

August 2013 issue #10



Featuring:

MONSTER FICTION!!

Poetry, Short Stories, & Flash Fiction

300 Word Comparative Flash Fiction

Original Photography by Pixie Vision

Featured Author
Interview with
Aiden Truss,
Author of the new
Horror Novel
'GAPE'

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## Are the Big Monsters Dead? An Editorial

Julianne Snow

Recently I had the pleasure of seeing *Pacific Rim* for the second time. If you have yet to see the film, I highly recommend it! It's got a level of plausibility that can only be matched with its utter fantasticalness – something that ends up missing in many of the movies made these days. But on the drive home, my mind began to wander... Are the big monsters dead?

I can remember watching many of the monster movies with my family over the years: *Godzilla*, *THEM!*, *The Blob*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Leviathan*, *The Day of the Triffids* – and that's to name just a few. While the giants in many of these films were terrifying, they instilled in me a love for the oversized monster. And the desire to never want to actually meet any of them in person.

Now my earlier question may seem silly to some – how can anything that exists only in the movies be alive? It's not so much that I'm asking if they are literally dead – for the most part they are, especially at the end of each of the films – what I want to know is this: have we stopped craving the giant monster flicks in favour of another flavour of terror? I certainly hope not.

Let's consider for a moment a few films of the last 10 or so years. I've already mentioned *Pacific Rim* with its Kaijus and Jeagers (seriously go see it, you'll thank me!) so we can move on from there. *Monsters* is a great film from 2010 that I hope you didn't miss. It's got huge monsters and while there are tense moments, I wouldn't exactly categorize it with the rest of the giant monster movies that depict large monsters attempting to annihilate the human population. It's a little more slick and contemplative than that, but still very much worth seeing.

Then we move into the likes of *Cloverfield* (2008) and *Eight Legged Freaks* (2002). Both of these films were intensely fun and they have helped to keep the diversity and terror factors high within the genre of the giant monster. I love *Cloverfield* because of its style, ingenuity, and well, for Hub. If you've seen it, you'll know exactly what I mean. *Eight Legged Freaks* made me think spiders were funny for a few short moments – that's success in my books.

When we look at the films being made these days, it's obvious that werewolves, vampires, zombies, ghosts and other paranormal entities are being exploited. But that's fine because it's what people want to see. The good news is that every once in a while, a movie about a giant mutated monster hits the screens and reminds us all just how small we really are. The big movie monster is certainly alive and well, and thankfully not done to death.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with* the *Undead* series. She writes within the realms of speculative fiction and has roots that go deep into horror. Julianne has pieces of short fiction in publications from Sirens Call Publications, Open Casket Press, James Ward Kirk Publishing and Hazardous Press as well as the forthcoming shorts in anthologies from 7DS Books, Phrenic Press, and the Coffin Hop charity anthology *Death by Drive-In*. Julianne is also the co-founder, co-owner, and Publicist of Sirens Call Publications.

## Monsters: Are they Real or Imaginary? An Editorial

Nina D'Arcangela

Are Monsters real or imaginary? It's a varied and complex answer. Here are the three easy ones: movie monsters are not real; monstrous life forms do exist; and the human creature is a monster of its own making.

Answer one: Wouldn't it be incredible if some of the monsters from the movies were real? Who wouldn't head to Japan to watch Godzilla battle Rodan, or King Ghidorah? Hell, I'd love to see him blow his atomic-age breath just once. If the King of Monsters (or more aptly Gojira - an amalgam of the Japanese terms for 'gorilla' and 'whale') was real, catching him in the act would definitely make my bucket list! But he's not real; he's the creation of Akira Watanabe. And while many of his attributes stem from a barbaric and heinous act in human history, the chimera himself is a combination of much more than a rash act perpetrated by a government lacking foresight.

Answer Two: The (scientifically proven) creatures nature has given us to co-exist with are unbelievably amazing. The Giant Squid, a cephalopod that until recently was thought to be the imaginings of the clearly insane sailors who thought the earth was flat. This incredible creature is just now coming to light, and is a prime example of the fact that we really don't know who or what the apex predators on our planet truly are. Even just your average Octopus is an incredible sight; the way it moves with such fluidity, its muscles in concert with one another as it nearly dances across the ocean floor. A magnificent creature, yet monstrous in the fact that it is so very different than you or I. A round of applause for nature folks, she offers us the most incredible sights to stimulate our imaginations!

Answer Three: The sticky answer... the human creature. As a society in whole, we can agree that certain humans are considered monsters or have committed monstrous acts. But what about the monster that lurks within each of us? The monster that wants more, needs more, has to have more? The monster inside that craves success and envies those who are enjoying it? The monster that tells us the more we have, the better we will ultimately be? Monstrous acts of war and crimes against humanity are easy to judge. The past century has shown us more examples than I care to cite, but the small acts that steal our individual humanity, are they not monstrous as well?

I pass no judgment peeps. I have no shortage of monsters of my own, I only pose that to be monstrous, we don't need to stand 400 feet tall. Though as Julie pointed out in her editorial, hiding under an overpass with a camera from who-knows-what sort of creature would be awesome... at least for the three minutes you survived!

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





# **Evolutionary Shift** Rivka Jacobs

Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. ~ From Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

I sat on the damp, weed-choked cement, my back against a cinder-block piling that had once been covered with pale-yellow tiles. I watched the man across from me, too tired to care if he might be a threat. The afternoon winter sun was rapidly fading, too weak to give warmth or comfort. A chill, twilight breeze strengthened, slithering through the holes in my tattered clothing.

My companion was bearded, his leathery skin stretched over jutting bones. He wore a green jacket that was caked with grime. He was eating out of a dirty food-storage container, his eyes like red ice as they locked on me from under his lids every time he lowered his face to shovel food into his slopping mouth

I smiled at him thinly, glanced down at my battered boots wrapped with rags, and wondered what kind of picture I presented.

We didn't speak. I listened to his spoon as it rapidly stroked plastic, the clink of his teeth on metal, and a kind of huffing sound puffing from his snout--animal hunger and greed.

He abruptly froze, his hand poised in mid-feed, his eyes darting around our small, protected space.

I concentrated, then recognized the particular trill and scuffle, and relaxed. "It's okay, they know me," I said, understanding from experience that my words would have no immediate impact.

He threw his spoon into the container, rose to his knobby knees, and pressed himself back against the rust-streaked column behind him. Our refuge had once been an exit ramp for some interstate in New Jersey, now reduced to chunks of reinforced concrete, piles of ceramic tile, and scattered lumps of asphalt, like a giant had picked up the highway and smashed it to the ground.

The man raised himself to a squatting position, still clasping his precious Tupperware. I could see he was trying not to breathe.

A soft, scratching, slithering noise reached my ears. I lolled my head casually to the right, to get a better view.

The man came to his feet now, in a slightly bent posture, preparing to flee. I watched his eyes, out of a genuine interest in his reaction, as the thing came into view from around a section of corroded guardrail.

Don't run," I said. "Stay still." The look of shock and disbelief on his face was fascinating.

At the sound of my voice, our visitor skittered around to face me. It was about three feet wide, one foot off the ground, with eight legs--if you want to call them legs. One extremity was a tiny human baby limb, several were insect-like, one seemed to possess the tarsus, metatarsus, and hoof of a cow. Arms were more like crab claws with opposable thumbs. It blinked one human fetal eye bulging from a mass of exposed viscera on the left lateral flank. A lump on its right seemed to be an amalgam of a bovine testicle, a trachea, and parts of a brain; I couldn't tell what kind. A large yellow-brown coiled mass formed the dorsal surface--this was slippery and viscous and pulsing--I could tell by the consistency and appearance it was human colon and rectum, possibly carcinogenic. I recognized pieces of primate skin, teeth, and bone, and a bovine epididymis. I counted a porcine kidney and bladder, seven mouse mammaries and at least one human penis growing from its belly.

My friend across from me made a gagging, retching sound, then muttered something like, "Oh geezus ... oh ... oh geezus...." He sidled along the wall in slow motion, trying to creep away.

"I'm warning you, don't move," I said in a light, conversational tone. "I told you, it knows me."

Most of the creatures retain some kind of sense-memory of me, a genetic imprinting of some sort, I suppose. While I drift through what's left of our civilized world, anonymous to my fellow original human

beings, the things, the monsters, remark my passage, pause to consider me. As of now--and this is always changing, that's the entire point--as of now, I am sacred and immune to harm.

But the man, if he was a man, wasn't paying any attention to me. He groped his way with his left hand along the freezing concrete, moving sideways, picking up his pace.

The shadows lengthened and the wind gusted; blackness would swallow us unrelieved by any artificial illumination, and there would be no moon or stars. It looked like it was going to snow. The thing with eight legs scampered around in a circle, tracking the escaping man with its one bulbous fetus eye.

"I'm telling you," I said, trying to sound non-threatening and reasonable, "I told you, you're safer here with me."

But he was gone, and the thing, the monster, scurried after him.

Throaty, garbled shouts of terror and pain ripped through the frosty dusk a few minutes later.

\*\*\*

I'm constantly on the move. I don't remember when I left Cleveland. I sleep where I want, I eat what I can salvage or procure. I pass through apartments, homes, and businesses that stand abandoned and empty. I try to avoid men and women, when I find them, holed up in small groups, defending themselves with guns or weapons they've designed themselves. I have no idea what happened to our government, despite the fact my Bioprinting Research Center worked snugly with the HHS, and the work we did at the Department of Cellular Biology of Western University, which I chaired, was all federally funded, and I was the co-author of the Human Cell Culture Protocols published by the Department of Homeland Security.

I have considered the irony of my accomplishments, and sometimes when unfamiliar snorts or howls or growls crowd around me, and on clear nights when dark shapes fill the skies and block the moon, I think about my bioink particles and how I endowed them with such superb properties of self-assembly. My goal, the aim of my entire team, was to heal the human body, to repair any injury to any organ or tissue. We created a successful organ farming process, we perfected recombinant DNA technology. With our bioprinting techniques we could regenerate anything from a piece of skin to an entire heart. My team and I revolutionized medical science. I remember thinking that I was going to win a Nobel Prize.

I don't know what happened.

Some of our people did have a problem with standard precautions, biohazard bags, and the concept of the hermetic environment.

\*\*\*

I see beauty in the midst of the decay. The city intersections at night with the empty, rusting vehicles seemingly paused for a red light. Terra cotta stucco walls black with mildew, plaster peeling away, old wrought iron fences crumbling. The squat and sturdy dark-red buildings that once housed schools and offices and residences, their windows broken or blocked by plywood, mortar dissolving, bricks falling, exteriors bedecked with fire-escapes now twisted wreckage torn apart by the inhabitants themselves when they barricaded themselves in on higher and higher floors.

Amidst the oxidizing cars and piles of bones and rubble, surrounded by the sniffing, scurrying, scampering, and flapping of wings made of human skin--and the occasional scream--I am moved and impressed by the resilience of human beings. In former days, I would scowl upon seeing graffiti--those quick and sharp marks, symbols of anger and alienation. Now I see entire walls filled with writing, and it moves me to tears. Everywhere I go people have left something of themselves before they disappear for eternity. Names, dates of birth, instructions as to where family members can find them or descriptions of lost wives, husbands, lovers, children, and new babies recently arrived. Entire blocks of buildings from Cleveland to Pittsburgh to Philly read like tombstones in an ancient graveyard; "I was born on..." and,

"The names of my pets are..." and, "My favorite songs are..."

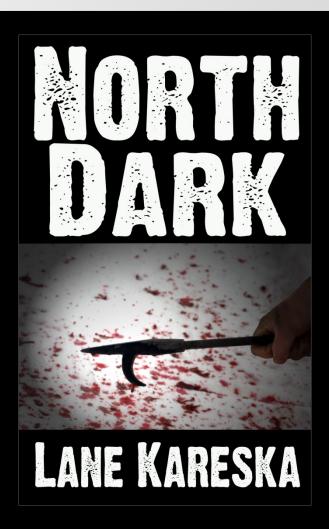
What I like best, though, are the epilogues--I call them epilogues. Sentences, paragraphs, tracts that recount last days and sum-up lives written in marker, pencil, crayons or anything at hand that can scratch a word. I find these scribbled on interior walls covered by peeling paper or cracking paint in the more secure, enclosed, private places where the survivors stayed briefly before they escaped again, or before they met one of my monsters.

And I guess that's what I'm doing now; writing my epilogue.

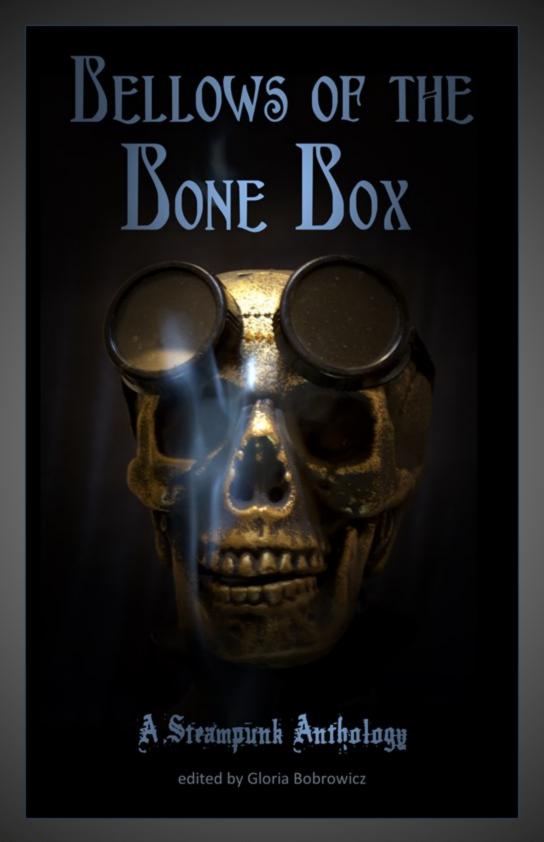
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Rivka Jacobs grew up in Miami, Florida, and has lived in West Virginia for thirty-five years. She has a master's degree in sociology and another in mental health counseling. Rivka went back to school in her fifties to earn a BSN and is currently an RN specializing in psychiatric nursing. She have one grown son, who lives in Philadelphia. Rivka published several stories in the 1980s, then stopped writing for a number of years. She resumed writing in 2009 and was lucky enough to have a story published in The Sirens Call February 2013 issue, "Women in Horror."

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# The Highway Jeff McFarland

It was a route I'd driven about nine million times: to Rapid City, South Dakota from Chadron, Nebraska and back again. It takes about an hour and a half or so one way, and was almost always a pleasant drive. I never much minded driving to and from gigs by myself. After four hours of just constant noise, lights, and booze (in other people, anyway), the senses can use the break. Plus the highway at night, man, it almost hypnotizes you. It pulls you in. There's nothing but miles of black ahead, and if you know Nebraska, you know there's absolutely nothing on either side of the road to take in. The prairie is flatter than a pancake, and it's easy to let your mind play tricks on you out there. Especially when you start getting tired. Your eyes droop and your brain struggles to deal with the boredom. You feel like the only living thing out in the middle of some wasteland.

But you're not.

About a half hour into this particular drive back to Chadron, I had fallen into my routine of counting the reflectors on the side of the road, and I was starting to zone out. The radio was on, but only up loud enough to serve as a dull hum in the background. In the quiet, in the dark, it's easy to get lost in your own head. The road just becomes a blur and your body mimics the cruise control of the car. My eyelids were beginning to feel heavy right about the time I felt my phone start to buzz.

"What's happenin'?" I gave my usual greeting, snapping out of my stupor.

"Dude," a voice slurred out, though it sounded more like 'DoooOOoooOod,' "did you leave town yet?" It was our guitar player, Ray.

"Yeah?" I said, somewhat irritated. "I've been on the road for like half an hour. What's up?"

"Aw man, we're about to head to some guy's party. We were gonna see if you wanted to come." I kind of chuckled and shook my head. 'We' was Ray and our drummer, Steve.

"Too little, too late man. Where did you guys go after you stopped for food, anyway?"

"We had to get gas on the way out of town, and another guy at the pump recognized us from the show. I guess a bunch've people are headed to his house to get liquored up. I'm already about halfway gone, m'self, so Steve's drivin'."

"I hear that. Don't let any of those alchies near the van, Ray. We don't make enough playing these rinky dink bars to replace that gear."

"Yeah, yeah, I hear you. Well, drive safe dude. Looks like there's a storm brewin' over your way. We'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, for sure. Later." With that, the conversation was over, and my phone took its place in the cup holder between the seats. I had told those guys I was going to bail as soon as we finished our last set since I had to work my real job relatively early the next morning. Oblivious as Ray usually was, it was hard to stay mad at him. It was only about 11:45 anyway, so I wasn't too worried about time.

Still, not being able to be with my friends bugged me, so I turned the radio up to try and curb my mopiness a little bit. As smooth jazz filled the car, my nerves started to relax, and I settled in to enjoy the drive ahead of me. A ripple of light off in the distance and the rolling thunder that followed put a smile on my face. Ray the weatherman had been right about the storm. The soft pitter-patter off the top of the car began slowly enough, but soon it would be pouring down, just like it always did. A lot of drivers are intimidated by the rain at night, but I welcomed it as an old friend of sorts. I absolutely loved driving through storms. I mean, being on stage is cool and everything, but nothing can quite match up to the lightshow out in the Sandhills. The rain started coming down pretty thick, but not so bad as to make my drive difficult.

Another half hour must have passed. I was counting the stripes in the middle of the road when a heavy *THUD* shot a spray of red that completely covered my windshield. I yelped and braked, hard. Between the beating of the rain against the car, the screeching tires, and my heart pounding in my ears, I

could barely hear the static that was now pouring from the radio. My hands clutched the steering wheel like a pair of vices. My knuckles were bone white. The rain started to wash the blood off the windshield as suddenly as it showed up, and I began to tremble. 'Jesus Christ. What the hell was that? Did I just kill some hitchhiker or a vagrant or something?' I grabbed my phone from the cup holder, and thanks to some miracle, I had one bar of service. My fingers fumbled about as I tried to dial 911. I tried hard to keep my cool as I held the phone up to my ear and listened for the dial tone.

"911, what is your emergency?"

"Oh thank god, um, I'm on 385, and I just hit something, or someone, it might have been a person, I don't know, I can't tell what it is. It's raining too hard to see."

"Just relax sir, it'll be alright. Where exactly are you? Are you on the highway?"

"I'm on highway 385, about an hour away from Rapid City, just send someone out here!"

"I'm sorry, sir, yohissreaking up."

"What? I said I'm on highway 385, I need help out here! Please! I've hit something."

"Sihisse can't uhissand yohiss,"

"Hello? Hello?!" I cried. I glanced at my phone, and felt my gut sink when I read the words *Call Failed* on the screen. All I was left with was some static laden jazz from the radio and the rain slamming into the roof of the car.

I obviously couldn't just leave. I wasn't totally sure I had hit a person... but what if I had? If I just drove away, there's no way I could live with myself. And would the police really believe I just plowed right into some stranger on total accident? I could see it now: my name under 'Vehicular Manslaughter' in the newspaper. I had no choice but to brave the weather, cross my fingers, and assess the damage. With a groan, I flipped my hood up and opened the door, deciding to use my phone's flashlight to guide the way. Reluctantly, I began to backtrack down the highway, struggling to see any more than five feet in front of me.

"Hello?" I called out, my voice barely reaching through the roar of the rain, now coming down in torrents. From the light of my phone, I could just make out the skid marks my tires had left. I glanced off to the side at the surrounding fields, but between the rain and the dark, it was almost impossible to see anything. Only the occasional lightning flash allowed me to see some cow shaped silhouettes off in the distance. I continued up the road a ways before noticing a crimson trail trickling down by my foot. Trying to prepare myself for the worst, I started to follow the trail back up the road, stopping the phone's light at what looked to be a quickly diluting pool of blood. I took a few deep breaths, stepped closer, and recited every kind of prayer I could think of in my head.

Gnarled, mangled flesh lay in a broken heap on the highway. The chest had been imploded by my tires. Not a single rib was left in one piece, and the fur sticking to the blood was matted down by dirt. "Wait. Fur? What the hell?" Puzzled, I moved my light up a little further, and noticed that the gnarled, mangled mess of flesh had antlers.

I let out a huge sigh of relief and laughed out loud right there in the middle of the road. I had only ran over a buck! No hitchhiker or homeless wanderer, but only a deer. I was so happy I could have kissed the ground beneath my feet were it not still pouring rain or doused in blood. Messy as the scene was, I decided I should probably try moving the buck off to the side of the road, lest someone else go through the same shock I just had. The highway patrol wouldn't be able to make it out until the storm cleared up, so I grabbed hold of the antlers and dragged the heavy bastard off to the highway's shoulder. Satisfied as well as relieved, I started heading back to the car, but a quick glance back at the deer made me pause. Why had the buck just been lying in the middle of the road in the first place? It didn't seem to have been struck by any other car, there had been no skid marks on the road besides my own. I didn't find any

pieces of glass or metal on the road. I supposed that stuff all could have gotten washed away, but who would have just hit and killed this thing and then left it here? Wouldn't they have at least gotten out to check the damage? My questions changed completely when another flash in the sky revealed a gruesome detail I had missed when I was still at a distance.

The deer was completely missing its jaw, and along with it, its tongue. The left eye had been gouged out by what looked to be a long, singular scratch. Zoning out or not, I had for sure ran over the deer's chest. It being relatively flat was evidence of that. A quick sweep from my phone's light didn't turn up a jaw or a tongue (not that the rain helped much), and aside from some other scratches, there was no other damage to the deer. Even if I had somehow been the one who removed the jaw, where could it have gone? I was sure I hadn't dealt the damage to the deer's head, and the fact that it had claw marks on it made me uneasy. There had been mountain lion sightings out in these parts before, and I had no desire to see if they were true. I turned and started to walk back towards my car, suddenly feeling very uneasy.

That's when I saw it.

Off in the distance, as another ripple lit up the fields, I noticed a figure. One distinctly different from the cows. It was hunched over on all fours, but it was far too gangly to be a dog. I thought for a minute that it might have been a person, so I shined my phone's light toward it and called out. Its head snapped up. Slowly, inch by inch, it turned its gaze towards me. Even armed with nothing but my phone's tiny flashlight, I could see the glassy shine of its eyes through the dark. I called out again, and in response, the eyes disappeared. A few moments later, they reappeared. They seemed bigger. In the dark, I couldn't see anything, but the timing of the lightning was making this thing's movement seem like some creature out of a stop-motion flick. When the eyes disappeared once again, I realized the truth. The eyes weren't getting bigger.

They were coming closer.

Panic hit me like a ton of bricks. My trip back to the car began as a slow tiptoe and quickly turned into a dash. True to form, I slipped trying to manuever around the back of the car and crashed my right knee into the bumper. Pain exploded up my leg, but I didn't have the time to care. I could hear it coming now: the pounding of feet against dirt, and a heavy, grinding sound, like a lawnmower that doesn't want to start. I ripped the car door open and jumped in, locking it behind me out of pure instinct. Without thinking to take the car out of park, I slammed my foot down on the gas, revving the engine but not moving at all. I could hear the noise over the rain now, even over my engine, inching closer with each set of heavy, galloping footsteps. The tires peeled out as I threw the car into drive, struggling to grip the rain slick highway. Just as I managed to get some traction, a loud *CRUNCH* of twisted metal screeched in my ears and the car started to tip onto its right side.

The lawnmower sound had become a chainsaw. Glass shattered into the backseat, and the car fishtailed wildly in its attempt to grip the road with only two wheels. For the second time that night I clung to the steering wheel for dear life, and this time, I screamed. I did everything I could think of to try and startle or distract the thing long enough for the car to pull away: flashed the brights, honked the horn, hell, I even popped the trunk. That must have been what did it, because I felt the car's two left wheels hit the road, hard. I didn't wait to find out what happened. I took off as fast as the car would let me.

For a little while, I heard the galloping footsteps trailing after me. I heard them over the rain pouring in through my broken window. I heard them over the static blasting through the radio that had gotten turned up in the frenzy. I didn't slow down until I was sure I didn't hear them anymore. It wasn't until the footsteps had completely faded away that I sat back and took a few deep breaths. I have no idea why,

but I thought it would be a good idea to glance in the rearview mirror for a quick minute to assess the damage done to the backseat.

They were a ways off, but even through the rain and through the dark, I know what I saw. They were clear as day.

A pair of eyes, shining, in the middle of the highway.

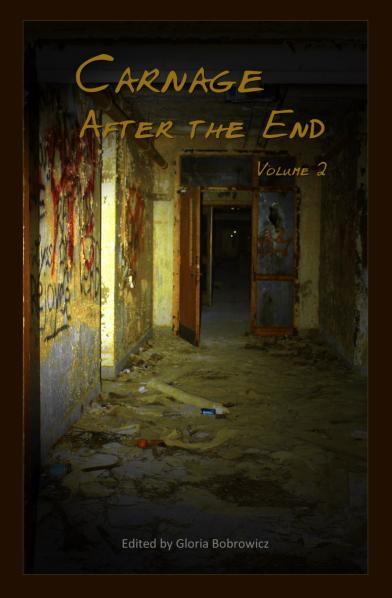
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Being born in a small town like Alliance, Nebraska can produce a twisted outlook on life. Jeff McFarland is currently enduring his junior year as a Literature student at Chadron State College. Other than CSC's newspaper, The Eagle, Jeff has no publication history to speak of.. until now, that is.

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# The Mysterious Disappearance of Jim Ramsbottom Denzell Cooper

Don't worry about them, they don't like talking to new folks is all. Once you've been here a couple of years, you'll be like one of the family, you mark my words. 'Specially if you're a churchgoer. No? Well, still. Me, I like talking just fine, so long as I'm not paying for my own drinks. That's right, you just go ahead and order another, this'n will be gone by the time the next gets here.

You're the feller what's bought the old Ramsbottom place then? Yeah, call it what you like, that's still what it is. Manor house is just a fancy city-folks name for a big house what costs a lot of money to heat, is all. I went to school with Phil Ramsbottom, he'll be the chap what sold it to you. No, didn't much like him. Nobody did, tell you the truth. Always had ideas about getting rich and going round the world did Phil, which is why you've bought a big fancy manor house on an acre of land 'stead of a working farmhouse, because he sold off all the fields years ago to get what he could out of them.

Jim Ramsbottom, his father, was a good man though - little chap, always wore a cap and wellies, looked like he ought to be carrying a shotgun. My grandfather knew Jim's father and their fathers knew each other before that. Wasn't always called Ramsbottom, neither - was Ratzwaren until the war and nobody wanted German sounding names no more. 'Course, soon as us kids found that out we were straight to calling Phil 'Ratsbottom', which he didn't like much. Ha! Felt bad later, of course, after what happened to old Jim and all. My grandfather, God rest him, said we ought to have seen it coming, since the exact same thing happened to old Eric Ratzwaren, but hindsight's a wonderful thing as they say down your way.

What happened? You haven't been told? I thought they had to put that sort of thing on the advertising for the place these days, like trade descriptions and all that. No? Well it's a story, that's for sure, had the village all up in a buzz at the time but this is going back twenty years now. Why did you think the place had been empty for so long? Ha! No, the old man didn't top his self. Least I don't think he did. Just upped and disappeared. Didn't even take his cap or wellies with him, as they found those up by the back door where he'd took them off the night before. I was the last person to speak to him, so the police were straight to talking to me when they got here, but there wasn't much I could tell 'em save what I thought I'd heard him say. He'd come into the shop, see - I own the little hardware place by the post office - and asked if I had any rat poison. Nothing strange in that, of course, but it was what he said next that startled me.

"Bloody rat's after the dog again," he said. Or at least, that's what I thought he said, but of course that's ridiculous, which is what I told the police. Rats ain't after dogs any more than grain's after the chickens. Dogs go after rats, not t'other way around.

So of course I asked him what he said, but he just looked around all startled and I saw that his eyes was all bloodshot, which is what I told the police. Like he hadn't slept in a week, which made me remember what Doris Vickers had said to me about there always being lights on in the Ramsbottom place all night lately. Anyhow, he just stared at me for a minute and then asked if that was all the poison I had.

"How much do you need?" I asked him.

"More'n this," was all he said, so I gave him what I had and then he was gone.

I thought it was strange, of course, but folks round here are entitled to be a bit strange now and then. A farm's a tough business to keep going all by yourself and it takes its toll on a man. Anyway, it wasn't the strangest thing that old Jim Ramsbottom had done recently. A week before that one of his cows had to be put down on account of stepping in a bear trap that old Ramsbottom had put in the field and forgotten to take up again. Big iron thing it was, proper Victorian museum piece. And when the police went in after it happened, they found that he'd nailed all the doors shut inside the house 'cept the one he used for getting from the yard to his kitchen. He'd even taken to sleeping in there and had made

himself a toilet by digging a hole in the nearest field.

Far as I know they never did find out what happened to him. Just wasn't there no more so that was that. The police searched the house, of course, opened up all the rooms that he'd nailed shut but didn't find nothing untoward. No skeletons in his closets, so to speak. Only thing strange was all the family portraits being hidden in the cellar and turned toward the wall so as the faces couldn't be seen. Or at least, that's the rumour that was out in the village, though who started that one I couldn't say.

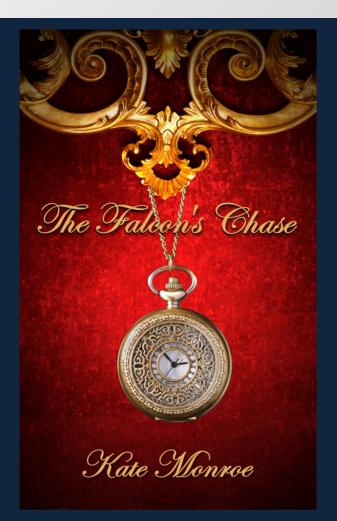
Anyhow, I'd better be getting off home to the wife and kiddies. I expect you'll be wanting to do the same. No? Not one for the family life is it? Old Ramsbottom was the same, never saw no appeal in it after Phil's mother upped and left 'em without a word of goodbye. Big place to rattle around in on your own though, enough to drive a man mad. Still, I expect you're used to it. Well, you have a good night and I'll maybe see you around.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Denzell lives in Cornwall, England. When not working as a specialist maths tutor or writing stories of horror and fantasy he can often be found hunting for ghosts in old mortuaries, castles and graveyards late at night.

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### Attention Whore Kerry G.S. Lipp

You ever think you feel your phone vibrate in your pocket and pull it out and check it only to see that there's nothing new?

THAT'S ME.

I do that.

\*\*\*

I gaze through the screen with static eyes and digital teeth at the idiot operating the device. The device in question this time is a smart phone, and usually is, but sometimes the idiot stares into the screen of his laptop. It doesn't matter either way to me. I live inside both. And I can jump between them faster than light travels. I'm smart enough and the idiot is dumb and predictable enough, that I am always one step ahead and waiting for him with my mouth wide open ready to devour.

I inhabit the cyberspace that the guy on the other side actually thinks is exclusively his own. It's not. I should love him, as much as he feeds me, but I can't help but hate his guts because he's just so goddamn stupid. I wonder what he'd be like born in another time, a time that didn't deliver instant gratification on a second by second basis. How he'd feel if he actually had to wait for important news to arrive in the mail, the newspaper, or those days even older in which important news didn't even exist.

But those days are dead and from those dead days rose a legion of digital demons just like myself. The needy idiot makes it so easy on me and I love the sustenance he provides, but sometimes I wish I could shoot a crackling, holographic hand out the front of the screen and smack him across the face or grab him by the throat and tell him to quit fucking looking at me.

I smile at that idea and think that perhaps in a short time those capabilities will indeed come to me. I am an infant, not even an infant. A zygote really, if you look at the timeline of the world. When you consider all those years in the past. The religious say a couple thousand, the scientists say a couple million, and I say who the fuck knows anyway?

What I do know is that regardless of the age of the earth or whatever you believe, me and my digital minions have only been around for a few years; the equivalent of a millimeter on the universal timeline.

And idiots like this guy looking through the screen right now are too stupid to actually see us, and keep feeding us without fail. The more they feed us, the hungrier we get and the faster we evolve. Everyday our numbers grow. Each newly activated cell phone or laptop or tablet connected to wi-fi creates another hungry attention whore.

Though I can't tell for sure, I think it's only a matter of time before we evolve to the point at which we can actually reach through the screens and deliver much needed wake up calls to the dazed and desperate people that constantly stare at us, stare into us, but never truly see us.

Once they figure it out, it'll be too late and we'll step out of our screens and our cyberspace all together, and then it will be time for us to rule the world outside the walls of the cyberunivserse that barely confines us. And the irony of it all is that they made us, they feed us, and they don't even know we're here. And they remain blissfully and shockingly unaware of what they've done.

Enough philosophy. Let me give you an example and tell you a bit about the idiot I'm currently dealing with. This idiot happens to be a writer. I've read a lot of his stuff in my spare time and while he's not that good, he's not entirely awful either.

This writer also happens to run a Facebook page, a Twitter page, and has the phone numbers of several girls to whom he is attracted. Like I said, he's a fucking idiot. But I love him because he feeds me almost all of his time. Harvesting all his free time like this, will eventually lead to my own immortality. And he gives it away so easily.

Sometimes I feel like an obese glutton, but I don't really gain weight because all I eat is time, which ironically is the only true possession that human beings own, but they are too stupid and far too

generous with that single possession. Sure it can be taken from them at any second by any number of means, but what they do until that happens, is really all they've got.

But they don't get it. Not even close. And that's why digital demons like myself constantly devour the time of all the humans out there. That's why we're smarter. That's why we are growing strong. I wish the idiots possessed vision enough to see the damage they're doing to themselves. Don't get me wrong, I want to replace them as the owner of this planet, but this isn't even a war. This is smashing someone with a sledgehammer while they snore in a helpless drunken sleep.

The only time that my idiot doesn't feed me is when he's asleep, but I suppose you could argue that sleep, or at least excessive sleep, which I've also noticed humans are apt to binge on, is wasted time as well. But even then, if he is asleep and wakes up in the middle of the night to piss or deal with heartburn, he feeds me a couple more nibbles of his time. He can't help but check everything his username is attached to. And I enjoy a midnight snack. But then he falls back asleep and I just wait for him to feed me the split second he wakes up in the morning and he does. Again. Without hesitation. And then, for the rest of his waking hours, he feeds me every five minutes until he again falls into sleep.

Maybe it's worse because he's a writer, maybe not. I don't know for sure but what I do know is that he has about ten short stories, one novella, and one novel manuscript submitted to a smattering of different small presses and lives in a wild pipe dream of expectant hope that he may one day be able to quit his day job.

So he constantly checks his email. In addition to that, he likes to check on his recent publications for new blurbs or reviews. I suppose most of that is forgivable, I think I can understand.

The idiot always gives me nibbles, but what I really have trouble understanding is when the idiot gives me a feast. It's so counterintuitive and self-destructive that it truly makes me wish I could force him to fight his own needy urges.

When that dumbass sits down to write or read for a free period of several hours, always, fucking ALWAYS, the idiot puts up a Facebook status, a couple fresh tweets, and starts at least one text conversation. Then he puts down his book or stops his fingers from striking the keys every minute or two to do the following: check email, check Facebook, check Twitter, check text messages and then email again. Usually he goes through the cycle twice before he goes back to the reading or writing. I've calculated. In an hour of his reading or writing time, he's good for less than 20 disjointed minutes that are unfair to the authors he's trying to read and the readers he's trying to dazzle. But that's the way it is.

I don't understand it. He's just crippling himself, his own enjoyment of entertainment and worst of all neutering his own ability to seamlessly create.

And for what? To see if someone favorited his tweet or liked his status? What a fool. It's like he has no concept of how successful, even being average at what he considers his passion, he could be if he just focused. Even if it is only a handful of people, his work is good enough to engage that small group emotionally and his own creativity would have the potential to resonate with others much more than a single, simple status acknowledgement resonates with him.

Though I love and need to devour his time, I pray that one day he gets it and sees some success before us digital demons dominate the world he thinks he knows.

Maybe it's an amateur move and one day he'll get past it and quit feeding me more than those girls with a brand new cell phone as a gift from mom and dad that they are given as they start their freshman year of high school. I hear from my friends, those chicks feed best. At least he's just checking the phone and not taking a bunch of selfies. I suppose that's worth something.

But it's not worth enough. And though I talk a lot of shit, I really do like the idiot and I want to see him succeed. Hopefully I'll be able to figure out a way to give him a digital slap in the face sometime

soon, but I'm still working on that one, and I'm not going to lie, I still enjoy sending that phantom vibration through his phone and down his leg and fucking with him just a little bit. I am a demon after all.

Though I get off on controlling and devouring his free time and stealing his attention, I'm not the attention whore. Honestly, I do hope he breaks his cycle and I do wish him well, but not quite enough to leave him alone. And even though I'm a monster and I love sucking the free time from his soul, I hope that he can rise above the bullshit and take control because I believe that's how geniuses finally recognize their talent. Most people, writers, bankers, painters, parents, whoever, don't break through the bullshit to achieve and fulfill their genius potential, but I hope this guy does.

I kind of like him.

And before you judge my idiot for constantly checking to see who's corresponded with him; ask yourself is he really that much different than you? Between digital demons like myself and you humans, just who exactly is the attention whore?

And just out of curiosity, did you make it through my short little story without feeding your own digital demon? Don't lie, because I can ask 'em and find out for sure.

Even if you didn't, I'm sure you will soon. I know you're thinking that since you just focused for a few minutes to read something you've earned your right to check your shit. Go ahead. We're always hungry.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Kerry teaches English at a community college by evening and writes horrible things by night. He hates the sun. His parents started reading his stories and now he's out of the will. Kerry's work appears in DOA2 and The Best of Cruentus Libri Press.

Twitter: @kerrylipp

Blog: - 666 Bottles of Blood on the Wall at www.horrortree.com



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## An Interview with Aiden Truss, Author

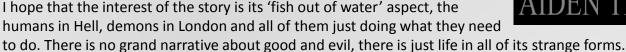
While forty-two years old physically, Aiden Truss maintains he's never really grown up mentally. He makes a good show of being an adult when he needs to be, but always feels like a fraud. This is despite the fact that Aiden has two sons and has been married for almost 25 years. He's done most jobs in his time, but in the last ten years or so has mainly been involved in marketing and copywriting. It's something that Aiden stumbled into accidentally, but which has given him more opportunities to write. He's been published in text books and journals, but all niche-market stuff and nothing that he keeps in pride of place on my bookshelf. *Gape* is the second novel Aiden has written, but the first to be published.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Aiden. Tell us, what made you decide to become a writer?

**Aiden Truss:** I suspect that I'm like most writers in that I never made a conscious decision to become one; I just always felt the need to write. It's always been an escape from the quotidian and from the difficult times in my life. I have on occasion reached for a bottle, but I'm more likely to reach for a pen if something gets to me. Of course, sometimes I reach for both and the results are brilliantly and unintelligibly embarrassing. I'm no Hemmingway when it comes to combining both skills!

#### SCP: What is Gape about?

AT: Gape is about what happens when the drudgery of a young girl's life is interrupted by the intervention of a demon. We don't know what his motives are at first, we just know that he's struggling with ennui despite his great powers and that he's looking for a diversion. He's fascinated with her desperation to cling on to life despite its poverty and he takes her under his (black) wing to spend time with her and to understand what being human really means. The trouble is that she is dragged into the politics of hell and the machinations of its ultra-competitive hierarchy. She also ends up with the power to revisit the wrongs in her life and her journey sees how she copes with these.



SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Gape* before they read it?

**AT:** That I hope that people see the humour along with the horror. It was written for misfits like me, with a fascination for the darker side of life in mind.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

**AT:** I'm a card-carrying and t-shirt-wearing pantser. I've tried to be more structured and to plot things out but it just doesn't work for me. My only concession to this is that I do tend to make notes on characters, on their appearance and attitudes just as an aide-memoir while I'm writing. *Gape* has a whole pantheon of exotic characters and I couldn't have ploughed through to the end without referring to my handwritten bestiary to remind myself of what these characters were like.



My characters drive the story and at the beginning of a chapter I often have no idea where they are going. That *Gape* has a fairly consistent story arc is entirely down to happy accidents and to the decisions that the characters made for themselves.

#### SCP: If you could cast *Gape*, who would you choose to play your main characters of Rose and Priest?

**AT:** I had this 'what if?' conversation with a friend and she desperately wants Daniel Craig cast as Priest. I've told her to keep her fantasies to herself!

I think that someone like Ben Whishaw (*Cloud Atlas, Perfume, Bright Star*), might bring the right combination of the ethereality and detachment to the role. As for Rose, Mary Elizabeth Winstead (*Scott Pilgrim, The Thing, Final Desination 3*), would be good. In fact, she could keep that look as Ramona from Scott Pilgrim and fit the bill nicely.

#### SCP: How would you like readers to see Rose?

**AT:** Rose is a victim, but she's not helpless. She's a fighter and a heroine, but not in the traditional sense. She is put into the position where she can make great changes in her life and in the lives of others, but she's no 'goody-two-shoes'. She's scarred and damaged by her past and this shapes her actions.

#### SCP: How would you like readers to see Priest?

AT: Paradoxically, I think Priest is the most human character in the book. He's the one floating around wondering 'what's it all for?' and unsure of where his life is going. He's reassuringly lost in what's going on around him. Much like we all are whether we admit to it or not.

#### SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

**AT:** Forcing myself to write regularly and not just when the feeling takes me. I was given flexibility on the deadline for *Gape* and deliberately gave myself a date to work to that meant that I had to write to a schedule. When I was an undergraduate, my screenwriting tutor told me that the difference between writers and wannabe writers was stamina. Everyone has a book in them, but not everyone has the resolve to sit in front of the keyboard for hours every day. I've always kept that advice in mind.

#### SCP: In your opinion, what sets Gape apart from other books of the same genre?

AT: It doesn't take itself seriously and it doesn't take sides. Though the story takes place against the backdrop of heaven and hell and good and evil, it's not really all about that. In fact, I tried to get some thinly disguised social commentary in there about the way people, particularly in a big city like London, react to the world around them.

# SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

AT: I always have two or three books on the go. I recently read Carlos Ruiz Zafon's The Shadow of the

Wind and was really impressed by that – it's a book about books, what's not to like? People have been recommending his stuff to me for a while and I'm anxious to read more. I'm currently enjoying Heroes Die by Matthew Stover and at bedtime I've been mostly reading the recent run of Marvel's Thor and Uncanny X-men comic books. I was always a dyed-in-the-wool D.C. guy, but the owner of my local comic store has made a recent convert of me.

#### SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

**AT:** I have the entire George Orwell oeuvre on my book shelves and most of Kurt Vonnegut's novels too. On the science fiction front, I love Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, both collections of which I've read several times. When it comes to horror and fantasy, for me the diabolical trinity is Stephen King, Clive Barker and Neil Gaiman. I'd recommend *The Stand, The Books of Blood* and *American Gods* by each respective author. If I want to read about politics and religion, then I reach for the late, great Christopher Hitchens.

#### SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

**AT:** That's a tough question. In terms of actually being published and having a book out there, I would count that as a success. I've been in so many conversations (usually in the pub), where everyone around the table claims to be either writing a book or thinking of writing a book. To be the one who can actually reach into his pocket and pull out a copy of *Gape* will be a success in itself.

Real success, I imagine, will be to hear that people have enjoyed reading my work enough to ask for a sequel.

SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are starting out?

AT: It won't write itself, so stop procrastinating and get typing!



SCP: What should readers walk away from your books knowing? How should they feel?

**AT:** Hopefully, that insanity and inanity pervades all. There is no divine plan and that life is what you make it, whether you live in the suburbs or in the seventh circle of Hell. Don't get too hung up on not knowing where your life is going, you're in good (and bad), company!

Thank you Aiden for taking the time to answer our questions.

For any readers interested in *Gape*, there will be an excerpt at the end of the eZine.



© Pixie Vision

#### **Dreamland** Gloria Bobrowicz

I woke suddenly. A feeling of dread echoed in every nerve ending. Something wasn't right, it was too quiet; Grandma and Grandpa were always up before me. I usually heard them arguing about something so inane that it borders on the ridiculous. The other morning it was because Grandpa left a spoonful of ice cream in the carton and apparently pissed Grandma off to no end. The day before that, Grandpa was yelling at Grandma because she ate the last banana and he didn't have one for his morning cereal. But today, nothing. Something was wrong, very, very wrong.

I jumped out of bed and ran to the kitchen. Grandma's mostly full tea cup was on the table along with Grandpa's half empty cereal bowl. Where did everyone go?

As I stood there in my pajamas, I heard a low growl. Afraid to turn around, I wanted to run to the back door but I couldn't move. Paralyzing fear routed me to the spot. I could hear it stalking me. Powerless to move, I prayed that I was still sleeping and this was all a dream. I heard a whimpering from the corner, it was my little sister. She looked at me with the saddest eyes I've ever seen and said, "It ate them, both of them, and now it's going to eat me."

I started to rush to her to assure her that it was only a dream. A dream of mine that she was in. As I started toward her, I heard another growl. Not wanting to turn around, I kept walking to her with arms outstretched. Before I could get there, something huge and hairy whipped past me. As I watched in horrified terror, it attacked my little sister. She didn't even have time to scream before it had her throat in his mouth, its teeth dug in deep.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Gloria is Editor-In-Chief at Sirens Call Publications as well as a freelance editor. In her spare time, she enjoys reading for pleasure and spending time with her family.

# Coming Soon from Sirens Call Publications

All little girls, and some little boys, know the game *He Loves Me*, *He Loves Me Not*. Each one who plays hopes to end on the *He Loves Me* petal. But how many of us really find that perfect mate? That one partner who will love us unconditionally for the rest of our lives? How many of us really live the dream, and how many live through the heartbreak of ending on the *He Loves Me Not* petal?

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not is an anthology of ten stories told from ten different perspectives on love and romance. Some have happy endings, while others end in tears, on a note of desperation, or even a new beginning. A few of the stories are fantasies come true, some steamy encounters of wanton lust, and others still are tales of woe – but the one thing they all have in common – they answer the age old question; does he love me, or does he not?



# Pen of the Namned



A collection of Horror writers that explore pain, horror and angst through poetry, muse, and short stories every Tuesday.

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#### Harvest Moon Blues Thomas Kleaton

"You know, we've been looking for you for awhile," said Will Lawson, peering at him in the rearview mirror. Brown leaves skittered across black asphalt in the patrol car's headlights, blown upwards by tiny gusts of wind. "Where were you going when we pulled you over?"

"To get some more beer, you pigs!" Ron Hutto's eyes were dark in his reflection, his lips poked out. His spiky black hair stood up on his scalp.

"More beer, huh?" Will eyed his partner, Al Thornton, whose features were twisted into a smirk. "From the way you were weaving on the road back there when we passed you, you won't need another beer for at least a month."

"Yeah, you cops think you're so smart. See if you get anything outta me when my lawyer shows up," he said, glancing from left to right and shrugging his shoulders.

Ron was halfway over the double-yellow line in his old Chevy when he rounded the curve, left headlight out. He'd yanked the wheel to the right as the sheriff's car veered over, blue lights coming to life, to avoid a collision. When Will had ordered him to get out and walk backwards, he'd tripped over his own feet and gone sprawling over the trunk lid. The lock had been missing for years, the latch barely functional. The lid sprang open as Ron slouched to the pavement.

In the beam of Al's flashlight, among empty beer cans and cardboard pizza boxes harboring half-eaten crusts lay the body of a gorgeous young woman. Her blond hair flowed around her head in a corona of flaxen-yellow, the bottom strands matted with still-drying blood. Her burnt sienna eyes were glazed over in death. Her throat had been sliced open, a great gaping grin from ear to ear.

"The way I see it, my friend, CSI will find enough DNA evidence in the trunk to tie you to at least five different murders around here. I wouldn't be trying to play hardball with the police if I were you," said Al. lighting a cigarette. He cracked his window and cool, blustery air came rushing in. October was Al's favorite month of the year.

Ron said nothing, his lips pouting, sullen. He stared out the window, watching the white lines of the road whiz by in the moonlight. The crisp scent of the roadside pines came wafting in, softly, as if afraid to intrude. "You told me I could have a cigarette."

"You'll get your cigarette. Later," said Will, staring into the mirror again. "First we want to ask you some questions."

"Like what?"

"For starters, how many were there?" said Al, turning around to glower at Ron over his shoulder.

"I told you. I ain't saying nothing until I get a lawyer."

"It was at least eight," said Will. "All of them found in shallow graves in the woods, all of them with their throats slashed. The coyotes had worked quite a few of them over. It's really disgusting to stumble onto something like that, Ron. Really disgusting!"

"Crap. You can't prove anything."

"Look familiar?" said Al, holding up a serrated hunting knife. Will peeked at Ron in the mirror, assessing his reaction.

"Where'd you get that?" said Ron, grimacing.

"Don't worry about where I got it. I want you to tell me about it, Ron. This is it, isn't it? The knife you used to slash their throats with?"

Al paused.

"The knife they're going to find in your house tomorrow, Ron, if you don't cooperate."

"Can I have that cigarette now?" said Ron.

"Sure." All poked a cigarette through the cage between the seats and Ron leaned forward, catching it in his lips. All it it and Ron relaxed back into his seat, uneasy, blowing grayish-blue clouds of smoke.

"There were twelve," he said, his cigarette dangling. "I carried four of them out-of-state. They're buried in a forest near Valdosta."

"Now we're getting somewhere," said Will. "That's what I like to hear. There was evidence of sexual assault, Ron. Tell me, did you have sex with them before or after you slashed their throats? When their eyes followed the knife, did their pupils dilate in stark terror? Did you get a thrill out of it? Did cutting them give you a hard-on?"

"You're darn right it did," he said, a malicious grin melting onto his face. His dark irises twinkled with glee in the scant light from the instrument panel. "Sometimes I wouldn't stop until *after* they were dead." Will slowed, brakes squealing as he turned onto a rutted dirt road leading into a pine grove.

"Well, we get a thrill out of it too," said Al. It was his turn to grin. The ghastly sneer on his face made Ron uneasy. He shivered. "And we don't like interlopers in our territory. It attracts unwanted attention." "You see, Ron, we're not really who you think we are," said Will, creeping to a stop and placing the gear lever in park. "The two deputies? We tossed them over the bridge at Miller's Creek. They'll be found in the water about three miles from here come morning, their throats slit courtesy of *your* weapon of choice."

Al dangled the knife in the air again.

"We picked up on your scent after we examined a couple of your victims," said Will. "The same way a good bloodhound will know he's picked up the trail."

"We smelled you," said Al. "Kinda like rancid gym socks."

"I don't care who you are!" Ron hollered. "You let me out of these cuffs and we'll see who's tough. Hutto the Hit Man, that's me."

"Oh, that's exactly what we plan on doing," said Will. "We're even going to let you have your knife back. Give you a sporting chance, so to speak. Al?"

Al got out and opened the back door, latching onto Ron's elbow to help him up. He slid the knife into the back pocket of Ron's jeans as he removed the handcuffs.

Ron stood on the cold red mud of the roadway, rubbing his wrists where the cuffs had bitten him. He looked up at the orange Harvest moon hanging low in the sky, suspended from the cold white stars. A subtle breeze nudged the swaying treetops.

Ron reached for the knife.

"I love a full moon," Ron said, smiling. "It really brings out the beast in me."

Al and Will stepped out of the shadows of the dew-glistened trees, their faces and hands covered with coarse dark bristles. Prominent bear-like snouts perched above rows of jagged canine teeth, and tapered, hairy ears lay snug against their skulls. Ron studied the curving claws stretching from the fingertips, then returned his gaze to their faces. He wet his pants, a dark stain spreading across his crotch.

Vultures' eyes, he thought, his mind frantic. They've got vultures' eyes.

Will growled and snapped his teeth at Ron as he spoke:

"That's funny, Ron, the full moon seems to have the same effect on us."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Thomas Kleaton grew up in Crescent City, CA. His stories have appeared in Death Throes Webzine, SNM Horror Magazine, Siren's Call Magazine, and Serial Killers III by James Ward Kirk. He is married and currently lives near Auburn University, AL.

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### Gators, Man! Pepper Scoville

Persephone tried to balance her weight so the cage wouldn't swing too much. The motion made her gorge rise. She feared dehydration had set in and she couldn't afford to throw up. At least she was small (petite, her mama liked to say), so balancing wasn't too hard.

Using a small twig, she poked at the cage's lock for the umpteenth time but the damn thing still wouldn't open. The crunch of boots on dry leaves caused her heart to flip in her chest. *Calm down, girl,* she thought to herself. *Keep your head now and you might just keep your head later.* 

She thought about the alligators that lay statue-still in the shallows, patiently waiting for their prey to make a wrong move. It seemed like she spent her whole life looking out for hidden dangers, only to miss the ones barreling straight for her. *Speak of the devils*, she thought.

Boudreaux and Tiny stomped through the undergrowth. Persephone skittered against the back of the cage which caused it to rock violently on the chain that suspended it from a large tree limb. The men chuckled.

"Damn, girl. Ain't you glad to see us?" Boudreaux drawled. He was the smarter of the two, not that it was saying much. Tiny laughed and his large belly shook. Boudreaux tugged at the simple cotton dress that barely covered the young woman. She kicked out at him and he sneered. "You ought to be nicer. We can make things go good or go bad." He leaned close so she could smell the rot on his breath. She turned her head and gagged. "Believe me, girl. You'll want it to go good." He slapped the cage so it swung wildly. Persephone held on for dear life. "I'll get the pot boiling. You bring her over when I call, you hear?" Boudreaux gave her a last wink and headed off.

Tiny stared at her and scratched his belly. Persephone licked her lips. "You got any water?" Tiny shook his head. "I'm awful thirsty, mister." He shrugged and glanced at his feet. "Y'all going to have some fun with me first?" The big man smiled, revealing missing teeth. "Yeah, I thought so."

Persephone smiled coyly at him. "Why not have some fun now? Just the two of us." She slid the dress's hem up, just enough for a peek. The toothless smile grew wider. She dropped the hem.

The smile dropped.

"Now, now. Open the cage and you'll the get full deal." Tiny glanced around. "He ain't looking. Come on. We don't have much time." Tiny pulled a set of ancient looking metal keys on a large ring from his overall pocket. The lock whined in protest as the key forced the tumblers to line up. With a loud creak, the door opened. Persephone eased her way out of the cage and winced as she hit the ground. Tiny grabbed her around the waist. "Hey, now. I'm not going anywhere. Just got to work the kinks out." She grinned and lay on the ground. Knees bent, legs wide, she raised the dress, inch by inch. Tiny's breath quickened.

Persephone smiled. *Just a bit closer now*, she thought. "Come on down." He nodded and unhooked his overalls. *Looks like the name Tiny isn't ironic after all*, she thought. He knelt between her legs. "No, baby. Come closer. I want to hold you." He obliged. She tilted her head back for a kiss. He leaned in. She let her knees fall to the side as her fingers closed around a good sized rock. His disgusting mouth pressed against hers as the rock slammed against his temple. He rolled to the side, clutched his head, and howled. Persephone leapt to her feet and bolted into the swamp.

Tiny howled louder as Boudreaux burst into the clearing. He took in the empty cage and the bloody Tiny. "Goddammit! Ain't you got no sense?" He hauled Tiny to his feet. "We'd best get her before the gators do."

Persephone tore through the forest. Her bare feet slapped against rocks and brambles but she ignored the pain. From the crashes echoing though the swamp, she knew the men were gaining on her. Boudreaux's voice boomed through the air. "You ain't never getting out of here, cher. Best give up now." Persephone dodged a low hanging branch and kept moving.

"Them gators gonna get you if we don't." Persephone jumped over large, knotty tree roots. "A gator can crush your skull like a soda can. It ain't pretty and we've seen it. Come on back, now."

No fucking way, Persephone thought. Her mama didn't raise no fool.

Mama loved mythology, hence the name Persephone. She was at the library in Bastrop, Louisiana where she was working at the paper mill and found a book called Venus in Furs. Mama assumed it was a book on myths and checked it out. Whoo doggy, that story weren't no myth. Mama had herself one of them epiphanies. She realized that women hold the power 'cause they got one thing that every man wants and if you play your cards right, a man will do anything to get it. Of course, some men are too damn stupid to be reasoned with. Those you just gotta slam a rock upside the head and run like hell.

Yep, mama didn't raise no fool.

Spanish moss brushed against her as she darted through the dense swampland. A twig snapped and she whirled around only to come face to face with Tiny. He reached out for her and she dropped to the ground, out of his grasp. She stumbled to her feet and lurched toward the water. A fallen branch caught her gaze. She lunged for it as Tiny grabbed her arm. He leered and gave the tender skin a rough twist. Persephone swung the branch, aiming for his eyes. The bark scraped against his face, gouging his flesh. He screeched and released her. Wasting no time, she raced farther into the swamp.

Boudreaux's hand shot out from behind a tree. He managed to snag a small handful of her hair. She cried out as the hair ripped from her scalp but she kept on running. Curses flew behind her.

Dashing through the trees, she passed an odd line of live oaks, similar to a perimeter marker, each marked with a red x. "You just made the worst mistake of your life, girl." Boudreaux called out behind her.

Persephone ignored the taunt and ducked under a low hanging branch. After a few minutes, she realized she hadn't heard the men for a while. Hazarding a glance back, she spotted them standing at the tree line. Tiny moved to continue the chase but Boudreaux shook his head and pulled him back. She could have sworn she heard him say something like "No way. Gators, man."

Screw that. She was going to live. She could watch out for a couple of reptiles.

Ever vigilant, she headed deeper into the swamp, even though exhaustion threatened to overtake her. The swamp grew dark though the heat didn't let up.

She should have never left the roadhouse, even if Wayne wouldn't stop flirting with that whore of a waitress. She always prided herself on her ability to drive after a couple of beers but she forgot about the damn wildlife. One of the biggest snakes she'd ever seen slithered out onto the pavement, directly in the truck's path. She should have run the stupid thing over but her instinct had been to swerve around it. Unfortunately, in her inebriated state, the swerve turned into a fishtail and she lost control. The truck slammed into a tree. When she came to, the blood from a cut on her forehead was already getting tacky. After a couple of kicks, she managed to get the door open and tumble out.

She wandered down the median of the two lane road, her sandaled feet occasionally catching on the cracked and broken surface of the old highway. When the headlights blinded her, she was relieved that someone was stopping to help her.

Ha.

As soon as they stepped from their pick-up, she knew she was in trouble. Boudreaux tried to sweet talk her as Tiny circled around behind her. She fought but Tiny choked her out in a matter of moments.

She came to in the cage. The men laughed and took turns poking at her with sticks and their fingers, giggling as she skittered around trying to avoid them.

She wished they'd just do whatever horrible thing they had in mind and let her go but then Boudreaux pinched her thigh and lamented, "She ain't got that much meat on her, but she'll have to do." Tiny licked

his lips. "Better than gator meat, am I right?" Boudreaux said and Tiny nodded in response.

Well, shit. She thought. Out of the fire and into the frying pan. While the men collected wood and filled a large cast-iron cauldron with water, Persephone schemed. She called upon all her mama taught her and she got away.

Persephone glanced at the dark swamp surrounding her. Not out of it yet, girl. What do they say about counting chickens before they hatch?

She stopped suddenly. A single light shone in the distance, a shack tucked between a handful Cyprus trees. She sniffed the air and her stomach growled. She ran her fingers through her tangled hair and rubbed at her face, pinching the cheeks. She smoothed the dirty, wrinkled cotton shift and sashayed toward the warmth of the decrepit building.

With a final deep breath to steady her nerves, she knocked on the door. No answer. She knocked again. "Hello? Anyone home?" She tried the door knob.

Unlocked.

Maybe my luck's changed, she thought. The door swung open on stiff hinges. She tiptoed into the shack and glanced around.

It was a simple shack, modestly furnished; only one room with a bed, a table, and a chair. A stew bubbled over a roaring fire in the fireplace. She lifted the lid. Whole frogs floated to the surface. She wrinkled her nose even as her stomach growled. Her attention was drawn to a small sink with a hand pump attached. Working the heavy lever, she almost cried out in joy as cool water rushed from the spout. She shoved her whole head under the running water and washed away the grim and slime of the swamps. Her hands wrung the water from her hair and she desperately wished for a bathtub that she could soak in and scrape the filth off of her.

Mama always said never look back, always look forward. You ain't what a man done to you, you're what you create for yourself. Nobody has to know your past, you give them only as much as you want them to see. Her mama was one smart lady.

Persephone studied her face in a sliver of mirror tacked to the shack's wall. The cut was red and swollen. Oh, well. She had worse things to worry about.

A flash of movement in the window caught her attention. She glanced up as something darted past the glass. "Hello? Is this your house? I didn't steal nothing. I just got lost in the swamp." Persephone peeked out the window.

"Hello?" The door creaked behind her. Startled, she grabbed the fireplace poker and held it like a baseball bat. She waited. Nothing happened. She reached toward the door knob with a trembling hand. As her fingertips touched it, it turned. She cried out and grasped the knob, holding tight as the person on the other side tried to force the door open. Persephone threw her shoulder against the door as it popped off its hinges. She fell to the floor. The poker rolled across the shack's dirt floor.

The man entered his home. Persephone winced as she eased up onto her elbows. What's wrong with his face? She thought. Is he holding a gator? It took a moment for her brain to comprehend what stood in front of her.

Patched overalls covered a rough green body which ended in a large bumpy head. Wide eyes with narrow slits for pupils sat on either side of the creature's skull. A long snout filled with razor sharp pointed teeth protruded from its face. A roiling growl rumbled from its throat.

Ohjesusgodwhatisitwhatisit Persephone's brain went into overdrive as the creature drooled and stood over her. Calm down girl. We'll get out of this. It looks like a man. It lives like a man. Shit, I'll bet it's smarter than those rednecks. Do your stuff, girl. You got the power.

She licked her cracked lips. "Hope you don't mind my dropping in. I got lost and your home was bright and inviting." The creature stood statue still. Watching. Waiting. It unnerved the girl.

Persephone slid her hands down her torso. "I bet it's awfully lonely out here, ain't it, mister?" The creature cocked its head to the side. She let her fingers play along the dress hem. The reptilian eyes blinked. Let's hope that's a good sign.

She crawled on her hands and knees towards the Gator-man. He didn't move. She reached its legs and sat back on her heels. Her hands slid up the denim. The creature remained still. Shimmying up his body, making sure to rub over every inch of the beast, she stood and put her hand on his chest. He didn't move. She reached for the overall's strap, a wary eye trained on those razor sharp teeth. He didn't move

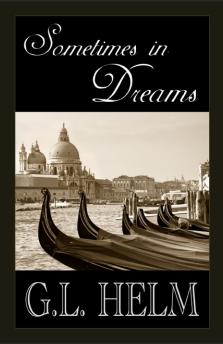
With a flick of her wrist, she unclasped one, then the other strap. The fabric pooled to the floor, revealing a leathery, muscular body. She couldn't help but smirk. *Definitely better endowed than that redneck*.

"You need some company?" Sliding down to the floor, her wet hair fanned across the dirt floor as she lay back. He took a step toward her. She parted her legs and pulled the hem up. The creature knelt down between her legs.

Persephone smiled and she could have sworn the thing smiled back at her. It opened its mouth wide, revealing even more teeth. "That's it. Come to me, baby." As the creature hovered over her, she thought Jesus. Just like all the rest. Her fingers inched their way over to the fireplace poker. The Gator-man leaned his mouth toward her. She arched her back and tilted her head, her lips opened for a kiss as her fingers slid around the poker. Her last thought was That's right girl, your mama didn't raise no fool as the Gator-man's jaws clamped down and neatly severed her head from her body.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Pepper Scoville has been writing stories since she could hold a pencil and horror is her first love. She lives in the subconscious of more timid writer, emerging only when duty calls. She enjoys moonlit walks and things that go bump in the night.

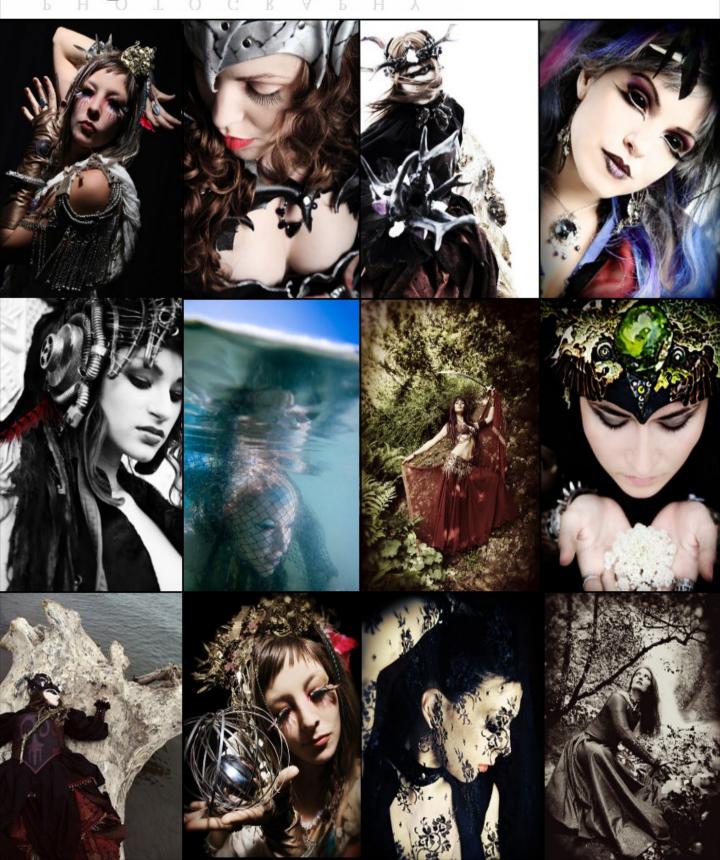
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#### Leeds Nina D'arcangela

Feet pounding as fast as they can, I tear across the hard-packed ground. Tree branches slap my arms, scrape my face, tangle in my hair; I don't think I'm gonna make it. I hear it chasing me, not quite on my heels yet, but close enough to make my skin want to crawl clean off my bones. At any moment I expect to be snatched from the trail by god-knows-what kind of clawed hand. The thing is so near I can smell its stench. It's enough to make me gag; make my eyes water and my nostrils burn. I set out to find it, to track it – to prove its existence. What a fool. I was never tracking it; it was tracking me the whole time.

If I can make it to the water, everything will be all right – that's what all the stories say. Make it to that deep blue pool buried in the Pines and for some reason, the creature won't come any closer.

I can't be too far from the lake by now. Christ – I must have trekked thirty miles into the dense Barrens since leaving the road. It's got to be around here somewhere, I'm right where the locals said the water would be. But there was something not quite right about the way those 'Pineys' were smiling...

My foot tangles in an exposed root where the dirt loosens and turns to a softer, more sandy mixture. In near panic, I almost go down, but somehow manage to keep my feet beneath me. The forest is starting to thin out quickly, and I can see a much brighter patch ahead.

A guttural roar sounds behind, almost on top of me. I can feel the air shift to the side as my eye catches sight of something black whipping by just off to the right. I scream, no sound comes out, but I don't stop moving. Before I know it, the trees clear and I stumble onto a small sandy patch.

I can see the water and whisper a silent prayer of thanks to those hicks who somehow managed to get me here. I can't believe I made it. I fling myself down at the water's edge and finally dare to look behind me. I can't see it clearly, but I can feel it; standing just under the dense canopy of the trees – hiding in the darkness.

Dunking my head into the water to cool off, I laugh when I realize what I'm holding. The entire time I was running, I was clutching my cell phone in my hand, but lost everything else. Can you hear me now? Nope! More hysterical laughter, the sound desperate even to my own ears. There's no cell service out here. I can't believe that in my panic the only thing I managed to save is this useless piece of crap. One last look at it, and I chuck the thing as far as I can into the water.

Leaning down again, I taste the water. First a bare sip to make sure it's safe, then small handfuls to quench my unbearable thirst. Making myself stop, I roll over and stare at the sun like it's my new found savior and God Almighty. I can still hear the thing rustling in the trees, but I'm safe – I made it to the water.

I must have drifted off from exhaustion, maybe simple relief, I don't know. When I wake, the sun is low and the dim shadows are half-way across the small beach. I hear it breathing again. A spike of adrenaline slashes through me and I dive for the only hope I see; one long bow from a white cedar reaching out over the water. Scrambling to it, I climb as far out as I can, shimmying backward the whole while. From what I know of the Blue Hole, the water is deep as hell. Drowning is no better an option than feeding myself to Mother Leeds' thirteenth son, and I would prefer to do neither.

As full night falls, I can see its red eyes glaring at me, along with the shadowy impression of a dark, winged figure. Its tail flicking from side to side accompanies the sound of tree branches being slashed to ribbons. Bellying down further onto the tree limb, I try for a little more distance. I know my chances of surviving the night are slim... Still, if I can keep my balance and stay awake, I might just make it until morning.

I hear a faint splash, and a responding roar from the woods – almost a challenge. Terrified to take my eyes off the beast before me, but more afraid of what might be below, I chance a glance downward. Hands reaching from the deep blue depths are all I see before I'm yanked from my perch, screaming for help that's never going to come.

"Howdy there, Bob, Tomas," the deputy says as he steps from his vehicle to greet the two men sitting outside the small shack that serves as a convenience store in this area of the Pine Barrens.

"Mornin' Officer," they reply in kind. "What can we do you for?"

"Well, seems we found a car, one of those German import types, parked a ways down the road in one of the pull offs. Little yellow thing called a Jetta. You boys know anything about that?"

Looking at each other, Tomas answers, "Might. Some young girl in a yeller car stopped in here yesterday asking for directions to the hole. Could be it's the same car."

"Tell me you didn't give them to her, did you?" exasperation plain in the officer's voice.

"Mighta'. Don't see why we wouldn't if she asked," Bob answers rolling a toothpick between his teeth.

The deputy reaches into his vehicle and grabs the radio handset. "Dispatch, we're gonna need a tow out on Rt. 532. It's a yellow Jetta – can't miss it. Hang on just a sec." He releases the com button. "Boys, she have anyone else with her?"

"Nope, but she had a crap load ah gear in the back seat of that foreign auto-mobile of hers."

Clicking the mic back on, the deputy relays, "Dispatch, I'm gonna need a sweep crew on the ground looking for a backpack, tent, a phone – anything they can find heading from that location toward the hole."

"Copy that, Tim. Do we need a rescue team down there too?" the dispatcher asked with hope and concern in her voice.

Looking over the roof of his car at Bob and Tomas, seeing the grin on both of their faces, he answers "Negative on the rescue team, just the cleanup crew and the tow." Getting back in the car and replacing the now silent handset, the deputy tips his hat to the men on the bench as they nod in return. He puts the car in drive, and mutters to himself "Fucking city folk," as he drives off.

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

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#### Down the Mountain Rebecca Snow

Amy stopped the car and stared out at the gully of a pothole in front of the little hatchback's bumper. She shifted into reverse and sighed at the fog bank encasing the vehicle.

"We'll never make it to the overlook," she said. An acorn smacked the windshield on its downward plunge and made her flinch.

"Want me to get out and guide you?" Daniel asked. A lazy smile passed over his face as he brushed a bit of dark hair from his eyes. "We passed a parking lot back around the turn. We can walk up instead. I don't think it's far."

Drumming her gnawed fingernails on the steering wheel, she watched Daniel step onto the abandoned dirt road and scoot past the drop off. He stepped behind the bumper and walked her around the bend, waving his hands like a traffic cop.

"I'm not sure I want to walk to the top in this fog. I can barely see you." Amy craned her neck, searching for Daniel's shadowy form.

He motioned her into the lot and poked his head through her open window as she parked.

"I've got a flashlight," he said, rooting in his jacket pocket. "Don't you think I can protect you?"

She could hear the smirk in his voice. Amy smiled as she thought of the random turns they'd taken to make it this far, most dictated by whims and tailgaters. None of the roads had been on his brother's hand drawn map. In spite of that, they'd found the park lane and followed it as far as her compact car would allow.

"We should brought your truck," she said. "But I guess we can make it if we stay out of the ditch." Daniel took her hand and helped her from the car. "On the way up, I can tell you the story 'bout the guy with the hook hand." He held the lit bulb under his chin and cackled.

"Do you want me to drive away and leave you here, or do you want to try and see those mystery lights?" Amy gave his chest a half-hearted push.

Steadying himself from the forced stumble, Daniel lowered the beam and offered Amy the crook of his arm. She grasped his elbow with both hands and peeked over her shoulder, checking her door handle for a wayward hook.

The damp air closed in around them. Washboard ruts in the packed dirt road looked like the surface of a puddle that a stone had disturbed. An unidentifiable animal scurried to the ditch and dove for cover.

"What are the lights supposed to be?" Amy asked as Daniel led her around the deeper erosion.

"Nobody's sure. Some people say that they're reflections from headlights, other people think they're methane." Daniel's shoulders rose in a shrug. "I've heard everything from UFO abduction sites to Cherokee ghost women searching for their dead warriors."

"What do you think they are?" Amy asked, tripping over a large stone.

Daniel steadied her. The flashlight's glare streaked the cloud bank around them. "No idea. I figure when I see 'em, I might be able to pick a theory."

"You just made your own mystery light." Pointing to the sky, Amy grinned.

Daniel waved his arm in random smileys, curlicues, and swirls. Amy's vibrant laughter attempted a feeble echo before dying in the fog.

"I've probably got the tourists shakin' in their boots." He pointed the beam back to the ground. As they walked, they listened to their footfalls on the tamped dirt mix with the curious night sounds.

\*\*\*

They reached the overlook as the fog receded. Daniel's flashlight illuminated yards ahead instead of feet until he flicked the switch and the moonless night closed in around them.

"Hey," Amy squealed. "Let me get settled before you take my light away."

Daniel lit the surrounding area once again. Amy skipped down the short stone steps and perched on

one of the rock walls. She rested her elbows on the weathered surface and glanced around the clearing. No one waited with them.

"I'm ready," she said as Daniel appeared beside her and restored the world to darkness. "Don't people come up here all the time?"

"That's what Randy said." He tapped out a drum beat on the cold stone.

"Your brother isn't the most observant person when it comes to the places he takes the flavor of the week." Amy squinted into the pitch black.

"I think a week is pushing it." Daniel nudged her, causing her to choke on a laugh.

A companionable silence rose between them as they stared into the empty space. An owl called in the distance. Another answered. Leaves rustled in a stray breeze.

Amy gasped. A fleck of light zipped in the valley and disappeared.

"Did you see that?" She pointed, not realizing Daniel couldn't see her.

He reached for her arm and followed it down to the elbow. Tracing the seam on her thin jacket, he found the direction she'd motioned and laced his fingers through hers.

"Nope, I didn't see it."

She squeezed his palm flat on her own. "It was this bright dot. Way too intense for a car, even with high beams."

"I don't think there are roads down in the valley, but some of those LED lamps are pretty powerful."

"There it is again." Amy leaned out over the rock wall that held her from a plummet she couldn't see.

A ball of light flashed in the deep valley, split in two, and raced in a random zigzag through the trees. One half fizzled back to darkness while the other crept like a dog sniffing for a lost bone.

"Wow." Daniel's voice wavered. "I've never seen anything like that not attached to a video game or a bottle rocket."

The flash glimmered a dull pink on its next appearance. A green flicker grew beside it before bouncing down the hillside after a collision with the blushing glow. The original orb pulsed and snaked its way closer to the mountain face below the two onlookers. As it moved, the pastel deepened to a ruby twinkle, glittering through the sparse leaves before rising above the trees and popping in sparks.

"I wish I'd brought my camera," Amy whispered. "It's just like the Fourth of July."

"Without the scorched eyebrows." Daniel coughed.

"That wasn't my fault." She lifted his arm and nestled into the warmth of his jacket, never letting go of his fingers. "You were the genius who wanted to show off with sparklers between your teeth."

The light reappeared. The red deepened to crimson and floated halfway up the cliff face as if trying to find purchase for the climb. Daniel squinted as it slunk toward them.

"Look at that." He released Amy's hand, untangled her from his coat, and pressed himself against the rock wall. "I think it's solid."

Amy stared down at the rising sphere. If she tilted her head sideways, she thought she could see arms reaching through the glow and pulling the brightness up the precipice. As she peered over the edge, a scowling face twisted in the sparks. Long dark braids swayed as it climbed. Bare toes scrambled up the rock.

"I don't like this." She backed away from the drop. "Something's wrong with it. It looks like a body."

"Don't worry." Daniel turned toward her quaking voice. "It disappeared again. Anyway, it's just a light."

A blinding flash blazed across the overlook, streaking Amy's eyesight with a red line. It stopped next to Daniel, and tendrils of maroon wove through the air and enveloped him. He swatted at the threads as they wrapped around his arms and held them in a hug at his sides. Grunting as he struggled, he dropped

his flashlight on the pitted rock terrace. Amy lunged for it and flicked the switch, hoping to scare the creature.

Releasing Daniel, the glowing strands fizzled into the battery powered beam. With nothing to resist, he fell into a heap on the stone outcropping.

"Are you ok?" Amy cried, running to where he had collapsed.

"I think so." Daniel rubbed his arms. "Whatever that thing is, it's strong as an ox. I didn't think it would ever let me go."

"What did it want?" Amy thrust a hand toward him.

"I have no idea, but I know what I want." Daniel accepted the extended arm and let her pull him to his feet. "I want to get out of here."

The flashlight exploded into a thousand points of light. Fusing together, the dots took the shape of a woman. She wore a loose-fitting hide dress. Limp braids clung to her head and neck. A veneer of skin blazed the same eerie shade of blood as the light around her. The monster sprang at the couple, separating the two figures like a runner in a game of Red Rover.

Amy tumbled over a small stump and landed in dried evergreen needles. The scent made her think of Christmas. Daniel stooped on his hands and the balls of his feet in front of the knee wall. The light swelled around him as he stood.

Settling back into a female figure, its fingers smoothed Daniel's hair. Its head tilted as if to look into his eyes. A closed smile bloomed on cherry lips. Wrapping both hands around his wrists, it pulled him a step toward the valley. Daniel leaned away from the aggressor, shoes sliding across the smoothness of the worn rock as he was dragged.

"Find your own man," Amy growled.

She shot to her feet and reached for a dangling braid. A bolt of energy flashed, and Amy fell back on the pathway. Tiny pebbles sliced her skin and lodged in her palms. Crawling forward, she grabbed one of Daniel's legs and pulled. A wisp of light plucked her from him and tossed her into the side of a pine tree. A chunk of her hair stuck in sap and tore from her scalp.

"He's not yours!" Amy fingered the wound and found it weeping.

In spite of his thrashing, the creature moved Daniel closer to the ledge, an inch at a time. His hips rested on the waist-high stone barrier. Amy crouched. Targeting the form's torso, she lunged. A look of surprise flashed on the amorphous face before a toothy grin spread across it. A step away from impact, the world winked black. Amy collided with Daniel using all the force she'd gathered for the enemy. They tumbled in a mass of arms and legs and shrieking cries over the side of the cliff. On impact, their screams died with them.

A rose tinted light blinked in the distance.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Rebecca Snow is a Virginia writer whose work has appeared in a number of small press anthologies and online and on Facebook (look for her bloody handprint).

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# Sirens Call Publications



## One Photograph, Two Points of View: Comparative Flash Fiction

Slivers Nina D'Arcangela

Slivers, that's all I ever saw - peering through the crack of a door that didn't seat in its jam; between window and sash where the slightest breeze blew; below floorboards that had shrunken, leaving the barest opening. Slivers of it as it watched and waited. For what, I dared not imagine in my waking hours, though I'd suspect it was for my guard to falter.

Closeting myself in a fully sealed room with no chinks each night, I allowed myself sleep when it would come. My dreams invaded by visions of that godless eye. It stared at me relentlessly, the light absorbed by its depthless void; a lie of beauty hidden among the allure of its iridescent skin. But I knew far better than to be fooled by its camouflage. Looking into that eye, I could see what it promised - it promised pain, it promised torture, it promised an end that would not come swiftly or easily. Worse yet than the uncaring, unfeeling eye were the rows of endless teeth. They glistened and dripped saliva. Translucent and

viciously pointed; some jutted straight upward to pierce and stab, others curved backward toward its bulbous throat, insuring that once it had snagged its prey, there would be no escape. Teeth designed for ripping, tearing, rending chunks of flesh from bone to be swallowed whole. A gruesome death awaited any that it caught. I did not wish to die that way.

Perhaps worst of all were the moments sleep did not come in my tiny sanctuary. I'd crouch listening as it scratched at the walls, the floor, the ceiling above me. It knew where I hid; it was only a matter of time before it breached my woeful defenses. This we both knew, but still the want to live another day...



Stalemate Julianne Snow

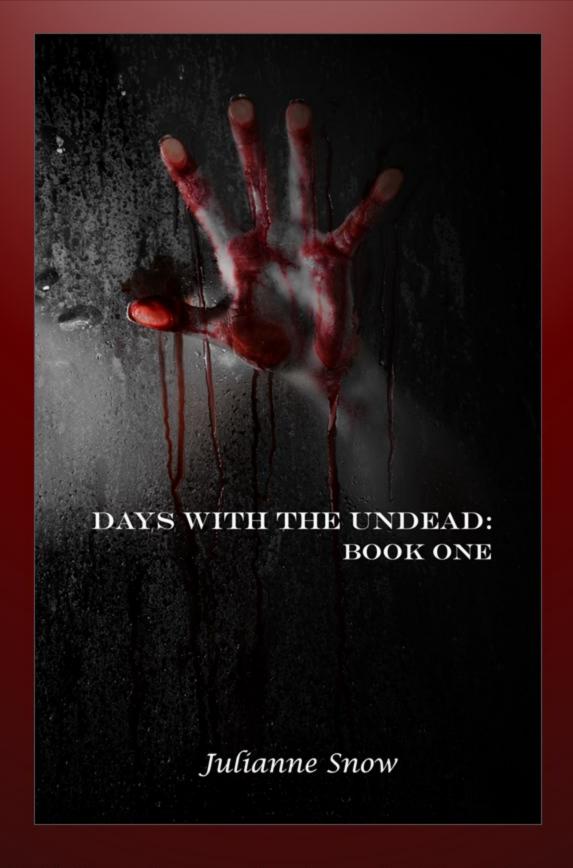
As I stared at it, I saw the mirror reflection of Earth in its eye. I was probably fooling myself, but as I was hard pressed to move from my spot, all I could do was gaze into the bulbous vacuum it radiated. I knew it was in there; it hadn't moved from its spot since it first noticed me but trust me, it had the upper hand if a fight ensued.

Massive. That's the only word to accurately describe what faced me sideways, its eye flinching ever so slightly as it sized me up. I was going to end up a snack, of that I was sure. I couldn't outrun this thing, especially not underwater. Instead I was going to die and it was going to eat me. Hell, I haven't even been able to get a good look at its teeth yet. I could see them in my periphery, but there was no way I was going to look away from that eye. It was almost as if I was in a trance and by not moving, I had entranced it in return. I was willing to grasp at any straw at this point.

Stalemate. With neither of us

moving, we were going nowhere. I knew I was running out of oxygen, but I had no actual recollection of the time I'd spent transfixed. Even as I prayed, I knew it was not going to end well. I could feel its triumph through the cold and murky depths. It was going to devour me and I could feel how much it would enjoy it. Was that the flicker of a shadow behind me? I turned slowly, as if the sluggish speed would save me from my fate, only to come face to face with another gigantic cerulean eye.

The Rules: 300 words only



Available on Amazon, Smashwords, & CreateSpace

## Monster Miracle Austin

**M**illions of cold and hairy tentacles flopped under the *Holly Hobbie* dressed canopy bed, as Morgan positioned herself back into a forgotten corner

Odors constantly stung her black and blue swollen eyes

No one heard the screams behind the card-box walls...

Solitude became her temporary fix with makeup to conceal the visible

Terror started again after cheerleader practice everyday

Events too appalling to rewind--only permanent stained memories replaying in her mind

Red x-ray eyes burned holes to unlock every door she hid behind, until Morgan never ran again....

## **Infinity** Miracle Austin

Full moon last night, so was I...

I stared in the smeared mirror with broken edges.

I wiped it with my wet sleeve.

The bathroom dim sapphire light flickered off and on, as flies swarmed above me.

I could feel my arms touching both sides of the filthy walls.

The broken faucet dropped small sewage droplets.

No fresh water there or in the dark, coffee stained toilet

My shirt and pants were both saturated from earlier.

I peeled them off and buried them deep into the overflowing trash behind me.

I wiped down my wet footprints with the coarse paper towels.

My claws finally retracted, as well as my bloodstained fangs.

I opened up the window with one glance.

As my arms rested close by my side, I flew back into the maroon sky. I soared effortlessly with my black glistening wings spread wide open and eagle eyes on my next prize...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Miracle Austin works in the hospice world. She's an emerging author who enjoys writing diverse free-verse poetry with mini-stories and short stories. She's been writing since hearing "Who's Gonna Drive You Home," by The Cars. She's working on her first novella and resides in Texas with her family.



Available on Amazon,

Smashwords, & Create Space

## **Ditchcrawlers** Mathias Jansson

In the ditches they were crawling creatures from the shadow side horrible experiments of man a terrifying mixture of damaged DNA results of a radioactive disasters multiplying faster and faster

A dead hairy bag of meat crawling in the mud looking for road killed humans or any poor animal to eat

They were the lowest scum on earth outcast and damned by human and beast homeless hobos following the roads seeking shelter in rabbits holes

They reproduced in speed spreading as a disease forming gigantic colonies at the highways dinners stops

Starved as a swarm of grasshoppers they started to move into town eating everything they saw billions of ditchcrawlers rolling over the land a terrifying pest was hunting man

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call and The Poetry Box. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction as Suffer Eternal anthology Volume 1-3, Hell Whore Anthology Volume 1-3, Barnyard Horror and Serial Killers Tres Tria.

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## Ripped from Heaven Patrick Tumblety

Paul McCaffrey stared at the surface of the ocean while he contemplated the world at his back. In a few minutes his present was about to change into something unrecognizable from his past. The irony was as vast and deep as the water raging below the cliffs. He drew a deep breath, making sure to inhale all the fear and uncertainty into one tiny ball in the middle of his chest. When his body was full, he let that hot air out in a violent stream between his lips, spilling it over the waves so they would wash his former life out to sea. A delightful tingle of happiness filled that space inside of his chest and remained there like a burning sun, beaming warm light out into the universe in every direction. No more would he allow negativity inside of his newly calmed countenance.

The heat on his back intensified. The cloud that had been blocking the sun finally stopped being a nuisance. They were hoping for a clear day. They had planned for the gathering after noon, at two o'clock to be exact, so they could have the ocean as background and their faces lit by the sun when it was time for pictures.

The clapping of tuxedo shoes across the planks of the overlook stairs signaled Paul that it was time. His best man was coming to escort him to his new life waiting inside the church. Paul never thought that this day would come, when a woman would vow her unconditional love, his family and friends healthy and there to witness it, and the world before him open and bright. Not in his wildest dreams did he think true happiness was attainable. But there he was, about to vow his undying love to the greatest person he had ever known, and accept that not only was true love and happiness attainable, it was so strong, so true and pure, that he no longer feared it could be taken away.

The large golden bells beckoned from the church's tower. The wind from the water blew his outfit askew, so Paul strengthened up the knot on his tie and pulled on the front of his jacket to set it back in place on his shoulders. No longer was he a weak man, afraid of the world. He was ready, so he turned his back to the deep dark sea and walked toward a sunny future.

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Sophia's lipstick was so bright that Paul didn't need to lift his fiancé's veil to see that she was smiling. He unveiled her from the cascading fabric and met her blue eyes. The priest was talking, and Paul was sure he had said something in response, but all he could think about was how blessed he was to be looking into those eyes.

Paul was ripped from his daze when Eduardo stepped beside him and opened the box to present the gold rings. The Spaniard smiled sweetly at his twin sister as she plucked the groom's ring out of the fabric inlet. Paul pinched out the bride's ring, and Eduardo patted his shoulder before stepping back to his position on the sanctuary of the ancient Spanish church.

Sophia and her brother were raised in Mexico. They moved into their aunt's home in Florida so they could attend a private high school, and of course, for the other reason that Paul did not want to think about during such a happy moment. Paul met Eduardo at the University of Pennsylvania where Paul majored in anthropology and Eduardo in archeology. Having seen each other in several classes together, their mutual interest in the ancient world served as a good icebreaker to their friendship. "The rest," they would say with their tongues in their cheeks, "is ancient history."

The details of how Paul met Sophia were complicated. When asked, they had to decide if their audience wanted the simple answer of "met through her brother," or if they wanted the detailed version that was filled with dread, sacrifice, and death. The latter was usually only dictated to close family and friends, usually after a lot of drinks and never without a heavy air of intimacy, like telling a scary story in the dark.

Paul glanced around the church so he could see his family and his soon-to-be's smiling and angling around each other to take pictures. For Sophia, and for their new life together, they all mustered up the

courage to come back to this church after all that had happened. Courage and hope were the reasons Sophia wanted to be married there. Joining together at that site was a bright way to christen such a dark place with new light, for herself, and for her parent's memory - that was their favorite place too, before they were killed.

The priest took the young couple's hands between his wrinkled palms and continued his sermon. His grey eyes flicked toward Paul and then back down. Paul read a lot in that quick glance. Somehow, the priest knew the path where Paul's thoughts were leading. Paul concentrated on their cuddling fingers and tried to keep his mind in the present.

Unfortunately, he couldn't help but stare at the lack of pigment in the old man's skin. His every feature, from head to foot, were shades of white. Everyone inside the church knew the man wasn't born as an albino. He was the last of only eight survivors of The Great Bellowing. He had been scared nearly to death.

Until twenty years ago, The Great Bellowing was no more than a myth from Mayan folklore, a civilization mysteriously undocumented after 900 AD. Had anyone heeded the warnings carved into the church's walls, they would know that the Alara'phagein, with its unfathomable size and unknown power, single-handedly weeded the Mayans from the Earth.

The chiseled markings around the nave and chancel depicted a man plunging his body into the sea; The Bellowing begins - strange noises from beyond the horizon. The sacrificed man returns with the creature in tow. It is feeding off of the man's deepest impulses and desires, and with that power it will oblige. It's a cautionary tale of humanity's ability to be influenced by power.

People living near the cliffs have strange anxieties and are prone to act out certain aggressions such as stealing, rape, and murder. It's illegal to drink or have drugs in the area, and is patrolled by one of four shifts of government-trained officials chosen by the United Nations so that no one person would be there for more than three days, for risk of becoming beckoned by the creature's yearn for power.

Twenty years ago, every person on the planet discovered the legend was true.

"Paul," the priest forcefully exclaimed, "Do you take Sophia as your wedded wife?"

Paul tried to pull himself back to the present, as though he were trying desperately to punch out of a nightmare. The priest's eyes were sharp, pleading Paul to snap out of his mind.

A woman coughed out in the audience and Paul tilted his head to see Sophia's Aunt Amelia excuse herself from the room. The heat was rising, even more than usual for eastern Mexico, and another cursory glance of his family showed many of the women wiping their brows and most of the men taking off their jackets. He looked toward Natalie, Sophia's best friend and bridesmaid. She had just put down her bouquet and fussily wiped the sweat from her forehead and her neck. Her eyes glazed over and her lids drooped. Paul readied his body to catch her, but Natalie shook her head slightly and opened her eyes, fighting back her fatigue. Paul's father must have seen this too because he approached the sanctuary with a bottle of water. Without stopping the ceremony she took a sip and handed it back. She then wiped the sweat from her forehead and neck again and reached down for her flowers. A line of red flowed down the length of her hand and dripped from her index finger onto the bouquet. When she stood, blood ran down her bare shoulders from somewhere behind her neck.

Paul caught Natalie before her body hit the stone ground. Her head in his arms, he could see that she hadn't merely wiped her skin, but had scratched through it with her fingernails. He patted Natalie's face and grabbed the water from his father who now stood at the head of the large crowd that gathered. Sophia shifted into doctor-mode and persuaded the crowd to keep their distance.

Paul poured the water over the bridesmaid's forehead and on her chest as Natalie panted for air. He patted her face and told her to stay awake, then pulled on the front of her gown, ripping the seam to loosen the hug it had across her chest.

"Do it, Paul, please," she said, but he didn't understand her request. Still panting, she looked up at him with a hard face, as though she were angry, "Right here in front of everyone."

"What are you..." Paul didn't understand what Natalie wanted.

"Kiss me, Paul. You know how long I've wanted you. Please."

Paul looked up at Sophia, who had her white-gloved hand to her mouth.

"Is it because of her, Paul?" Natalie said in a voice filled with anger and passion. She lifted her head slightly and whispered toward his ear, "I'll kill her if you want me to."

Paul shuffled away from Natalie, placing her head gently on the ground. He looked up at the priest, but the man was not paying attention. He stared out of the front doors of the church and toward the ocean's horizon.

"Padre," Paul pleaded, "This can't be..."

Natalie screamed and pushed herself to her feet. She lunged at Sophia, violently knocking her friend off of the sanctuary's rise and onto the ground. Natalie grabbed Sophia's neck in both of her hands and squeezed.

"I'm sorry, Sophia," Natalie yelled maniacally, "but I'm taking what I deserve."

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Eight people, including Paul, could not pry Natalie off of Sophia. His bride was turning blue and had passed being able to gasp for air. Paul raised his fist and thrust it down, violently beating the back of his friend's head until he heard her bone crack. He felt a twinge of joy when the bone gave, not because he had successfully knocked Natalie off of Sophia, but to his horror, because he enjoyed hurting the woman.

Madness was changing their minds. The Bellowing was beginning again.

Sophia gasped for air. The skin around her throat was bruised, but that seemed to be the extent of the damage. Paul approached the priest, whose gaze was still fixated beyond the church.

"I don't have the strength this time, my son," he whispered with a scratchy voice, "not anymore."

"Are the acolytes ready? Can they serve?" Paul asked, hastily.

"No," he croaked, still looking in the distance, "they are young. Their resolve is not strong enough. They have barely lived. They..."

"Okay, Padre. There is a shelter underneath the church. Can you lead them there?"

The priest finally looked toward Paul, "I can't protect them from this. No one can be saved."

Paul closed his eyes and tried to think of a way to save his loved ones. He knew the old man was right; if there wasn't going to be a miracle, this was probably the end of the world. Twenty years ago a homeless teenager slept in the hills undetected, her soul softening under the creature's influence with every passing day. She unknowingly gave her will over to the evil and purged herself into the sea. A cadre of devout men held their ground to pray against the rising darkness. Over fifty of those men died with only eight surviving to teach the type of fearless resolve needed to stand against the plaguing madness and the witnessing of oblivion. The most popular theory is that the holy men's righteousness and hopeful resolve counteracted the teen's desire for destruction. However, no one knew if it had been the holy pleading that returned the creature to the unknown depths, or the mere fact that the teen's heart failed from malnutrition and strain. After snacking on some of the citizens still trying to flee the area, the Alara'phagein bellowed, and the ones whose ears were not swelling and filling with blood swore that the sound was laughter. The monster squished the young girl between its fingers as one would extinguish a candle's flame and then returned to wherever it originated.

Almost everyone in the church was shouting. Some were crying. Some were praying. In little time they would start tearing each other apart.

This is it, Paul knew, this is the moment when my happiness gets taken away.

No. That's the madness clouding your judgment. Don't give up on life again.

"You may not be able to save them from this, but until then, please help me save them from each other."

The priest nodded, understanding Paul's plight. He lookup up toward the sea again and breathed in deeply, "It's here."

Paul turned to see the shadow hovering slowly in front of the horizon and getting larger by the second. A loud roar filled the air, like a warning, but in reality it was a death knell.

"Everyone, please follow me down into the shelter," the priest's voice boomed across the church. Everyone helped each other forward across the sanctuary and toward the back door.

Paul tore away the train from Sophia's gown and lifted her, cradling her body in his arms.

Sophia looked up at him and whispered, "I'm sorry."

Paul cried, "This is not your fault."

"No," Sophia's voice strained, "it's everyone's."

He took in her words like a knife to his heart. She had such faith in humanity that she truly believed this would not happen again. The world had failed her. He had failed her. She lost hope. He walked over to Eduardo and lifted Sophia to him. Eduardo took his sister into his arms and looked quizzically at Paul.

"Keep her living for as long as you can."

Sophia's body shook violently and tried to push itself out of her brother's grasp, "No," she yelled desperately, "No, don't do this. I need you. Please, Paul. Stay with me. Don't do this."

Crying, Paul placed a hand on his lips and blew his love a kiss. He nodded at Eduardo, which prompted the man to restrain Sophia and walk away. He could hear Sophia screaming until her voice lowered and died somewhere in the bowels of the Earth.

Paul turned his back on the church and walked toward the sea.

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Madness had engulfed the cliffs. The people in the surrounding markets were either screaming, writhing on the ground, fleeing, or acting violently. Paul stopped to defend himself from an approaching woman, but her intention wasn't to harm him. Instead, she lifted her wrist to her mouth and bit herself, pulling out a mouthful of skin and squirting blood into the air. Her red lips twisted into a proud smile as she held high to him the great work she had done. Paul forced himself to look away and continue toward the edge of the cliff.

He knew he should be with Sophia; if they were not to be married 'till death did them part, then at least they could die together. Curiously, selfishly, he needed to confront the horror that was about to take everything away. He had made a life out of searching for the thing. Sophia thought they could defy its existence by sealing their union on its port of call. Perhaps it was that same hubris that had called it forward and served the couple up as its first meal.

The thing was so large that the top half of its head was shrouded in clouds. Since studying the history of the Mayan people, and the research that was already discovered about the creature, he had considered what would happen if he ever had a chance to see it face to face. He thought that being this close, looking into the thing's enormous eyes, he would go mad, or cease to exist, based on the stories he had heard. He never considered that his body would be numb and his mind blank. He felt like he was already dead to the world.

The Alara'phagein lowered its gaze and stared into Paul's soul. The feeling that overtook him was unlike anything he had ever felt before, and he wondered if the color just left his body.

Another figure hovered into view, breaking the terrifying gaze between Paul and the creature. The man was middle-aged, wearing the tropical printed shirt and khaki shorts of a tourist. This was the man whose desires had called the thing forward, and now fed the thing with dark ambitions.

His mouth opened like a loudspeaker, and two sets of voices fell out, one for the man, and the other for the beast, whose purposes was now one, "My name is Isaac, and I will rule the world. Bow before me, or die."

Paul fought through his fear and spoke, trying not to concentrate on the monolith behind the man, "Isn't that the same thing?" Paul smiled in defiance, but felt no sense of humor. He was faking bravery, trying to push that out instead of desperation.

The possessed man gave no acknowledgement. The Alara' phagein lifted its hand. It bellowed again, and Paul knew it was definitely a laugh.

Paul looked away and walked to the edge of the cliff. The water looked beautiful as it rose and burst against the earth a mile below. The last time he was somewhere this high was when he walked to the edge of the roof of his dormitory and tried to muster the strength to throw himself over the edge. Up until that point, his life had been plagued with sadness and disappointment. He never believed it could get better or that, if it did get better, that state of being wouldn't last. It was a pipe dream.

The creature's hand descended, and Paul didn't want to die that way, squished like an insignificant bug or eaten like a potato chip. He was a human being; he had lived, known love, made accomplishments and experienced failures. He even talked himself out of leaving it all behind, once. He wanted to at least die with dignity, on his own volition, his last thoughts reflecting on the love he had somehow managed to hold onto for a small amount of time.

Paul kept his mind focused on Sophia. The sun inside his chest had been encased in solid stone when the horror began, but it tingled with life again at the thought of his love. The bliss that Sophia gave him battered the stone from the outside to liberate the light within. He imagined that light slipping through the cracks in every direction until the cold exterior shattered and the sun that was his soul shone full. He was grateful to know that, even at the moment before his death, his love for Sophia was strong enough to fight back the fear when faced with the cold threat of oblivion. He closed his eyes, opened his arms to the world and leaned forward. He felt at peace knowing that he would die already having everything he ever wanted.

Paul opened his eyes and reared his body backward, swinging his momentum away from the edge of the cliff. An interesting notion had filled his mind, and he couldn't help how much he wanted to know if his newfound theory was true.

The hand was near, so Paul acted quickly. He grabbed the man hovering in the air and pulled him downward. Paul wrapped his arms around the man, standing on his toes and squeezing their chests together. He embraced the man with compassion, imagining that he could beam that feeling of happiness and peace from of his chest and into the other man's so that he too could feel the elation that Paul was feeling.

The world should be mine, Paul shoved his conviction outward without needing the madness to prompt him, my need for happiness is much greater than this man's. Take me and the world will be mine and you will be forever full.

He pushed his desire through the herald and hoped that the message would get through to the beast. The creature's hand stopped moving. The man in Paul's arms went limp and fell to the ground.

Paul wanted the world more than the other man, and the monster believed him.

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The Priest and patrons spilled into the room after the ground had stopped shaking. Paul walked into the church and looked over the terrified faces of his family. He floated in the air at the center of the church glowing from the inside with the light of the sun. His eyes focused on Sophia as she stepped out from the crowd, and she couldn't hold back her features from contorting into horror. Once their eyes.

met he smiled at her, warm and loving, and he sent his newfound power into her soul. She bounded forward and reached up for her love tears and sobs released in desperation. They embraced and kissed. Energy spilled out of Paul's mouth and into Sophia's until they shared the power.

The priest was the first to speak as their family and friends gathered around the couple, "Son, is the beast gone?"

Paul looked at the man and couldn't contain the self-righteous smile that made God's servant open his mouth in surprise, "It's a part of me now."

Sophia pushed slightly on his chest, trying to break the embrace.

"Don't worry, my darling," he said into her blue eyes, "I sent it away."

Sophia shook her head in confusion.

Paul pulled her closer, "It feeds on your deepest desires and provides everything you ever wanted. For most men that means the world."

"You're not different than any other man, Paul" Sophia cried.

Paul hugged Sophie. She was his love and his heart - his angel ripped from heaven and brought to Earth to give him strength. With absolute conviction he whispered into her ear, "You're right, I'm no different, but I was able to send the monster away. I already have everything I ever wanted."

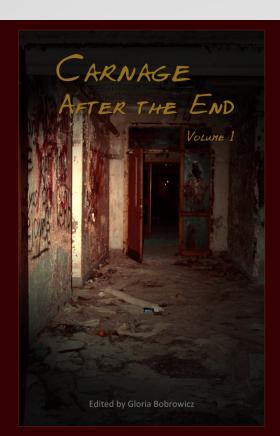
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Patrick Tumblety is a multimedia artist. His writing is featured in various publications, as well as a self-published anthology of thrillers, Dark Passages, available on Amazon. His films and photography are touring the country in various outlets. He resides in Dover, Delaware with his wife Kathleen and their cat Dusty.

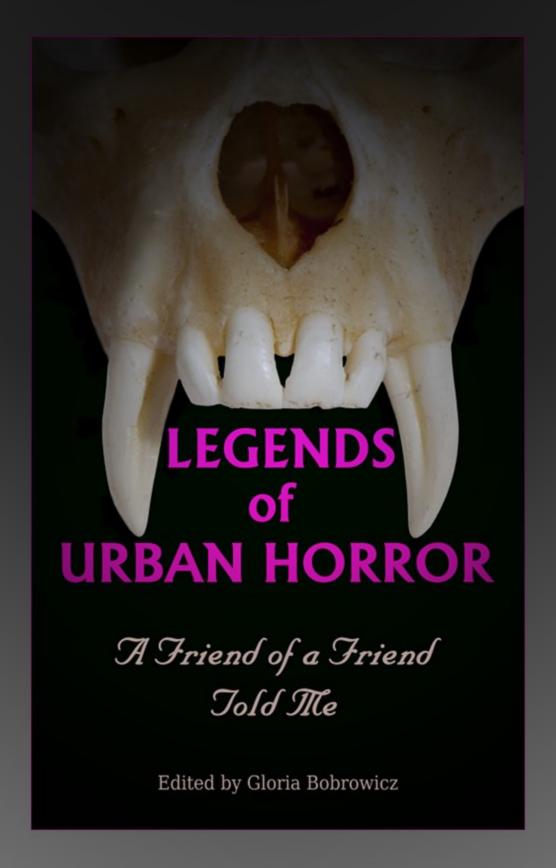
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## **Zukunft** Julianne Snow

#### August 4th, 1942

Today is the day. I shall be making medical history doing something that has yet to be done before. How all of my peers scoffed at me, telling me what I envisioned cannot be done. I shall show them, the fools! Sometimes if you want to create something new and unique, you have to be willing to break a few eggs in the process. And that is exactly what I shall do.

#### August 30th, 1942

My subject appears to be showing the first signs of pregnancy. I cannot be 100 percent certain at this point, but all of the signs are pointing in the right direction. The subject has missed her menses this month and complains of tenderness in her female organs. Have I already attained success in my first attempt? Was what I envisioned easier than I had even dreamt? I am excited and nervous at the same time – but my peers will have to bow to my superior intellect in this instance. For if what I have created does in fact reach full term, I will have means to create an army that will surpass all those comprised of mere humans. When this comes to pass, I shall be the one laughing.

### October 15th, 1942

The subject is indeed pregnant; her abdomen already stretching as if indicating the fetus is full term. Internal examination reveals normal gestational signs but the distension of the uterus is somewhat troubling. I fear the subject will not be able to sustain the growth of the fetus and that her uterine wall will tear, nullifying my creation before it can take its first breath. Not much can be done at this juncture. I shall have to wait to see if divine miscarriage is in the cards.

## December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1942

The subject can no longer sustain her own life as well as the life growing insider her. She has been placed on intravenous fluids to feed her body while I have rigged an iron lung to ensure that she still breathes without causing harm to the fetus within. With some difficulty, I have measured the circumference of her abdomen at 107 inches – well over 8 feet. I am shocked that the skin on her stomach as not split, especially given the rapid rate of growth but the body is a miraculous thing. I can see signs of wear on her epidermis, something I liken to metal fatigue; something I am certain will create a distressing problem should the skin rent. The fetus is active, the entire surface of the distended stomach rippling as it moves. If my calculations are correct, the subject will not survive the pregnancy, nor will the fetus. I give the entire experiment only three more weeks at the most before catastrophic failure occurs.

## December 24th, 1942

It lives. I cannot believe it. I was called to the laboratory early this morning as the epidermis of the subject finally failed to contain my creation growing inside of her. While it was a shame we lost the subject, the spoils of our experiment are ever so much more exciting! I have never before seen anything to monstrous and yet so beautiful! I feel like a father seeing his child for the first time. I have nicknamed it Zukunft as that is what it is — the future. More to follow once I have had a moment to observe and examine.

## December 27th, 1942

Zukunft has been very hungry, a sign of viability in my eyes. I cannot believe how quickly it has grown since its birth, having gained an astounding 62 pounds already. It weighs well over 150 pounds at the moment and if its accelerated growth is any indication, it will outgrow its enclosure in no time. I will

admit I find some of this troubling. Zukunft shows an incredible amount of awareness already and I can feel it studying me as I observe its behaviour. I think it's doing things simply to demonstrate that it can; using a stick to bring its food closer, drinking from its hands in order to keep its face as dry as possible. It should not be demonstrating such things but I am happy it does, even if the ramifications of such gestures are troubling. I swear I see cunning in its dark eyes, but of that I cannot be certain.

#### March 14th. 1943

Zukunft has killed two of my most trusted aides. It was a gruesome attack perpetrated at feeding time. I had assumed it was used to our presence, wanted to be feed instead of starving but perhaps I have been wrong all this time. At the window of the enclosure, as I looked in on the men I had trained personally, their bodies mangled and bloodied, I realized for the first time what I had created. As sad as I am to see my experiment end, I know I must kill it before it kills me.

#### March 16<sup>th</sup>, 1943

It cannot die. Nothing I have tried has worked and in the process it has killed three more of my aides. I simply cannot have this, but what can I do? Why can I not kill what I have created? What is this abomination? Have I created a new god? I must think and weigh my options carefully. Something must be done.

## April 1st, 1943

I have figured it out! Or rather someone else has given me the answer that I desire. Zukunft will be going to an underground facility buried in the heart of Hamburg. It's meant for research, but it has the capacity to contain Zukunft without worry. I shall be able to wash my hands of the entire experiment and begin anew. While the transport will be dangerous, and many are likely to not live through it, it only matters that miles of concrete lock Zukunft away from the rest of the world.

#### April 6th, 1943

I fear this shall be my last entry in this journal as I must flee for my life. It is not the Allied forces; Zukunft has escaped and with it a new hell on Earth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series. She writes within the realms of speculative fiction and has roots that go deep into horror. Julianne has pieces of short fiction in publications from Sirens Call Publications, Open Casket Press, James Ward Kirk Publishing and Hazardous Press as well as the forthcoming shorts in anthologies from 7DS Books, Phrenic Press, and the Coffin Hop charity anthology *Death by Drive-In*. Julianne is also the co-founder, co-owner, and Publicist of Sirens Call Publications.

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Blog: http://theflipsideofjulianne.wordpress.com



## An Easy Mark Ken MacGregor

Jake was a tough guy. Back home in the city, people crossed the street when they saw him. Even some grownups.

It made Jake smile. He enjoyed causing fear. Made him feel like a god.

When his dad told him they were moving to the suburbs, Jake had mixed feelings. He liked the city. Living here had made him who he was. Jake was not the toughest guy in the city, but he was up there. And, he was on nodding terms with the tougher ones. But, the suburbs? Shit. Jake was going to be King of the Badasses.

The new high school was a joke. Jake's first day, the local tough guy, Billy-something - probably captain of the football team - got up in Jake's face. He clearly recognized Jake as a threat.

Billy was right. Jake didn't waste any time: he brought his knee up fast and Billy bent over in pain. Jake met Billy's face on its way down with his own elbow and stepped aside as the big, muscular boy hit the floor. Billy was grunting and snorting, holding his balls with one hand and trying to staunch the blood from his nose with the other.

Those five seconds made an indelible impression on the other teens. One of them was a knockout redhead Jake couldn't wait to get to know.

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Turns out, Jake's dad made enough money to buy the house in the suburbs, but only just. Jake's mom had to work part-time so they could afford to eat. Nothing was left for Jake except ten bucks a week which is the same as nothing.

Jake had caught up with that redhead at school. Brandy, her name was, and Jake bet she went down smooth, too. He had seen her looking at him. Girls like a bad boy, and Jake knew it. Trouble is, if he was going to date her, he needed some money.

So, Jake started looking for an easy mark. He'd rolled a couple of guys in suits back in the city. You could tell a victim by the way they walked, by where they looked. These two were looking at their feet and walking fast, trying to get out of the neighborhood as fast as possible. Jake saw one was carrying a plain brown periodical bag and figured it must be the kind of porn you can't get up uptown.

Jake hit one of them in the belly hard enough to knock the wind out of him. Jake rounded on the other guy who had his fists up. But, Jake could tell the man didn't know what to do with them. Jake feinted with his right and jabbed the guy twice in the face with his left. The man fell to his knees, crying.

Jake took their wallets and the bag while they were down and left them there for the scavengers to pick clean.

He was right about the bag. It was women and farm animals mostly. Jake flipped through them, aroused and repulsed in roughly equal measure. Jake fed the whole bagful to the furnace in their building's basement.

Jake would never look at horses the same way.

It wasn't long before Jake saw the old woman. She looked liked she was 110, shuffling along the sidewalk in her aluminum walker with black rubber grips. Plastic grocery bags hung from the handles, swinging in shallow arcs when the woman took a step. It was sunny and pushing 90 degrees, yet she wore a raincoat and plastic babushka on her head.

If there's milk in there, Jake thought, it's going to be yogurt by the time she gets home.

The old woman also had a purse. Jake wondered how much money a person could save in 110 years.

Jake followed her, a block away. It was an effort to match her pace, and Jake had to stop several times and wait for her to get further ahead.

It took them almost an hour to reach the old woman's house. A ramp led to the front door; the woman paused at the bottom, seeming to steel herself for the climb ahead. Jake waited a few houses

down until the woman was almost to the door. He stepped forward and put a charming smile on his face.

"Can I give you a hand?" Jake asked, moving by the door. The old woman smiled at him, face open and trusting.

"Why," she croaked, "thank you, young man. That's very kind." She handed Jake her house key and waited for him to open the door, which he held for her.

They went in, and the old woman closed the door behind them. With great care, she peeled the plastic bags off the handles of her walker and handed them to Jake.

"Put those on the counter, if you would," she said. "I can put them away myself." Jake set the bags on the counter and turned to her. He was still smiling.

"I should give you a tip," the old woman said, rooting around in her purse. She pulled out a large brown leather wallet with a hand that trembled slightly.

Jake dropped the smile and his face was hard. He put his hand on hers and their eyes met.

"I'll take it all, lady," Jake said. His tone left no room for argument.

"My name," the old woman said, "is Esmeralda Keane. But, most people just call me Granny." She didn't seem the least bit afraid of Jake, and he didn't like it. Jake squeezed her hand, just a little, to make it hurt. He didn't want to break her bones. Not yet at least. Granny looked down at her hand in his. She cocked her head to the side, birdlike and snapped her face back up to his. Jake gave a little involuntary jump. The movement was too quick for a 110-year-old.

"Did you know, young man," Granny went on, "when I was your age, Andrew Jackson was President? He was a good man. Every time I see a twenty-dollar bill, I smile at the memory of that man. He was better looking in person, I have to say."

Jake wracked his brain. He knew Jackson had been President a long, long time ago, but he couldn't remember when.

"That would have been," Jake started, and left it hanging.

"The 1830's, dear." Granny gazed into Jake's eyes, letting it sink in. Jake did the math. His hand lay forgotten on Granny's.

"That's, like," Jake faltered, "what? Two hundred years?" Granny shook her head, the look on her face made it clear what she thought of Jake's education.

"Just over one hundred and eighty," Granny said. I was born in 1817. I'll be two hundred in a few years. I'm beginning to feel it too, I'm not ashamed to say."

"That's impossible," Jake said.

"No, dear," Granny said. "It's inhuman. Please take your hand away so I can give you five dollars for your help. I'm afraid if you don't, something unpleasant will happen to you."

"You're full of shit," Jake said. He squeezed her hand harder. He didn't care if he broke her old bones. She was fucking with him and he didn't like it, not one bit.

"No, dear," Granny said. "I'm full of something else." Granny used her free hand to open her raincoat. Under it, she was naked and Jake was at once fascinated and repulsed by her flattened breasts that hung almost to her belly and the thatch of coarse white pubic hair between her legs. Granny's torso was a roadmap of wrinkles and scars. She had one huge, thick scar that ran in a straight line from the bottom of her ribs to the top of her pubic bone. It looked like it had been ripped open and re-stitched many times. It was horrible to look at. Whatever caused that scar should have killed the woman.

Jake yanked his hand back, but Granny caught it with the same hand he'd been holding. It was lightning fast. Her grip was steel cables.

Granny pulled Jake toward her. The scar in her middle split open. From it, greenish yellow tentacles,

the color of bile snaked out. Jake tried to count them, but they wouldn't be still; he figured there had to be at least ten, maybe as many as fifteen. The limbs spread out and Jake could see a huge beak inside Granny's body. It snapped open and shut hungrily.

Jake pulled back with everything he had, but Granny's hand held him tight. When he realized he was stuck, Jake lunged forward, swinging his right fist around and putting everything he had in the punch. He connected with Granny's jaw and heard it pop at the joint. Jake grinned. Then, he realized he had moved too close. The tentacles had Jake and were pulling him toward Granny and her internal snapping maw.

He looked up at Granny's face, hoping to plead for his life. As he watched, Granny's jaw slid back into place with an audible click.

Jake pushed against Granny's exposed ribs, but they were slippery with blood and some oily substance and he could get no purchase. The tentacles were squeezing now, as well as pulling, and Jake was finding it hard to get a breath.

"I'm sorry," Jake gasped. "Please." Granny shook her head. She looked disappointed.

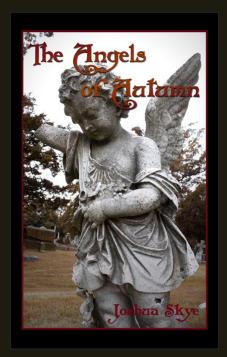
"You should have taken the five, dear," Granny said. She pulled her tentacles back inside and Jake with them. His screams were largely muffled, but she turned on the radio just in case. Her favorite station was playing Mozart. Granny tapped her foot to the music as she got out her sewing kit. She used the curved needle and the sturdy nylon thread to close the hole in her middle.

Then, taking her time, she put the groceries away and made herself an iced tea with just a hint of bourbon.

It went very well with Jake.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Ken MacGregor's work has appeared in anthologies from Siren's Call Publications, Hazardous Press, Bloodbound Books, and others. Ken is a member in good standing of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers. Ken will reread something he wrote and shudder in revulsion and/or glee. He lives in Michigan.

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## **Bottom Feeders** Jon Olson

"You like the lobster candies too?" the old man asked from behind the counter.

Eight year old Gavin Spears looked up at the old man then retreated behind his Grandpa Spears' legs. The old man and Grandpa Spears laughed.

"He's still shy," Grandpa Spears said. "We'll take two." He gestured to the four inch lobster candies in an unmarked plastic container on the counter.

"I guess it'll be one of the few times he can eat these," the old man said. He picked two candies out of the container using metal tongs then plopped them into a small paper bag.

"It'll probably be the only time," Grandpa Spears said. He locked eyes with the old man who nodded.

Gavin peaked out from behind Grandpa Spears and looked around the store. Something caught his eye and he wandered away from the cover of his grandfather's legs, stopping in front of the large community bulletin board. The entire board was covered with black and white photographs. He squinted as his eyes roamed from picture to picture and became so enthralled that he didn't notice his grandfather stepping up behind him.

"What are you looking at, squirt?" Grandpa Spears asked.

Gavin jumped. "Who are all these people?"

"Those are people that used to live in Amelia Cove but are now gone," Grandpa Spears said. Sadness crept onto his face as he read some of the names and realized he knew each of them.

"Where did they go?"

"I'm not sure, to tell you the truth," Grandpa Spears said. "Pretty much all of them just left during the night." He looked down at Gavin and forced a smile. "Come on let's get home before the bottom feeders come out." He immediately regretted mentioning them.

They left the small convenient store, both shooting waves to the old man behind the counter, and walked along the busy waterfront where fishermen were tying their boats up for the night. They lived in the small coastal town Amelia Cove along the southern shore of Nova Scotia. Amelia Cove only had one paved road which ran through the middle of town with gravel roads splitting off of it. Fog started to roll in off of the Atlantic Ocean cloaking everything in a white mist as they continued walking up the paved street then veered left onto a poorly kept gravel road towards Amelia Hill where Grandpa Spears's house stood at the top.

"What are the bottom feeders?" Gavin asked.

Grandpa Spears sighed. When Gavin's parents died and no other living relatives could be located he was reluctant to take the boy in given Amelia Cove's secret. Gavin had only been living with him for three weeks.

"Are you even listening, Grandpa?" Gavin asked. His impatience could be detected in his voice.

"Sorry, I was distracted."

"What are the bottom feeders?" Gavin asked again.

When they neared the top of the hill they stopped and turned around. From this vantage point they would have had a tremendous view of Amelia Cove and the Atlantic Ocean except much of it was hidden by the fog. A single concrete pillar was still visible three hundred yards from the waterfront.

"You see that there?" Grandpa Spears asked pointing.

Gavin followed his finger until he saw it and nodded.

"Twenty one years ago a plane crashed in that exact spot."

"Really?" Gavin asked, his eyes growing wide with interest.

Grandpa Spears nodded. "It happened late one night in October. We had no idea what was going on when we heard the explosion." They resumed walking home. "Rescue services began searching for survivors but they were immediately called back by the Canadian Forces who showed up and took over.

The odd thing was no one could get an ID on the flight, even when the body parts washed up on our beaches."

He looked at Gavin who was completely mesmerized by the story.

"Within two days the Canadian Forces pulled out without any type of notification. Aside from the few arms and legs that initially were strewn onto the beach by the water, no more body parts emerged. We erected that monument as a tribute to the unnamed victims of the unknown flight and as the weeks passed life went back to normal."

They reached the single level house that Grandpa Spears owned and as he fumbled for the keys, Gavin looked across the street noticing a shell of a house. The roof and two of the walls had been ripped out as if something large had tried to make its way inside. Through a thin tree line on the house's left Gavin could see another house where the occupant was rushing around the yard, almost in a panic, cleaning things up. Grandpa Spears noticed Gavin looking across the street as he slid the key into the lock and opened the door. Gavin stared for a few seconds more then quickly followed his grandfather into the house.

Once they were inside Gavin bent down and removed his shoes as he had been instructed to do by Grandpa Spears many times. Now in his socks he darted for one of the chairs at the dining room table and hopped onto it.

"A few months went by and we started to hear strange noises coming from the water," Grandpa Spears said taking his own seat at the table. "They were smacking sounds intermingled with splashing. We thought it was a whale in distress or something like that. When a couple of fishermen took their boats out to investigate, they never came back. Their smashed up boats drifted aimlessly with large chunks of the hulls missing."

"Is this true?" Gavin asked.

Grandpa Spears ignored the question. "Then a little while later people in town started to disappear. Those pictures you were looking at in the store are of those who disappeared. Every few nights we'd find a house torn open and the occupants missing."

Gavin immediately thought about the house across the street.

"What happened to them?" Gavin asked. Although fully captivated by the story there was a tone in his voice that indicated fear.

"The bottom feeders got them," Grandpa Spears said. "The best we can come up with is there was something on that plane that affected the lobster and other bottom feeders in the harbor. Whatever it was caused the bottom feeders to mutate and on top of that they probably ate the bodies of the plane's victims, giving them a taste for human flesh. So every few months they creep out of the water and eat some of the people here in Amelia Cove."

Gavin's mouth had dropped open slightly and his eyes had been completely overtaken by the horror of what his grandfather had just told him.

When the cordless phone rang, Gavin screamed.

Grandpa Spears laughed. "Come here, I'm sorry." Gavin jumped down from his chair and hugged his grandfather.

The phone kept ringing and Grandpa Spears let go of Gavin to answer it.

"Hello?" He asked watching Gavin make his way into the living room still a little shaken up.

"They've been spotted." It was the old man from the store.

"Where?" Grandpa Spears asked. He walked over to the nearest window behind the table and looked out. Night was starting to fall but it was still bright out due to the fog.

"Jim Banks saw them crawling out of the water near the bottom of Amelia Hill."

"Shit." He heard Gavin turn the television on.

"You be careful tonight." The old man said.

"I'll do my best."

"You look after yourself and the boy," the old man said. He paused. "I hope to see you tomorrow." The old man hung up.

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Night had completely fallen when they sat down to eat what Grandpa Spears had whipped up for supper: Kraft Dinner and hotdogs. He ate a little bit of it but most of his appetite was gone thinking about the bottom feeders. There was no doubt in his mind that they were almost at the top of Amelia Hill now. The last time they climbed the hill they tore the Gilroy's house to pieces across the street. He could still hear the screams over the inhuman sounds of the bottom feeders.

"Did you hear me Grandpa?"

Grandpa Spears shook his head to come out of his daze. "No I'm sorry, I didn't. What did you say?"

"I asked if we could have the lobster candies for dessert." Gavin said with a cheesy goatee plastered around his mouth.

"Yes, I think we should."

Grandpa Spears pushed off his chair and walked over to the kitchen. The paper bag containing the candies rested on the empty counter and he scooped it up. He started walking back towards the table when he began to hear them. Not wanting to worry Gavin he kept moving and placed a candy down on the table.

"Boy the wind sure is making funny sounds." Gavin said dropping his spoon onto his empty plate. He reached for the candy lobster.

What Gavin thought was the wind Grandpa Spears knew to be the bottom feeders. They didn't roar like the cheesy science fiction movies from the 50s; their sounds were much worse because they were *real*. From what he had seen of them, the bottom feeders were roughly the size of a fifteen passenger van. Their large claws could easily crush a grown man but it was the bottom feeders' mandibles and antennae that made them horrifying. When the mandibles moved up and down they emitted what Grandpa Spears could only call 'a wet smacking' while the antennae cut through the air similar to a child whipping around a pool noodle. These were sounds that people could not hear on regular sized lobster but in their mutated form they were loud and frightening.

Grandpa Spears sat back down in his chair and frowned as he watched Gavin happily eat his candy lobster. In any other place the sight would've been innocent and worthy of a picture but knowing that the roles were reversed in Amelia Cove changed that.

Something large and powerful smashing through a wall filled the air. Both Grandpa Spears and Gavin jumped in their seats. There were more blows and Grandpa Spears knew that the bottom feeders were at the house across the street. He looked at Gavin and saw that the boy knew it too.

"Is that them?" Gavin asked. He dropped the candy to the floor.

Grandpa Spears nodded. "It is."

"They're across the street aren't they?"

"I'm afraid they are." Grandpa Spears's eyes welled up as he saw the horror and truth dawning on Gavin's face. "Want to see them?"

Gavin thought for a moment then nodded.

"Come with me."

He stood up offering his hand which Gavin took and they made their way into the living room. The large bay window had the curtains closed and before Grandpa Spears pulled them open he looked down

at Gavin. The boy was scared but there was a look of determination to see the new terrible truth to life in Amelia Cove. He nodded and took a deep breath as Grandpa Spears pulled the curtain open a few inches.

Three of them had surrounded the house across the street. Their antennae were moving about at a quick pace while they swung their claws into the house in slow but deliberate blows. Even in the dark Gavin could see that the bottom feeders were the same color as regular lobsters.

"Grandpa?"

"Yes?" Grandpa Spears looked out at the bottom feeders then down at Gavin.

"Will they come after us?"

Human screams pierced the night as the occupants in the house across the street were grabbed by the massive claws and pulled up towards the bottom feeders' mandibles.

"I don't know."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Aside from being a horror/dark fiction author, Jon also works full time as a Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L Stanfield International Airport. In 2007 he graduated from Saint Francis Xavier University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. While he mainly writes short and flash fiction, he recently completed his first novella and also hopes to branch out to do some work in comics/graphic novels. When he is not writing or working, he can be found at his home in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his wife and four cats.

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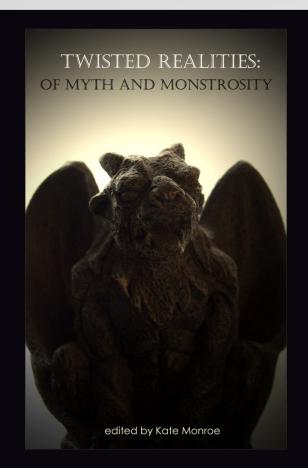
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## Escape LE Jamez

Her lungs screamed with the strain of inhaling and exhaling, her legs battered and bruised by the forest floor. Her Minnie Mouse nightie offered scant protection from the elements. Tears flowed freely down her face blurring her vision. Yet still she ran. Twisting and turning along the forest path, her short legs carrying her body further and further from the campsite, further from the images of her best friend being taken.

But Cissy was gone now, and she knew that if she stopped she would be taken too. Her only hope was to run all night, deeper into the woods, try to keep as much distance between her and whatever was chasing her. All she could hear was her heart hammering in her head, forcing the blood to her extremities, giving her legs the power they needed to keep pounding along the path, increasing the distance between her and her attacker.

Yet she knew she was not alone.

The mist appeared from nowhere, making it difficult to see too far ahead, difficult to follow the path. Lungs and thighs burning with pain, Karen slowed. A mistake; as it wasn't long before, at this slower pace, her legs betrayed her; bringing her body crashing to the ground. Panicking she struggled to get up, her legs entangled in the undergrowth.

It was near.

Karen stopped moving. If she lay still and quiet maybe it would pass her by. She could hear it crashing about, angry at her for running, angry that she had dared to escape. No other sound could be heard, the animals of the forest had long since disappeared, not willing to witness this latest horror unfold.

Then silence; almost as if the world had stopped. Dare she move? Dare she hope it had gone? There was no hope.

She could feel it smiling, feel it reaching for her. She had to look. She had to see. She took a deep breath and turned her head; looked up to see eel-like arms reaching out...

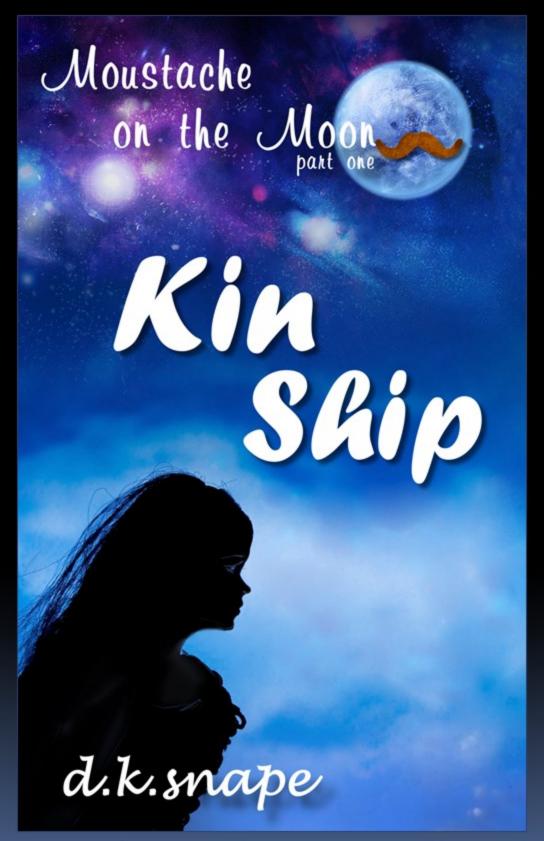
Ready to embrace her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - LE Jamez is a mother of two from Dunfermline in Scotland, who has been obsessed with horror from an early age. Recently she decided to share her love of horror with the world and her first collection of flash fiction 'Kitchen Antics & Other Tales' was released as en ebook in May 2013.

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## Road Kill Ken Goldman

"Turn and prepare to meet your maker, 'cause OI' Zeke's gon' send you to your final reward!" Ezekiel Crawford called in the darkness to the glowing pair of eyes peering at him from the dividing line of Old Mill Road. He snapped on the truck's high beams and watched the terrified creature in the road freeze for an instant. Zeke needed no more time than that.

Too furry for a deer and too big for a rabbit, dog, or 'coon, he thought as he caught the animal's stare. He didn't much care what it was. Once spooked, those bastards moved fast. The animal turned and fled. Zeke stomped the pedal and the old Chevy pickup lurched forward.

The creature lumbered along the highway's white marker as if it felt that safety lay straight ahead in the least unobstructed path. In Zeke's estimation such logic made it just another dumb animal fit for the hunt. Tonight's kill would be easy because whatever it was, its legs were short and its movements sluggish.

It mattered little to Zeke if the weapon were his Mini 14 sporting rifle or his half-ton pickup. Today he had already emptied a chamber into four 'coons without leaving the pickup, just to get in a little target practice. Shooting them or steering into them, it was all the same. "Huntin's huntin'," he would have explained if asked about the battered pile of animal remains in the back of his truck.

But no one ever asked because Ezekiel Crawford was only a man doing the job Sussex County paid him to do. Six months earlier Sheriff Dexter P. Brophy had given himself one hell of a task choosing an official title for that job, one that would not make the men on his force laugh themselves sick. The sheriff finally settled on The Highway Sanitation and Animal Removal Patrol.

Old Brophy might have more accurately called the job The Roadpizza Packing and Stacking Patrol. 'Old Mill Road' read the marker off Interstate 65, and that became Highway 96 once it passed the Dairy Queen, but no one in Sussex ever called it by either of those names. 'Skunk Alley' the townsfolk of Sussex called it, and the stench of road kill animal carcasses rotting in the sun along that ten-mile stretch explained why.

When Brophy posted the job opening on the Sussex County police station's bulletin board, the next morning only one man applied. Until that day, Ezekiel Crawford's primary responsibility around the station house had been to see that the sheriff had himself a clean and proper porcelain crapper upon which he might park his ass.

During those six months civil servant Ezekiel Crawford had redefined the boundaries of his duties as originally envisioned by the sheriff, although he never bothered to inform Brophy of this. The job promised flexible hours, so Zeke selected night-time when the air was cool and the hunting was best. After the first week he requisitioned himself a cow catcher like those found on the front of old railway trains. He claimed the Chevy's grill had suffered considerable damage when a buck had crossed the pickup's path. The impact had been so forceful that part of the animal's dripping hind leg had lodged in the grillwork.

Zeke chose not to inform the sheriff that he had chased the fleeing creature a good quarter mile before catching up with it. Brophy took one look at the ruined dripping grill and the next day Sussex County's newest employee had his cow catcher.

Tonight the cow catcher had surely done its work. The truck had caught its target dead center without Zeke's hitting the brake, and the pickup sent it flying. The animal came down on Highway 96 like a sack of laundry, thumped a few yards, and came to rest along the soft shoulder about a hundred feet from where it had been struck. Zeke had to practically stand on the brake to avoid hitting it again, and as he swerved the rear of the truck dove-tailed into the muddy trench along the side of the road.

Zeke cut the engine and laughed a squeaky cackle. "Goddamn, that was close! If it'd been a snake, it'd bit him," he said aloud as he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "But dumber'n a stump,

that's no lie." From behind the wheel he examined the dark lump that lay motionless near the front tire. He knew only a fool would approach a large wounded animal while it was in its death throes.

He took his high beam flashlight from the glove compartment and flashed it on the creature, but it remained still. Slowly he stepped from the truck. The animal's dark fur had matted on the side where it had been struck and it lay in a gradually expanding pool of blood. Zeke still could not make out exactly what he had hit, and the animal's thick fur made it impossible to tell its front from its hind quarters. Zeke extended his leg and prodded the fur with the toe of his boot, holding the flashlight's beam steady on it, but he could not even locate a face beneath the fur. The creature did not move.

"Deader'n a stuffed frog," Zeke said through his grin, "...and you sure as hell ain't no frog. But, Jesus! You sure do stink enough to be from around here." He turned to the truck and pulled out the large shovel from the cab. He slid it under the carcass, leaving a smeared trail of blood as he dragged the shovel back to the pickup. Getting the heavy animal into the back of the truck presented no problem. The Sheriff had added a lift to the old Chevy because it was cheaper than hiring two men for the job. The animal lay on the lift in a formless heap, and Zeke hit the switch.

He kept the heavily bleeding creature separate from the two dead mongrels and six assorted road kill 'coons and rabbits in the back of the pickup. He again flashed the light on his kill, took off his red hunting cap and scratched his head. "Don't that beat all? Coulda sworn I knew everything that went on all-fours in Sussex, and that ain't no lie. Shows no one really knows which way's up when the sun goes down 'round these---"

He stopped cold.

For a moment it looked as if he saw the fur heave, like maybe the thing might still be breathing. He moved the flashlight's beam along the animal's entire body to see if any part of it swelled or fell, but he saw nothing move. "Damn goose feathers I been sleepin' on must be ticklin' my eyes," he muttered and slammed the flap of the pickup.

He climbed back into the truck and turned the ignition. But when he threw the Chevy into gear the pickup rattled and shook without moving forward, the rear wheel spinning in the mud-filled trench behind him. Zeke tried popping the clutch but the wheel only hissed louder while kicking up clods of lumpy mud and grit.

"Goddamn toad-suckin' mother---!" He slammed his fist hard on the steering wheel and the horn's sudden blast startled him into silence. During the brief hush of the moment Zeke heard a dull thud from the cargo area of the pickup. He turned and looked through the rear window of the cab.

The moon shone off the large lump of fur in the back of the truck, and the pile of leaking guts had somehow shifted closer to the remains of the other dead animals. The vibrations of the spinning wheels rocking the old Chevy had probably caused the carcass to shift its weight.

A nervous grin twitched in the corner of Zeke's mouth. "C'mon, Zeeker. This ain't no time to get yourself all spooked," he said under his breath. "Less of course you want the good sheriff to find your sorry ass still in this trench come mornin'." He looked at the cargo area through the rear window and saw the large shovel gleaming in the moonlight, still dripping with the blood of his mangled freight. He hesitated for a moment, then quickly climbed out.

Zeke pulled the flap down and reached for the shovel, the stench from the back of the pickup causing him to cover his mouth and nose. A few of the earlier kills had been out baking in the sun all day, and their pungency was potent enough to cause him to gag up a taste of his dinner. Sheriff Brophy had once told him to consider the reek of dead animals one of the job's occupational hazards.

The mud covering half the rear tire felt soft and it was not very deep, so Zeke expected no difficulty digging the truck out. He might even have time for another go-round of road hunting before the sun

came up.

Fifteen minutes later beads of greasy sweat streaked his forehead. He tossed the shovel back into the cargo area of the pickup and prepared to close the flap, ready to roll. Suddenly he stopped and froze where he stood. What he saw took a moment to register ... or what he *didn't* see.

"What the---?" Zeke spun around in the darkness, then quickly looked back at the rear of the pickup, his eyes darting from right to left and back. He ran his palm along the surface of the area where fifteen minutes earlier the creature with the matted fur had been. The sticky pool of blood had gone cold, but still had not dried. The creature from which it had spilled had shambled out of the truck leaving a trail of blood that led off into the weeds.

Zeke wiped the blood on his trousers and remembered the sporting rifle he kept in his cab. It looked like he would be doing some more hunting tonight after all. He opened the door of the cab and reached behind the seat. His hand had just grasped the Mini 14's long barrel when he heard the bushes rustle directly outside the cab. Holding the rifle in his lap he turned and looked out into the darkness.

"You out there, you sonofabitch?" he called into the brush and the mesquite trees. The rustling stopped and he heard only the crickets. The silence lingered, and Zeke's eyes darted around him. "Step out where I can see you, you goddamn hair ball!"

A thick gurgle came from the weeds. The bushes suddenly parted.

Zeke's face went white.

It stood in darkness, a massive wall of fur whose face Zeke struggled to see but could not. He saw only its eyes glowing from behind the thick folds of fur, and the eyes seemed to lock with his.

It lumbered from the shadows and slogged toward the light of the open cabin door. Zeke had hit it with two tons of truck, but it was alive and coming at him. And something else, something else...

It was bigger. The creature seemed to grow right in front of him as it moved closer. But in the dim light of the truck's cabin he knew that was not true. It wasn't growing. Not at all.

It was opening its mouth, opening it wide. A liquid gurgling sound bubbled somewhere deep inside its throat. It was at the truck's door, much too close for Zeke to slam it shut.

"Holy mother of sweet Je---!"

Zeke recoiled into the truck's cabin.

It had a face, all right, and Zeke saw it clearly now. But the animal had neither front nor hind quarters. The thick matted fur that Zeke had thought was its body was its face. And most of its face was its mouth.

Zeke fumbled with the sporting rifle, but his hands would not remain steady.

The drooling mouth opened and the entire bulk of the creature expanded like the lid of an enormous trunk whose insides contained rows of long pointed teeth from its top and bottom. A blood-soaked tongue lolled inside it like a fleshy rubber raft. Framed by teeth that protruded like shards of broken glass, the tongue moved toward Zeke dripping blood on his boots. Zeke kicked at it and pulled himself back.

His left hand tightened around the barrel of the rifle and the other groped for the trigger. He kicked again at the creature that had already pushed itself partly inside the cab of the truck.

The gaping maw opened wide inches from Zeke's feet, and he aimed the Mini's barrel directly into its gullet. "Hope you're fixin' to chew on some gunpowder, 'cause you been tacklin' with a man meaner'n a snake, you mother---!"

He pulled the trigger. The rifle clicked dully.

A thick cloud suddenly lifted inside Zeke's brain. *Target practice on the 'coons!* He stared blankly at the gun in his hands. Maybe he could get some more bullets from the glove compartment. Maybe he had enough time to---

Before he had completed his thought the mouth came down on Zeke's legs just below the knees. He heard a sound like the crunch of dried wood, and in the next instant saw both legs dangling from the creature's mouth, saw the furry head swing back, and watched his boots disappear down its gullet. He screamed first at the sight of the two raw stumps that remained, then at the agony that exploded inside him. The barrel of the rifle had disappeared along with his legs, and he still held its useless handle in his palm. He heard the creature chew into pulp the bones that had been his legs.

A great massive darkness suddenly surrounded him. This must be death, he thought, and he shut his eyes tightly to welcome its relief. But the darkness was not death. It was something much worse.

Ezekial Crawford was inside the mouth.

\*\*\*

Hunger. It understood hunger. It understood pain also, but that was not nearly as bad as the hunger. Pain did not last long, like the bloody wounds beneath the thick fur did not last long. It had learned to cough up blood, yes, but that was only part of the trick to feed the hunger. Wounds healed quickly. But hunger? That gnawed and gnawed until it was satisfied.

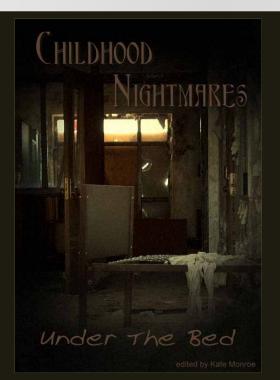
Fortunately it knew how to satisfy hunger. It knew well what it had to do. It had to hunt. And it knew well where to find fresh game.

It slogged from the weeds to the strip of hard ground where the strange vehicles that carried its prey always passed. It crawled out to the white line in the center and waited...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Ken Goldman is a former Philadelphia teacher. He is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association with homes on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. Ken's stories appear in over 675 publications. He has written four books: YOU HAD ME AT ARRGH!!, DONNY DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE, STAR CROSSED, and DESIREE.

A sampling of his stories is at: Kenneth C Goldman

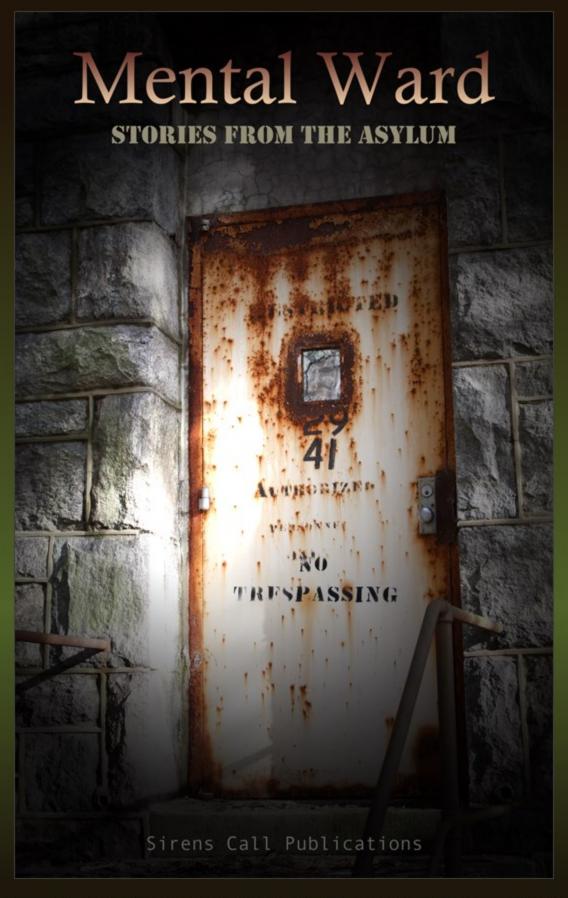
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## **Arrest Report** Alex Chase

\*The following is a transcript of the questioning of suspect 10134, who was apprehended for drunk and disorderly conduct, grand theft auto and two counts of using a vehicle while under the influence of an unknown intoxicant. After arriving at the Exxon station at the outskirts of Hashfield, he proceeded to steal an oil tanker and drive it down 3<sup>rd</sup> avenue. He was arrested after driving four blocks. The suspect has refused to identify himself and had no ID on him. He is a fair-skinned male, Hispanic or perhaps Asiatic, late thirties, and stands 5 foot 11.

Officer Jallot: Please state your name and age for the record.

Suspect: Its name? Nah, I dunno its fuckin name.

OJ: Not its name, your name.

S: My name? Listen, sonny, my name ain't important. What, you really think you're gonna get some hot tips out of a guy like me? I got nothing', guy, no info, got it?

OJ: Listen, we're only here to figure out why a quiet little guy like you, especially a guy with no record and no debts, would go racing off into the night in an oil truck, endangering the lives of God knows how many others.

S: Oh, is that what you're on about? ...I'd say you wouldn't believe me, but you wouldn't care, and I'd sound like a tool for saying something so cliché, so I guess I'll make the most what little time we have and get straight to the point... Sides, were both in law enforcement, so I'm not going to BS you. See, there's this thing, up on the hill, up in the Gentech lab where I work, that's fuckin *eatin* people, you got that?

OJ: Excuse me?

S: You heard me. They made a damn monster up there. Not like they meant to; at least I hope they didn't. But they did, so I had to try.

OJ: I'm not following. Who did what, and what did you have to try? Are you talking about some sort of animal?

S: No, no, they built it. Wait—not built. Solid things are built; this shit's water, it's untouchable, it's chaos, sonny, and you just can't fight that. The universe loves chaos, you know-that's entropy for ya. At least, that's what the white coats would say. This thing, though, it shifts around like it never had a shape, like it don't even know what shapes are, and when you least expect it, it's tearin' you right apart.

OJ: I need you to calm down or I'll be forced to secure you to the county jail immediately. Now, slowly, start again.

S: Fine, sonny, but don't come crying to me when this thing gets ahold you cuz you're too full of ya self to listen. See, this all started a few months back. I worked night security over at Gentech. Some eggheads were working on a cure. A cure for everything. Developed some kind of formula or serum or nanobots or

some other fancy science shit that's supposed to turn regular cells back into stem cells or something, coat those little computer things in your own DNA so you can do whatever the hell you want. Reverses cancer and everything, or its s'posed to.

OJ: So what's this have to do with the oil truck?

S: Calm the fuck down, you sound like my wife. Nag, nag, nag! Let me tell the story and we'll get there when we get there, all right kid?

OJ: Sorry. Go ahead, then.

S: Ah, don't apologize, got two kids of my own, just as impatient as you. I'm used to that by now. Anyway, I'm there, watching the front door, 'cause it's my station and it's been my station ever since Jim decided he needed to go to UC Davis instead of Atlantic Community College, when out of the blue I hear a scream. Naturally, my first thought was, 'Oh fuck, I'm so fired.' So I'm racing down the hall, thinking to myself, 'Shit, shit, please don't let anybody else be here, better be a tech dropped a beaker or some little tiny small accident 'cause I'm not getting fired tonight,' when I round the corner into one of the labs where I think it came from.

OJ: And?

S: Why you gotta ask like I wasn't gonna tell you? I'm sittin, I'm talkin, you ain't listenin! Sit back, son, I'm not gonna leave you hangin. So, back at the lab, I walk in and I see broken glass. I was like, 'Hell yeah, just a beaker!' Then I notice more. It's too much glass. Way too much. I catch on that *all* the glass is on the ground, all the beakers and test tubes and flasks, all of everything is smashed to Hell and one of the test chamber doors is wide open. Lying on the ground is a pretty young thing named Daisy Thompson. Ain't that the most American name you ever heard? She was a right fine young lady, beautiful, like somebody plucked her right out the ground and stuck her in a lab coat stead of a vase. Cept she wasn't fine tonight. Something clawed her, scratched her the hell up. That lab coat of hers was shredded, stained red, hanging all around her. So I rushed over to her, put my fingers to her neck, check see if she's got a pulse, got breath in her chest, and you know what sonny?

OJ: ...What?

S: She wasn't dead! Not at first, anyway. Poor little lady didn't stand a chance. She's bleedin out, sayin something about their experiment goin wrong, that the computers overpowered the test subject and I'm not sure if I heard right but she seemed to say that he just downright melted, went splat on the floor in a puddle of shifty goo. Then Donnie Figueroa apparently stepped in to clean up what was left of it when some kind of tentacle thing, like a snake, shoots out wraps around his leg and drags them down into that puddle like it's a hole to some alternate universe. Cept its no hole, and there's no new world on the other side, and life ain't the twilight zone — it's way stranger and a hell of a lot worse.

OJ: \*Chair scrapes\* Okay, it looks like we're done here.

S: I'm almost done, wait, hold on, you need to hear this! I sit there, starin down at this girl the same way

you're staring at me: bug eyed and disbelieving, sure that the person I'm talking to is straight off the rocker. That's when something scuttles along the floor next to me. I look down and there's something like a head on top of a metal spider, staring at me, all shiny-wet with blood, flittin toward Daisy. Then this mutant-spider-flesh-psycho-cyborg thing lifts one pointed leg and splam! Put its leg right through the girl's neck. The leg turns into a tube and the whole thing rolls up into this one skinny little tendril that works its way in. Seems to twitch a bit and some bumps start rolling along and I realize it's drinking her brain. Have you ever seen someone's brain get sucked right outta their skull? Makes you wanna hurl, I'll tell you that. Her head starts cracking in cuz there's so much pressure, blood and pinkish-grey stuff sprayin the wall behind her. Then the tentacle jerks, flinging her head into that wall, sends skull shards everywhere. Then... Oh God, then it forms the shape of a man, buck naked, with a snake for a tail, and he starts hounding after me. I run out and I'm so freaked that the world goes black 'til I see myself hit the emergency switch. Then I realize, 'Shit, even if we can kill this thing, people might use the data in the lab to create a new one.' I mean, if you thought you could create something that would make sure people don't get sick anymore, wouldn't you? If not for the people, then for the fame and money. So I ran out, hijacked that oil truck, and I was aiming to destroy that building and its godless research but ya'll stopped me.

- OJ: \*Sighs loudly\* Sir, please stand and put your hands behind your back. We're going to continue tomorrow when whatever substance you been using has worn off, ok? I don't want you getting worked up and risking injury to yourself.
- S: \*Chair scrapes\* I'm fine with that, sonny. I just wanted to make sure you were aware of what you might be getting yourself into. I'm just trying to get by, make sure I do what's right by me. You want to kill me for that, go ahead.
- OJ: We're not going to kill you, we're just holding you for your own safety until your arraignment.
- S: ...Is that so? You know, officer, you're a decent guy. \*A harsh laugh is heard\* A bad cop, but a decent enough person.

\*The suspect was placed in a holding cell overnight. After a few hours, Officer Jallot began to hear a slight commotion from the detainee area. Upon investigating, he found that every incarcerated person had been slaughtered, with the only officer guarding them terrified to the point where he was unable to speak. The victims were found without brains. Carved into a wall was the following phrase:

You're a good man, Jallot. Stay that way. I'll have my eyes on you. Sincerely, 10134

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Chase is an American horror writer who has had over a dozen stories published, some branching into subgenres such as fantasy, romance and science fiction. His work has been featured in a number of internationally selling anthologies. He is a member of the Horror Writer's Association and Mensa.

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## An Interview with Pixie Spindel, Photographer

Our artist this month is none other than Pixie Spindel of Pixie Vision Photography. Welcome Pixie, why don't you take a quick moment and tell us about yourself.

**Pixie:** I am a fine art portrait & wedding photographer based in Los Angeles. I also travel worldwide. I began my obsession with photography at age 6, attended the School of Visual Arts in NYC for Film/Video, moved to LA and found the dreamers. While dance portraits have been my focus for the past 10 years, I enjoy shooting everything from weddings, families, pets & pregnancy to products, musicians & many other genres. I especially love shooting off-beat and themed events such as Faerie, Steampunk, Viking, and Gothic weddings.

SCP: When was the first time you felt the spark to be a photographer? What or who were some of your first inspirations?

**Pixie:** When I was a child, I was inspired by moments, people, music and time passing. Even then, I was aware of time, perhaps through watching my three younger sisters go through predictable stages, I saw definite patterns and phases coming and going. I felt a need to preserve time for them.

Photography is something that runs in my family, I guess. My uncle had a darkroom in the basement of my grandparent's home in Brooklyn. I remember sneaking into this dark place while my father and uncle were talking by the door. I was six years old and we were supposed to be leaving to go somewhere but my uncle stopped, came over and switched on the light, and the whole room went red. There were photographs hanging by wire, and trays of strong 'water' and he showed me how it was done. That smell of chemicals and the curtain falling is my earliest fuzzy feeling, a pulse of a drive forming perhaps. It was just a big curious thing to me and it stayed with me; that sacred space where paper turns into memories for people. A decade later he gave me that enlarger, his tongs, the trays, all of it, and I set it up in my closet just as he showed me. I read a book about how to develop photos and spent days and nights in that closet making mistakes with light until that enlarger literally disintegrated. Knobs rusted and fell off; tongs got screwy. Then digital age swept me up and I've never looked back, never taken a proper class either.

My father is also really into preserving memories for people. He always had these gadgets and things; the first portable video camera on the block, the first DOS computer. He had a closet filled with film that I kept depleting and he'd let me use his camera, talking to me of f-stops and things I didn't want to know. I looked at the sun, pressed buttons and some of the prints came out, cool! Trial and error, the story of my life.

A few years later, my parents bought me my own camera. It was a Ricoh XR-10. I started to become inspired by serious things... mortality mostly... and music. One of my first 'shoots' with that camera in black and white film was of an orange, with grapes hanging down and ketchup dripping over it like blood. As I got older, stories, symbols and nature were my inspirations... music still, more than ever... from David Bowie to Buzzcocks, Brian Eno, The Ramones, Joy Division and the like. I also liked any music with a hammered dulcimer in it.

When I moved to Manhattan to get my BFA at the School of Visual Arts, I had this walkman and I was so obsessed with merging my love of music and memories, that I would often make music videos in my head, closing my eyes to the beat and opening them up some space new. My earliest inspirations seemed to form a crescendo that told me that directing films is where I was supposed to be. Someday perhaps... Right now I'm riding a Photography wave.

## SCP: We're told you have piles of fine art photos, but you seem more drawn to photographing people. Where are you most comfortable as an artist?

**Pixie:** I am aligned with both shooting people and shooting fine art. They are not really separate in my mind, except for the fact that one needs coaxing and the other just happens. People are often art; their emotions and the way everyone carries them like fingerprints are art to me. Right now I am drawn to shooting people because it's difficult, challenging, most rewarding.

My work in fine art is still emerging as themes develop and shape my future gallery shows. I have fine art projects in mountains in the corners of my closet that are forming into shows as we speak.

## SCP: What are some of the different challenges of shooting in the studio versus shooting performances, and which do you prefer?

**Pixie:** Studio shoots take a lot out of me. I give energy to receive energy in such a visceral way in the studio that it sometimes leaves me unable to move or speak for hours afterwards. My goal in the studio is for my clients to shine, to feel comfortable, bold, sexy; to ease them from a place of held breath to the inevitable zone where they share their art with themselves, and then me. I will them to bring out into the world their true nature just by being themselves. Studio shoots are most challenging but the most rewarding because when I see these images out in the world, I know half of me is in them, that it's magick that we made together.

Capturing performance comes effortlessly to me. It's easy because the energy is already there. I am always most concerned about lighting. Red light just kills me. I try to get as many angles per performance as possible. I'm small so I tend to climb things to get the shot. I like balconies and speakers. I like silently following performers from their dressing rooms to the stage. I like the process... I can feel their focused butterfly bellies and after the show, I can feel them beaming.

So I enjoy all of it really, both studio work and performances. They both mean I get to experiment.

## SCP: You seem to have a rapport with people that always brings out their best side. How is that important to your art and what are your methods?

**Pixie:** When people aren't feeling it, they aren't going to like their photos. They aren't going to feel good about themselves or the experience. It's my job to put my subjects at ease, to create a grounded pathway to their fiercest self. I feel things instantly from people, sometimes supernaturally. I know where they hide their true selves and I generally know what they need to shine. Sometimes it's a lot of work to get there but in the end, they tend to thank me for it. It's work, it's a process but in the end, it's real. It's their best side and it is worth it.

My shoots typically begin with candles, music and breath... big deep breaths, throwing negativity into the fire, spreading toes to feel connected, first within themselves... and then to me. After we are centered, anything is possible. "It's about how you feel!" I constantly remind them over the music. I give lots of direction and change my mind often but I remind them that my words are only suggestions, that it's ok to feel what they feel at any given moment as long as they show it. No hiding. No doubting. No fear. I like to affect people, to cause reactions. I'm a brat, a professional instigator and although I have a few techniques that seem to work, I'm constantly aware that everyone is different and everyone needs different energy from me at different times.

SCP: It's clear from your photo galleries, that your subjects are having a good time being photographed. How do you get people to loosen up and feel comfortable in front of the camera?

**Pixie:** I tend to just jump right into it, which leaves very little time for insecurities. I get very excited about wardrobe, about colors and fabrics. I love smiles and boldness. I love movement and spontaneity. I like to find new ways to bring emotions out of people. My shoots seem to turn into these fluid experiences making it a safe place for us both to just be ourselves. I love to take photographs; people love to shine... it's just about finding that zone.

What makes a good model? A good model is someone that can take direction well and remain true to themselves, that doesn't stop the energy just because I asked them to turn to the right or reach down to grab a flower. That they do it in their own beautiful way is all I usually ask of my models.

#### SCP: Where does your endless passion stem from?

**Pixie:** I see no distinction between passion and excitement. I am excited about everything. I guess it comes from really knowing myself and what I'm meant to do in this world, to have a purpose I guess, a means to get what is inside of me out. To know that my friends and family love and support me propels me in this life as well. It's hard to be drawn to something, to doubt yourself, dabble in it throughout your whole life without people believing in you. It drives me, all the feedback and encouragement, all the events and people that pass by my lens. These are the things that fuel me.

SCP: People use the term "soul" for a lot of things; food, music, trains, but rarely for photographs. Is there a separation in spirit and work? Or does each photo have a little Pixie glitter in it?



**Pixie:** This is my life's work. Yes, it's a lot of work but it's also a lot of life. If I died tomorrow, the people in my life would know how I felt about them through my work. These playful, talented, magnificent, demure creatures that I call my clients are most often also my friends and they would know. There is no separation in this for me.

SCP: Describe a typical day for you--or typical day for you "these days".

**Pixie:** I wake up at 5am every day, even in a room without a clock or a window, which is a blessing and a curse... It's a time when things are quiet and I plan my day. Lists, schedules, prioritizing... business faerie hat goes on. And then I eat oatmeal, do yoga, edit photos, play with my puppy, start shooting and let the day unfold. Each day seems to be different but morning time is important to me, to create that space for breathing and planning. When I'm on the road, I typically bolt out of bed even earlier and into more of a frenzy. Things move lightning fast as I tend to book shoots in cities from hour to hour, and am usually

completely booked. I have to remember to eat, drink and sleep when I'm touring. I turn into a camera and bypass my body's needs in favor of constant inspiration and expression. Having assistants and taking a day to myself between cities seems to be helping. My focus lately seems to be on balancing all aspects of my life, even on the road.

SCP: Your name Pixie seems very fitting for your personality – how was it chosen? And what made you choose "Pixie Vision" as the name of your business?

**Pixie:** I've been shooting photos since I was six years old. For years I wanted to emancipate myself from my office job. In 2004, life circumstances led me to shoot more and more, and to take this feeling more seriously. Questions arose like "Who would even pay me to do this?", "I love it too much. What if I burn out?" but I chose the auspicious date of 5/5/05 to make it official. I quit my job and started my own company. I'd spent many a lunch hour scribbling out 'Pixie Productions' but there was something missing... and that something was VISION.... I needed to have vision, to see clearly what I was conjuring, to see purely who was in front of me, what my goals were... so I called my business 'Pixie Vision' to remind myself...and 'Productions' as I have future goals of video work as well. I am currently riding a photo wave but have my eyes on directing music videos in the future.

#### SCP: What are some of your most inspiring piece of art, films, or books?

**Pixie:** My inspirations are.... The Alchemist, Weetzie Bat, Mists of Avalon, Dogs in Space, Wings of Desire, Blue Velvet, Some like It Hot, Harold & Maude, Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead, Red Shoe Diaries, Ladyhawke, Brian Eno, The Slits, Legendary Pink Dots, Kate Bush, Stereo Total, Transglobal Underground, Tones on Tail, The Ramones, Dead Can Dance, The Buzzcocks, Cranes, Chicks On Speed, The Clash, Robots In Disguise, David Bowie, Cibo Matto & Massive Attack.

## SCP: Your astrological sign is 'Cancer', how do you see it influencing your work?

**Pixie:** Being a photographer often asks of me to be encouraging, trusting my insight and intuition. It's amplifying energy that already exists, challenging the nature of people or situations to extract essence and feelings. Being a Cancer means I'm tapped into that. I'm a professional instigator. I seem to be able to help others to overcome their fear. I'm emotionally in tune with myself and others in a way that seems to be enhanced when I'm around other Cancers so perhaps that can be attributed to this astrological sign. On the flip side, I'm often hyper and change my mind a lot.

## SCP: What is your favorite city to photograph in for outdoor shoots, and why?

**Pixie:** Probably New York City... I was born there and know those streets like my own self. In no other city can I go from shooting in a gorgeous garden to walking one block over and shooting despair. The polarity and diversity of NYC still speaks to me.

SCP: Tell us about your biggest Pet Peeves; favorite foods and beverage; and something people would find surprising about you.

Pixie: My biggest pet peeve is when models show up late... it puts a huge dent in the energy we try to

create and the art suffers for it. Favorite foods and bevs - Quinoa, beets, oatmeal, nerds on a rope.... And cosmopolitans!!!

SCP: What would people be most surprised to find out about you?

**Pixie:** That I am 40 years old; I don't eat as many Pop Rocks as people think; and that I disappear when I sleep.

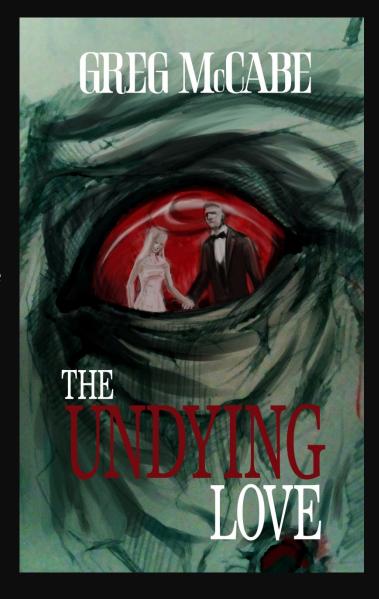
A big thank you to Pixie for taking the time to answer our questions. The artwork featured in this issue of the eZine are all photographs that Pixie has taken.

## **Coming Soon from Sirens Call Publications**

For Diane and Jackson, life is just about perfect. They're healthy, happy, and madly in love with one another. Unknown to them, a virus is sweeping across the globe that instantly kills the infected and turns their corpses into mindless, murdering cannibals. In short: zombies have taken over the planet.

Diane and Jackson find out about the epidemic the hard way when their wedding is crashed by friends and family who have succumbed to the virus. Now, fighting for survival, they're faced with unthinkable decisions.

Follow their story across Southeast Texas as they meet unforgettable characters and face challenges that will put their love, and lives to the ultimate test.



## An Excerpt from Aiden Truss' Gape

Separated by those vast and normally insuperable gulfs of space, time and imagination, two beings sit at the crossroads of their lives - one human, and one something more than human. Both feel the weight of their existence and a solitude born of their introspection and contemplation. Both are equally lost and shackled by their seeming impotence in the face of the storm blowing around them.

Of all the different types of crises we face, it is the internal, personalised ones which hit hardest, cut the deepest and yet teach us the most valuable lessons. In that sense, it makes not one jot of difference that one of our protagonists is a female human and the other a male demon. As we shall find, near omnipotence does not denote omniscience and incapacity need not mean weakness.

Life cuts through complications – it's just that we seldom step back and allow it to take its course. We always assume that there is a point, that there is something more to it all than a series of contiguous moments, a chain of causes and effects – that there must be a cosmic narrative and a divine plan. Sometimes it's handy to know what's around the next bend in the road, but still, we must negotiate that bend and the change of direction that it brings. Whether you're a milkman or a 7<sup>th</sup> level demon, you still have to get your head around your day job and the challenges and satisfaction that it may or may not bring. In Paradise Lost, that shrewd observer of the eternal struggle, John Milton, wrote:

The mind is its own place, and in itself, Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.

It was poetic licence – Satan never really had to jump to such conclusions, but you get the gist don't you. It's where you're at in your head that defines the world around you. For this reason, our tale is set in recognizable worlds, with familiar terms of reference. The everyday world of humanity is set in the unremarkable London suburb of Bromley. I would have used Croydon for a setting, but this might have placed us nearer to purgatory in terms of imaginative leaps. (Papers recently unearthed during Dan Brown's search through Vatican records reveal that the medieval Catholic Church considered calling the transitory state between Heaven and Hell 'Croydon', but were persuaded differently by its connotations of helplessness and despair; at least in purgatory there's the hope of something better to come!).

The universe, or cosmos as your author has chosen to describe it (paints a bigger picture than just 'universe' don't you think?), is full of different levels of life and evolution. Creatures living in dimensions unknown to traditional science co-exist in areas of space occupied by more conventional life-forms. Every so often, these planes intersect and cross over. Hence we have unexplained sightings, strange craters in the wilderness, ghosts and silly old women making a fair living at pretending to be psychics. None of which are the least bit extraordinary if you have a tiny inkling of the true nature of the cosmos. Therein lies the problem – in attempting to show the narrow scope of the human concept of the cosmos, it would be easy to overcomplicate things and to show you too much of what we all grasp to understand.

Here, Hell is exactly as you would expect it: the fantasy landscape, the salamandrine imagery, the demonic hordes, and, of course, the pointy instruments of torture. It is a recognizable construct that we have become strangely familiar with due to cultural exposure to centuries of Hellfire preaching. Our entire occidental concept of Hell seems to stem from three main sources: *The Book of Revelations* – thanks to John the Divine's narcotic-fuelled bender while on an enforced stay on the island of Patmos nineteen centuries ago- from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and from Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*.

These texts lead us to a perceived familiarity with the imagery of Hell – even if we just have a second-hand, post-modern understanding of the place. It's where The Devil lives and where all the bad people go when they die, isn't it? So, there are your terms of reference – I'll not try to makeover those places in your head where these people exist, I'll just use the information in your head to paint a backdrop to the drama as it unfolds. Paradoxically, you'll find that Hell is a thriving, heaving place of industry and intrigue,

whereas Bromley is painted in suburban grey and not much goes on in the open, beyond shopping and washing cars. Like all suburbs, the real dramas unfold not in the streets and public spaces, but in the shadows, behind the twitching curtains and the veil of respectability.

Hell's denizens are meant to be as convincing as their human neighbours. They have personalities, ambitions and politics beyond petty evil and the acquisition of souls. Most importantly, they have a propensity for introspection and soul-searching that has been denied them since Satan's ruminations in *Paradise Lost*. Our demonic friend is as lost as any human and must find his own way out of his predicament.

Most importantly, as you will find, there is no Manichean dichotomy here – no good and evil or black and white (how boring!). There is just life in all its forms and dimensions, being played out relentlessly by characters familiar and exotic and all lost in their own way. Life doesn't present us with easy answers to our questions; this is perhaps what makes it all so interesting. As the old cliché goes, it's about the journey and not about the destination...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Aiden Truss is a forty one year-old geek who still thinks that he's twenty-one. Despite never having grown up, he's now been married for twenty four years and has two sons who have grown up against all odds to be strangely well adjusted.

Aiden spends his time flitting between high and low culture: he holds an MA in Cultural and Critical Studies and can often be seen stalking the galleries and museums of London, but also likes watching WWE, listening to heavy metal music, collecting comic books and playing classic video games.

Aiden lives in Kent, England and *Gape* is his first novel.

Gape can be purchased in both Print and Digital versions from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Apple, Kobo and CreateSpace.

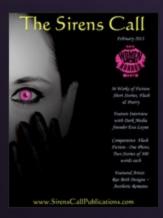
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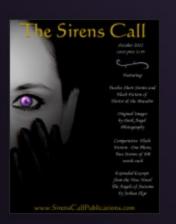


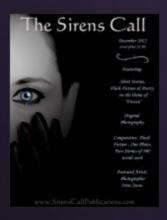












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