun fell. While the moon rose, she'd work her fabrics and thread wearing her linen evening gown. A vision of beauty on any occasion. And I, relaxed down to shirt and trousers, would relay to her any news of interest, sometimes rumor, as she worked with a smile, listening. A single candle, wide and tall, sat upon the table between us and lit our time of sharing. We'd been gifted a fine life and cozy home that we cherished completely. And yes, we had our love.

Around us though, all was not so hopeful, news of devious fevers within the large cities had reached our village. Tales of sickness, death, and fear. People began to travel away from largely populated, to the countryside areas. An escape, refuge from violent illnesses reportedly spreading like wild fires. Extended family and friends of long past had come to our village, among others, to stay. To wait out any potential epidemic in rural safety.

One specific late fall morning, clear and crisp cold, I took to the village with my dear Elizabeth. The distance from our small stone cottage at the roads crossing to the village was short, but her company a joy. Before moving on to our respective tasks, we shared a gentile kiss and tender embrace while wishing each other well. A fine way to begin the day. We parted ways at my office, she to market while I began my day delivering post, letters, and parcels in and around Keeper Stop.

On my rounds, with contact to so many people, exposure to current events was a constant. No matter that the information only questionably reliable. However, being a well traveled topic, rumor informed that some had fallen quite ill. I had a feeling of fatigue myself, but never confessed to any but my Elizabeth. She herself had mentioned a touch of wariness just that morning. We'd suggested the cause was a changing of seasons, the colder nights and days taking a toll. Those within and around the village were on an edge. There were fewer persons walking the street, preferring to stay inside, those who did venture out gave space in passing, covered mouths, and took care not to touch. All were alert to signs of sickness, therefore, I did not betray my own concerns for myself and my wife.

I finished deliveries a bit later than I preferred, returned to the office to log the day and prepare for the next. There was more correspondence this day than average, with even more sure to come in the morning, a result that dastardly fever spreading. So much fear. I myself was in no way immune to a scare, slow dread taking hold. My efforts felt quite important at that, I was doing good deeds in keeping families and others in need connected. I finished with the ledger, gathered my round top cap and long coat, I started the walk home knowing my Elizabeth would be waiting.

I moved past the closed market and beyond darkened homes. At the edge of the village, I could see the stars and the moon at half creeping up in the distance. I made my way along the road to the point where it crossed another and I'd find our home. As I approached in the moonlight, a figure stood at the cross road. A head smaller than I, hair of chestnut and curls tied up hastily. My Elizabeth was waiting outside in the cold night.

"Oh dear William." She said in a fragile voice as she noticed my arrival. "I could not wait."

My initial worry grew, she was in just her bed gown and bare of foot. "Love, why are you out in this chill." I rushed to her.

"I needed to know you were coming home." Her statement was pleading. "There is gossip of fevers and even death. Your contact with so many, I feared you'd be taken, never returning."

In general, she was playful with shades of rationality, her current state a departure. "I am here now love. We must get you inside, we shall take our tea and warm ourselves. We can discuss your worries inside."

"Yes my dear, inside." I could see the moonlight glittering in her dark eyes, tears were beginning to form.

I took her small, pale hand. It was warm, very warm. My own concern growing in that moment. The thought, no, she must be feeling the cold. Simple as that. We made our way, I opened the iron gate and we tread the stone walk through the garden to our home. The door was still ajar. We entered.

She stood for a moment, her face a mask of worry and confusion. "William, I must tell you I do not feel well."

"Just some good rest, a warm cup." I did my best to not reveal my uncertainty, to reassure her as much as myself. "Let us get you to the bed, we shall take our tea there."

She looked as much through me as at me, "Yes, my sweet, I'd like that."

I led her to and helped her settle in bed, covered her gently with our blankets. Though warm to the touch, she shivered quite noticeably. With her situated, I stoked the small stove to flame and set a kettle to boil. I prepared the small pot for tea and readied the cups. While waiting for the kettle, I moved my chair to bedside, our table with the tall candle as well. She looked fragile yet still displayed a sweet smile.

I returned with hot tea, took my seat, and set a match to light the candle. "Are you restful now my Elizabeth?"

She sat herself up a bit, taking her cup carefully, gently in both hands, "Yes love, I believe so." She took a shaky sip, "I pray whatever has come over me passes with haste."

"As do I, as do I," I could only look at her, try not to show the depth of my worry. "A good rest and ease of day will do you wonders. Tell me, had you a meal today?"

She gave this more consideration than likely needed, "I did not. Right now though, your love and your care. Those are all I need for my fill." She made effort to gift me a grin and a wink.

"Even so, come morning, I will make sure you have something proper." The last I spoke with a sigh.

No sooner had I spoken, a loud pounding came on the door. Elizabeth startled, nearly spilling her tea. I set my own cup on the table and stood. Wondering who could be calling at this hour, "I will see to our visitor."

I opened the door to see an older man, very familiar to me, meeting me eye to eye. His white hair wild atop his head, fine suit in slight disorder, and a hand filled with papers. The town doctor. Had someone seen Elizabeth out earlier and sent for him? "Doctor Giles, what an unexpected visit."

"There's not time for pleasantries William. My visit is urgent." He spoke clearly and directly, more so than his usual gentile, calm demeanor.

"Please come in, would you like a tea." I stepped aside to allow him entry.

He strode past me toward the warm stove, handing over the papers as he passed, "It's the fever William, it's been quiet, but some have taken ill, seriously so, and some taken completely. This I tell you truthfully." He rubbed his hands over the heat, "Everyone must be told, immediately. I need your help."

"Doctor can this not wait for the morning?" I righted the papers and began to read a bit. They were all the same, hastily copied in his hand, stating the urgency of the fever. There were preventative measures, explanations, and symptoms to be wary of. I could read no further, all I could think of was Elizabeth. Her shaking, the warmth of her flesh and the uncharacteristic behaviors. True fear gripped me then.

"I prefer not, thus my coming here now at such an hour." He looked at me most seriously. "William, you either know or at very least are aware of everyone in and around the village. This information must spread at pace, hopefully, faster than the fever. I need you to deliver or post these for everyone, particularly anyone who will pass the information on. The baker and banker or shopkeepers. Anyone who can and will tell others in greater numbers."

I thought a moment, "The local busybodies and gossips would also be sure spread these words. But, Doctor, is there no other?"

"I thought you first, most trustworthy, and can effect with haste." He said almost at a beg.

I hesitated, "I must tell you, it's Elizabeth, Doctor Giles. She is not feeling well and I pause to be away this night. I'd truly rather not leave her alone."

"Shall I look in on her now? To set your mind at ease." He offered with only genuine intent.

I looked down at the papers, all things people would need to know. The traits of fever spinning in my mind. A tear escaped, "Please, thank you, I truly think it is possible she..." I just could not finish the statement.

"Oh dear boy, William, this illness has no sway on me. If that is the case at all." He reassured, "I have been, and will be caring for many in the time to come, I am happy to stay until you return, do what I can for her as well."

"I am thankful for it, Sir. I will do as you ask, and with speed. I do recognize the importance." I found my coat and hat on their pegs, made right my necktie should I encounter anyone out. "First, I'll just say a good-bye to Elizabeth. Help yourself to the tea."

I went to the bedside gathering myself, candle still dancing with flame, the light on her face dancing. "I heard it all my love. You must go, go quickly, and come back to me."

"I will dear," I spoke softly, and kissed her forehead. "I'll return and we shall have our meal. A promise, to share a proper meal with you in good health. He is going to stay until I return, look in on you."

Though I'd left Elizabeth in the care of Doctor Giles, I delivered or posted publicly his notices of urgency all around Keeper Stop as quickly as I could manage. To be sure, his words of caution and action should be made known to all as the new day began, so all could take proper action. Before returning home, I posted one last at my courier's office then started my route back to our cottage. My mind racing with thoughts of Elizabeth and how frail she looked. I hardly even noticed the midnight bell ring.

As I came within sight of the crossing roads, half-moon lighting my way, I could not help but slow a step. The fear I had was now a full terror. I made my way through the gate, through the garden, across the walking stones, and in through the door. Doctor Giles was waiting for me.

He spoke the moment our eyes met, "Son, she did not last." He said quietly.

I was frozen, blank. I felt heat of fire and cold of ice within. My mind a fogged mess of everything and nothing a mind can conjure. The Doctor rested his hand on my shoulder. I brushed it aside and went back out the doorway. I stared at that half-moon pleading with myself, gathering myself, before returning to see my love.

In the days after, I set her affairs in order, and to a degree my own. I kept to my duties as courier now without fear of people or places to have been touched with fever. It had, honestly, spread among the villagers quite widely. I didn't see that it was a matter to me. I cleared out our home, all except for the small table, large candle, and my chair. I felt it wrong to remove those things. Elizabeth's chair, I'd placed in the garden, her place of joy. I could not be rid of the home, I also could not live there without her. I took to staying in the room above my office. Resigned to do my duty and visit the house evenings, light the candle, and sit speaking as if she could hear. I just could not sleep or wake there without her.

My visits to the cottage were few before the fever caught me as well. I fell ill, though I would imagine some noticed long before I could admit it to myself. People began to avoid my path as I pressed on working, greetings and condolences were fewer and fewer. Though, I hardly noticed at all from my grief.

I woke on my last night, that fire heat in my core, that ice cold on my flesh. I did not cry out though, not for help or from the pain. I had to strain opening my eyes so that I could look out my window. The moon did shine on me that night, not full, only half. I remembered my Elizabeth, I was still not ready to say a final good-bye to her, my love. It was time for me though.

"My love, my Elizabeth, I shall see you soon. We'll have our meal at last." With that said, I allowed my mind to go black. Not the dark of sleep, something without comparable depth. A final absence of thought or emotion. I knew, I was at my end drifting into that void.

That was not my end.

Wake I did, feeling differently, disoriented. My mind a frosted confusion. I was ravenous, such hunger. Everything felt wrong, I was already standing. Something nagged at me through haze, as if called, called home. I'd made a promise.

And, I was so very hungry.

About the Author: James Denier has always been drawn to the slightly spooky. Living in the Northwest United States, he feels quite fortunate for his collected experiences. Many of which inspire his stories and poetry.

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The Holding | *Simon Lee-Price*

She remembered waking up throughout the night from bad dreams, and shivering in a draft. Each time, her new husband squeezed her hand, his grip strong, anchoring. When the sun rose he had already departed. At breakfast, she overheard the servants whispering that he had ridden away on urgent business in the small hours. Puzzled, she went out to garden with her book. But instead of reading, she stared up at the house. She was certain the solitary grey oak had moved closer to corner tower. The twigs of one branch, stretching like fingers, started to tap her bedroom window.

Homesick | *Simon Lee-Price*

She would get used to the moonless nights and the static brooding oceans. She could even tolerate the roar of the nuclear blasters, fired in relay to offset the wobble. Ten years defending mines on the outer colonies had freed her of sentimentality. But Earth ought to be home. She climbed the stairs to her old room in the attic and poked her head through the smashed skylight. The melted-plastic sky filtered the sun to a pale smudge. She removed her helmet and mask. The worst was the smell, pink and sweet, produced by the ore in the decontamination machines.

Neglected | *Simon Lee-Price*

Every Christmas Eve the three children came to collect their gifts. Custom required one gift for each child: something wooden, something stone and something living. He laid the gifts before the hearth and waited across the room. As midnight struck, the children wriggled out of the patterns in the wallpaper. His breath caught in his throat. There were four of them this year. They picked up the doll and the necklace and the tethered puppy, and then they all stared at him. The boy with the empty hands was much bigger than the others. "And something to eat," he said.

About the Author:

Simon Lee-Price lives and writes in the UK. His strange fiction has appeared in *The Breakroom Stories*, *Five:2:One*, *Sirens Call* and in anthologies *Breathless*, *The Second Corona Book of Horror Stories*, and *Hidden Histories*.

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It's time to let the monsters loose...



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

When I picked up the phone, I heard my mother screaming.

"Hey Momma's Boy! Are you ready to get in the car now?"

"Jim! Jim! J-"

And then my mother's throat exploded into a wailing scream.

As if her skin was being pierced by knives.

As if her limbs were being chopped off her body.

"Don't you want to save her, Momma's Boy? Come on, let's go for a ride. You can rescue her!"

"Jim! Help!"

My car sat in the parking lot, waiting to kill me.

I asked Tara what she was doing to my mother.

Tara laughed, and then my mother screamed.

I met Tara in 2016.

I saw her at a bar, her with her long black hair and shiny blue eyes.

I approached her, and she told me all sorts of crazy things:

Like that I looked like an attractive version of her father.

How when she told her mother she wanted to be an actress, her mother had to be hospitalized.

And that neither her mother nor her father lived into their forties.

Looking back, I realize I should have run.

But at that time, I thought she was just a strange girl with a strange family.

And I took her home.

"Jim! Help me! Jim!"

"Momma's Boy, your mother needs you. Get in the car! Don't you love her?"

Momma's Boy, ever since Tara died, she has called me Momma's Boy.

Not Jim.

Not babe.

Momma's Boy.

I'm not sure why.

Maybe it's because I have a picture of my mother in my apartment.

Maybe it's because my mother tried to call me once while Tara and I were having sex.

I don't know.

"Jim! Please! Help!"

I love my mother.

"You know what you need to do, Momma's Boy."

Get in the car.

Die.

I realized Tara was insane in 2017.

For a year, Tara and I would go to restaurants, movies, parks, and we would always have sex at my apartment.

Never her apartment, always my apartment.

I had never even seen her place before.

But on our one-year anniversary, she gave me her address.

She told me to come to her apartment at nine-o'clock at night.

She said there was something she needed to ask me.

I had no idea what to expect, but I sensed that something was wrong.

On the drive to her apartment, my hands shivered and my teeth chattered.

I did not feel as though I was driving to my girlfriend's apartment.

I felt as though I was driving to the scene of a crime.

A murder.

My murder.

And when I reached Tara's door, she opened it before I could knock.
She wore a long black dress, and make-up covered her smiling face.
She handed me a shot glass after I stepped inside, but she told me I couldn't drink it until after I saw her
parents.

I froze.

Her parents?

Her parents who had not lived into their forties?

Her parents?

My hands were drenched in sweat.

I nearly dropped my drink.

But Tara, still smiling, took my hand, and led me to her room.

And the moment I entered, I released a sigh of relief.

There were no dead bodies in the room, only a bed, paintings, and a dresser.

I looked above the bed, and I saw a picture of a young Tara sitting beside an older man and woman.

Her parents.

Tara walked to the side of the bed, pointed at the picture, and asked: "Do you love me?"

I said I did.

She said: "I love you too. My parents also loved each other. That's why they died together. Isn't that
romantic?"

I looked at the shaking shot glass in my hand.

I told her I didn't understand.

She said: "When people love each other, they are willing to die for each other. But they're really still alive,
because their souls are eternal. Everyone in my family is dead, because everyone in my family is in love. They can
live happily together for eternity. Isn't that beautiful?"

Tara stepped away from the bed, grabbed a shot glass off the dresser, and held my hand.

I asked what was in my drink.

She said: "Love."

And I ran!

I dropped the shot glass and I ran out of the room, out of the apartment, down the stairs, towards the
parking lot.

And behind me, I could hear Tara screaming.

Saying that she needed me.

Saying that I needed her.

Saying that we needed each other.

And when I reached my car and put my hand on the door, I heard the loudest, most terrifying scream I had
ever heard.

It was the scream of a woman being tortured by electricity.

The scream of a woman witnessing the murder of her best friend.

I turned around, and I saw Tara collapsed on the ground.

I froze, not knowing what to do.

My phone was dead.

I couldn't call an ambulance.

But the nearest hospital was only a couple of miles away.

I ran to Tara and shook her shoulder.

She was still breathing, but she neither moved nor made a sound.

I sighed, looked at my car, and decided what to do.

I picked Tara up, put her in the back seat, and began to drive her to the hospital.

I refused to make a sound as I drove down the interstate.

But I could not stop myself from thinking.

From thinking that Tara wanted us to die.

From thinking that I would never allow myself to see her again.

I had just passed a billboard showing a policeman when I looked behind me to make sure Tara was still asleep.

But the moment I did this, Tara woke up, and she grabbed the wheel.

"Jim! Jim!"

I survived the wreck.

"Momma's Boy get in the car. I know it's not the same, but it's close enough. We need to be together."

Tara did not.

In 2019, I bought a new car.

And in 2019, I heard her voice, Tara's voice, over the phone, with the first of countless threats to kill my mother.

"Jim!"

But now, they were no longer threats.

"Jim doesn't love you anymore. But he loves me. Don't you Momma's Boy?"

My car sat in the parking lot, waiting to kill me.

"But if he did love you, he would rescue you."

"Jim!"

I loved Tara once.

But I will always love my mother.

"Jim! Help!"

I opened my apartment door, walked down to the parking lot, and saw Tara sitting in the driver's seat of my car.

"Get in," she said. "And don't buckle your seatbelt."

Now, Tara and I are speeding down the interstate.

"Where's my mother?" I ask.

And Tara is smiling.

"Where's my mother?" I ask again.

And Tara is laughing.

"Your mother? 'Jim! Help! Jim!'"

It's my mother's voice.

An actress.

When Tara was younger, she told her mother she wanted to be an actress.

Oh God!

I can see the billboard!

And Tara's laughing, screaming, turning the wheel, and...

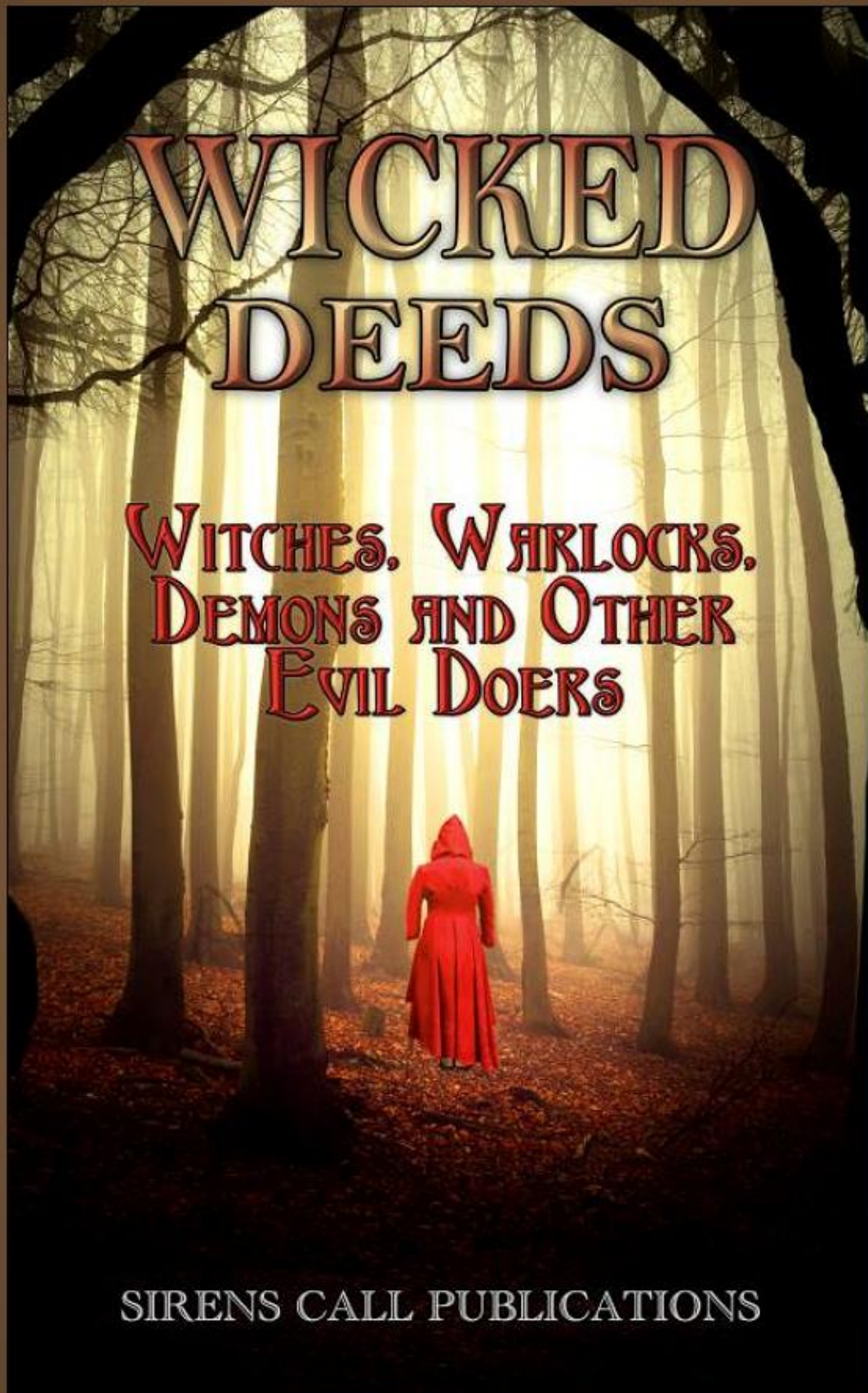
About the Author:

A.R. Farley fell in love with words at the age of seventeen, and he has since then developed a passion for writing and stories. His two favorite current writers are Cassandra Khaw and Kristi DeMeester. He has previously appeared in Sirens Call Publications.

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A collection of tales with ill intent...



Available on Amazon

I swear we made it up. No one will believe it now, but that's how it began, as simply as a couple kids playing make-believe. Deke and I would hang around the bar just off the university campus, drinking what we could scrape up enough money to buy, hopelessly trying to hit on women. In that, at least, Deke had something going for him well before everything got out of hand. Looking back on it now, I can see the first inklings of what was to come, that charisma he'd use to talk girls into dropping their guard, then their clothes, all for little more than sport. Admittedly, he was the better looking between the two of us, but there was something there, a *je ne sais quoi* Deke possessed that I didn't. But a little charm didn't mean he had to go reinventing himself as the New Multiversal Messiah, even if that was how it innocently began.

I can't remember which one of us first came up with the idea of *The Word*, but I do remember the night it came into being. We were at the bar, in the midst of a lager-fueled haze when a television news item came on about a big-wig mega-preacher who'd been indicted for fleecing his flock for millions of their devoted dollars. Just seeing the man's smugness as he gave a legally-forced apology made me boil.

"It's disgusting," I said. "Abusing the faith and goodwill of others like that."

Deke laughed. "You can't blame the guy for seeing an opportunity and taking it, Kurt. It's dog-eat-dog out there. If you stand in line for your turn, you might not get one." He grew serious then. "Look, all belief systems are essentially the same. A message of hope intertwined with a message of doom. Anyone can come up with some variation of it. No divine inspiration required."

I laughed. "That's beyond cynical, even for you."

"Cynical, but *true*." Deke took a sip of beer. "All it takes is someone with a vision. And if you get enough people to believe in that vision it becomes irrelevant whether there's someone upstairs telling you what to say or not. Then it's all money, power, women and sex. *Lots* of sex." He grinned. "Anyone could do it."

And that was the seed of it right there. *Anyone could do it*. So, we did it. Not overnight, of course. No, it took a while to write *The Word*. That's what Deke called our neophyte religion's holy text. *The Word*. In truth it was a hodge-podge of every faith we could think of—a little fundamentalist dogma, some Hindu-chakra-karma chameleon flair, a dash of obscure occult mumbo-jumbo for good measure—all pulsed in an esoteric blender. The result was such a joke we were sure nobody would buy into it. But of course, we were wrong.

Deke started pushing *The Word*, spreading our invented inspiration passage by passage on social media, pretending we were translating some lost text from an ancient people we'd completely fabricated. It was ludicrous, but it wasn't long before we had our own promotional website that started getting serious traffic, and it was around that time that Deke started acting like the guru he'd always wanted to be. With some of the profits we made selling *The Word* we bought a small farm near San Jose that became ground zero for the Dawning of the New Age of Humanity, complete with a commune stocked with the essentials to support the spiritual growth of our first few college-age converts: free-flowing booze, weed, women and sex. Lots and lots of sex.

There was a snowball effect after that. *The Word* became an international bestseller, and soon the commune turned into a mansion, then two. Then a yacht and private plane, tailored suits and trips to exotic locales. Audiences packed convention halls, auditoriums—stadiums, even—just to hear us speak. We constructed a sleek, high-tech temple just to accommodate the clamoring, weeping masses who'd make the pilgrimage to catch a glimpse of Deke, reciting verses we'd laughingly cut-and-pasted together, secure in their belief that they had a straight line to an Other World that didn't exist. Suddenly, Deke was Elvis, The Beatles, Mohammed and the pope all at once, and he reveled every minute in his role as Twenty-First Century Savior.

It wasn't until I saw online reports about earthquakes in Tokyo that I wondered what we'd done. I'd been so wrapped up in everything—well, wrapped up in getting laid as much as possible—that I didn't see the news until it was too late.

A message of hope intertwined with a message of doom. That was the basis of Deke's creed. We'd stolen bits of hope for *The Word*, and faked a bunch of the doom, too. Every religion had an apocalypse, so why not ours? Earthquakes in Asia. Oceans turning to blood. Crumbling cities smothered in radioactive smog. Nothing we hadn't cribbed from a hundred Godzilla movies. Until they started occurring, that is. Each one in its turn, and with every happening more and more people the world over turned to *The Word* to explain the mysterious events, to give them guidance in their time of tribulation.

Now there's half a million believers outside our temple walls, begging to be let in, pleading to get to the Other World before this one expires, with millions more around the globe praying for the same. And every second the sky

grows darker, and I can hear the locust-like gnashing from the tentacled beasts we dreamed up as they burrow from the crevices deep within the earth, intent on swallowing every last soul alive into their infinite darkness. And those people, bereft of hope, look to us for help, unknowing that there's no help to give, unknowing that we made it all up. I swear, we made it all up.

About the Author:

Exposed to the weird worlds of horror and science fiction as a boy, Damascus Mincemeyer was ruined for life. Now a writer and artist, he's had work published (or set to be) in *Bikers Vs The Undead*, *Psycho Holiday*, *Monsters Vs. Nazis* (books for which he also provided cover art), *Fire: Demons, Dragons and Djinn*, *Hell's Empire*, *Crash Code*, *Gallows Hill*, *StoryHack* and the *Sirens Call*.

Amazon: [Damascus Mincemeyer](#)

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Roses, Dandelions, Teardrops | Russell Hemmell

Antlers of roses, thorns of dandelions - the corpse is there, beauty in slumber.

I'm on the crime scene, but it's not the killer I'm after. It's the crowd -sick humanity excited by violence. Hungry eyes and lustful stares, they can't get enough of death in theatres and upset dreams.

They want it live.

I let them gather around like flying shimmering pistils and, made invisible by my lack of significance, I take eyes shot, their faces engraved in my cyborg receptors.

Until the moment they bleed too, victims and heroes - limelight's shooting stars for once in their life.

Prayer Beads for the God's Acre | Russell Hemmell

Herrnhut, 1732. We stayed up all night, the brothers and I, joint in prayers. The plague swept away the poorest of the village, and my Eve with them. Today, I carry more than rosary and torchlight.

"It's Resurrection Day, Hermann. If your faith is strong, Eve will rise, too. In spirit, brother."

Or you'll follow her -in flesh, brother. All of you, who let her die.

I lock the cemetery's gate.

Fire creeps up, igniting the wood bundles crowning the burial ground like prayer beads. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, guilty to the innocent –and mercy for no one.

About the Author:

Russell Hemmell is a French-Italian transplant in Scotland, passionate about astrophysics, history, and speculative fiction. Recent work in *Aurealis*, *The Grievous Angel*, *Third Flatiron*, and others.

Blog: [earthianhivemind.net](#)

Twitter: [@SPBianchini1948](#)

None who heard tell of Darkwater ever dared sail upon it.

As a boy, I'd played dangerously close to the shore. My mother had yanked me back, yelling, "Henry! Be careful!" A few years later, I was old enough to understand why she obsessed about what lay concealed beneath the water's beguiling surface.

Darkwater Town straggled alongside the black lake. It attracted the sort of middle-aged walkers and retired couples that balk at taking their fresh air abroad. Holidaymakers went on a daytrip to nearby Whiteacre Hall to gawp at its lunatic aristocracy. After that, they rambled up in the hills, ate too much and nagged about the lack of sailing boats for hire. There were always plenty of tourists around thanks to our railway station, Darkwater Halt, and the coach parking at the scenic points along the water's edge.

Many came. All felt the lure of the lake. Few left unchanged.

My parents, James and Camilla Flint, owned the Darkwater Spa Hotel. It was pretty much afternoon tea, beauty treatments or golf, and cocktails before dinner on the veranda. They charged a packet. My mother said that cheapskates should've plumped for packed lunches and greasy breakfasts at the Darkwater Arms.

Just after my sixth birthday, my father spearheaded a marketing campaign, after countless locals claimed to have seen a monster on the lake. TV was wild for the details and the story went viral on social media. A real monstrosity turned up a year later, unbidden and malevolent. It had been feasting on tourists ever since. We should've said something in the last decade, but we scraped a living as best we could this far north. Instead, we kept as silent as the grave about the fact the Darkwater Beast had been sent by the Master to torment us.

I thought of the lake as female. I often wondered, late at night as I lay staring at my ceiling, how she'd felt about the brute's arrival. Whether she'd welcomed the intruder. Whether he'd fought for authority. Whether the Master had needed to intervene.

The year I turned eight, a new spring moon drew the leviathan back to the lake's glassy expanse. The water's surface rippled with anticipation. He swam out of the ocean, overcoming its currents with ease. Witnesses spoke of a fifty-foot tail with a barb that could smash a boat in two. He'd grown in the year since we'd seen him last, but he still liked to lure his prey with a song.

I sensed the lurking presence of the predator in his lair as darkness fell. An ultrasound scan had shown that his den was a shaft hewn out of the rock at the southern tip of the lake. The seas had crashed against the stone for thousands of years and the waves had forced through a tiny passage. The behemoth probed this refuge. When he was ready, he would drift up from the depths and break the surface. He was always hungry for human souls and Darkwater Town was happy to oblige.

We hung red Chinese lanterns from strings lashed to the trees every spring. I went to light the candles as usual the next evening. Laughter and chatter from our guests drifted out across the water. I stared down at the lake, hoping that the fiend would leave without feasting. But his appetite was voracious. He skulked along the shoreline, the tip of a fin breaking the water every hundred yards or so. He surfaced by the hotel's jetty. His slender body was all muscle and those foot-long fangs were razor sharp.

The beast began to sing. He gently let the mesmeric notes drift up to the veranda on the wind. We called this music *The Luring*. We gave thanks to the Master that we were immune to it by holding an annual ceremony at the lakeshore. We made models of a young man and woman, set them alight and watched the flames claim the detritus.

A young boy was playing on the veranda. His parents, Lavender and Jeremy Boreman, were staring out at the lake. Timmy was rosy cheeked with straw blond hair. He wore red plastic boots and a raincoat to match. He looked up and turned towards the music, dropping his wooden train onto the flagstones. The gruesome devil used children as bait. Suggestible. Easily enticed. Inexplicably valued by the adults, so far as the aggressor was concerned.

Timmy toddled down towards the shore without looking back. His parents were engrossed in each other and didn't notice. He began walking down the stone steps towards the water. I started to call out a warning but my father's gaze quietened me. Our hotel had a huge mortgage, at a punitive rate of interest, to repay.

The song became louder. Other guests were starting to feel its soporific charm. The bar and the lobby began to empty as they filtered out onto the steps and down towards the lake. My mother came out onto the

veranda and motioned for my father and me to come back. She bolted the patio doors and we watched from inside.

The Boremans noticed Timmy was gone. They started searching for him. Lavender, bubbly and blond, wore a thin black full-length dinner dress. She rooted about under the bushes shouting her son's name. Jeremy, in his black suit, ran down to the park to look by the swings.

I glared at my mother. She shook her head. We'd been over this a million times.

"Timmy was right there!" Lavender shouted as her husband returned.

"Could he be back in his room?"

"If you made a proper effort with our boy, instead of just hanging out with your friends in the evening--"

"That's rich!"

"Me? I'm stuck at home all day with him."

Lavender spotted Timmy sleepwalking towards the water. She sprinted after him, her husband calling out to her to wait. They reached the shore together. They shook Timmy, but he was still asleep. Then they heard the lullaby for the first time. It wasn't for their boy. It was for them. The monster liked the taste of mature human souls.

The Boremans jostled to reach the waters first. Jeremy shoved Lavender to one side, dived in and gulped down the brackish water. She followed. The predator drank their souls, draining their vitality and leaving the shells of their bodies floating on the surface. They bobbed on the undulating current back to where Timmy waited. I felt like telling him Mummy and Daddy would never be the same again.

Other visitors came down to the lake. They started shouting and pointing at the bodies floating on the surface. Then they heard The Luring. One by one they fell silent and walked into the water.

The beast gorged himself during the night. Two coach parties had arrived this afternoon and our hotel was full. My parents kept the doors locked until it was over. When my father opened them, the white shadowy empty shells that had been adults passed back inside. Their stunned children followed. My parents did what they always did: my father behaved as if nothing was different to usual and my mother went to count the evening's takings from the bar.

Eventually, the behemoth was so replete with human souls that the evil overwhelmed him and I felt him slip away from Darkwater.

The next morning, a gold Rolls Royce drew up while we were serving breakfast.

"Good! They'll want the Monarch Suite. We'll charge double," Mother muttered as she supervised the maids taking platters of bacon, sausage and eggs into the dining room. People were always ravenous the morning after they'd had their souls sucked dry.

I followed my father back into the lobby. The clerk was dealing with the uniformed chauffeur.

"You the proprietor?"

My father nodded.

"Boss'll be over in a moment. Been some odd goin's on 'round here!"

My father turned white.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Course you do. What's more, the boss does, too. Chester Q. Baron recognizes a good film opp when he sees one!"

Mr. Baron waddled into the lobby, shouting at the chauffeur to bring his bags in from the car. He stared around as if he was scoping out the place for filming. He wore a white fur coat over his broad frame and kept smoothing his thinning blond hair back down.

My father muttered, "Henry, you'd better go fetch your mother."

As Mr. Baron waited for my mother to come, he lit a cigar and puffed on it. He stood staring at the guests milling around. After last night's encounter with the beast, most of them didn't notice him.

"Baby! What I *wouldn't* give to have an audience like this one! Talk about captive! A Hollywood film producer's dream!" Mr. Baron drawled.

My father took our visitor to one side.

"I don't know how you--"

"Your wife emailed me last week."

My father muttered evasively that we'd see about that. My mother came bustling up, all smiles. She didn't generally like Americans, but she was instinctively perceptive about how much money people had to spend. I could tell from the high blush on her cheeks that Chester Baron was a gift from the gods. She ushered him into the office and closed the door.

When I took the coffee in ten minutes later, my mother was flicking through what looked like a contract. She had a gold fountain pen in her hand.

"Mum," I murmured, "I don't think you should sign anything without consulting the rest of the town first."

"Nonsense, boy! Your ma can do what she wants. It's her hotel. What they gonna do about it?"

The people of Darkwater Town subscribed to an odd sort of honour code. It was a small place so it didn't take long for word to get around that my mother had signed a film deal with the devil. Later that afternoon, they rose as one in defiance of my mother's announcement that a film about the beast was going to be made right here. They trussed up my mother and carried her screaming down to the lakeside. A bonfire was blazing. It was much bigger than the one we used in our annual ceremony.

My father tried to drag the townsfolk away from my mother. Her pale face, drawn and repentant, mouthed that she was sorry. The constable handcuffed my father to a bicycle rack.

"Mum! Mum!"

I scratched like a cat at the mayor and his deputy as they carried her to the bonfire. The mayor kicked me.

"One more word, Henry, and you'll be next."

The mob threw my mother onto the bonfire. After one hellish scream she lost consciousness. The flames licked at her flesh until only charred bones remained. Chester Baron left pretty damn quick, speeding away in his gold Rolls Royce.

Wind and rain lashed at the windows that night. The Master didn't take kindly to Darkwater's offering. The guests and staff fled in terror. My father and I cowered in the attics. Dad didn't say so, but he blamed himself. Eventually, the storm passed and the lake was calm again. We crept to our beds and I cried myself to sleep.

As dawn came, we saw that an island had erupted from the lake during the night. I got a sinking feeling. Wherever an island existed, man was drawn to reach it. We couldn't resist the temptation. The prospect of colonizing it triggered something primitive. But it was worse than that. In return for the insubordination Darkwater Town had shown in bringing in an outsider to tell our tale, the Master decreed that The Luring could now entice locals as well as visitors.

I mourned for my mother as the seasons passed. Visitors would come back to Darkwater. Then, the beast would return. And when he reappeared, he would feed on our souls. His was not a song that any of us could ignore.

About the Author:

John C. Adams is a Contributing Editor for Albedo One Magazine, and Reviewer with Schlock! Webzine.

John's short fiction appears in anthologies from Horrified Press, Lycan Valley Press and many others. John has also had fiction published in The Horror Zine, Devolution Z and many others.

John's fantasy novel Aspatria is available on Kindle. John's futuristic horror novel 'Souls for the Master' also is available on Kindle.

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The air had a way of getting quiet just before the sun fell, hanging light and still as the evening shadows grew dark. One could get lost in his mind during the evening in the best of ways, thinking up whimsical nothings as a child would. But to say a child thought of such carefree things in the time of evening would be ignoring the impending night. The evening shadows were, after all, a silent warning. The darkness only held trouble.

The trees liked to gather in clusters along the road, parting every now and then for the farmhouses that freckled the hillside, but it was easy to see through their branches in the winter, when they twisted up to the sky like thorns and brambles. Their roots dug under the roads in a way that made even the smoothest, most expensive car bump along like a tractor.

In one of the most expensive cars the road had ever seen, a rather slender and personable man sat with eyes and hair like dusty coal. Behind him, a son that showed little reflection.

Charlie, the greyish man's boy, was young—perhaps not yet thirteen, or perhaps just a bit older. He had a pugged nose, much like his mother, and freckles that splashed on his face like flicked brown paint. The only parts of him that resembled his father at all were his spindly wrists, which were digging through his school bag to straighten his homework. He had stuffed the sheet in his backpack early in the day, and it was wrinkled, a result of being squished up against his gym shoes.

Charlie felt his father's calloused stare, and he looked up to the rear-view mirror. He only saw his father's face watching him for a few moments, but he understood to be silent.

Today was an important day for Charlie's father.

Three times a month without fail, Charlie's father left for his job. During all other days, he didn't work. In fact, he rarely went out of the house at all, sitting in his office and reading thick textbooks.

Charlie's father spoke very little about himself, but Charlie was never short on knowledge. He got most of his information from his mother, and whatever she didn't tell him, he would simply imagine. Sometimes, Charlie forgot which information was true and which was simply thought up.

Charlie's mother was a fair bit younger than his father, and it showed in her face—bright, with clear skin and soft brown eyes. She spent her days moving about the kitchen, baking pie after pie and going on about her husband's work. He was a brave man, according to her, working a dangerous job to provide for them. On the select few days she wasn't in the kitchen, she watched crime movies with Charlie, pointing out the detectives and investigators.

"Just like that," she would say. "He's just like them."

It was the first time Charlie would finally get to see his father working.

The road opened up to a small field, and the car slowed alongside a ditch. It wasn't raining like it was during most investigations on television, and it wasn't quite dark enough, either. Perhaps they were early, because the crime tape wasn't up yet.

"I'll be just a moment." Charlie's father collected his hat and straightened his tie. "You'll wait here, won't you?"

"Yes, sir," Charlie said eagerly, gripping the knees of his trousers.

Across the clearing was a small farmhouse just one story high. The paint at its side was chipping and white, and the chicken coop was long since empty. Beside it, a patch of mint grew under a thorn-apple tree, and wild flowers had begun to poke up under the deck, where several wind-chimes hung.

Charlie's father disappeared behind the house, and Charlie pressed his face up against the glass, squinting to see where he had gone, but there was no movement at all. Charlie slumped back in his seat. It looked like he would have to wait for the investigation to begin.

The car's smell of tobacco became less and less noticeable as time passed. With the heater off, the winter's frost seeped in and turned the leather cold.

Charlie bounced his legs to stay warm, turning his attention to the glove box at the front. The colors outside had gone muted as the sky began to darken, but *only* darken. There was no orange sunset that day. That meant soon, Charlie would have no light to work by. He had homework due the next day, and he specifically remembered breaking his pencil during his last class. Since it was getting so late, he figured it was best to get it done, but he had nothing to write with. Perhaps the glove box had a pen he could use.

Now, Charlie's father was a very tidy man. He cleaned up after himself, leaving not a crumb or spill in his wake. Charlie already knew that there would be nothing to write with under the seats. Charlie's father was also very particular about keeping his belongings in their exact place, and he didn't like anyone to go through his things. But it had surely

been an hour since Charlie was left alone in the car, and he had no better entertainment than to pass his time with his homework.

He reached into the glove box, scavenging through plastic bags and brown glass bottles. At the very bottom of the box was a long black pen, but it went ignored.

Detective supplies, Charlie thought, picking out an empty brown bottle. The label's ink was smeared and faded, and with his father's strange, loopy way of writing, Charlie didn't attempt to read it. In addition to bottles and plastic bags, there were several cleaning supplies: mostly bottles of hand sanitizer and cleaning wipes. Off to the side sat beautiful bracelets, similar to the ones Charlie's mother always had on around the house. They must have been gifts for her, and Charlie knew he shouldn't have seen.

Charlie set the bottle back down and picked out the pen, closing the glove box and sitting back. He picked his homework out of his backpack, smoothing it out one more time, and he tried to write in his name. No ink came out. Charlie considered it was invisible ink, like the ink that detectives used on television, but he didn't want to risk it. It would have been frustrating to finish his homework only to realize there was never any ink, or, even worse, that the teacher didn't have any special light to read it.

Instead, Charlie replaced the pen in the box and leaned back in his seat, pushing his head against the headrest to stare at the ceiling. The roof of the car was almost completely black from the lack of light, and Charlie didn't last long watching it. He felt as though something could jump out at him.

The sound of windchimes in the distance. Charlie didn't want to hear them. He imagined long, dirty fingers reaching out to rattle them in his ears. Or a malevolent wind that graced the chimes on its way to the car. On its way to *suffocate* him. Charlie squeezed his eyes shut and covered his ears, wishing again and again that when he opened his eyes, the sun would return. He would even settle for his father coming back, even without Charlie having seen any of the investigation.

But if Charlie's father did come back, he would see a cowering boy, unfit to be someone as brave as a detective. Charlie uncovered his ears, and he began to relax. The evil wind had gone, the sound of chimes taken with it.

There was a quick knock at the car window, and Charlie's head whipped around to look. A face was peering through, one he didn't recognize.

"You alright, boy?" The face said. It was a man with long jowls and thin lips. His brows hung so low that he had a permanent scowl.

Charlie hesitated to answer.

"That's my son," Charlie's father spoke, calling from somewhere in the darkness. "Do let him be."

Charlie breathed out relief as the stranger backed away from the car, giving only a discarding wave and grumble as he left in the opposite direction. Charlie leaned back into his seat, pressing a hand to his heart to try and calm himself.

Charlie's father emerged and opened the driver's side door, the lights flicking on and illuminating the scene. He leaned in with a long sigh, searching through the glove box and taking out his hand sanitizer. "Don't mind him. Just my boss."

Charlie saw a light in his father's eyes that he had never seen before. His father looked alive. Energized. He did not hold the same solemn lips and straight brow. He looked almost pleasant. Pleasant enough for Charlie to dare ask him a question.

"Is your job done already, sir?" Charlie asked, voice quiet with caution.

"For now. My part of the job is, at least." He slipped into his seat and started the car up, a soft, sweet smile settling in on his face. "I just hope the police will be able to clean up after me this time."

About the Author:

Elizabeth Fox is a college student and freelance writer. She has a passion for the English language, and enjoys travel, cooking, and sports such as swimming, volleyball, and horseback riding. Her writing deals with dark twists, taboo subjects, and elements of fantasy.

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This month's featured author is Kealan Patrick Burke. We asked him a few questions and here are his answers and a bit of sage advice. First, let's get to know a little bit about him. Kealan, in a quick summary, tell us a little about yourself.

I'm an Irish ex-pat, currently living in the States. I've been writing since I could hold a pencil, but didn't submit anything for professional publication until I came to the U.S. Since then, I've won some awards, published over twenty books, written over two hundred short stories, and generally continue to make a nuisance of myself.

Q: What made you decide to become a writer?

A: Part of it was the tradition of oral storytelling in Ireland. My grandfather loved to tell scary stories, all of which he claimed were true. I was enthralled and it illustrated for me the power of stories. I believed every word of them too, until I heard variations of those same stories clear across the globe in later years, but it didn't detract from the sheer enjoyment of those tales or the atmosphere he cultivated around them. Another part of it was my mother's love for books. She was a voracious reader and taught me to love and appreciate them at a very early age. I can't always rightly recall the when and where of it all, but I was still a kid when I decided I wanted to write the types of stories I was reading, wanted to make readers feel the exhilaration that comes with a well-told story. I started taking it seriously by the time I was 13.

Q: What is your most recent published work of fiction? Was it a labor of love, or something scratching to get out that needed to be put to rest?

A: The last major original release was, I believe, *Blanky*, which, as an exploration of how we process grief, gutted me to write. I can't say I enjoyed the process, but I've found that nothing resonates in fiction as much as honesty from the writer, so in that regard, it was certainly a success. It was both a labor of love and a story that demanded to be written, as many of them are.

Q: What is the most significant thing you'd like readers to know about you before they read your work?

A: I don't really think there's anything readers *need* to know about me, though of course I'm always happy to answer any questions they might have. I think what's important is the work, and that's where we meet in the middle. All you need to know about me is hidden in the stories.

Q: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantsier?

A: Sometimes one, sometimes the other, though I tend to write whenever the words are there and don't adhere to a rigid schedule. There's value to the idea that writers should write every day for a certain amount of time, but that's not something I practice. If the inspiration isn't there, sitting at the computer trying to force it is a waste of time better spent reading or living or quietly and slowly dying.

Q: What is the hardest challenge you have faced as a writer?

A: Breaking through to the mainstream. Part of the problem is that I don't write fast and have a penchant for shorter fiction, but of the novels I've written, all but two of them went to NY through my agent at the time, back before horror



was the scorching hot commodity it is now. All got the same response—“love it, can’t sell it”—which is the best/worst kind of rejection because it doesn’t leave you much to work with. So, for now, I exist in the spaces between small press and mass market, fantasizing about the day I walk into Barnes & Noble and see my work in the remainder bin!

Q: What piece of work are you most proud of, and why?

A: I’m proud of all of it or it wouldn’t be out there in the first place. But the ones that were most *fun* to write and therefore still make me smile when I think back on the process of creating them, are *Sour Candy* and *The Tent*. I’m rather proud of *Kin* too, because it’s as close as I’ve ever come to writing exactly what I intended to write, even if it’s not a book I could write today. The sequel, on the other hand...

Q: How do you define success as a writer?

A: It depends on which aspect of success you mean. At its simplest, success for a writer means sitting down, starting a story, and then finishing it. Only writers truly understand how hard that can be to accomplish. To the world at large, we’re just fools spinning stories for a lark. I mean, how hard can it be to put a bunch of words on a page, right? The answer is: very. I’ve worked innumerable jobs and this, though I love it with every fiber of my being, is by far the hardest. Another form of success is the hardest to achieve, and that’s financial. Most other jobs pay you a minimum wage. Writing does not. You may never make a cent from it, or the stars could align and you’ll find yourself writing steamy romances from a beach house in Malibu. It’s hard to know, and what you make is not always commensurate with your talent. There are terrible writers making millions, while great ones toil away underground, searching for daylight. That’s not to say that there isn’t plenty of dreck to be found in the indies, and plenty of quality work being put out by the big houses, but I can’t tell you how many books I’ve read, from independent presses and self-published writers, that completely blew me away in ways no mass market release ever did, and yet these folks can’t seem to catch a break. It’s like independent cinema. Below the marquee are where you’ll find the risk-takers.

Q: Who are some of your favorite authors, or what are some of your favorite novels?

A: If I listed them all, we’d be here for a month and I’d still omit some of my favorites, so here are a select few. You can assume they’ve written the titles that fit the second part of your question: Stephen King, Ray Bradbury, Peter Straub, Marisha Pessl, Ramsey Campbell, Cherie Priest, Victor LaValle, Steve Tem, Ken Bruen, Caroline Kepnes, John Connolly, Tananarive Due, Charles L. Grant, Tana French, Kathe Koja, John Fowles, Paul Bowles, Jenny Lawson, Graham Greene, Michael Marshall Smith, Danika Stone, Erik Larson, Gemma Files, John Langan, Josh Malerman, Laird Barron, Don Winslow, Grady Hendrix, Susan Hill, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Dennis Lehane, Patricia Highsmith, Larry McMurtry, David Sedaris, Tennessee Williams, Donald Ray Pollock, Christopher Fowler, Sarah Langan, Joe Lansdale, and Robert McCammon. There are countless more, but I don’t want your publication to become a phonebook of the writers who thrill me.

Q: Do you have any crumbs of wisdom you’d like to pass on to writers or novelists who are just finding their way into the writing world?

A: Expect to fail. Expect to want to quit. Expect your heart to be broken a hundred thousand times, and then write about it through the armor that grows as a result.

We’d like to thank Kealan for taking the time to share a piece of his world with us. Please feel free to follow him online for new and upcoming works, and a further peek into his realm.

Web site: www.KealanPatrickBurke.com

Instagram: [@KealanPatrickBurke](https://www.instagram.com/KealanPatrickBurke)

Amazon Author Page: [Kealan Patrick Burke](https://www.amazon.com/Kealan-Patrick-Burke)

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *KIN* & *THE TURTLE BOY*

SOUR CANDY

"one of the most original authors
in contemporary horror"- *Booklist*

KEALAN PATRICK BURKE

Four months to the day he first encountered the boy at Walmart, the last of Phil Pendleton's teeth fell out.

1. The Scream

When the child started screaming, Phil Pendleton had his arms loaded with chocolate bars and his girlfriend cooing in his ear. Later he would think of the moment prior to that klaxon-like intrusion as one of utter bliss, a rare occasion in which his customary concerns were in absentia.

It was a Saturday, so he was off work and had woken up pleurably late after a night of equally pleasurable lovemaking. And while he had briefly considered doing some much-delayed yardwork today (if only to stave off the disapproving looks of his neighbors), Lori had convinced him to *actually* take the day off and join her in doing nothing more taxing than lounging before the TV with a veritable stockpile of chocolate. As the invitation had been extended while she stood in the bathroom doorway wearing nothing but her pink silk underwear, and with the memory of her uncharacteristic sexual abandon still fresh in his mind, he hadn't needed to be asked twice.

His mission was a simple one: procure as much chocolate as possible and return home, a task which saw him standing in the candy aisle at Walmart, Lori doling out her requests over the phone in between bouts of sexual innuendo as he tried to focus on the overwhelming selection on the shelves before him.

Yes, he would have said the day was a fine one indeed.

Then the scream had come, so abrupt and so unexpected, Phil's whole body jerked as if someone had punched him between the shoulder blades. Jamie Lee Curtis had screamed like that in *Halloween*. Loons did too. A half dozen or so chocolate bars rained from the cradle of his arm to the floor, smacking against his feet. Only his quick reflexes kept his cell phone from joining it. This last was a relief. As Lori was so fond of reminding him, he'd had to replace the phone twice this year already due to natural clumsiness.

"What in God's name was that? The fire alarm?" Lori asked. In the fright, the phone had slipped down to his cheek. Only luck had kept it pinned there. Now, hands unexpectedly free of candy, he grabbed it and put it back to his ear.

"No. Someone's kid." As he said this last, he looked to his right, to the source of the sound.

There were a half dozen or so shoppers wandering the aisle. Many of them were making concentrated efforts not to look at the thin woman standing midway down the aisle, or the towheaded child currently tugging at the hem of her unseasonably heavy coat. On the faces of the shoppers, Phil saw his own emotions reflected back at him: irritation, pity, and relief.

Irritation at the obnoxious introduction of such a hostile and unwelcome sound into the general lazy-Saturday ambience of the store.

Pity at the sight of the browbeaten woman forced to accept responsibility for her child's misbehavior.

And relief that the child belonged to someone else.

This last was particularly relevant to Phil. Infrequent paternal impulses notwithstanding, he had never wanted children. Indeed his first and only marriage had ended for that very reason. Despite the agreement that they remain childless and therefore free to live their lives untethered by such suffocating obligations, over time his ex-wife's position morphed into mourning that she would never be a mother. Seeing the naked sadness in her eyes whenever they were around the sons and daughters of their friends, Phil had agreed to consider altering his own stance on the subject. But his heart had never been in it. His own childhood had been a train wreck, and rather than emerge from that endurance test better prepared for parenthood, he suspected it had probably ruined such prospects for life. Whatever the case, he wasn't in any great hurry to find out. His hope had been that, given time, Stacey would realize the limitations a child would impose upon their lives and bury her maternal need. She hadn't. Instead, her impulses bred anger and resentment toward him, rendering him little more than an obstruction to the natural course of her life. Even so he might have stood a chance of pleading his case if not for the unwavering, and often openly hostile support of her friends, few of whom had cared for him from the beginning. Their dissolution

had been a cold one, and despite halfhearted efforts to stay in touch, they never did unless the topic was a practical one, such as ownership of certain items discovered in the basement of the house they'd once shared.

Now, as Phil looked at the child with the runny nose and puffy eyes, his clothes remarkably pristine and oddly old-fashioned, he wished Stacey were here if only so he could use the kid as an example of why he had never conceded to her wishes. "This," he would tell her, "is just a taste of what we'd have been forced to put up with."

Aware that he was staring but unable to stop, drawn to the sad tableau as one might be to the interaction of animals in an enclosure, Phil moved his gaze back to the mother and immediately felt a pulse of guilt for his uncharitable thoughts.

"Honey?"

"Yeah, babe," he said into the phone.

"What's going on?"

"I think you can guess."

The woman might once have been beautiful. All the elements were there, but appeared to have been sullied by hardship and filtered by distress so that to find them, one had to look harder than her appearance invited. Her dirty blonde hair was in disarray, as if she hadn't bothered to brush it after getting out of bed, or had, in some fit of rage or desperation, tried to pull it out. Or perhaps that was the child's doing, for in his eyes, behind the shimmering tears, Phil thought he detected a glimmer of glee, as if nothing gave the kid greater pleasure than the reaction his histrionics wrought from his suffering mother. Indeed there appeared to be the slightest upward curve at the corners of the child's bow-shaped lips.

In contrast to her son's rosy complexion, the woman was pallid and drawn, cheekbones pushing against her waxy skin like hangers beneath a sheet. The cold fluorescents did her no favors either. She looked lost, her focus not on the child yanking at her threadbare brown coat, but on the riotously colorful bags of Gummi Bears, Cola Bottles, and sour candy suspended on hooks before her. She stared as if the secret to some elusive quandary might be hidden within. Phil estimated the woman to be in her mid- to late forties, but suspected her Thrift Store sense of dress, general unkemptness of her appearance, and the obvious weathering of the child's attention probably made her look a decade older than she actually was.

"That kid has a hell of a pair of lungs on him," Lori said.

As if he had somehow heard her, or maybe just because his attempts to get his mother's attention had proved unsuccessful, the kid clenched his little fists, tilted his head back, opened his mouth, and let loose another scream. Throughout the aisle, people flinched, winced, and abandoned all pretense of obliviousness to the root of the awful sound.

"Fuck *sake*," exclaimed one shopper, a heavysset man in coveralls and a dark red beard that looked like lichen moss eager to reclaim his face. He had a six-pack of Miller Lite in one hand. He was flexing the other. He glared, not at the kid, but at the back of the mother's head. Her focus on the candy did not waver.

The kid fell silent. The slight smile remained.

None of the shoppers left the aisle, and now all of them were openly staring at the child and his mother.

"Jesus," Lori said.

A manager appeared.

"I think I'll try Giant Eagle instead," Phil said into the phone. "I'm actually starting to fear I'll go deaf."

"Good idea."

But he didn't move.

The manager, a balding man with spectacles and bad skin, looked only marginally less stressed than the woman to which he had been summoned. Lost inside a forest green suit, he resembled a turtle none too enthused about coming out of his shell.

"What's happening?" Lori asked.

Again the kid looked in Phil's direction, and the feeling that somehow he was hearing Lori's side of the phone conversation intensified. But as there was at least ten feet separating Phil from the boy and his mother, this was highly unlikely.

"The store manager's on the scene," he told Lori, quietly.

The manager reached the woman and her son and joined his hands together before him as if his intent was not to chastise them but to lead them in prayer.

"I'm sorry...Miss?"

The woman did not move. Phil's impression of her graduated from one of pity to concern. Given the pallor of her skin, dazed eyes, and reluctance or inability to move, the only thing suggesting that she wasn't a statue was her presence there in the middle of the candy aisle. He wondered if maybe she'd had a stroke.

"Miss?" The manager looked as if he might disappear back inside his suit and scuttle away. "Do you mind if we have a word?"

The shoppers were watching, and while Phil found himself wishing they'd move on, he felt similarly enthralled.

"Miss?"

The kid spun on a heel to face the manager. For a brief moment, he just smiled at the man, but just when the manager started to return it, encouraged perhaps by any acknowledgment at all, the kid screamed a third time. Startled, eyes bugging from their sockets, the manager staggered backward and almost collided with an old woman who had been watching, her gnarled hands clamped around the handle of her shopping cart.

"I'm going to go," Phil told Lori. "I'll see you at home."

"Just when it was getting interesting. Pick me up a bag of Dove darks too, will you?"

"Will do."

Phil hung up and pocketed the phone. Up until now, curiosity had kept him rooted to the spot—and clearly he was not alone in feeling that way—but now he felt uneasy, the awkwardness and weirdness of the situation registering as a quiver in the pit of his stomach. And while he was rarely the kind of man to intervene or contribute to situations he deemed none of his business, the words were up and out of his mouth before he could think to stop them.

"Maybe someone should call an ambulance?" he suggested, his words aimed at the manager, who was gathering himself with great difficulty, his face the color of a beet.

And then the mother moved. In a motion better suited to a machine, she reached out and snapped free of its hook a bag of sour candy. Her other hand came up and she ripped the plastic bag wide open. Candy flew on both sides of her. Like a seagull hovering above a school of mackerel, the kid inspected the colorful debris, and then dropped to the floor to retrieve them.

The woman turned, her gaze like a lighthouse beam as it swept over the onlookers before settling on the nervous face of the manager.

"Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to I—"

With both hands, and hard enough that her knuckles made a hollow *thwack* sound as they mashed her upper lip against her teeth, the woman crammed two fistfuls of the candies into her mouth.

As if helpless to do anything but mimic her, the manager's mouth dropped open. With the spell broken by repulsion and maybe the same note of trepidation that had insinuated its way into Phil's stomach, a few of the shoppers at last began to make their way out of the aisle. Phil started to follow, but then the child, hands full of multicolored candy, rose and once again stared at him.

Inexplicably unnerved—*it's a kid, for Christ's sake*—Phil composed a smile he was sure must have looked as plastic and insincere as it felt. "Hey, kid."

Propelled by impotent outrage, the manager hurried away, no doubt to fetch someone with a steelier disposition.

Phil felt abandoned.

Overhead, one of the fluorescents flickered and dimmed.

The mother stopped chewing and turned her empty eyes on Phil.

He nodded. "Hi there."

Both of them were staring at him now, neither one of them moving.

Then the child extended his arms to offer Phil the candy.

Credits

*John C. Adams
Jonel Abellanosa
Gabriella Balcom
Jason R. Barden
Heather EM Barrett
Ryan Benson
Bill Bistak
Kerry E.B. Black
Lesley-Ann Campbell
Alexis Child
S. E. Cyborski
Michael D. Davis
James Denier
Jeffrey Durkin
Stephanie Ellis
David Estringel
A.R. Farley
Alyson Faye
Greg Fewer
Eddie Fogler
Elizabeth Fox
Tony Flynn
Michelle Joy Gallagher
Holly Rae Garcia
Maxwell Gold
Charles A. Gramlich*

*George Lee Grimsley
Russell Hemmell
S.D. Hintz
Ken Hueler
Rivka Jacobs
Mathias Jansson
Nick Johnson
Kieran Judge
Naching T. Kassa
Tawny Kipphorn
EV Knight
Grove Koger
Christine Lajewski
Simon Lee-Price
Courtney Leigh
Roger Ley
Maria McCallion
P.L. McMillan
R.J. Meldrum
Melissa R. Mendelson
Terry Miller
Damascus Mincemeyer
Emma Munro
Andressa Osta
Nicholas Paschall
David Lewis Pogson*

*Ken Poyner
Andrew Punzo
Linda Lee Rice
Brian Rosenberger
Joshua Skye
K.T. Slattery
Angela Yuriko Smith
Melanie Smith
Wally Smith
Susan Snyder
Mark Steinwachs
Les Talma
Tabitha Thompson
Joseph VanBuren
Eliana Vanessa
Michael S. Walker
Sonora Taylor
Amanda Todisco
Jacek Wilkos
Alisa Willemse
Patrick Winters
Jack Wolfe Frost
Alex Woolf
Chris Wright
Patrick J. Wynn*

Featured Artist

Francois Vaillancourt

Featured Author

Kealan Patrick Burke

Featured Novel

Sour Candy

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