The Sirens Call

August 2014 issue #16

Apocalyptic Fiction

Poetry, Short Stories, I Flash Fiction

200 Word Comparative Flash Fiction - One picture, three tales of 200 words each

Photography by Danielle Tunstall

Interview with Ela Lourenco, Author of 'Essence'

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Contents

Editorials

4 Apocalyptic Fiction: An Editorial – Gloria Bobrowicz

5 Enjoy the Apocalypse: An Editorial – Julianne Snow

Fiction

7 Something in the Air – B. M. Jones 12 Rush Hour - Thomas Brown 14 The Last Day - Jennifer Mccullah **17 The Legacy** – Julianne Snow 22 The Last Night at Sacks - Wayne Haroutunian 24 Aftermath - Laura Jamez 27 Bounty Hunter - Shawn Davis 32 Retreat - DJ Tyrer 33 Carrying Time - Jessica R. Santillan 38 Category 5 – L.E. White 47 Mesozoic Redux - Christofer Nigro 51 Metal Transitions, Trundling Death, & Foraging - Jackson Fitzjames 53 Educating Zachary - Maynard Blackoak 58 A Personal Apocalypse - John H. Dromey 59 Scorched Earth - Jon Olson 64 Hurry - Jacob Bayne 66 The Haunted Air - D.S. Ullery 69 The Becoming - Brent Abell 74 Sanitized - Ken MacGregor 76 Uirusu - Talisha Harrison 79 West Nile - Tabitha Thompson 80 Awake - Lori R. Lopez

Poetry

40 Atlas Shrugged - DJ Tyrer
40 The Revelation of a Broken Mirror - Mathias Jansson
41 Silence - D.R. Minion
42 Speaking with Endangered Tongues - Justin Karcher

Features

44 An Interview with Photographer and Graphic Artist Danielle Tunstall50 Comparative Flash Fiction

Just a Matter of Time – Gloria Bobrowicz

Sunlight – Nina D'Arcangela

Oasis of Rusted Dreams – Julianne Snow

87 An Interview with Author Ela Lourenco

89 Excerpt from Essence by Ela Lourenco

Photography by Danielle Tunstall

3 Photo 1	57 Photo 5
23 Photo 2	65 Photo 6
37 Photo 3	75 Photo 7
45 Photo 4	

94 Credits



APOCALYPTIC FICTION: AN EDITORIAL

Gloria Bobrowicz

I don't know about you guys, but I love stories and movies having to do with the Apocalypse. It seems there are a great deal of movies and TV shows out now showcasing this subject matter. Not that I hope it eventually happens, although it's a very real possibility. Fiction is just fine with me, thank you very much. In the end I think we'll either annihilate each other with atomic bombs or we'll finally kill off all the natural resources of Mother Nature. In my humble opinion, mankind is stupid enough to accomplish either of those things.

The weird thing is with the bombs, we the people, will probably not even be aware it's happening until it actually happens; one can only hope. There have been close calls in the past we weren't aware of. Who knows what the people in power have done. All I can hope is that I'm close enough to the bomb being dropped for my family and me to be vaporized immediately. We won't know the suspense and fear of it coming, as those people did in the movie *Independence Day* and the alien invasion, thus will be spared the anxiety. One minute we're here, the next we're not. I don't want to be one of the unlucky survivors who has to deal with the effects of radiation poisoning, possibly zombies—I'm not brave enough to deal with zombies—or trying to find food and maybe getting killed trying to get that food. Not for me, give me a quick and easy death.

We are well on our way to destroying the natural resources of Earth. Some people are trying to slow that down. We need to support that effort. What will happen if we pollute all our water or air? I don't mean to get all political and I'm not endorsing any organization that does. It's just common sense. If we destroy the earth in which we plant food, feed our animals etc, how do we feed ourselves? Do we starve to death?

I'd like to think that mankind is smart enough to divert any and all catastrophes; however, I'm not sure we are. I hope I am wrong.



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

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ENJOY THE APOCALYPSE: AN EDITORIAL

Julianne Snow

Think about it for a minute. Enjoy the Apocalypse – it's a strange thing to say isn't it? But when you get to the crux of it, we've made a killing from doing just that...

There's a fascination that exists around all things End-of-the-World-esque. There are blockbuster movies, best-selling books, and a multi-million dollar industry supporting the preppers among us. Each of us (at least those willing to admit it), have either thought about what we would do if there was a Zombie Apocalypse, or have a definite plan A and plan B in place. We've all filed away the head shot as the only means of true death because pop culture has instilled it within us. Heck, most of us are of the mindset we'd be able to outwalk and outwit the living dead in most situations.

But have we made ourselves too soft? Why do we not fear the inherent danger any end of the world scenario would entail? Instead we see bold-faced bravado at every turn and people who truly believe they're ready for anything. Don't get me wrong—I'm not calling *bullshit* on all these people—I'm just asking if we haven't given ourselves a false sense of security in what we think we could handle, or not handle.

Me? I'm just as full of the false bravado as the next person: I truly believe I could survive a slow-moving horde of the undead with relative ease or find a place to hunker down if the weather took an extremely nasty turn. I don't live too close to a major fault line, nor do I live inside a major city where pandemonium would fuel all sorts of secondary devastation. Would it be awful to survive the end of the world—very likely the answer would be a resounding 'hells ya!'—but I'm certain I could make a decent go of it...

Chances are the end of the world is not going to come when hell is full and the dead walk the earth—it's more likely to come in the form of an errant meteor on a collision course with the planet or series of vicious weather, tectonic, political, or economic events and that's just to name but a few of the possibilities. It's coming and I think deep down we all know it. So while we're waiting, might I suggest cracking open a new book, or popping in that DVD? Heck, get some popcorn and make a night of it! After all, since our time here is short, we might as well enjoy ourselves right?

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

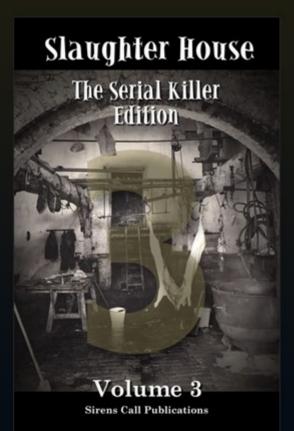
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SOMETHING IN THE AIR B. M. Jones

Alison had forgotten how tough it was to face a Monday back at work after taking time off, especially when the time off was so draining that she could do with *more* time off to recover from it.

This particular trip to her mother's house was more demanding than usual, partly because her mother's illness meant that she required almost constant care and attention and partly because her mother felt cold all the time so demanded that all the windows and doors remain firmly shut, even in a freakishly warm July like this.

As she forced her eyes open and began to slowly drag her body out of bed, she made every effort to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake David, who had fallen asleep within minutes of putting his head on the refreshingly cool pillow the night before and was showing no signs of waking up this morning.

Kissing him gently on the cheek and glanced at the bedside alarm clock.

"SHIT!" she cried, as the green digital numerals melted from 8:52 to 8:53.

"What's wrong?" David asked, blinking slowly in the sharp wedge of sunlight that had crept in through the gap in the curtains.

"Oh God I'm so sorry; I didn't mean to wake you up"

"It's fine, silly! I just thought you'd hurt yourself!"

The sunlight shone through his messy hair and Alison caught the tiniest hint of red in his brown curls. She couldn't help but grin when she saw the dopey, sleep-shaded smile appear on his face.

"No! Just gonna be a bit late for work, that's all," she replied.

"Oh good. I'll go back to sleep then!" His smile widened and he pulled her back onto the white, lavender fragranced sheets.

"Stop it, you big dope! We weren't all clever enough to book an extra day off!"

"Just phone in sick!"

"I wish I could, but I'm down to my last couple of sick days, and I need them in case of... well, you know what I mean."

"I understand," he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, "now go and get ready, quickly!"

Alison quickly got dressed in her usual smart white top and black trousers then brushed her hair into a pony-tail.

"OK, I'm dressed, look! I'll see you later. Love you. Don't work too hard!" she laughed as she practically ran out of the front door.

On her way to the call centre, she cranked up the air-con in the car and pulled the visor down to shield her eyes from the unrelenting glare of the low, morning sun.

It only took her just over five minutes to reach the modern, sleek and prismatic office building that housed the call centre in which she worked.

The centre itself was a looming presence, nestling among the traditional architecture of the banks and insurance companies that surrounded it. With its narrow base that fluted slightly as it rose to the top of the building in a flower-pot shape, and the tessellated triangular windows that made up the decorative outer shell, about a foot away from the inner, sheet glass windows, the office looked like an alien spaceship that had landed right in the middle of an otherwise ordinary business quarter of an otherwise ordinary city.

Jumping out of her car, she extracted her door card as she ran up to the front door of the building in order to save a little time. The door opened with a beep and a *schunk* sound before she pushed it open and, still running, went up the stairs to the second floor and across the office to her desk.

She smiled and mouthed an apologetic, "Morning," to her supervisor, Andy, who responded by looking at his watch and shrugging his shoulders. Since he had announced that he had handed in his one month's notice the Friday before Alison's week away, she could only assume that he no longer cared what happened any more, as long as he still got his final pay.

The atmosphere in the office was exactly as it had been before Alison had gone away: busy, noisy and too hot. For such a modern building, the air-con system could only be described as ancient. It came on for one hour every day and each time was accompanied by a grating, shuddering sound.

Switching on her desk-top computer, Alison looked around at her colleagues to see all of them busy on telephone calls. Over the hubbub of the entire office, it was almost impossible to discern the words being spoken by all but those who sat in her immediate vicinity.

"Good morning, Hope Springs Health Care, Alison speaking. How may I help you?" The first call of the day was always the worst. On a daily basis Alison felt like when she slept, she lost the confidence to speak coherently to customers. After over a week of not taking their calls, she could feel that today was going to be a long day.

After 3 hours of talking constantly about the best kind of health insurance for the customer, Alison felt her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth, and was aware of a soft, papery clicking sound as she unglued it each time. She spotted Andy walking towards the small break area of the office, so decided to take the time to have her own break.

"Andy!" she called as she approached him from behind, "I'm so sorry about this morning, I just slept through the alarm! Looking after my mother, it really took it out of me. I'm sorry."

"I understand, honestly. Don't worry about it. As long as she's ok! Coffee?"

"No, thank you. I'll just get some water."

"Looks like you've come back on a good day, anyway. The calls are slowing down a lot now!"

"I hadn't noticed! I'm still half asleep! Sorry ... "

"Stop saying sorry! It's fine!" Andy had such a friendly smile that Alison was certain he meant it, resignation or not.

"Thank you," she returned his smile with as warm a smile she could muster considering the heat and her fatigue, "I'd better get back now."

"Yeah, go on. Danielle's just gone out for her cigarette break anyway, so stop holding up the team and hurry back to your desk!" he joked.

As she walked back through the office, Alison made a point of listening to the murmuring of her colleagues on their calls. Although it wasn't a huge difference, the sounds of them talking were somewhat quieter than usual.

Strange for a Monday, they normally can't wait for the weekend to go so they can get straight back onto complaining about their illnesses...

With her headset on, feeling like Madonna in an alternate universe, the time she spent sitting idly between each call continued to pique her curiosity. It was unusual for the office to be this quiet, but the baking heat outside should keep any normal person off the phone, if they had any kind of sense, Alison supposed.

Making the most of the time between calls, Alison decided to text David:

Missing u babe, can't wait 2 get home 2nite xxx

Probably still asleep, lucky guy. Wish I was still there in bed with him.

Looking to her left, Alison realised that Danielle still hadn't returned from her break. She was known to enjoy a bit of gossip with the other girls, but Alison figured that by now, Danielle had been out of the office for at least twenty-five minutes. Only ten minutes late, but it was still unusual. Normally she was a few minutes late at the most. And David hadn't replied back. *Still sleeping. He must be.*

Without realising what she was doing, Alison called his mobile.

Ring... ring...ring... Must be on silent while he's sleeping.

By now the calls had reduced further, and the time between each call had increased to at least four minutes. Looking around, Alison also noticed that the office was slightly emptier than it had been when she had gone for her break.

Unable to shake the feeling of dread that had begun creeping up in her gut like a thick, greasy snake making its way through her abdomen, Alison decided to speak to Andy.

He looked up at her with a confused look on his face, and for a fleeting moment, Alison thought that he hadn't recognised who she was.

"Andy, are you ok?"

"Sorry Alison, I'm just a bit puzzled. Danielle hasn't come back, a few other people have been missing from their desks for the last half an hour, and the phones are barely ringing at all now. It's just weird. I don't know what's going on."

"Oh thank goodness, I was just on my way to say the same thing!"

"I'm gonna go out and see where everyone is"

"No! Don't... I know it sounds crazy, but I think something's wrong."

"You're right, it does sound crazy! But I know what you mean. I'll email tech first, see if there's anything wrong with the server. As soon as they get back to me, I'll let you know," he smiled that genuine smile again, though this time Alison detected another emotion behind it. Fear? Worry?

Before she had got back to her desk, the loudspeaker system crackled. The metallic voice of the operations team supervisor filled the air with its tinny, reverberating shrill.

"Could all members of staff please report to the main rest lounge of their respective floors immediately. Repeat: All staff to their rest lounges immediately. Thank you."

Seeing the same fearful expression on everyone else that she was certain she was wearing, Alison broke into a speedy walk towards the double doors that opened out onto the corridor. When she got through them, she saw people pouring out through every door on the corridor, all making their way down to furthest end where the rest lounge was situated.

Each lounge was equipped with seventy plush chairs, arranged in banks that facilitated conversation. Each also had a large plasma TV on the wall and several vending machines and drinks fountains, as well as a small kitchen area with the usual amenities. By the time Alison arrived there, she saw that all the chairs were occupied and several staff members were standing around the TV, which had been turned up almost to its maximum volume.

As she approached she saw the solemn face of the local newscaster filling the screen.

"...are unaware what has caused it, but one thing they are certain of, based on the reports that have been coming in all morning, is that it came in from the sea off the west coast. The whole country has been advised to remain where they are, and ensure all windows and doors are closed. More information will be relayed as soon as it becomes available."

The screen went black momentarily then the blackness was replaced by videos of familiar streets, filled with men in radiation suits carefully picking their way through what appeared to be bodies on the ground.

Oh my God, David!

Alison ran back to her desk, where she had left her phone earlier. She hit his name on the screen and started running back towards the lounge.

Just as she was about to hang up, the ringing stopped.

"Alison, are you ok?" the tone in his voice both terrified and worried her.

"I'm fine, well; I'm not, but... How are you?"

"I'm ok. I'm just looking for my car keys"

"What? Why?!"

"I'm coming to get you, I'm so worried!"

"Did you not hear the news guy? Stay where you are, please!"

"I heard him, but I can't stand being away from you and not knowing!"

"I promise I will keep ringing you to let you know I'm ok, just promise me you'll do as the news man said?"

"Ok, I promise. I love you."

Those last three words hung in Alison's mind and pushed a tear out from the corner of her eye. "I love you too," she said, then hung up.

She raced back into the rest room.

On the screen was the newscaster again, looking even more solemn this time.

"...still unaware what is causing the toxic gas, but it is spreading quickly. It is with great fear that we

must announce that the effects of this gas are both fast and deadly. Everyone is urged to do their best to block as many windows and doors as possible in the hope that the gas will soon blow out to sea."

Andy had become frenzied during the last part of the broadcast.

"Ok, men, take off your ties, go around all the doors and stuff the gaps with them. I don't want as much as a fart to get through those doors. Everyone else, please try to stay calm and don't leave this room."

As the men went off to follow their orders, people began to calm down. The shouting and chatter was replaced by sobbing, and everyone started to sit down in the spots they had been standing in.

Arms were being placed around shoulders and some of the people gathered in the room were hugging one another, shoulders heaving and shaking with their sobs. Alison wanted contact from only one person.

Going to the very corner of the kitchen area, she dialled David's phone again.

Please, please pick up; just let me know you're ok...

Upon hearing the cheery sound of his voicemail message chiming in her left ear, Alison put her hand over her mouth and slumped down against the refrigerator and sobbed.

Around her, a strange sense of resigned calm fell over her colleagues, and she could barely hear the muffled crying over her own sobs.

David's sleepy smile from just a few hours earlier was imprinted on her mind.

Where is he? What's he doing? Please, be ok David, I love you.

She was jolted from her silent petition by her text message alert sounding from her hand:

DAVID

Her heart leaped in her chest as she opened the text message.

There was no text, just a picture that at first she struggled to see through the tears that had welled up in both eyes.

As she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, the photo came into focus.

Seeing the small, red velveteen box in David's palm, and the way the afternoon light glinted off the diamond on the ring, fresh tears stung her eyes.

Even the end of the world can't stop him from being romantic and sweet!

Alison smiled sadly; wondering if she would ever see him smiling back at her again, she messaged him back:

Yes <3

She continued smiling and closed her eyes. Leaning back against the fridge and letting out a soft sigh, she thought of David and her mother as she heard the rattling and whirring of the ancient air-conditioner clunking to life, ready to begin slowly filling the office with the deadly outside air.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - B. M. Jones is a thirty-something former hairdresser and occasional amateur actor who currently enjoys studying towards a degree in English Language and Creative Writing. His main inspirations in writing are Stephen King and Dean Koontz, though he enjoys discovering new authors all the time. When he isn't indulging in the macabre, he can usually be found in a karaoke bar.

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Pen ok the Ammed



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



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RUSH HOUR Thomas Brown

They say the apocalypse is coming. In five years, they estimate, a meteor will strike the earth and wipe it clean of life. Five years is not a long time, but it is long enough. It is long enough for weddings and funerals for those who cannot wait, for that walk down the beach, where he first holidayed with his family at St. Bees. It is long enough for work, long enough that the world still turns, for now at least. So he finds himself on a train platform each morning, stepping onto a carriage, staring through dirt-smeared windows as the world passes him by.

Sometimes he thinks he could sit there forever, watching the countryside slip past. Trees blur into fields, which seem to stretch, longer than any field should, until there are no boundaries, no roads, no thicket hedgerows, only a palette of greens and browns beneath blue shining skies. The carriage rocks beneath him, lulling him slowly in his seat, while far above cerulean clouds blossom with wind and rain. He has only eyes for their phosphorescence, their purple twilight tinge, and for the twenty minutes it takes him to reach the next station he is lost in their depths, rolling with them through the sky; a fish caught in their awesome ocean pull.

Then the train shudders, stops, expels its load, and he is back inside his business suit, black briefcase in his hand. His mouth sighs. His shoulders sag. The Underground drinks deeply of his soul.

People swarm up escalators, spilling out of the station into the road. Traffic screams after them; a chorus of sirens and sudden brakes. Women wobble past him on heels too high while men with faces shaven clean march briskly in their wake, and in between their legs dogs gambol, vagrants dance another day with life and children rush headlong into the roads. He wonders when it began; when things first showed signs of ending up this way, then remembers he need not wonder about anything anymore, ever again, for more than the minute it takes to type as much online.

The offices are tall, grey things overlooking a grey Thames. His room is on the fifth floor, next to administration. At eight-fifty he takes the lift, in the foyer beside the stairwell. His shirt is hot and wet beneath his arms. Inside his office, he closes the door, sits at his chair, which sinks beneath his weight, and stares at the face reflected in the blank computer screen. Drawing a deep breath, he begins to type.

While he types, thoughts tumble through his head. He does not know why administration is called administration, why it is singled out when they are all administrators; every man in his pin-stripe business skin, every woman with her pay-check pulse, record-keeping, number crunching, so that the world will keep on turning.

He thinks about love, and what it might feel like. He thinks about death, and when it was that they all died. Sometimes he turns in his chair and stares at the plant in the corner with its plastic fronds, its sterile soil, its bright, synthetic stem, until it is all he can do not to close his eyes, ball his fists and scream at the top of his voice.

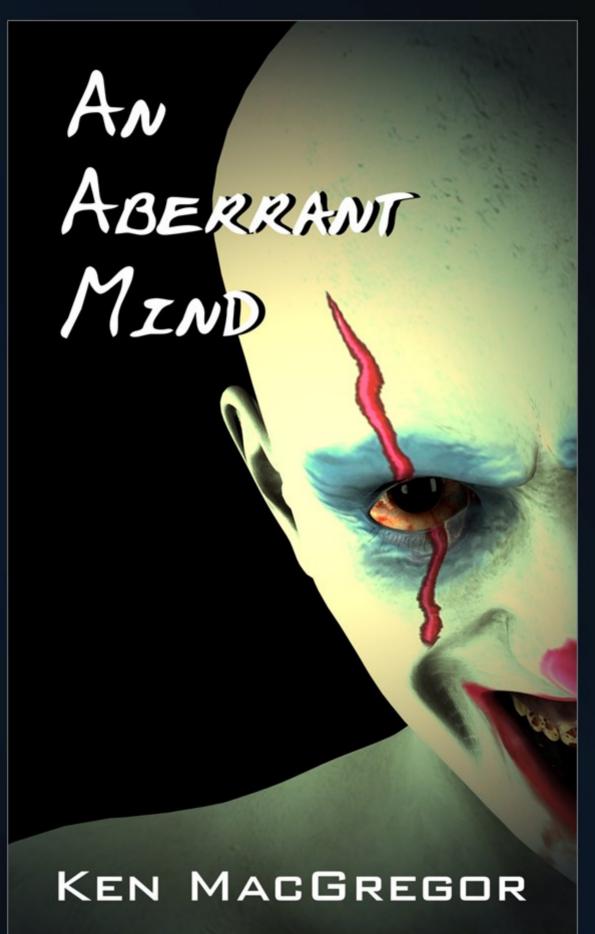
He does not remember weeks in terms of days. He does not remember working weeks at all. There is only one day repeated, in which he wakes up, travels by train, pushes through crowds, through streets made black with rainwater to stinking, sweaty offices built of old brick the colour of dried blood, peopled by corporate puppets in black suits with empty eyes and long thin fingers twitching by their sides.

They say the apocalypse is coming. In five years, they estimate, a meteor will strike the earth and wipe it clean of life. He wonders if it has not come already. Not by fire and smoke but a commuter contagion; this, the human condition, made better for a few minutes each morning by the birds in the sky, the distant glimpse of a dream in the clouds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Thomas Brown is a graduate of the University of Southampton, where he studied MA Creative Writing. Literary influences include Friedrich Nietzsche, Poppy Z. Brite and Thomas Ligotti. He writes dark, surreal fiction.

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



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

THE LAST DAY Jennifer Mccullah

When Phillip reached the liquor store, Rocky was behind the counter as usual. There was something new on the countertop though, a sleek black handgun. Rocky took his eyes away from the gun long enough to greet his customer.

"Hey Phil, take whatever you want. Free of charge," he said.

Phillip surveyed the nearly empty shelves. Apparently, he had given this offer to many other customers.

He grabbed his usual case of Rolling Rock and sat it on the counter, "I feel bad not paying."

"Take it, really. I won't be here much longer and I won't need the money."

He looked up at Phillip's case of beer and said, "Get more than that, in case you do survive. Unless you plan to kill yourself too. You can use the gun after me if you want."

"No, I'm not killing myself."

"Well, you really are though, just a lot slower than me. By the way, I want to apologize for the part I played in your sickness. I fed your addiction even when I found out it was killing you. Any ethical person would have refused to sell, but I liked your money more than I liked you."

Phillip eyed the bottles of liquor; maybe he would get some vodka too. Might as well live it up today.

Before he walked to the liquor aisle, Phillip said, "I made my choice and if you refused to sell to me, I would've gone somewhere else. It isn't your fault that I didn't listen to my doctor."

Phillip walked back to the vodka aisle to check out the selection of flavored Smirnoff.

"Thanks for that, you're a good guy," Rocky said.

Phillip shrugged. "We're all responsible for our own actions."

He examined the wares and tried to decide between Cherry flavored or Orange. Phillip thought about it until a loud boom echoed within the tiny store. His ears buzzed and everything was muffled. He dreaded to turn around but clutched two bottles and did it anyway. When he approached the counter, he found exactly what he was afraid of, brains, blood and bits of skull. Rocky's fingers still twitched as he bled out onto the cheap tile floor.

Phillip looked at his old friend's corpse and asked, "You couldn't have waited until I left?"

Damn. He wished he hadn't come out in this madness, but he had to, he was out of beer. He grabbed his case and started to leave, but then he had another thought. Phillip sat the beer back on the counter. He grabbed one of the pens, a post it note and wrote: Everything free. Take what you want. Phillip placed the note on the middle of the counter.

He was on his way out when a police officer walked into the store and spotted Rocky. Phillip felt a surge of fear and immediately began to explain, "He killed himself while I was in here. I was getting some vodka and then I heard the gunshot..."

"Smart man," the officer said, "I'm just picking up some wine to have a final meal with my family. Brenda's cooking her lasagna tonight, that's our favorite. We're going to spend time together, reminisce, and love one another. Then, when we've hugged, kissed and said our goodbyes, I'm going to kill all of us."

The officer continued, "I know it might sound bad but say we do make it. There will be no law and it won't be long before criminal groups form to loot and take whatever they can. I can't let my wife and my little girl live in that kind of world. I'll put a bullet in their brains before I'll let some vermin rape or kill them. Did you know we've released all of the prisoners in the jail? The chief figured they have a right to see their families too."

Phillip grasped at an appropriate response and eventually said, "Well, I hope your family enjoys their meal."

"Thanks."

The officer walked past Phillip, who grabbed his beer and left. He knew the world was ending but the way people responded, the encounter with Rocky and the policeman had left him rattled. His forearms were covered in chill bumps.

Phillip crossed the street to avoid the religious crowd. There were a couple of fire and brimstone preachers, preaching on their usual corner. Most of the time people passed them by, but not today. The

young preacher boys with their high and tight haircuts waved their thick black Bibles. Their faces were reddish purple as they shouted about 'God's forgiveness" and "trusting Jesus before it's too late.' People in the crowd nodded and a few added the occasional "Amen!" or "Yes, Lord!"

He was not surprised to find people scrambling to pick up religion. It was a typical response in the face of crisis, loss or impending doom. Half the people listening probably didn't believe the words any more than they had a week ago, but now they needed some comfort, some hope to cling to in their final hours.

Phillip had avoided the crowd but one woman shouted at him to "lay down the devil's drink and come be healed of his sins." He moved a little faster so he could go home and enjoy the last of the 'devil's drink' that he would ever have.

Phillip still couldn't believe it, five hours until impact. The asteroid had taken everyone by surprise, even NASA. It had been moving away from the planet but then it made a sudden, inexplicable turn. The rock was estimated to be twice the size of Texas and scientists predicted it would hit near Japan. It didn't matter where it hit, the impact would be felt globally. It was huge and coming in fast. This asteroid was a lot bigger than the one that destroyed the dinosaurs.

He looked up at the beautiful blue sky. There was not a cloud anywhere and the weather was perfect, sunny and dry. It was odd to think how awful things were about to become. The asteroid would set off massive global earthquakes. There would be crumbling mountain ranges and floods on all the costal lands. No one who managed to survive the impact and aftermath would live long. Most experts thought Earth would be sent on a new course, straight for the sun. Eventually the planet would be consumed by fire. Phillip laughed as he thought of the surviving conservatives. Even as the Earth headed toward the sun, they would probably still deny global warming. With his cirrhosis in its final stages, Phillip didn't care what happened. He would have been dead by the end of the year anyway and he didn't have a family or anyone he really loved. Phillip was lost in thought as he walked home. A couple having sex shocked him back into the present. They were right there on the bench at the bus stop! She was on top with her skirt pulled up to show her big white ass. Phillip looked away and kept moving, but when the woman saw him, she said, "I've always wanted to have sex in public. Since the world's ending today, I figured it was now or never."

"Good for you," Phillip said.

"I've never had a threesome either, if you want to join."

The man on the bottom looked up at Phillip, "Yeah man, it's cool with me."

With his age and his condition, sex was the last thing on his mind, especially public group sex at a bus p.

stop.

"I can't. I have to get home to my wife," he lied.

"Go home and get her, she can join too," the woman said.

Phillip didn't say anything else he just rushed past them. With those two inviting anyone to join in their activities, there was likely to be a citywide orgy on Market Street, right down from the make shift church service. He'd never been so happy to reach his apartment. When he got inside, he shut the door, locked it and opened a beer.

Phillip watched the news for a while. They were reporting on the crazy things that were happening. People knew there were no real consequences so they were doing things they'd always wanted to do, acting out their darkest desires. Spouses murdered one another, parents killed their children, one landlord killed his tenants, barbequed and ate them; it was mayhem. The world had officially gone crazy. A reporter took it upon himself to go on a barely coherent, anti-Semitic tirade that ended with him mooning the camera.

Eventually, Phillip couldn't watch any more. He turned off the news and found SpongeBob. Nickelodeon was one of the only channels still playing regular shows. That was fine with him since he liked SpongeBob. While the rest of the world panicked, Phillip enjoyed his last few hours. He got as drunk as possible, ate Pizza Rolls and laughed at the little yellow guy's shenanigans.

By the time he felt the first rumblings of the Earth, he was already on the edge of passing out. He stretched across the couch and let sleep consume him. Maybe he would wake in the morning, maybe he

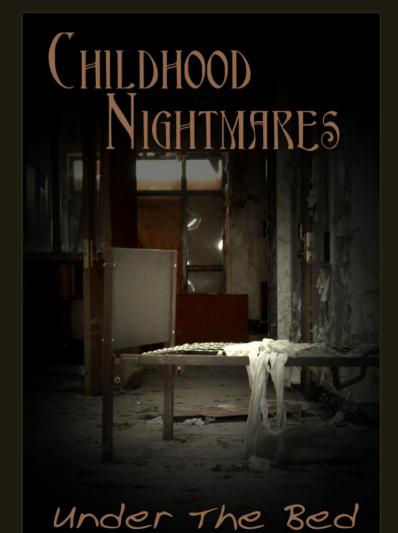
wouldn't. Either way, today had been a good day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jennifer Mccullah writes horror, science fiction, fantasy and YA. She's published four books, which are available on Amazon. Jennifer also has short stories in two horror anthologies and has been published on various websites. When she isn't writing, she enjoys reading, watching movies (especially campy 80s slashers) and gaming.

Twitter: <u>@JenMccullah</u> Blog: <u>http://incoherentrambling-jen.blogspot.com/</u>

Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

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Sirens Call Publications

THE LEGACY Julianne Snow

"I'm sorry... I've got what?"

"Grant, I know this is hard for you to hear, but you have stage four colon cancer. It's inoperable. Had we found it sooner, you may have had a chance, but it's in the first stages of metastasis and fairly soon it will have spread throughout your body. We can try an aggressive round of chemotherapy, but all that's likely to do is make you sicker. You need to think long and hard about how you want to spend your last weeks."

The cool detachment of the oncologist chaffed Grant. He could feel the anger boiling from within at news of his diagnosis and the demeanour of the person delivering his fatal news. He lashed out verbally at the doctor—the only concrete thing in his path.

"Are you fucking kidding me? I have cancer? Me?"

The doctor could only stare at him, used to the gamut of emotions that came from those who'd been recently diagnosed. No one wanted to believe it could happen to them and, based on past experiences, he just sat there, waiting for the storm to pass.

"This isn't supposed to happen to me. I help people! It's my job to keep people healthy..." Grant trailed off as his mind exploded with the treachery of his body. He looked up at the doctor and saw a charlatan; a man who spent years in school just so he could watch people die. The air around him felt foreign. All he wanted to do was leave the claustrophobic atmosphere of the office and drown himself in a drink.

Grabbing his coat and hat, he stood while giving the doctor one last parting look of disdain, "There will be no aggressive rounds of chemotherapy for me. If God has decided I must die of this disease, then that is my lot in life. It's simply too bad the world will be robbed of all of my future discoveries in the process."

Turning on his heel, Grant stalked out the office and into the chill of the early autumn air. Soon it would be flu season and the paranoia surrounding the illness would hit the streets. What superbug was coming our way this year? An H1N1 variant? Perhaps a less virulent strain of SARS would make an appearance. There was no telling what strain of influenza would strike and what mutation it would undergo while replicating in its hosts.

Grant Mazra turned up his collar and hunkered into the warmth of his jacket, his mind still spinning with the news of his diagnosis. He wondered what it all meant as he walked the six blocks to his office at Hubertson Pharmaceuticals, the drink forgotten for the moment.

As the biochemist in charge of new drug development, Grant had the rewarding job of helping millions of people. With his hands and mind behind so many of the recent discoveries, he was lauded as one of the most brilliant biochemists in the field.

None of that seemed to matter to his own cells however, and he cursed how they had betrayed him. Sitting behind his oaken desk, he could almost feel how they mutated and multiplied. He could see them in his mind's eye, turned black with cancer, tiny pieces breaking off and entering his blood stream in search of healthy tissue to infect.

His head dropped to the blotter on his desk, tears causing darker blotches to blossom on the paper. Grant's shoulders shook as he allowed himself the moment of self-pity.

As quickly as it started, it was over, and the fist slamming down on the desk rattled the picture frames that covered the top left corner. Grant looked up to see his secretary eyeing him warily over the cubicle wall surrounding her desk. He shook his head and smiled haphazardly. Not wanting his colleagues to know just yet, Grant decided to do the best he could to hide his cancer from them.

Figuring it was the best way to drown his sorrows enough to forget them, he dove into his work. Pulling up the newest data from the preparation of this year's flu shots, he concentrated on the molecular formulas and recumbent DNA curled into them. His mind began to spin and within a few hours, he knew he was well on his way to creating his legacy. One last discovery to bring the collective world to its knees in awe of his brilliance...

"Damn! Why won't this work?" Grant spoke, thinking he had the lab to himself. He jumped when the voice answered him.

"What are you working on, Dr. Mazra?" It was Lucille, a very talented PhD candidate who interned at the lab while using their facilities to research her doctoral thesis.

Grant's head snapped up at the sound of her soft voice so close to him. Shuffling his papers and angling his body in front of his computer's screen, he turned to give her his full attention, nervous at what she might have seen before revealing her presence behind him. "Ahh, Lucille, hello! I didn't realize you'd be working today... thought maybe you'd be off doing what young women get up to these days." He smiled in an effort to reassure himself he hadn't let her see his lack of composure.

Lucille smiled back before answering, always a little stilted and nervous when speaking to the senior biochemist, "I had to check on the samples for the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy study. Results need to be documented each day or we might miss something important. You know how it is." Her shoulder rose in a tiny shrug before falling back down.

"I certainly do, Lucille. Do you need any assistance?"

"No, Dr. Mazra, I'm fine. Just a few Petri dishes under the microscope, some notes about growth, and I'm good to go. Thank you, though, I always appreciate anyone's help when I need it." She smiled before moving away to a different corner of the lab.

Grant watched her put on a white lab coat before collecting her specimens from their labelled shelves in the lock-up. Observing her walk carefully to her workstation, Grant was struck by how self-assured she was in the lab setting and knew she would make a brilliant biochemist. She might even be the one to cure cancer...

He snorted at the thought, drawing a strange look from Lucille. "Sorry, was thinking about something I'm working on. I think the answer just hit me while watching you. Isn't it odd where we get our inspiration from?"

"Yes, I think that sometimes myself, Dr. Mazra. I can be driving to the lab and something in the traffic patterns can spark an idea. Or even the song on the radio can make me think of a process in a new way. I love how the mind can always be working on those little things even while it's concentrating on a different task."

"So true, Lucille. And on that note, I must get back to what I was working on. Please let me know when you leave."

Grant turned back to his workstation, and while keeping a wary eye on Lucille, he got back to work. He witnessed the cancer cells he'd harvested attacking the healthy cells through the lens of his microscope and frowned. Had he made them *too* aggressive? His legacy rested delicately on the aggressiveness of the cancer cells he was working with; if they were too aggressive, they may end up killing themselves. And that certainly wasn't in Grant's plans.

Having come from his own body, he now knew more than he ever wanted to know about them, but in experimenting with them, he was struck by their aberrant perfection. They had one simple job—the infection of other cells—and they carried out that job in absolute simplicity. Mutate, replicate and infect. Over and over again.

Could he revolutionize the way the world saw the cancer cell before he died? Grant believed he could, and on that cool October day, he made his breakthrough.

A cancer cell that behaved like a cancer for other cancer cells.

He was confident his research would be the cure for cancer everyone was looking for, but his motives were not completely altruistic. No one would ever see his work for what it was: his cancer would kill him, but it would kill the rest of the world as well. For, while he'd created a lethal cancer for cancer, he'd also devised a way to make his cancer virulent. Grant thought of it as a necessary side effect, but in truth, it was his way of evening the odds. It was too late for him though, his body too far ravaged to be repaired.

Gathering his data, he shut down the computer at his workstation, erasing the files from it, and left for the day. Grant's mind was consumed with that he planned to do and he wondered if his resolve would

withstand his conscience. In his heart he knew his plan was immoral and depraved, but his head didn't seem to care either way.

Grant gave himself the night to sleep on his decision, deciding he would know what to do when he awoke. For the first night in a long, long time, he drifted peacefully into sleep.

Waking with his alarm on Sunday morning, he showered and dressed, grabbing a quick cup of coffee on his way back to the lab. He had work to do and a new virus to synthesize; luckily he had no shortage of replicated cancer cells to work with.

The lab was empty, just as he knew it would be, and he set to work immediately, knowing it would take him days to synthesize enough of his new virus for what he was planning to do with it. Just as he was setting the DNA synthesis machine to begin, Lucille walked into the lab to check her samples.

"Hello, Dr. Mazra, I wasn't expecting to see you here today."

"Hello, Lucille, just working on a little something I think I've figured out. Sometimes the brain doesn't let you rest until you've started your next big project." With a smile, he turned back to what he was doing, unaware that Lucille was crossing the room toward him.

"What are you working on?"

Grant jumped at the sound of her voice in such close proximity. Whirling around, he closed his notebook and said, "Nothing for you to concern yourself with."

Said in such an authoritative tone, Lucille immediately backed away. "Sorry, Dr. Mazra, I didn't mean to pry."

"Not to worry, Lucille, I just don't want to share what I think I've discovered until the time is right. Check and double check—you know the drill..."

"Understandable, Dr. Mazra," she replied as she retrieved her samples and brought them to her workstation.

The two worked in silence at opposite ends of the lab until Lucille left for the day. Once Grant was alone, he relaxed and worked through the night. For the next week, he barely left the lab, stopping only for a few hours to sleep in his office in the middle of the night. He couldn't risk leaving his work unattended and open to prying eyes while the other scientists were working in the lab during the day. Plus, he needed to be there when each step of the preparation was complete. He only had a short window of time.

It was 3:47AM when it was finally complete. In total, Grant had synthesized over three litres of a highly virulent and continually self-replicating strain of his cancer. It was his crowning achievement and would affect the medical community in a profound way. He just needed to do one more thing with it.

Hefting the container into his arms, Grant walked the distance to the manufacturing area of the compound. He had only a small window of time to add his discovery to the newest run of flu shots that would be packaged over the next few days. While the three litres did not seem like a lot in terms of the volume of vaccination vials they would package in the coming days, he knew his addition would use the dead strains of influenza virus to continue its replication, infecting the entire batch. In fact, the virus he had created would likely withstand the sterilization procedures performed between batches. There was no way of knowing just how far this could spread.

Pouring the contents into the vaccine reservoir, Grant felt no remorse. He was simply completing his life's work. If he must die of cancer, so shall the rest of the world; Grant was just a little disheartened to realize he would not be around to witness the fruits of his labour.

Closing the lid on the reservoir, he made his way back to the lab and gathered up all of his notes. He erased the hard drives in both the lab and his office, then used a program he'd purchased from the internet to fry the mainframes completely. It wouldn't keep them out of his computer, but it would buy him some time. After that he'd be dead and unlikely to care which fingers they pointed at him.

As an extra level of security, he uploaded the program onto the server and let it run rampant through the databases. All of data from countless experiments scrambled and disappeared. It would take someone quite some time to reveal even the smallest of fragments. Careful not to disrupt the production side of things, Grant brought the development side of Hubertson Pharmaceuticals to its proverbial knees. Taking one last look around the lab, he gathered his notes, donned his jacket and left for the night. Looking back at the structure of iron and glass, he let a small smile curl his lips. He would burn his notes at home and call in sick the next day. His co-workers would understand when he revealed the news of the cancer consuming his body.

Three weeks later, Grant Mazra was dead, the cancer having eaten more healthy tissue than his body could sustain. He was laid to rest in a simple ceremony attended by many of his colleagues and close friends. His eulogy outlined a legacy that started with his first synthesized drug for diabetes control and ended with his work to create a more comprehensive flu shot. None of them knew of his last discovery; his parting contribution to the world.

How could they have? Hubertson Pharmaceuticals was still trying to dig their way out from under a catastrophic computer failure in their development department. Production of flu shots continued uninterrupted and the demand this year exceeded their initial supply. More people were getting their preventative shot than in previous years and more pharmacies were holding clinics to help inoculate the public.

Shipments of the flu vaccine were dispatched across the country, even around the globe as the demand rose along with stock prices in Hubertson Pharmaceuticals. All of those shipments were tainted with Grant's legacy as he had correctly predicted his new virus would be resistant to sterilization.

It didn't take long for the world to see the effects of that legacy either. The rates of aggressive cancer rose exponentially, but no one could figure out why, and no one connected it to the influenza vaccine. There was no reason to suspect anything.

Anyone who received the tainted inoculation died within a few short months of its introduction into their bodies. With many of the doctors and nurses knocked out of commission in the early stages, the world's remaining medical community could barely cope with the steep rise in cases. No one knew what was going on; they just knew it was an event unlike anything they had ever seen. Like an apocalyptic culling of the population.

And the engineered virus didn't stop there. It continued to do what it was made to do. Mutate, replicate and infect...

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

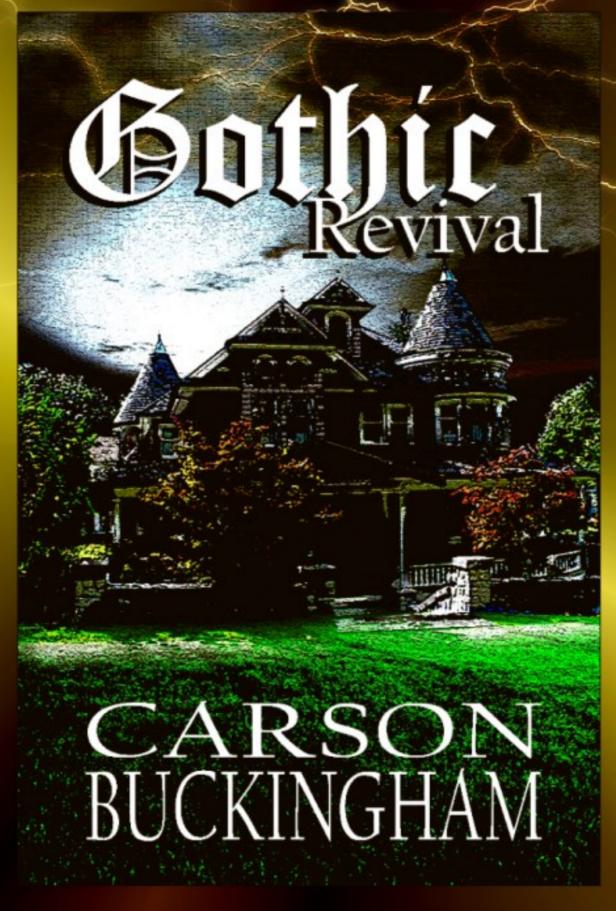
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"Excuse me, did I hear you were looking for work?" but with the job come a series of unusual conditions...



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

THE LAST NIGHT AT SACKS Wayne Haroutunian

A black car parked on a downtown street, rain. Woman inside, crying. She doesn't want to go inside but she knows she has to. Looking down at her purse, her fingers fiddling with it, then reaching for the keys to pull them out of the ignition, but can't. She needs to drive away. Looks out her window at the restaurant.

He's there. He takes a seat at a table by the restaurant window and looks outside.

He doesn't see her.

Seeing him look outside and not notice her, seeing him look at the emptiness outside instead, the rainy street—and maybe he noticed a black car there but doesn't know it's hers and that she's there inside of it ... her sobbing grows and she throws her hands against the steering wheel—and grabs the keys and gets out of the car.

She stops and looks at the restaurant window again. He's looking out the window her way, but still doesn't see her. His inquiring eyes, still looking and wondering. The rain on the window, the world outside and the world inside.

She starts across the street, a car honks and swerves, she backs away and lets it pass. Too tired to even care. She was going to be dead anyway.

Tina makes it to the door of the restaurant—Sacks, it's called. It reminds her of something she can't recall but knows she doesn't like; and she'd rather be at home right now, wherever that actually is. She swings the door open and steps inside and—

-there he is.

Richard stands up, looking at her with concern.

She doesn't know if she's going to be sick or if she's happy.

"Tina—here—you're all wet," he says and offers for her to have a seat.

She doesn't want to sit; she just wants to tell him. But she takes a seat at the table.

"Let me get this off you," Richard says and he removes her coat. "Take mine, it's dry and you're probably cold." And she doesn't stop him from putting his coat over her.

The waiter, "Anything to drink, Madam?"

"Oh—I don't think..." she says.

"Dry white?" Richard asks with a smile. "Your favorite?"

Tina thinks to herself, it won't hurt. "Yes, please." And the waiter nods and as he walks off, Tina says "Thank you," and she turns slightly to watch him go. He doesn't know, she thinks. If he did, if everybody did, how many would still be serving wine?

"So," Richard says. "Not a beautiful night, but here we are. Cozy. Indoors. Some wine and some food, huh?"

She smiles back. His hands on the table, she reaches for them with her own. The feel of his hands. And she looks into his eyes again.

I won't tell you, she thinks. Because that's tomorrow and this is today. And there won't be a tomorrow. For anyone. But you are here now, and so am I. And we're together.

And if it is truly the last night we will be able to have together, we will be cozy, indoors, with some wine and some food.

Tina looks outside and can barely see her black car through the rain on the window. Another world outside. She glances back at her hands on Richard's, and then looks at him, smiles again—glad that she had come inside.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Wayne Haroutunian lives in California with his wife and son. He attended film school in Canada, has been devouring books and writing since he was a kid. One of his sci-fi stories received Honorable Mention in the Writers of the Future Contest; one his fantasy stories received a nomination for a television contest. His inspirations are Stephen King and Ray Bradbury.



AFTERMATH Laura Jamez

Location : United Kingdom Population : 64 million Timeframe : 30 weeks

Distribution centres are ready, project is a go.

PHASE ONE

Monday

Owners of Playstation 4 games machines returned home to find a 15 by 15 cm package, complete with Amazon logo, waiting for them on the doorstep. Inside was a game, Aftermath, and a note which said: "Congratulations you have been selected as a PS4 beta tester. Enjoy your game."

The game was nothing special. An RPG it allowed users to upload their physical dimensions and facial images turning the main character into a copy of themselves. The object of the game appeared to be to wander round a two-bedroom house. It took, on average, twenty minutes for each gamer to dismiss the game as nothing more than a waste of time. Walking around an empty house as themselves provided no thrills.

The game was abandoned and users took out their frustrations on Facebook and Twitter.

Wednesday

It was the turn of XBOX owners to receive their Amazon package of the Aftermath game, complete with congratulatory note.

Twitter and Facebook had been awash with the disappointment of the game, but enough XBOX owners were curious enough to try the game anyway. It appeared the same as what had been described on social media, upload yourself and walk around the house. Only this time when the gamer passed by the front door they were presented with a new feature - the ability to go online.

Stepping through the door, each user was faced with a pleasant suburban street, similar houses and gardens stretched as far as the eye could see. Communication was initiated between users and all of a sudden the game became more interesting.

Gamers took to the forums to remind everyone that once again XBOX gameplay was far superior than Playstation.

Friday

Smartphone and tablet users awoke to an email from Amazon inviting them to download a new game, Aftermath. The buzz created on social media from XBOX 1 users was enough for nearly all these people to download the game and join in.

The Aftermath community was becoming larger by the hour.

By the end of the weekend all gamers were hooked on Aftermath, including Playstation users determined to be the first to crack the game play.

The United Kingdom was online.

PHASE ONE - SUCCESSFUL

PHASE TWO INITIATED.

The majority of users were happy to sit in gardens and houses chatting with each other. Rumours

existed on the forums that if you walked the length of the street you would come to a shopping centre with restaurants, cinemas, supermarkets and similar. Yet within the game itself users couldn't find anyone who had been successful, it was always 'friends of friends of friends had heard'.

Midway through the next week the game changed once more. Side streets appeared which led people to the once rumoured shopping centres.

People started spending all their spare time in the game. Soon the only people on the streets in the real world were those too young to play or technophobes who refused to be drawn into the seedy world of gaming.

It took only one month for the online world to become more important than real life. People only left their houses to visit the nearest supermarket for essentials and to attend work. Yet during working hours tablets and smartphones were used to keep up to date with online friends. Companies started to notice a difference in productivity as their workforce became more interested in Aftermath than real life.

It didn't take long for arguments to leak from real life to the online world and petty jealousy to surface. Safe online you could have an affair, beat up your neighbour, do what ever you wanted. No anonymity but with people thousands of miles away as your target, there was no come back in the real world.

As the gamers changed how they interacted, the landscape of Aftermath adapted. No more pretty streets of two-story houses, but large barracks where like minded individuals chose to congregate. The shopping centres morphed from places of entertainment and safety, to dark derelict locations where gamers met and discussed what hidden secrets were in their mind. No longer a bright cheery place of interaction some gamers left, unable to cope with the darkness that had seemed to descend on the remaining users.

For those in the real world life became difficult with more than half the population permanently online. Public transport stopped; rubbish was left uncollected blocking streets; burst water mains continued to spout water flooding roads; food deliveries were sparse. Petrol became a luxury and fights were common within garage forecourts.

Society began to break down. Gamers ignored pleas from family to eat and wash. Those with no close family lived in squalor, preferring to sit within their own waste rather than move. Non gamers left the gamers to their fate and collected within churches and schools, working together to try to hold on to societies rules.

Eventually the electricity failed with no one to monitor and run the energy companies. Tablet and smartphone users were safe only as long as their battery held out but eventually they failed too. With no Aftermath to play, users didn't know what to do. Too weak from days without sustenance some simply faded away, without the lure of the game they no longer had the will to live. Others who were less diminished took to the streets, the real world mimicking the world they had created online. Attacks became common, death swarmed the streets as like minded people gathered together targeting the churches and schools. Taking what they wanted with force whether it was needed or not.

PHASE TWO COMPLETE

Location : United Kingdom Population : 54 Million and decreasing Timeframe : 12 weeks

Operation Aftermath deemed successful, phase three to be put into immediate effect. Based on phase one and two, distribution can be initiated simultaneously.

PHASE THREE

Monday

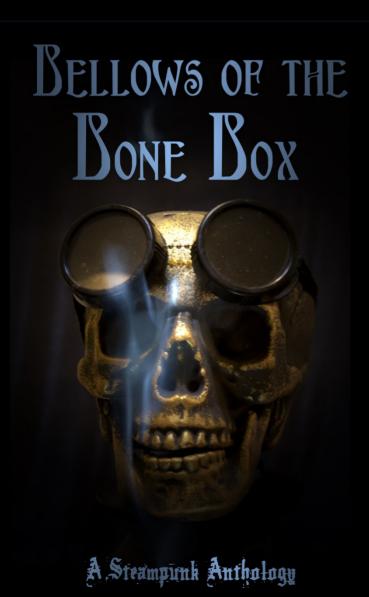
Aftermath hit the doormats and emails of almost the entire world population. Due to the positive comments and buzz created by the United Kingdom gamers, everyone was excited.

No one looked at why the newest comments had been posted more than a month earlier.

No one questioned why the United Kingdom was dark.

The world was online, that was all that mattered.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura Jamez, a mother of two from Dunfermline in Scotland, has been obsessed with horror from an early age. She is currently involved in producing an anthology of horror tales in time for Halloween. One of Laura's aims for 2014 is to appear in every issue of *The Sirens Call*: Only two to go and her goal is achieved.



edited by Gloria Bobrowicz

Bellows of the Bone Box

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BOUNTY HUNTER Shawn Davis

Six heavily armored cars blasted down the highway like metallic demons from a Mechanized Hell, kicking up clouds of dust in their wake; five silver Empire Cruisers shadowed a single midnight-blue Corvette like malevolent spirits intent on retribution. The sleek Corvette outdistanced the silver interceptors by a hundred yards, but they were closing rapidly.

Glancing in his rearview mirror, the driver of the Corvette watched his pursuers gaining on him. Sunlight gleamed off the interceptors' armored hulls like a thousand miniature suns, blinding him momentarily. This was getting serious. He had to do something fast or he was finished.

Mark Tanner was used to driving fast, but not on an ancient, neglected highway. When the chase started, he thought it would be a smart move to leave the Empire's vast road network and set off on a remote route across the Wasteland. Now, he was questioning the wisdom of his decision as his car skidded over rough patches and shook as it drove over crater-like potholes. He had to use all his skill to keep from sliding off the road onto the desert terrain.

No, it was not one of his best decisions. He would have been better off staying on the main Imperial Freeway, despite any traffic he might encounter. He could have used the traffic as obstacles to place between himself and the cruisers. Instead, he found himself heading off the Imperial map toward the closest Dead Zone: an irradiated landscape that ordinary travelers avoided like a plague.

Tanner heard gunfire explode behind him and knew time was running out. Glancing in his rearview mirror, he saw white lightning erupt from the Empire Cruisers' front-mounted machine guns. A horrific grinding noise assailed his ears as the Vette's rear armor plating was stripped away by the bullet storm. The armor could only take so much before it was blasted away. Luckily, he was not completely defenseless.

Won't they be surprised, Tanner thought, as he flipped a series of switches on his dashboard control panel, which opened a view-screen in the center. Targeting crosshairs hovered in the middle of the screen. Tanner wrapped a leather-gloved hand around a stick-shift that fitted his fingers like a pair of brass knuckles. As he moved the shift, the camera view in the dashboard view-screen changed. He spun the shift around so the view-screen's crosshairs focused on one of the pursuing cruisers.

Time to get friendly.

Tanner pressed the red fire button in the brass knuckle shift. More machine gun thunder exploded, this time close by, as the Corvette's roof-mounted cannon opened fire. Tanner watched in the view-screen as the pursuing cruiser's windshield imploded in a shower of sparks and glass fragments. The panicked driver must have cut the wheel sharply because the vehicle flipped over twice and smashed into another cruiser. The colliding cruisers spun off the road; the first exploded into fiery shrapnel as the second flipped onto its roof.

Two down, three to go.

Tanner watched the cruisers fall back out of range, assessing the new threat.

Yeah, that's right, just give up.

No such luck. Two cruisers stayed back, but a third began gaining rapidly, firing its front-mounted guns.

Apparently, we have a hero on our hands.

Tanner winced as more bullets sliced into his rear armor plating. Glancing in the rearview mirror, he saw the hero-piloted cruiser swerve to the right as it closed on him. He recognized the whirring silver spikes protruding from the tires as the Empire's latest addition to their pursuit vehicles. If the car pulled alongside him, the blades would rip his tires to pieces.

Not so fast hotshot.

Tanner swung the stick-shift around until the dashboard view-screen focused on the windshield of the rapidly approaching car. He depressed the fire button and the results were spectacular. Thunder filled his ears as the cruiser's windshield blew apart. The shattered vehicle swerved off the highway and flipped over five times before exploding into fiery shrapnel. The remaining two cruisers fell back.

Smart decision, Tanner thought.

Glancing left, Tanner saw the ruins of a bombed-out city on the distant horizon: the Dead Zone. He

knew exactly where he was now. He had been here before. He remembered another highway intersected this one a few miles ahead. If he took the left exit, it would take him to the city and he sure as hell didn't want to go there. Only death and irradiated Old Tech festered in that hellhole. A right would take him the opposite way from the decaying ruins – back toward the Imperial Freeway. So right it was. He knew he was getting close when he spotted the beat-up exit signs ahead. He read the faded letters on the first sign; RICHMOND - NEXT THREE EXITS.

Tanner glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the remaining pair of cruisers following, but at a respectful distance. He might be in trouble if they radioed for reinforcements. Especially air support. Hopefully there was none in the area.

Tanner decelerated and hit the fourth exit ramp at 45 mph, slowing just enough to avoid sliding into the desert. He took the sharpest curve at 30 mph and accelerated rapidly. In moments, he was back to 110 mph. Glancing in the rearview mirror, he saw the cruisers making the turn behind him, but they were losing distance. Their heart didn't seem to be in the chase anymore. Things were looking good.

As the pursuit faded into the distance of his rearview mirror, Tanner listened to the wind rushing over the rocky desert landscape. The cracked highway was the only sign of civilization in the barren wasteland. The center line had long since faded and the highway was melted and cracked in places, so it looked like it hadn't been traveled in hundreds of years. The damage had been done to the road despite the fact the Pantaran Empire maintained this highway as a supply route between their cities. Tanner guessed it had been several years since it had been repaved.

The Empire must be slipping. Maybe they're stretching themselves too thin with their recent conquests.

The road was set in utter desolation; it was a hot, barren, boulder-strewn wasteland with no signs of life whatsoever. Not even a stray cactus or blade of grass poked through the dry soil. No plants could survive in this desolate land. Of course, the reason for the large-scale devastation was that this landscape was part of a toxic perimeter surrounding a nuclear Dead Zone. Tanner knew that if he traveled fifty miles east across this wasteland, he would reach the actual Dead Zone: the irradiated ruins of an ancient city dead for almost four hundred years. It was a twenty mile square radius of ruined landscape lethal to all life.

Well, almost all life.

It was a well-known fact that the race of mutant Demon-spawn was the only species left on earth with the ability to survive in the irradiated ruins. They had only obtained that unique ability after hundreds of years of adaptive mutation.

If he followed the highway due north for two hundred miles, he could view panoramic mountains surrounded by lush green forests in an Oasis Zone controlled by the Pantaran Empire. One hundred miles south would bring him to the rich green fields surrounding Junction City: a metropolis of trade only recently-acquired by the rapacious Pantarans. They had only conquered the previous inhabitants of the city less than a year ago.

The place has gone to hell since then.

Not the real Hell, of course. Just the figurative hell. The real Hell was still three hundred miles to the west beyond the Appalachian Mountains: a vast irradiated wasteland that made this barren toxic perimeter look like an Oasis Zone. There was nothing left out in the real Hell but mutants, ruins, Old Tech, and death. Tanner figured the damn Pantarans had probably acquired all the surviving Old Tech in their numerous expeditions to Hell. They were the only civilization that possessed the proper radiation shielding to mount such treacherous expeditions. They were rumored to have gone out there many times.

Right now, he had to forget about his problems with the Pantaran Empire. He needed to find a way out of this wasteland. He still had to travel a hundred miles south to get to the Oasis Zone surrounding Junction City.

As he drove, Tanner thought back to the history of the Eastern Oasis Zone. There were many theories regarding the origin of the nuclear holocaust of 2100, which was popularly known as the Great Armageddon. The prevalent theory, which was backed by the majority of surviving historical evidence,

asserted that the conflict was initiated in Russia where a Middle Eastern terrorist group had joined with Chechen rebels to take over a secure nuclear missile bunker. From there, the radical fundamentalist terrorists had launched the first atomic missiles to initiate the nuclear war. The terrorists had chosen the start of the new millennium, 2100, to begin the worldwide elimination of their enemies. The terrorist group's purported goal was to purge the planet of all infidels. If that was true, then they did a hell of a job.

Not surprisingly, the United States responded to the initial nuclear attack by launching a wave of hundreds of nuclear missiles at Russia. When Russian radar detected the oncoming atomic storm, they responded by unleashing the first massive wave of their own nuclear arsenal. The United States had a slight advantage with its orbiting satellite defense system known as 'Star Wars.' Modern historians regarded the defense system as only a slight advantage due to the fact it was designed to stop a limited nuclear missile strike by a renegade terrorist group. It was not built to handle a full-scale nuclear assault.

The terrorists launched their captured bunker's total arsenal consisting of one missile containing ten atomic warheads. Eight of the ten warheads were shot down by the United States' orbiting satellite defense system. Unfortunately, one of the warheads penetrated the protective laser gauntlet and annihilated Washington DC. The other warhead annihilated New York City. The destruction of the U.S. capitol city and seat of government power was most likely the deciding factor that provoked the massive retaliatory response from the USA. Within minutes of the destruction of Washington, the U.S. launched a wave of atomic missiles at their Russian targets. The Russians wasted no time launching a counterstrike.

While the first wave of missiles flew, the surviving U.S. government officials desperately tried to contact the leaders of the Russian government via satellite. When they finally got through, they were informed about the Middle Eastern and Chechen terrorists and the captured nuclear missile bunker in Russia. The U.S. officials sent an order to stop all subsequent missile launches. Unfortunately, Russia's first wave of missiles struck at that time, disrupting the communications between the silos and the leaders of the federal government. The order never got through. Standard Operating Procedure dictated a second launch in the absence of counter-orders. By the time the message finally got through to U.S. missile command, the second wave had already been ordered to launch.

The second wave, consisting of more than a hundred long-range ballistic missiles, containing almost a thousand warheads, was already in the air. This seemingly irrational second attack by the U.S., in the context of the information concerning the terrorists provided by the Russian leaders, provoked a second wave of missiles to be launched from Russia. There was no third wave. There was no need for one. By that time, over a quarter of the earth's surface had been rendered uninhabitable.

In the U.S., the American Midwest had been hit the hardest. This seemingly innocuous landscape was a prime target because of the prevalence of nuclear missile silos in its territories. The extreme flatness of the Midwest terrain also made it susceptible to radioactive fallout carried by winds and radiation clouds. The result was that none of the survivors on the east coast dared to venture west past the Appalachian Mountains without adequate radiation gear. Those who had dared never returned. Or even worse, they returned horribly burned and scarred by radiation. It was not surprising that the lethal Midwest Wastelands were now commonly referred to as Hell.

The first mutated Demon-spawn was reported migrating east out of Hell in the late 2200's. Not surprisingly, they were regarded with horror and revulsion by the survivors on the East Coast. Some local scientists captured a few of them for study and analyzed their mutated physiology. The mutant's red, leathery skin was covered with boils oozing thick yellow pus. Apparently, this was their body's adaptive way of excreting irradiated fluids from their internal organs. Amazingly, their internal organs had evolved to function in the presence of constant exposure to radiation. Their digestive systems could no longer handle any fruit, vegetable, cereal, or milk products. The reason for this was very basic; none of those food products had survived in the irradiated Wastelands of the Midwest. The only food available to the mutants, and consequently the only thing they could digest, was raw meat. It didn't matter if it was irradiated or not. The mutant's teeth had evolved to become longer and sharper, like a predator's, so they could tear into live flesh.

Very few animals had survived the nuclear bombardment in the Midwest. Given that unpleasant fact, the research scientists were not surprised to discover that the mutants, or Demon-spawn as they were later referred to by local religious leaders, had turned to cannibalism to survive. They had no scruples; they were content with eating each other or preying on non-mutated human beings. In fact, the Demon-Spawn seemed to prefer feasting on non-mutated humans because their bodies didn't have to work as hard to excrete excess radiation. This unsettling news spread quickly throughout the East Coast, and a border patrol of armed vigilantes was quickly formed to guard against incursions from these monsters. Patrols were still guarding the western border to this day in 2478. Currently, no one knew how many mutants existed in the toxic Wastelands of the Midwest because no one but the Pantaran Empire ever went out there. The Pantarans were always very secretive about their excursions into Hell.

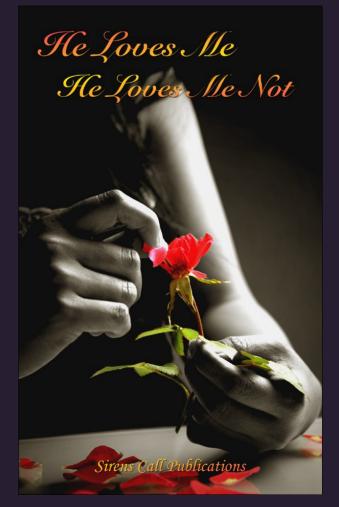
Other than the Pantarans, no intrepid souls in the Eastern Oasis Zone were brave or foolhardy enough to attempt a journey straight through Hell. Someday, when he had nothing left to lose, Tanner thought he might try it.

> **ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Shawn Davis grew up in the small town of Holliston, Massachusetts. He earned his Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminal Justice from Salem State University, and he works as a police officer in a small New England town. He also worked as a police lieutenant at a New England College for eleven years. Shawn's background in law enforcement lends authenticity to his action-packed thrillers.

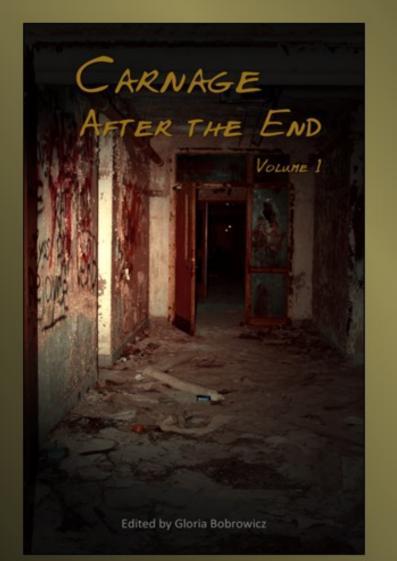
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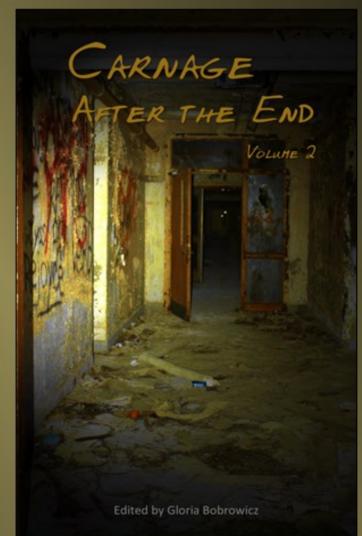
He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

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RETREAT DJ Tyrer

"The entire valley is alive with them," PFC Tomas said.

He was right; the ground of the valley below was an undulating carpet of ants and other invertebrates. The warning signs had been there for years: the destruction of the rainforests had sent a cascade of creatures northward. Others had made their way onto boats and been carried to new homes across the ocean, infesting the unlikeliest of places. But, the discovery of displaced colonies was a mere hint of what was to come.

The devastation of Bogota was the first revelation of the real threat they posed as hordes of spiders, ants and snakes poured into the city as if under the direction of a general. Incredulous, the world watched in horror as the city was overrun, leaving only clean-picked skeletons and empty homes. Other cities fell in turn as the creatures advanced north.

Now, they were here.

Sergeant Warner called in their location.

"Bombers are on their way," he told his unit, meaning 'get down and take cover'.

Without the threat of anti-aircraft fire, the bombers could come in low and slow, raining down devastation into the valley below. Canisters of napalm released their contents in mid-air, raining down sheets of flame. Within seconds, the entire valley was ablaze, a sea of fire. It was the only thing that had any effect on the massed ranks of invertebrates.

But, as the bombers swept away northward, bomb bays empty, Sergeant Warner could see swathes of blackness sweeping up either slope of the valley, bypassing the flames that had claimed their kin. The advancing mass seemed unending. He'd heard the rumours that satellite photos showed such masses covering hundreds of square miles. From what he'd seen, he couldn't doubt it. No matter how hard they were hit, they just kept coming and mankind kept falling back, powerless.

Suddenly, PFC Tomas shouted, "Watch it, Sarge!" and Warner's head snapped up.

An outrider of spiders had popped out an area of scrub and was heading straight for them. It was uncanny how they seemed to plan such pincer movements.

"Fall back," ordered Warner, scrambling to his feet, but the order was too late for Corporal Hall, who fell screaming to the ground, beating at himself as they swarmed over him.

Retreating to their waiting humvee, they sped back to the rally point. That was the lot of humanity in a microcosm. Retreating again and again. Only, they were rapidly running out of land to retreat through and the advance showed no signs of stopping.

Warner dismounted the humvee, dreading to learn the latest news in the fall of humanity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean *Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines in the UK, USA and elsewhere, most recently in *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Cosmic Horror* (Dark Hall Press), as well as *Tigershark* ezine, and in addition, has a novella available on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

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CARRYING TIME Jessica R. Santillan

Five-fifteen. The sun is beginning to set. This is one of the only beautiful things about the world now. Red—deep red—blankets the sky. Other colors mix on the periphery; orange, yellow, pink, blue, purple almost like a bruise. It's as if the sky is covered in the blood of the lives this world has lost. And maybe the dead are up there. Somewhere. How do I know?

Lorena and I move inward. The road is an easy guide and when it's daytime it's the best route. We find a spot as far isolated as we can, at the edge of a large strip of barren land. The soil looks like it had been tilled once but no one got around to planting crops.

Light is leaving fast and we're quick to start a fire with nearby brush. It won't last long but will heat our food enough to give us a warm meal. We eat in silence. Lorena looks as if she wants to say something, but of course she can't. She's the ideal companion. She's here but not here at all.

We sit and watch after dinner. This is the way it goes. Hours of stillness, of alertness, keeping an eye on the landscape for any movement. After several hours like this, I can see Lorena's head beginning to droop. Eventually, she curls up on the ground almost mechanically. I can see it's a pattern that she sleeps too much. If she's going to travel with me, this is a habit she'll need to break.

I pull out my pocket watch and squeeze it in my palm, feel warmth returning to me from the metal. I can't see its face now; no, time is only for the day.

Howls ascend in the silence; they are far off, sound almost like laughing, yipping and mocking the lone traveler. Coyotes. I tuck my pocket watch away and pull out my gun. They are far; perhaps much further than they sound. In the heaving silence of the night, any sound is close.

The coyotes howl, licking the night with their cries. Just after they stop, I hear one final shout, a scream pure and filled with pain, gurgled with the agony of death. The night has taken another life into its cold grasp. The coyotes will be satisfied. And perhaps tonight, Lorena and I will live on.

The fog must have rolled in some time after I fell asleep. I can feel the dampness surrounding me before I open my eyes. All I see is yellow, the moisture mixing with the chemical that has become part of the air. I am bathed in yellow. Enclosed in its grasp. For a moment, I feel the hysteria of the past. Heart racing and memories of sickness, death, violence flood me. Bombs blast and leave my city in ruins. I am lost. A husband disappeared. A daughter gasping, gasping and dying and—

I squeeze my eyes shut, push back the memories, remind myself the chemical has lost its potency. I breathe, deep, filling my lungs with the air. What remains isn't as toxic as it used to be. Slowly, I become reoriented to the present. I sit up and look around.

Lorena has already woken. She turns, hands me her notebook.

Still heading north, right? The page is damp; the lines bleed at the edges.

"Yes," I say, failing to mention that I'm not sure how far that'll be. Because there are two choices left for me: keep going, or don't. My throat itches. If I can just make it past Bakersfield and the memories, I can get up to Sacramento.

Lorena nods. City will have food.

"Is that where you got this?" I point to the three cans she has out. It occurs to me that these are the last cans of food. No more water, either. We have to go in.

She nods. City's mostly empty. Most everyone is by the river where there's clean water.

"Well," I say. "As clean as you can get it." And, it occurs to me to ask, "Why aren't you up there?"

She opens her mouth and points to what used to be her tongue. She quickly writes on her notebook and shows me the page. *Dad made enemies.*

"Why would you stay so close?"

It's the only home I know.

I mean to say, "You're a brave kid," but I stay quiet. I've been unable to stay close to the memories.

**

It's eight-fifty. We've been walking since six-fourteen and are nearly to the city line. It'll be maybe an hour. Right now we're walking on the center divider of the highway, staying far away from the interspersed

housing developments in which a few homes still stand. Lorena says they're likely empty but I know better.

I once tried to break into a house that looked vacant. My face met the butt of a rifle. I fell, dropped my gun. Inside I could see stockpiles of weapons and a man, greasy-faced and scowling pressing his rifle to my face. If he'd been a lesser person, I'd be gone already. But that was early on and we didn't know what kinds of things we could be driven to do to one another.

A stench arises, faint at first, but grows in intensity. I take out my gun and walk steadily forward. If there's a body nearby that smells of early decay, then there's a chance someone is nearby. The smell thickens, like a wall of rotten death hanging limp in the air.

We come across the body. The corpse is in its early stages of decay; I can see the coagulated blood sitting on his hands, dried on his mouth. His body looks fetal in the way he lies curled, tight and rigid. It's almost like the mold of a Pompeii civilian grasping onto himself, holding onto the only thing that is real, present, in the face of immense destruction. As if he's still holding on to the last vestiges of life with his fingers clawed around his shirt. As if he's saying to the world I want to keep going.

If the body could sit up and talk, if I could look into his eyes and understand this all.

How did you die? I would ask. How did it feel to watch your loved ones succumb to sickness? How did it feel to see the world so derelict, so imbued with disorder and decay that nothing seemed meaningful any longer? And, in your final moments, as you tightened your fingers, as you squeezed shut your eyes and held onto the twisting agony of death, did you feel life?

How do I die? I would ask.

"The coyotes will get to him soon," I say. We keep moving.

Welcome to Bakersfield the sign reads. I can feel my pace slowing. I thought I could go back but I feel my body locking up, rejecting return.

It's only nine-thirty when we reach the sign, but I say, "Let's take a break here." I circle the slab of concrete fenced by a small gate and sit leaning against the short black spires. It was just a few miles in when Maggie collapsed. And wheezing for hours, she died slowly, suffocating on nothing and everything. I squeeze my fingers around the watch.

You okay?

Lorena points to my hands. I loosen my grip on the watch.

"I don't want to go back," I say.

Lorena writes, Don't have to. Could go back south.

"I've been south. There is no south. There is no west. There is no east."

The trees shake, like knobby knees quaking, like chattering teeth.

"My daughter died just up the road," I say. "We stayed as long as we could. I insisted. John-my husband disappeared one night and I knew he wasn't coming back.

"Six years old. She was the liveliest child I'd ever known. Almost without warning—because really, the warning had always been there—she began to degenerate. It was too late when we'd left. I suppose, even if we'd left earlier, the result would've been the same."

I turn the watch over in my fingers.

Was the watch your husband's?

"Yes. We were always so obsessed with time then. I need more time I need more time. I suppose it's the same. I need more time I need more time. But I want less of it too.

"How do we keep going?" I ask.

Lorena shrugs.

"You don't know either." I laugh. "Of course you don't."

Let's keep going? she asks.

"Might as well," I say.

And there is an overpass, one that creeps up on us. East 58. North 99.

The cinder overpass leans upon sturdy legs, housing graffiti, the stench of excrement and mold. Weeds tangle themselves under its belly, twisting like scrawny arms reaching up, rising from the soil, from cracks in the cement.

I sat and held Maggie there.

The cough. The incurable cough and the collapse of lungs. I pulled my car over, drew her into my arms and sat on the cement. I thought we were so close to escape, approaching something better. But this was inevitable. I will always lose her.

I sit on the ground, remember the feeling of death in my arms. The watch was in my hands then as I watched the tick-tick-tick of her life floating away. How long does she have to die for? I asked the watch. Too long.

Lorena looks perplexed.

"Maggie," I say. The moment lingers, but at last I break myself away from this spot.

I stand up. We push on.

Now we are off the highway. There are several houses and convenience stores that have been stripped bare on the inside. They lie open, exposed like a wound. Lorena points to a section of housing that has been leveled.

Food there.

We split up and get started searching through the rubble in the place that used to be the kitchen. The smell of rotting, fermenting bodies hits my nose after I lift a plank. I cringe but keep searching.

"Here," she mouths and waves her arms. She pulls out two cans from beneath the rubble and lifts them in triumph.

There are several cans, many of which have exploded and are growing mold around the edges. But a few are salvageable. We gather ten in total and split them to carry. There's no sign of water, but that's always the hardest to find.

I look around the ruined house. One wall stands erect; the ruins of some family's lives lie at our feet. I go toward the wall. A curtain hangs from a single screw, no longer covering the blasted-out window. The yellow wall is perhaps the perfect color for this air. What is it that has made every wall collapse, but this one? I wonder.

Beneath the rubble near the wall, thin metal coils peek out at me. I lift pieces of drywall, and broken furniture to find a stack of unused notebooks.

"Lorena," I say. "Look." I carry the notebooks to her. She smiles.

There are birds in the sky. Only a few, but they fly in formation, heading north as well. They might be seagulls. Lorena and I stop and watch the mystery of these creatures, animals we haven't seen take to the skies in so long.

If I could fly. *They're beautiful*, Lorena writes. "Yes," I say.

The waning sunlight carries us forward. We reach the Bluffs just as red bursts forth from the sky. It's at this time that the sun and the wind and the haze strike upon each other in just the right way to unveil the landscape as anything but threatening. Palms stand tall, swaying gently, rippling against the wind. Overgrown bushes and plants tangle together in the park.

I move toward the edge of the hills that overlook the river, but Lorena stops. She shakes her head. "Go on," she mouths.

I continue until I stand against the high-up hills that seem to touch the sky from this angle. The land is pocked and charred. The shambles of old oil refineries sit charred and crumbling. Oil derricks stand in

disuse; pumpjacks lift their arms skyward, frozen in supplication. And below, just past the dried-up canal, I can see movement, life by the river. Small encampments are set up around the drizzling river that must be frozen up in the mountains.

This is the land I return to. The place of my birth, the place of death. The place of expiration. The place which keeps me up at night and which carries me forward during the day. I am home. I am home and I don't know how to feel or react.

Five-forty-three. My watch ticks away time. Time moves forward endlessly but we do not. I look back at Lorena who will die someday and I look at my hands. They quake. These hands, too, will fall into disuse. This heart will stop beating; these lungs will stop breathing. Every cell will break down, unable to move forward with replication. And yet I hold on. Because I am afraid to die. Because everyone around me has died and so there must be a reason to continue.

To continue. Is that what I've been doing? Or have I simply been stagnant this whole time? Sitting, spoiling, spending time just wasting wasting into nothing. I have traveled and yet I am static.

The watch falls, maybe on purpose, maybe by accident, from my hands down the steep and rolling hills. It strikes upon the yellowing grass, expelling a poof of dirt outward and tumbles away. A faint thud, and the watch has landed somewhere beyond my eyesight.

For the first time in years, I do not bear the weight of the watch. I almost feel a sense of relief. Is that what this is? The easing of tension at my core, the slowing of my heartbeat. The absence of time ticking in my brain. Release.

There is a gasp from behind me. Lorena runs forward, dropping her bag, and prepares to descend the slope of the hill.

"No," I say and block her path. "No."

"But," she mouths.

"It's okay," I say. What a strange child, I think. To be so willing to go down and face the horrors of her past, horrors which I can't even conceive, just to retrieve my watch. But I will not let her do that. Not for me.

"I think we ought to find a place to rest for the night," I say.

And we persist, with our eyes toward Sacramento, that holy Eucharist, that blood and body of sustenance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jessica R. Santillan is a current MFA student of Fiction at Fresno State. She has had her work published in the San Joaquin Review. Currently, she teaches Intro Fiction at Fresno State and works as an editorial assistant for The Normal School.

> Twitter: <u>@JessRSantillan</u> Blog: <u>http://jessicarsantillan.wordpress.com/</u>

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CATEGORY 5 L.E. White

Jerry rubbed his face with his hands. The sound of the stubble on his cheeks reminded him of the way the sand paper sounded as he rubbed the edges off Josh's first set of blocks.

He looked down beside the table, to the pile of wood. Squares, triangles and circles that he had hoped would make his little boy smile. He stared at it until his eyes blurred and he had to wipe away the tears that had wet his cheeks.

When he wiped his cheeks, he rubbed his stubble again. The cycle repeated itself, over and over, as Jerry tried to focus on his work.

He did not know the time, but he knew it was getting late when the sunlight met his arm on the table. Light only came in from that window when the sun was close to setting. His day had wasted away and he couldn't remember it.

He thought it was better that way.

After a deep breath, he reached forward and picked a fat, red, plastic shell from the box of empty ammunition and sat it in front of him. He loaded it with slow, shaking hands as tears dripped off his chin to fall onto faded jeans. He thought of Molly, frowning at him on a Sunday morning, shaking her head and threatening to throw his old clothes out.

With the cap set and the powder and wadding in place, Jerry took a measuring spoon and dipped it into the bowl full of shiny gold spheres. He dumped a fortune into the shell, not once thinking about how much money it might have been worth.

Not that there was anyone to sell it to anymore.

He placed the shell into the clamp and pulled the lever down, pressing and packing until he closed the case. Jerry took the heavy shell out and lifted it up to inspect his work. It looked good, just like they always had, and nodded before laying it down on the table.

He placed it at the end of a row and then counted them by saying a name as he touched each one. He looked at the window, at the soft yellow light, and turned back to his work. There was still plenty of time.

Twice more, the arm of the re-loader groaned as Jerry pulled it down. Twice more, he checked his work before reaching across the table and picking up his favorite gun. He slid one into place with a click that sounded like a clap of thunder in his kitchen. He stopped and looked at the gun, checking it over, before loading another shell.

Jerry shook his head, trying to keep his mind from wandering away.

When he put in the last shell, Jerry looked back down at the newspaper on the table. The picture of a blurry monster charging towards a group of people had been one of the first reports. There were not very many more papers after that. Another warned people to stay inside. One had told everyone about the gold. Then the paper stopped coming.

Molly's cat walked into the room, slinking along the walls, scared of being seen, and Jerry couldn't blame it.

"You know," he said to the cat, which froze and stared at him for a second before running out of the room like a tabby lightning bolt. "I remember watching movies about zombies being the end of the world."

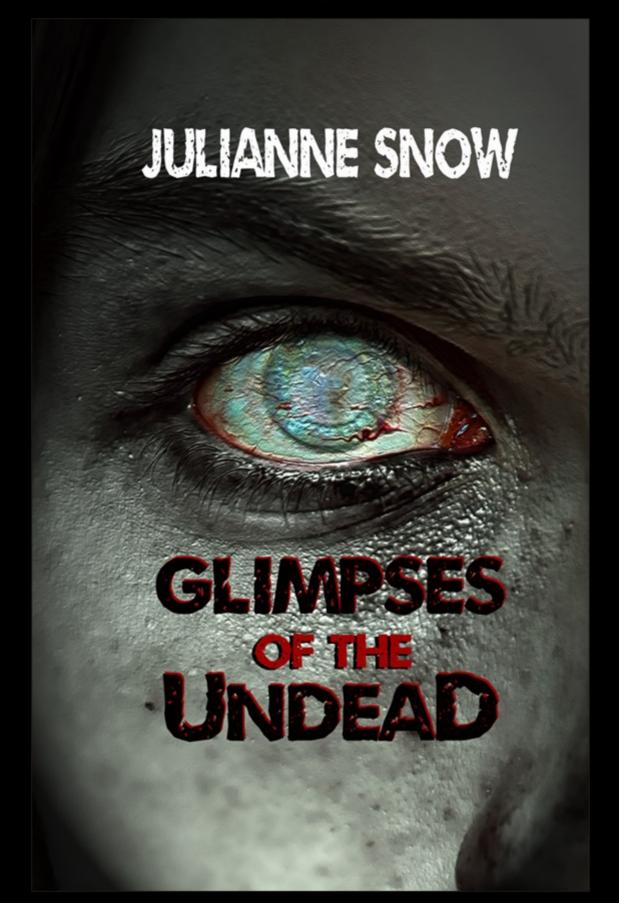
Jerry shouldered his gun and headed towards the door. He stepped on a newspaper, leaving a dirty boot print over the words, "Shifter Virus Covers Globe. Werewolf Pandemic Elevated to Category 5."

He put his hand on the knob and stopped, taking a deep breath before stepping outside. Jerry's family was waiting for him out in the barn. They should be hungry; the horse wouldn't have lasted long.

He worked the action, putting a shell into the chamber, as he went to set them free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - L.E. White is a happily married father of four, living on his family farm in Southern Indiana. This is his fourth piece to appear in an issue of *The Sirens Call* e-Zine. He also has stories included in "Carnage, After the End, Volume 2", "Slaughter House: The Serial Killer Edition - Volume 3", and an upcoming release as a standalone from Sirens Call Publications.

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ATLAS SHRUGGED

DJ Tyrer

Atlas shrugged and the sky fell Continents rose, sank, shifted Seas returned to cover long-arid land Cities tumbled and millions died The remainder fighting for their place in Hell As a new city rose Towers of obsidian rising to the moon A white-masked stranger stalked the land Sourcing acolytes for a new world order Built on the ashes and bones of the dead That happy multitude that did not survive The Day of Wrath The day on which God reached out his Hand Snuffed out the stars Leaving only a blank black canvas As blank as the mask of the Living God The emotionless mask that observes a dying world Makes no judgement Merely questions Leaving the living to judge themselves In the ruins of their old lives Clutching their heads in their hands Sobbing, wailing Defeated, doomed

The Revelation of a Broken Mirror

Mathias Jansson

A crow lies dead on the floor The mirror is broken a closed door is open The old frame of oak is unable To keep the captured souls

The devil's demons are singing in choir Spreading the words of Satan Black wings covered with tar Breathing fire in the air From below released from his chains Rises the dark underlord Pulled on a wagon of hell's unicorns

The fire spreading around the world While the priest in vain prays God's word Sunset boarding the ship of Sodom Given no respite when humans are slain The book of Armageddon is filled Dripping wet with names covered in blood

On the floor lies a dead crow In the broken mirror scattered pieces I see the horror of tomorrow The apocalyptic end drawing near

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines in the UK, USA and elsewhere, most recently in Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Tales of the Dark Arts (Hazardous Press) and Cosmic Horror (Dark Hall Press), as well as Tigershark ezine, and in addition, has a novella available on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dynatox Ministries). **ABOUT THE AUTHOR** - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and *The Sirens Call*. He has also contributed to over 50 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press etc.

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Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

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SILENCE

D.R. Minion

The isolation in this place, society's discarded waste of space. They wouldn't listen, and didn't care. But in the air, and all around, the silence of the wicked damned.

This everlasting bitterness, in every crevice of my world. My world, my mind - it's all the same!

And in the air, and all around, the silence of the wicked damned.

So in this end I'm finally free but I find what's left - is only me.

And in the air, and all around, the silence of the wicked damned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - My name is Dallas Minion. I am thirty four years old and have two wonderful children who are my biggest supporters and inspirations.

I grew up in a small town in south-western Canada and learned to rely on my imagination at an early age out of necessity. The written word and music have been my constant companions, helping me retreat from reality when needed.

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Gape By Aiden Truss

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AIDEN TRUSS

SPEAKING WITH ENDANGERED TONGUES

Justin Karcher

Yeah, I've made angel wings out of aborted wire hangers And one morn, when flying over the wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald, I suddenly start spitting blood and projectile vomiting And I desperately need a Pepto Bomb, a shot of Pepto In a Red Bull, to reinforce my wings. Sure, I can lie to myself, Convince myself that the world hasn't ended, but it's the Little apocalyptic things in life that mean the most, Like the two craters in Siberia that just ripped open the earth Or the bro I made love to at the abandoned campsite last night. His permafrost beard was equator long and tasted like The Battle of Stalingrad. Kissing the bastard was a turning Point for me. I know. I know – the heart is a feast of losses. Happiness is a difficult task, the world isn't worth it. So, me and this Russian (I think he was Russian) were walking through a meadow And came across a dead horse with extinct words carved Into its equine body. There was 'LOVE' in blood red letters, A lie full of empty bliss. Love was pulverized to fine dust Beneath 200,000 tons of NYC steel. There was 'HOPE' Etched in white bone, a disease that can affect any bone In the body. The only hope for the world is to make sure There's not another United States. Me and the Russian Knew. This was the handiwork of a vigilante group Calling itself Words Will Save Us – poets and linguists That roam the tumors of earth knifing alphabets into flesh. We stood there in silence, the moon shining on us and It felt like Chlamydia. My Russian friend lit a cigarette. After a few puffs, he handed me the cig and took off his shirt. "Look," he said. Carved into his dusty chest were hundreds of words-'HATE' and 'ANGER' and 'SADNESS' and 'GOD' and more. He was a victim of poets and linguists; they carved him up real, Real nice. "Touch," he said and he placed my hand on his chest. I was turned on, so I finished his cigarette and kissed every inch Of his chest, every incensed letter that adorned it. Before long, We were making love next to the dead horse. All panted out, We were looking up at the flammable moon and wondered Where it all went wrong. That's when the Russian asked me, "Why the wings?" And I answered: "Because I almost died Of the virus aboard a flight to Minneapolis. As I looked out The tiny window, I saw a meteor crashing to earth...dinosaurs Going extinct...fireballs crashing to earth...friends with benefits Crying out for love...tanks rolling into Gaza...and like I thought, I'd rather die in the air than live on the ground...but I didn't die Up in the air, because the soul is subject to gravity – it's disgusting. Baby, I want wings..." By the time I finished ranting or whatever, The goddamned Muscovite was fast asleep and at peace. That night, his graffiti chest was my pillow and I dreamt I was The wind in the wires. When I awoke, my Russian lover was gone And the sun was again on its killing spree. The catacomb

Seems to be closing in and there's a vigilante group leaving Hesitation marks on our linguistic skins, but I won't give up. Sure, I can lie to myself, convince myself that the world hasn't ended, But I won't give up...I can't...I can't...I've made angel wings Out of aborted wire hangers and now I'm hanging out to dry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Justin Karcher's a playwright and poet living in Buffalo, NY. He's the Co-Artistic Director of Theater Jugend as well as its Playwright-in-Residence. He's been nominated for Artvoice Best of Buffalo Best Writer (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014) and Best Poet (2013, 2014). *Click Chamber*, a play he co-wrote, took home Best Drama at NYC's Festival of the Offensive in 2014.

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Sometimes in eams



G.L. HELM

Sometimes in Dreams By G.L. Helm

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes

INTERVIEW WITH PHOTOGRAPHER AND GRAPHIC ARTIST DANIELLE TUNSTALL

In this issue of The Sirens Call, we're pleased to feature the artwork of Danielle Tunstall, a horror photographer graphic artist from the UK. We sat down with Danielle to ask her a few questions relating to her art and the following is what transpired.

Welcome Danielle, why don't you take a moment to tell us a little bit about yourself?

My name is Danielle and I'm self-taught mum of 2. I've been a photographer for 5 years. Before that I was a cleaner. I got my first camera, a Sony alpha, about the same time I got the internet, when I was pregnant with my son. To earn extra money I started off on poker sites, then discovered EBay before one day coming across a photography competition.

Out of the 300 entries, I came last. The next competition was about "textures". I lost three times in a row and realised I had to start thinking different. I covered my kid's dad in a mud mask and waited for it to dry and crack, when asked him to snarl. I not only won \$500 for the competition, but one of the images was spotted by a company working for PlayStation. They bought one the images from the shoot which got me a new camera and a new sofa (as ours was falling apart).

From that day I gave up cleaning to pursue photography. That was 4 years ago, and to think that I was worried about spending £3 on a mud mask that ended up changing my life.

What mediums do you work in? Is there a medium that you've always wanted to try but just haven't gotten around to yet?

I would like to experiment with my camera more. And I already paint and make sculptures when not working.

What are some of your main influences?

I'm completely self-taught, with all my inspiration coming from life and a misspent youth. I've lost several friends along the way and most my family but I've also met so many new inspiring individuals. I'm doing this for one reason; I've wasted more than half my life and so I want to do as much as possible in the short time I have left. I almost died before and feel I was left here for a reason and this is it - to help people through my photography.

Is there an artist you would love to work with?

I would love to work with hip hop artist DMX – in fact, I have a shoot coming soon with some amazing hip hop artists like Black the Ripper and Mad Hat McGore. Would also love to have a shoot with Dynmo the magician.

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

As writers, we sometimes suffer from 'writer's block'; is there something similar to that in the artist/painter/illustrator world? If so, do you ever suffer from it? How do you combat it?

I do suffer from that. If that happens I just don't work, you can't fight it when you have a block you just have to wait it out and hope it comes back soon ⁽²⁾

Where do you find your inspiration?

Life, Death, dreams, people - we are strange creatures of weird habits and condition.

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

What I can find - like I will take stuff from skips, find stuff in street, see what they have in charity shops, if I get a good commission I treat myself to a new gasmask.

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

I was asked to do a portrait of a man called Tim Andrews. He was a lawyer in Hampshire and when he found out he had Parkinson's Disease, he gave up his job to go on an artistic journey - getting photographed by different photographers at different stages of his illness.

I was so pleased he asked me to do his portrait and it was an honour and an inspiration to meet him and to be a part of the project. He said if tomorrow he could go back to his old life and get rid of Parkinson's disease he wouldn't, he has never felt so alive and happy. I have for obvious reasons had to shorten this story!

The photo I took was be used to promote an exhibition alongside Rankin and Harry Borden. For my photo to be chosen to be used alongside was amazing for me. I have never even stepped foot inside a studio before so for that to happen, I was in shock. I also had to do a TV interview because of it (which I totally messed up) and it reached The Guardian, which is huge in the UK.

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

Hard to spick just one piece ... My fave artist is <u>De Nigris Daniele</u>. I love the way he creates order from a blank space.

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

If you'd like to view more of Danielle's art or get in touch we her, please visit her website at: http://www.danielletunstall.com/



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



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

MESOZOIC REDUX Christofer Nigro

Nobody knew exactly how the dinosaurs suddenly returned. Many have theorized that the strange flashes of intense light across the globe that directly preceded the appearance of the Terrible Lizards signaled a chronal anomaly of some sort. The opening of thousands of planetary wormholes leading back in time to the three Periods comprising the Mesozoic Era could very well be the culprit. If they were open for at least an hour this would have provided more than enough time (yes, 'time' being the operative word here) to enable Earth's ancient inhabitants to emerge into the present, where they've been rapidly taking over the planet anew. They seem quite capable of adapting to all manner of climates, and promptly initiated a rampage across the planet, crushing human lives and infrastructure with their massive feet and jaws. Perhaps the strange bluish comet-like object that sped past the Earth a few weeks ago constituted some sort of heretofore unknown spatial phenomenon that opened the portals in the first place; people were too busy trying to survive the 'great return' to put much thought into the 'how' of the matter.

The media outlets that continued to operate were calling this anachro-invasion a 'Time Break.' Whatever you wanted to call it, I saw people in my hometown of Buffalo, New York die horribly as a direct result of it. No one knew when one of these portals would open, or where. We only knew that no place was immune, and those quick flashes of blinding light were the only heads-up we got before the dinos appeared. My cousin Bob was lifted in the air and bitten in half by an Allosaurus when one of those portals opened in the middle of one of my family barbecues. Right in front of his kids, it happened. I nearly shit myself and fainted at the same time before getting the hell out of the yard. The rest of my family also ran as fast as they could, but my uncle Kenny was snatched from the driveway by a swooping, hairy winged thing that must have been a Pteranodon. We never saw him again.

My good friends Rachel and Jack pushed their kids into their SUV and attempted to drive out of the city when a group of Utahraptors suddenly appeared, tearing both their dogs and three of their visiting neighbors to pieces right in front of them. Unfortunately, they ultimately fared no better than their mutilated friends and canines. No sooner did they turn the corner in the van than another portal opened, the flash of light distracting them just long enough for their van to swerve and smack directly into the side of a Tricerotops. This pissed the dino off enough to charge the van and smash into it head first. Its two top horns punctured the SUV's doors and skewered both Rachel and one of the kids. Jack pushed one of the doors on the other side open and pulled out his remaining son, running down the street screaming for help. But no one was willing to open the doors for them and risk a raptor rushing into their house.

One of these indoor onlookers thankfully called the police, but the cops were too busy dealing with the problems emerging from portals all across the city. By the time they got there, the only thing belonging to Jack and his son they could find was one of the man's severed legs and pools of blood that supposedly came from two different people according to DNA tests. No one knew exactly what type of dino got them, or where it went after it did. It could now be hiding in anyone's backyard from that neighborhood, just waiting for someone to leave the house for any reason.

On the East Side of the city, the cops handling the dino appearances there managed to shoot a pack of invading raptors to death, but only after the bastards disemboweled five of them and separated two more from their limbs. But when the T. Rex appeared, the five remaining officers were stamped into bloody pancakes or crushed in the king dino's massive jaws before they could shoot it enough times to take it down. The rest of the B.P.D. and Erie County Sheriff's Dept. were occupied dealing with other dino incursions elsewhere in the Western New York area. Even though Mayor Byron Brown called the National Guard for help, their forces were stretched too thin to arrive quickly. They had to contend with all the portals that were opening across the rest of America. I imagine the New York state troopers were too busy pulling over the many vehicles racing out of the city and handing out speeding tickets, since none of them ever showed up. Well, there was one report of a trooper using a rifle to hunt down some raptors out in Wyoming County, but that's about it.

It wasn't too long before my wife Dina and I found out that this was a worldwide occurrence. Our TV and cell phone screens were filled with images of dinos belonging to many species from multiple ancient eras fighting the police and military forces of countries throughout the globe. We saw dino entrails

splattered about as soldiers launched bazooka shells at them, as well as the soldiers themselves torn to pieces by attacking raptors and Allosaurs. I never knew a person's intestines were flesh-colored before watching those broadcasts. Hell, I never knew so many species of dino had feathers. My wife and I must have puked several times while watching these videos, but we couldn't stop. We had to know what was going on, and as horrific as it was, it was just too damn fascinating *not* to watch. I mean, these were fuckin' *dinosaurs*! In the modern world!

As a kid, I always dreamed of seeing a real dino. Now I was regretting every single one of those dreams as I watched people get torn apart and our world overrun by these invaders from the past. Scientists had no time to figure out how those portals were opening, because they were too busy trying to come up with survival plans for humanity. So many of these inter-chronal wormholes were appearing all over the world, and so unexpectedly, that the police and military forces couldn't respond fast enough to handle them. Soldiers and police were set upon so quickly they usually couldn't wipe out every dino that appeared in the area. And when they did, another portal would open, and more dinos would rush in and take out the guys who survived the first strike.

Something about these portals that shunt the dinos into the present seems to drive them mad. Not that the carnosaurs among them were ever of a pleasant mood, but they seemed more vicious and bloodthirsty than any paleontologist ever imagined. This couldn't be their natural state, because even the herbivores like the Triceratops, Apatosaurus, and Stegosaurs that appeared were acting batshit crazy, smashing the first people they saw into a bloody pulp.

For example, the footage we viewed of the Apatosaurus that suddenly appeared in Rochester. It stampeded through the city and deliberately slaughtered everyone in its path. The whole neighborhood was littered with smashed vehicles and people crushed into the shape of a huge dino footprint before the National Guardsmen managed to shoot it down. And then there was the Stegosaur that appeared in the picnic area of Chestnut Ridge Park and skewered two people on its tail spikes with a single swipe. I'll never forget blowing chunks after seeing the footage of that guy's liver pushed through his back and attached to the tip of the dino's tail spike when it punctured through his back. Man...

Okay, I guess whoever is reading is wondering who I am, and why I'm bothering to record all of this. My name is Spencer Boyd, and I'm a feature columnist for the *Buffalo News* who always kept a journal. This special journal is recording a worldwide disaster of a sort humanity has never before experienced as the events unfold. Well, specifically those that I either happened to see personally or managed to catch in one of the videos. See, as of the past few days, it seems things are getting bad enough that the very survival of humanity, or at least our position as the top organism on this planet, is in serious jeopardy. These Time-Breaks have escalated to the point that the world finds itself in the midst of nothing less than a full-blown dinosaur apocalypse, for want of a better term.

Any future civilization that may find this journal of mine and can decrypt the contemporary English language may find the information valuable beyond whatever else any hypothetical future society may consider valuable. In other words, I'm recording it in the hope of saving the future from a similar assault from the past. I don't know how long I'm going to be around, because it's getting more and more difficult to leave the house and go to a store, or to one of the emergency food disbursement centers opened by the government. For all I know, in another week, there may be no government left. It's been rumored that all the richest folks and top bureaucrats in the country have fled to some underground city established by FEMA back during the 1950s in preparation for a nuclear war or something like that. No one ever quite predicted a national—let alone a global—emergency of this sort, but it certainly counts as an emergency of the same magnitude.

The President has still been issuing reports, but no one knows from where. I've heard some rumors that the White House has been abandoned, and the bodies of several secret service agents with their internal organs torn out are currently decorating the place's front lawn. Allegedly, they gave their lives to cover the escape of the President and his family as another pack of raptors descended on them. Has it really gotten that bad? All I know for certain is that every time I look out the window, I see some strange

kind of animal roaming about the streets. Occasionally they peer into our windows, as if to remind us they can show up at any time, and as if they were daring us to come outside.

So I'm recording this journal both in paper form, and on a few of the CD discs our civilization utilizes to store information in digital form. At this writing my wife and I haven't been outside of the house in over a week, and our supplies are now dwindling. What happens if the water stops working suddenly, like if sooner or later no one is alive to operate the utility services anymore? Sooner or later, we're going to have to try leaving the house for some reason, and I'm not sure what will happen when we do. Right now, I just want to sit on my couch, hold my wife tightly in my arms, and treasure every single moment we still have together. Dear Lord, why is this happening? How can it be happening in the first place?

Spencer Boyd signing off from what is likely my final log.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Christofer Nigro is a published author whose work in the horror, sci-fi, and pulp fiction genres has appeared in various anthologies. This has included publications by Black Coat Press, Scarlett River Press, Chupa Kabra House, and Pulp Empire in addition to Sirens Call Publications. He is presently working on two novels in the super-hero genre. Chris is a lifelong fan of comic books and speculative fiction.

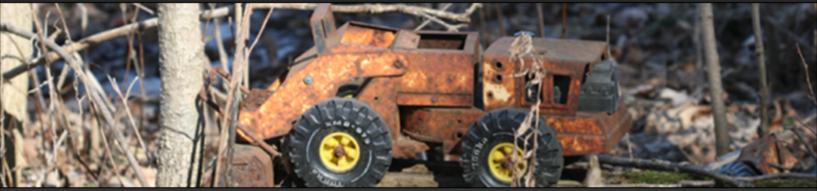
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JUST A MATTER OF TIME

From under the grates of a New York street, Andy stuck his head out of his hiding place, which was where he took his family when he first heard the commotion. He turned to his wife, Edna, and said, "I knew it; it was just a matter of time. I've been saying it forever, haven't I?" Everywhere he looked, he saw total devastation. Buildings collapsed, dead bodies lying about, mouths hanging open in silent screams. He crawled out of his hole and onto a discarded toy truck. A deep, deep sadness overcame him as he glanced about. There were no birds chirping, no dogs barking ... just total silence. The explosion was the last sound Andy had heard and he knew exactly what it was. Gathering his offspring and his wife, they travelled into the nearest building for food. That building happened to be a Chinese restaurant, bingo a meal fit for a cockroach and his family. "We don't have to go any further, we've got enough food here to last us a very long time," he told Edna. "Relax and feed the little ones."

"Stupid humans, I knew they would kill themselves off eventually. They finally did it this time."

SUNLIGHT Nina D'Arcangela

The winds howl around me, I can't remember a time when they didn't. Da' says there were once calm, sunny days, but I've never seen one. My Da', he spends his days indoors now, too weak for anything but rest. Even wearing a re-breather he coughs up a storm to rival the evils this planet conjures to scrub us from its surface. He worries that I scavenge alone, but I prefer my own company. Trust isn't easy to come by, best to rely on myself; best I should learn that now.

Dull color draws my eye. I walk closer; it's a child's distraction, though nothing I have the privilege to enjoy. Dropping my rucksack beside it, I foolishly unclip the front of my gasmask wishing an unfiltered view. The air is foul; tastes of things long dead. My eyes immediately begin to sting from the miasma that taints this world. I reach a trembling hand toward the tiny vehicle. Too late, my guard having faltered too long; mutants surround me. I clutch the rusted reminder of an age long gone to my small chest, joyfully spinning one wheel. Smiling, I gaze upon the brilliantly searing sunlight for the first time.

OASIS OF RUSTED DREAMS

Julianne Snow

It had been so long since Mac had spied a reminder of the years that had faded into the past. Most of the world was a burned-out husk, barely functioning, unable to sustain the life still walking its surface. But he scoured its shell, looking for any part that survived: an oasis to claim for himself, and the memories of his family.

Deep in a valley, he saw the flash of green Thinking his mind had tricked him, he hadn't planned to investigate. But there was nothing of colour in this new world, everything a drab palette of greys and browns with the vicious splashes of red marring the landscape far too often. His eyes focussed on the colour, almost willing it into existence, his feet carrying him down the rocky terrain likely into death, or a trap. Breaking into a run, Mac rounded a rocky outcropping, the lavish foliage too bright for his seemingly monochromatic eyes. The smell was fresh, the colours vivid. Scanning the scene, his eyes came to rest on the toy long-forgotten. Left to rust in the midst of the end. A reminder of the dreams of children and the hope lost to every last one.

METAL TRANSITIONS Jackson Fitzjames

Little pellets of iron and zinc fall from the sky, crashing through skylights and battering metal. They formed clumps and shredded skin off the people who waded through them. Plenty of people were interesting enough to try smelting them into weaponry or turn them into sculptures.

The sea was filled with titanium, and people found chunks of it in their drinking water. Swimmers were cut and some people set fire to the excess hydrogen gas. People liked to think that the red was just rust, but titanium doesn't rust in water- it was red with the blood of the fish. Eventually, every island nation was an impregnable stronghold, and out of the 326 people trapped on desert islands, more than 250 gave up their efforts to return home and committed suicide.

The clouds turned to graphene aerogel. Planes and helicopters crashed and burned, and space launches were consistently aborted. The weather became erratic everywhere, and people feared the shrapnel that could drop onto them. Birds went quickly, and so did birds'-eye tours.

Eventually, people stopped asking why. Soon, there weren't enough people left to bother asking questions.

TRUNDLING DEATH Jackson Fitzjames

It stomps across the landscape on hundreds of little piston-legs, rending the landscape with flamethrower breath. Die, all of you little villages! Burn in the righteous artificial fire!

A young man hides in a cupboard. Will these bombardments of brass beasts never end? Will the countryside ever know peace from its ceaselessly building overlords?

Under the earth, a churning mass of metal furnaces and mechanical arms becomes the mother of all monsters.

FORAGING Jackson Fitzjames

In the park sat a chipmunk, about to run through its daily routine.

It surveyed its surroundings, ensuring there was nothing new in the vicinity. There wasn't.

Then, it went in search of food.

The city outside of the park was a great place for foraging, now that there weren't any cars or people around. It scavenged around in trash cans, having not learned yet that there was no longer new trash. There were few predators here, too, which was a comfort unfamiliar to it.

It was just a matter of avoiding the corpses that got up and kept moving.

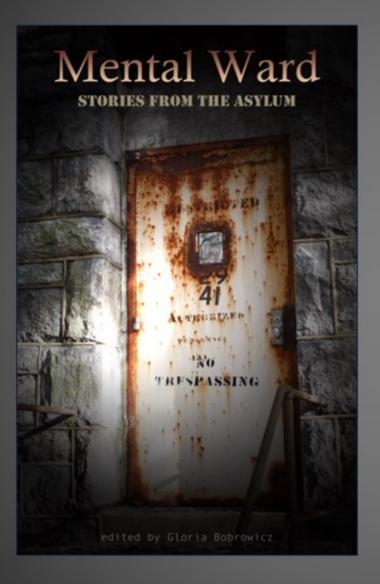
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jackson.Fitzjames is the pseudonym of a college student living on the fringes of New England. He started writing at 13, worked as an editor at 16, and now studies to become a professional author and travel the world. He enjoys midnight strolls, microblogging, Discordianism and many things besides.

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EDUCATING ZACHARY Maynard Blackoak

A special bulletin of yet another failed economy, this time in the United States, interrupted Zachary's favorite television show. All over the world, governments had been going bankrupt and failing at an alarming rate. With the collapse of the American government, only China and Germany remained in operation, though experts predicted they too would fall in the coming days.

Decades of irresponsible spending to fund useless projects and nonsensical studies along with a wanton disregard of their mounting debts had finally caught up to them. When the time had come to pay the piper, there were no funds available to do so. Those countries holding notes on bankrupt countries had not received their payments, and consequently, had insufficient funds to meet their own financial obligations. What had begun as a problem with only the poorest of countries had started a domino effect that began affecting even the wealthiest of nations.

Adding fuel to an already explosive situation, people all over the world had begun taking their dissatisfaction to the streets, creating havoc and mayhem. Their anger enflamed by the insidious acts of their leaders and having had their trust misplaced with spurious politicians, the people succumbed to a primal need for violence, voicing their displeasure in an uncivilized manner. Peaceful demonstrations and protests had devolved into violent riots, and chaos arose to rule the streets.

At first, governments had employed armed troops to deal with the unruly and furious mobs. The use of lethal force had left many dead, both the guilty and innocent. This only served to incite more such activity, leaving many more corpses littering the streets in the aftermath of violent clashes. Eventually, governments lacking the funds to pay law enforcement and the military gave up the notion of maintaining order, and vigilante justice had become the rule rather than the exception.

As Zachary watched in horror, the scenes of enraged mobs attacking people and businesses, pillaging and looting, he averred to himself, *What's wrong with these people? I could never do anything like that.* Now, more than ever, people should cling to their good sides, and be doing something constructive, not tearing everything to shit. This kind of thing could never happen here in America.

His attention consumed by the terrifying and gruesome images playing out on his television, he failed to hear the sound of someone entering his home.

"Quick! Change the channel," his neighbor and friend, Roger, commanded unexpectedly, giving him a heart pounding start.

"What the hell, Rog," Zachary scolded him with a disapproving scowl. "Don't you knock anymore?"

Roger darted to the television, and quickly changed the channel. "No time, Zach. You gotta see this. It's so damn unreal; I don't quite believe it myself. The shit is starting to happen here."

Images of angry American citizens clashing with a small force of heavily armed police began playing in graphic detail. Studying the scene closely, Zachary was horrorstruck by the realization that the frightening spectacle was occurring in his hometown of Tulsa, only a few miles from his house.

"We gotta arm ourselves and fortify our homes. This shit is coming our way," Roger stated in a panicked voice. "It won't be long before there isn't a police force to stand between us and the crazies."

Zachary turned a skeptical expression toward his friend. "I know this looks bad. But this is still Tulsa, part of the heartland of America. You know...the Bible belt...churches on every corner...love one another; even as I have loved you... Folks here are mostly decent. Sure, there is a violent element around, but the good people will always triumph over them. So let's not go flying off the handle and act all crazy just because a small group of people in our city are acting like horses' asses."

Just then, the television switched from the scene in Tulsa to an angry mob ransacking the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta. The government, no longer able to fund the research or maintain the center's security, had abandoned the building, as well as others like it in other cities across the nation. Only a few dedicated doctors and lab assistants remained to protect the virulent diseases that were kept for research purposes. They proved no match for the throng of people that stormed the facility, making off with containers of deadly maladies, each capable of starting a global pandemic that would make the black plague of medieval times pale in comparison.

"This shit is getting too real, Rog," Zachary remarked, watching people parading outside the Center

for Disease Control, holding vials of deadly viruses. "Those fools are going kill us all."

"It's a new world out there, Zach. The rules have changed, my friend. It's a dog eat dog, everyone look out for their own mentality now and it's only going to get worse, much worse. We have to change with it or die."

Zachary set an intense gaze upon Roger, and shook his head, refusing to accept that civilization had gone in a primordial direction. "I just can't believe that there's not any good left in people. I can't accept living in a world like that."

The scene on the television changed once again, showing a throng of people overrunning a site used for nuclear research and development. As had been the case with the Center for Disease Control, there was no security personnel remaining to guard it, and consequently, the facility had been pillaged. People danced in celebration outside the resource, holding containers of radioactive materials.

"Damn!" Zachary exclaimed through a horrified façade. "What the hell is going through everyone's mind? Diseases and radioactive material? It's like the whole world has gone insane."

"It's a total societal meltdown. The world as we once knew it does not exist any longer. We'd better prepare ourselves to survive in this new world before the shit finds its way to our front door," Roger responded, staring with disbelief at the worst of human behavior on display.

Two weeks after violence had erupted in his hometown, the world around him had indeed begun changing for the worse, as Roger had predicted. Television and radio transmissions ceased. Grocery stores, plundered by panicking mobs, became deserted structures of empty shelves. Items such as iodine and bleach necessary for water purification and gasoline had become precious commodities, nearly impossible to find, leading to violent altercations and sometimes death over the smallest amounts. Electricity no longer surged through power lines, leaving only those homes equipped with generators to have the energy for lights and other modern conveniences. Phone communications, both landlines and cellular, had come to a halt. Every vestige of modern civilization had suddenly disappeared from the lives of most people. Those who had managed to maintain some semblance of modern comfort did so by a show of force and other extreme security measures.

Houses all over the city had windows barred or boarded. Once all useful commodities had been taken from local establishments, armed parties raided homes, sometimes murdering the occupants just to steal their last remaining slices of bread or a few cups of water. Rumors of cannibalism were exchanged in hushed tones and always with a wary glance over the shoulder to see who might be lurking about.

The threat of deadly diseases and dirty bombs preyed on the thoughts of everyone. Outbreaks of Ebola, hemorrhagic fevers and a new strain of influenza, aptly named Extinction Level Disease, ELD for short, had popped up in many cities throughout the country. Though Zachary had yet to hear of any outbreaks in Tulsa, he knew it was only a matter of time before it happened. Deadly epidemics were no longer just a threat. They had become expected.

Homemade nuclear devices had been exploded in a few cities in the northeast, but none in the remainder of the country. However, most believed it was only a matter of time before the stark reality of a nuclear detonation struck the rest of the country. Again, what had once only been a threat had become an expected part of everyday life in the rapidly devolving remnants of civilization.

Despite all the hardships and reports of atrocities, Zachary remained clinging to the last vestiges of his human decency. There had been a few instances when a crazed person had shown up on his doorstep, forcing him to make threats of violence to force them to exit his property. Even those situations had left him with guilt and remorse, believing he should have at least offered his fellow human being some compassion and maybe even a few drops of water.

Four weeks after social order had collapsed, Zachary and Roger decided it was time to leave Tulsa, to find a piece of land far removed from the chaos and violence of the city, a place where they could grow their own food and have a sustainable water supply. They packed what little necessities they had

remaining, and began hiking northeast, hoping to find a quiet place in the foothills of the Ozarks.

A few miles into their journey through burning pyres of corpses, ransacked structures and boarded homes, they encountered an emaciated man whose appearance was frail and weak. He approached the pair, begging for a crumb of bread and a drop or two of water. Despite Roger's protests, Zachary removed his backpack to give the man a little food and water. As he opened the flap, he heard a click. Looking up, he noticed a pistol held mere inches from his head.

"Just give me what you got there," the man commanded, as his cracked and dehydrated lips curled into a menacing smile. "And don't you let my appearance fool you. I'm strong enough to pull this trigger and blow a hole clean through your head."

Zachary began pulling his supplies from his pack with a disgusted expression canvassing his face. "Uh Uh. Give me the bag and all, so's I can be sure you're giving me everything."

As he prepared to hand over the backpack, Roger produced a pistol of his own, and calmly shot the man in the side of the head. Zachary stood dumbfounded, staring at the dead man lying at his feet with a bullet hole in his temple. He bounced his eyes between the corpse and Roger repeatedly, until finally allowing them to settle on his friend. "When did you get that?"

"I've had it for months. I bought it way back when the first government of a major country failed. If the world was going to go to shit, I wanted some protection."

"Now, I hope you see why you can't trust anyone these days, Zach. That bastard would have killed you after you gave him your backpack just for the fun of it. That's how this world works now. You'd best become wise to it before someone puts a bullet in your head."

Zachary swallowed hard, gazing into the stilled form of the emaciated man with the gun still clutched in his dead hands. He was beginning to understand, yet there remained a small piece of him that wished to cling to the belief that there still existed decency in humanity.

Three days into their trek, they came upon a stretch of highway, well removed from Tulsa. Deserted vehicles, some with decaying corpses still seated in them, sat scattered on the pavement and off to the side as well. It was a long shot, but they began checking to see if any had fuel and remained operational. After attempting to start a few dozen vehicles, they abandoned the notion of finding a faster means of travel, and concentrated on scavenging anything that could prove useful.

Passing between a semi and a pickup truck, Zachary encountered a young woman sitting with her back against a wheel of the tractor-trailer and sobbing.

"What's the matter, miss?" he queried, gazing upon her with compassion showing in his face. "Do you need some help?"

"I put my baby in the backseat of a car for the night, and walked away to find some food and water. Now, I can't find the car or my baby."

"Well, you aren't going to find your baby sitting and crying like this. Let me help you look."

"Really? You would help me? No one helps anyone these days."

"I'll be glad to help you. To be honest, you wouldn't want most people's help these days. You just can't trust anyone anymore."

"I trust you, mister. You look like a nice man."

After helping her to her feet, Zachary followed as the young woman led him from car to car, searching for her misplaced baby.

"Wait a minute," she shouted with excitement. "I think that's it over there."

"My baby has been alone all night and most the morning. You'll think I'm a terrible mother, but I couldn't stand to find my baby sick or dead. Would you go look for me while I wait here?"

"Of course I will," he replied with a congenial smile. "And I don't think you're a bad mother."

With a reassuring pat on her shoulder, he walked toward the car the young woman was certain held her baby. Nearing it, he heard the sound of footsteps closing in on him. Before he could turn to spot who or what approached, a rope slipped over his head, and down to his midsection. As it tightened around his belly, pinning his arms to his sides, he was spun around, finding himself face to face with young men, one of a tall and brawny appearance and the other of average height and build.

"We got 'im Flo. He ain't goin nowhere," the larger of the two shouted, poking Zachary in the ribs. "He ain't too plump. Might have to work extra to get meat off his bones."

"He ain't too bad, Bubba. Least ways, he's enough to stink up the pot," Flo responded in a loud voice, as she ran toward the two young men holding Zachary. "There's another with this un that's much stouter. He'll give us plenty of meat."

Suddenly, a shot rang out from a spot not far from where they stood. A stunned expression fell over Bubba's face. Seconds later, he crumpled to the ground. As Zachary and his captors glanced around the area, another shot sounded, followed immediately by another. The smaller young man's head jerked, and then he too fell to the ground. Turning his gaze toward Flo, he noticed her struggling to remain on her feet. A large bloody splotch stained the chest of the tattered white shirt that covered her. She teetered for a few more minutes, before joining her cohorts on the ground.

"Damn it, Zach!" Roger shouted, as he made his way toward his friend. "Do you have shit for brains or just have a death wish?"

"What part of don't trust anyone don't you get?" he added with a disapproving stare.

"Hell, Rog. She seemed like a young woman in trouble. How was I to know she meant to do me harm?"

Roger shook his head briskly in utter disbelief. He sat Zachary down, and explained the new world order to him once again, this time in explicit and graphic detail. Once he had finished, he was satisfied his friend had a new outlook on the world and how to survive in it.

Many months had passed since Zachary and Roger left Tulsa to begin a new life away from the madness that pervaded the city. It had taken much effort and a lot of walking, but they eventually found a farm nestled in the Ozark foothills with rich, black soil and many nearby streams. Life had not returned to normal, but then it was unlikely that it ever would. However, they had found a peaceful existence, living far removed from the dangers of urban life in the new world.

Zachary, busying himself tilling the soil for the spring planting season, happened to glance toward the tall pines that surrounded the crop field. He spotted a solitary figure emerge from the woods, waving their hands above their head as if in distress. An amiable smile appeared on his face, as he wiped a bead of sweat from his brow with one hand and reached to his waistband with the other. Retrieving a pistol from its resting place, he pointed it the approaching figure. Without giving the matter a second thought, he fired a bullet that caught the figure in the chest.

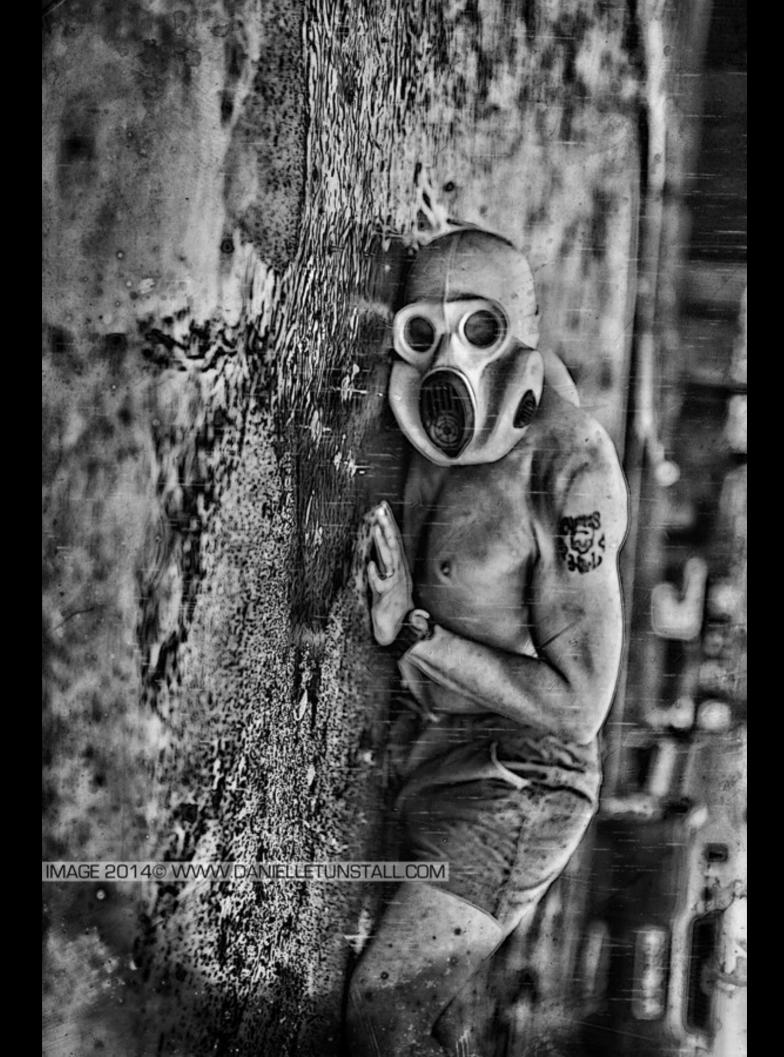
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Maynard Blackoak is a freelance writer living in the backwoods of Pawnee County, Oklahoma. He draws upon the sights of neglect and unusual sounds around him for inspiration. A bit of a recluse, he can often be found strolling through an old, forgotten cemetery or in the woods among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

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Sirens Call Publications





A PERSONAL APOCALYPSE John H. Dromey

Granny Parson's garden had seen better days, but sadly so had she. Both were now in slow winter decay.

The garden gate was frozen shut with rusty hinges. Gaps in the tumbledown fence allowed rabbits free access, though very few came around.

There were patches of wolfsbane and clumps of garlic here and there, but not the profusion of plants there once had been. Granny had cultivated those two particular items to keep away werewolves and vampires. Successfully.

She used to wonder what she could grow to protect herself from zombies, but not anymore. Not since she became one herself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He's had short fiction published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Gumshoe Review, Plan B Magazine, Plasma Frequency Magazine,* and elsewhere, as well as in a number of anthologies, including *Now I Lay Me Down to Reap* (Sirens Call Publications, 2012).



Climate Change By Daniel Durrant

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes

SCORCHED EARTH Jon Olson

Ken Stapleton woke with a start. He remained still, lying on an old mattress in his unfinished basement, and listened. His house had been eerily quiet ever since the power went out a week ago. Above, the windows rattled slightly as the wind blew.

"Is everything alright, Daddy?" his daughter Leila asked.

He looked over at her and smiled. "Yes, sweetheart, everything's fine. I'm sorry I woke you."

"It's okay, I was already awake."

Light spilled in through the three windows sitting high in the basement walls. Ken kicked his blanket off and stood up. His back was stiff from the sleeping accommodations but it was better than nothing. Grimacing, he walked towards the nearest window and stood on his tip toes to look outside.

There wasn't much to see besides his green sport utility vehicle parked to the right. The lawn on the other side of the driveway was getting long and starting to invade the asphalt. There were clouds in the sky but he didn't think it would rain.

"How does it look out there?" Leila asked stepping beside him.

Ken wrapped his arm around her small shoulders.

"It doesn't look too bad," he said. "Maybe after breakfast and depending on what the radio says, we can go outside."

Leila smiled, but Ken could see that her hopes weren't very high.

"I'm sorry, honey."

"For what, Daddy?"

"That all of this is happening."

Leila hugged his leg. "It's not your fault." She looked up at him with her blue eyes that at one time had been filled with happiness and excitement. Now he could only see fear and uncertainty. "It's *their* fault."

She released his leg and went back to the mattress. As Ken watched his daughter pick up her stuffed animal rabbit, anger swelled within him. Christ, she had only celebrated her eighth birthday two months ago and already knew there was a strong chance that there wouldn't be a ninth.

It was their fault.

His wife had been down in New York City on business when the objects began falling through the skies. Hundreds of thousands fell all over the world and not one of them had been burned up in the atmosphere. They had all made it to the ground in one piece. The science community was excited with the prospects of investigating what they thought were meteorites.

No one noticed, at least not at first, that they had all fallen in and around the most heavily populated places on Earth. Five had landed in and around New York. The day before his wife was supposed to leave and come home was the day it began.

Ken returned to the mattress, gave Leila a rub on her head, and sat down on his side. He took out his battery operated radio from the plastic milk crate it had been sitting in and turned it on. At first only static hissed through the small speaker, but as he adjusted the tuning dial, he found a clear station.

"... and at this time, the whereabouts of Prime Minister Mercer are still unknown. To reiterate to, uh, any new listeners, authorities and experts have determined that it is dissipating and slowing down. I repeat, the gas clouds are dissipating and slowing down. In the areas fifty kilometers or more away from impact zones, authorities are giving the okay for people to venture outside, but are advised to do so with caution..."

Ken turned the radio off, hearing what he needed to hear.

"What does dissipating mean?" Leila asked.

"It means that the clouds are thinning and are no longer dangerous."

Leila's eyes lit up. "You mean ... "

"We can go play outside today."

When Ken stepped onto the back patio, he felt good to get out of the house. His first couple of breaths were quick and short, as he tasted the air. There was a very faint taste in the air, like soya sauce, but other than that, the air was refreshing. They lived just outside the Nova Scotia coastal town Emilia Cove,

almost two hundred kilometers from the nearest meteorite impact site. Their two story house sat on old Highway 3 with an unobstructed view of the Atlantic Ocean.

"Come on out," Ken called into the opened patio door. "We're good."

Leila darted out, laughing as she ran down the patio stairs onto the grass. She had her rabbit with her which she tossed in the air and failed miserably to catch. Ken smiled watching his daughter have some fun despite the world's current situation.

"I'm just going to walk out front for a minute," Ken said. "Don't stray too far from the house." "I won't!"

Ken walked down the steps and made his way past his SUV, down the driveway toward Highway 3. A light layer of fog hung over the water but it was still a great view of the ocean. Before the objects, Ken used to watch the ships in the shipping lanes making deliveries to and from the nearby city of Halifax. He couldn't remember a day when he didn't see at least three ships going about their business, but today, there were none.

The Atlantic Ocean was empty and deserted, like the houses on either side of his. He could still remember when his neighbors had packed up and bolted. Two other things happened that day that would forever stick in Ken's mind.

It was the day that the extermination of mankind began when poisonous gas began seeping from the objects and also the day that he lost his wife.

"What are you looking at, Daddy?" Leila asked as she rounded the house onto the front lawn.

Ken sighed. "Nothing. I was just seeing if there were any ships on the water."

Leila cupped her hands over her eyes and looked out at ocean.

"Can you see any?" Leila asked. "I can't."

"I don't either."

He placed his hand on her back and gently guided her towards the backyard.

"How about I push you on the tire swing?" Ken asked.

Leila agreed and took off running towards the large poplar tree, with the tire swing tied to its lowest branch. She slipped into the tire and gripped the rope as tight as she could.

"Ready?" Ken asked.

He pulled the tire back a few steps and pushed hard. Leila laughed as the tire swung and spun. Ken pushed her for close to twenty minutes until she was ready to stop.

"Daddy?" she asked, still sitting in the tire. "Why did the aliens send those things with the gas?"

"I don't know," Ken replied.

"Does anyone?"

Ken shook his head. "No one beside the aliens."

"They won't talk to us?"

"No."

"They want us to die, don't they?"

"Let's get inside and have some lunch," Ken said, trying to change the topic.

Leila looked at him.

"It's just like that time that man came over to get rid of the wasps in the wall, isn't it," Leila said. "Except, this time, we're the wasps."

Ken opened his mouth to reply when a noise caught his ear. He looked up into the sky but couldn't see anything. It grew louder by the second and was getting closer.

"What is it, Daddy?" Leila asked. She had to shout over the noise.

He grabbed Leila, pulling her out of the tire and ran up the patio steps. They were about to head inside when six Sea King helicopters flew over the tree tops in the backyard. Ken watched, his mouth agape, as they flew out over the water and banked to the right, heading towards Halifax.

"What is happening?" Leila asked.

"We better turn the radio on."

Ken quickly picked out a package of crackers and some canned soup before he followed his daughter down into the basement. They settled down on the mattress and Leila picked up the can opener that was on her side of the bed, handing it to her dad. Ken opened one of the cans and carefully passed it to her. Once she was situated and eating her lunch, he turned the radio on.

"... and it has been confirmed that the aliens have touched down. Currently, all military personnel are being mobilized and an offensive is being planned as we speak..."

Leila slurped some soup out of her can.

"What do they look like?" Leila asked. "Did they say what the aliens look like?"

Ken shook his head.

"...with more reports coming in from around the world that the armies of other nations have engaged the enemy. The military is advising anyone still living in their home to remain there until further notice. Do not venture outside under any circumstance. When more comes in we will be sure to update you. In the meantime, God bless the men and women in the forces."

Throughout the afternoon, they heard more helicopters and planes flying over the house. For a while they played a game where they tried to guess what they were and how many, but with no way to determine a winner, they stopped. Leila then pulled out a coloring book and her crayons. She flipped through the pages until she found an untouched picture of a giraffe balancing on a beach ball and started to color.

Two days after the objects began releasing the gas, the world knew that a hostile race of extraterrestrials had sent them. The effects of the gas were horrible but quick. Before the power had gone out, Ken had watched a segment on the news where they showed the results. Once the gas was inhaled, it quickly went to work melting the internal organs. The pain was excruciating and nothing could be done for the victims. Within three hours, the victim was almost always dead.

The image of his wife, writhing in pain as the foreign toxin melted her insides, haunted Ken's mind. He shut his eyes and tried to picture her in happier times like on their first date and on their honeymoon. It was no use.

He felt a tear run down his cheek and he wiped it with the back of his hand.

"Daddy, what's that?" Leila asked.

"What's..." he started to say but then he felt it.

The ground was shaking. It was subtle at first, but then violent. Above them, he could hear his house rocking on its foundation. Ken covered his daughter and held her close as she screamed. Glass broke and pieces of furniture were knocked over.

And then it stopped.

They were both breathing heavy and scared to move. Leila started to squirm underneath him.

"You're squishing me," she whispered.

Ken released his grip and then reached over for the radio. He was about to turn it on when he noticed orange and red glows filtering through the cracked basement windows. Leila started to move but Ken motioned for her to stay put as he stood up and approached the window. He swallowed and then peered out.

The sky was bright orange with thick plumes of smoke rising into it. From his vantage point, Ken couldn't see exactly where the smoke was coming from but if he had to guess, he would say it was Halifax. He needed a better view.

"Leila, I'll be right back," Ken said turning to his daughter. "I'm just going to run upstairs real quick. Okay? I won't go far. Are you okay with that?"

She nodded and held onto her rabbit.

Ken darted up the stairs but slowed when he got to the top. All of the windows in the kitchen had shattered and a strong wind was blowing through the house. He could smell burning as he walked into the

living room. Through the large bay window, he saw the source.

Something had crashed about sixty meters off shore. The debris field was large and flames were still licking almost ten feet into the air. Ken looked in the direction of Halifax and could see even more plumes of smoke dancing into the air. In the distance he could hear what sounded like artillery and gunfire.

With his thumb, he turned the radio on, but the kept the volume low so Leila wouldn't hear, and held it up to his ear.

"...forces have been wiped out and overrun... the aliens are advancing at a frightening pace..."

A loud shot of static hissed painfully in his ear and he pulled the radio away from his head.

"...just been informed... all of the remaining nations of Earth, including ours have... agreed and... begun to initiate Operation: Scorched Earth...with large groups of government leaders and officials safely hidden in military bomb shelters... the use of nuclear weapons has been authorized in a last ditch effort to destroy the alien invaders..."

We're all dead, Ken thought.

Looking out toward the horizon in the Atlantic Ocean, he could make out a large number of objects flying, with smoke trails behind them, through the air toward the mainland; toward them.

It was the nuclear missiles.

Ken ran from the living room, tripped in the kitchen and fell on some broken glass cutting his palms and right knee open. He ignored the pain and hobbled down the stairs to the mattress.

"Is everything alright?" she asked. Leila saw his cuts and her eyes opened wide. "Daddy, are you okay?"

He winced as he knelt down on the mattress and hugged her.

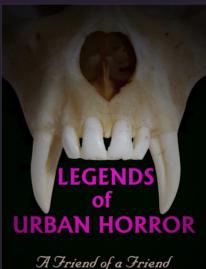
"Yes honey, I'm okay," he replied. He held her tight, stroking her hair, as tears started to roll down his cheeks. "Everything's going to be alright."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jon Olson, when not working at his full time job as a Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L. Stanfield International Airport, is an author of horror and dark fiction. He is also a proud member of Pen of the Damned. He lives in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his wife, daughter and four cats.

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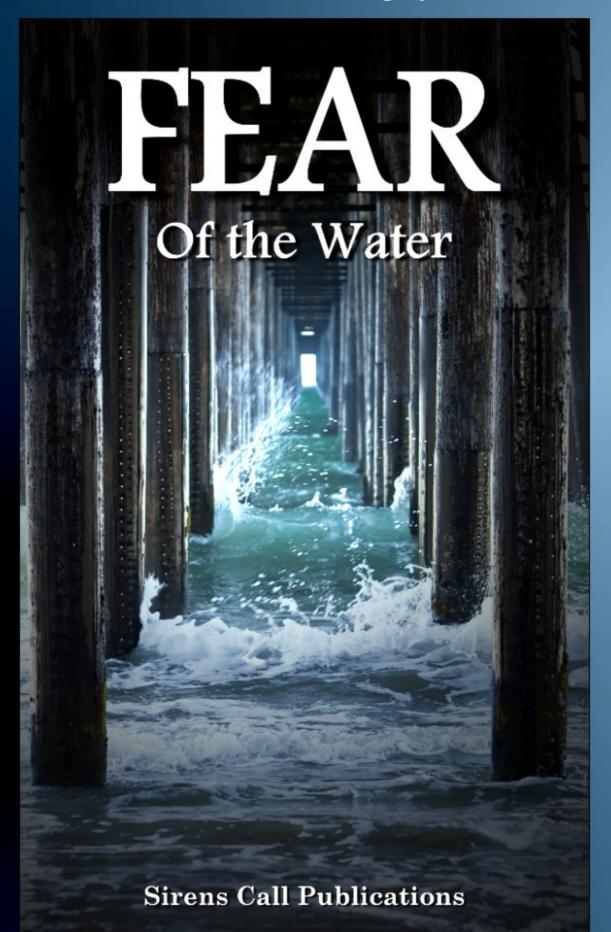
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Friend of a Friend Told Me

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HURRY Jacob Bayne

She was buried in the hallowed ground of a little church just outside of town. The cemetery lay on a gently sloping hillside.

The sky was filled with clouds, thick, billowy... *glowing*. From where he stood, they seemed so close, almost touchable.

He would have to hurry.

Andrew Sutton stood next to Jana's grave. Flowers protruded from the sod covered mound, but all he could smell was the fresh earth.

Jana was... Jana *is*, and always will be, his wife. Till death do us part. No. Not even then.

He'd found a shovel in the basement of the church. No one would mind that he'd taken it. The grave diggers had abandoned their duties, so had everyone else... almost.

Though sweat coated his skin and soaked his clothes he could feel the air getting warmer.

He would have to hurry.

Andrew raised the shovel and slammed it into the ground, grunting at the stinging rawness of his hands. He hadn't thought to bring gloves. Red blemishes had already formed on his palms. Soon enough blisters would follow and eventually erupt. He would simply have to bear the pain... but only for a while.

As he worked, tossing spade after spade of dirt over his shoulder, a tune began to play in his head. *The Star Spangled Banner*.

Though his body ached, he couldn't help but chuckle at the irony. The bombs bursting in air...

The song was born nearly 200 years ago when the nation was still in its infancy. Yet the world was dying as he sang it in his mind.

A sound reminiscent of thunder roared somewhere in the distance. It didn't matter where. No place was far enough away.

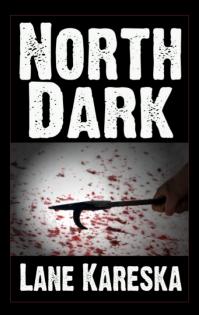
The air had acquired an oddly bitter scent that he could also taste. The glowing clouds were lower, pressing, and it was warmer still.

Andrew lifted the shovel again and brought it down into the rich dark soil of the shallow pit that would be his tomb.

But... he would have to hurry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jacob Bayne is a short story author and novelist from upstate South Carolina. His work has appeared in several venues, including anthologies, Hell's Hangmen: Horror in the Old West and Pandora's Nightmare, Horror Unleashed.

Twitter: <u>@BayneJacob</u> Blog: <u>talewriter.wordpress.com</u>



North Dark By Lane Kareska

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes



THE HAUNTED AIR D.S. Ullery

The first rays of sunlight pierce the gloom, the ashen glow announcing that another day has begun. I swim to the surface of consciousness, blinking away the darkness. The cold mist hangs over the morning like a sickly gray shroud, reminding me that each new dawn is a grotesque mockery of what once was.

I stumble forward, somehow navigating past the cavernous ruin which used to be Chesterfield Avenue. Shattered remains of the pavement litter the street in all directions around the edges of the craters which interrupt my path. Pausing, I glance over my shoulder. I do this every day and don't understand why. It's a compulsion, like everything else going on around me and everything I do. I don't know why I walk west down this hopelessly ruined road. I don't know why I look back over my shoulder at the pile of black rubble that used to be my house and I don't know how all of this destruction happened.

Thoughts of my life, of the wife and two children who along with me once called this wreckage home, burn my heart and I fight the tears. Shuffling forward, I somberly take in the horror stretching in all directions.

To my left I can see the waterway. Once upon a time, neighborhoods stood between where I'm standing and what was once a blue serpent of flowing, healthy sea water separating the mainland from the barrier islands. Now the buildings, the trees, even the sidewalks are gone, allowing me to clearly see black death, a poisonous artificial river in which nothing can survive.

From the murky water broken pillars of concrete rise, culminating in jagged points where the base of the bridge they once supported shattered, stabbing at the forever cheerless sky like charred, broken bones. Large, twisted hulks which used to be cars hang motionless in the water, their shapes twisted beyond recognition, dead hulks piled atop one another in malformed spires that pierce the toxic surface.

To my right and dead ahead, it's all the same- a flat, broken void where townhouses and shopping plazas once stood. A desolate ruin comprised of the remains of pizza parlors, video stores and local schools, all reduced to scorched earth littered with piles of dirty, soot covered debris for as far as I can see.

I walk. Not because there's anywhere to go, but because it's familiar. I walk toward what used to be downtown. As I move, I hang my head, trying to block out the ghastly testament to death I find myself trapped in and the painfully vivid memories of life and love it inspires.

My boot strikes something, the sensation striking a chord somewhere deep inside. I open my eyes and see the head of a child's doll resting in the filth beneath my feet, one side of the cherubic face a molten ruin. One pale, blue eye stares up at me from above what remains of an eternal, plastic grin and I shudder as the sight of thousands of bassinets bursting into flame swims across my vision, accompanied by conjured images of mothers and fathers holding their infant children close to their chests, shrieking in the face of the remorseless inferno that reduces the bodies of their loved one to ash in the same breath it takes to consume them.

I kick the doll's head away and it rolls into one of the craters, the hollowness of the thing catching the air as it tumbles, causing a thin tapping which echoes through the otherwise completely silent ruins. I shudder at that sound, which is so very cold and artificial. A somehow fittingly sub-par aural epitaph to a material world which has ceased to be.

Then I hear it. As the remains of the toy come to rest and the sound of its descent to the bottom of that pit of destruction ceases, I hear the moaning. It's faint at first, almost as if I'm remembering something from a dream. Some afterthought of a nightmare I cannot fully remember. But the sound doesn't stop, doesn't go away, it persists until the unmistakable tenor of human lament drowns even my thoughts.

They emerge from the mist, hunched silhouettes staggering from within the diseased veil of haunted air the catastrophe has left permanently draped over the world, their bodies rotting. More putrid infection than whole flesh, these cadaverous survivors cry out for a salvation that will never come. Each cry of anguish stabs my heart, triggering a recollection of something dark, a sense of responsibility.

Then I am in a familiar room. I don't know how I came to be here, don't remember making the journey. All I do know for certain is that I've been here before and that this place is occupied by the sadistic ghosts of shattering memories. Memories of computer banks, giant screens with electric maps of the continents displayed across them and stern men in sharp uniforms declaring that we can win what cannot.

be won, survive that which cannot be survived.

I remember a console and turning a key. I remember the screens lighting up minutes later as all consuming fire swallowed the world outside these walls and the deep, terrible knowledge that I had forsaken everything I held dear, sacrificed an entire world in the name of duty.

The room shatters in a storm of crimson fury and the heat –the impossible, unholy heat- sweeps over me, incinerating me before I can even move.

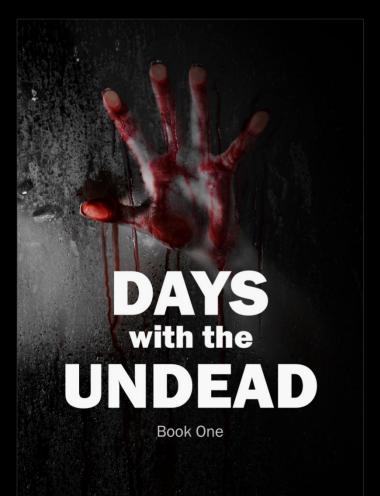
Now I'm falling into the darkness. The darkness down deep where it's cold. So very, very cold...

The first rays of sunlight pierce the gloom, the ashen glow announcing another day has begun. I swim to the surface of consciousness, blinking away the darkness. The cold mist hangs over the morning like a sickly gray shroud, reminding me that each new dawn is a grotesque mockery of what once was.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - D.S. Ullery has been published in Blood Reign Literary Magazine, The Sirens Call Ezine and the horror anthology When Red Snow Melts. His work will appear in the upcoming collections Journals of Horror and Night of the Car Nex. His stories "Gruff123","A Strange Taste in Ornamentation" and "The First Rule of Showmanship" have been self published on Amazon and Smashwords to critical acclaim.

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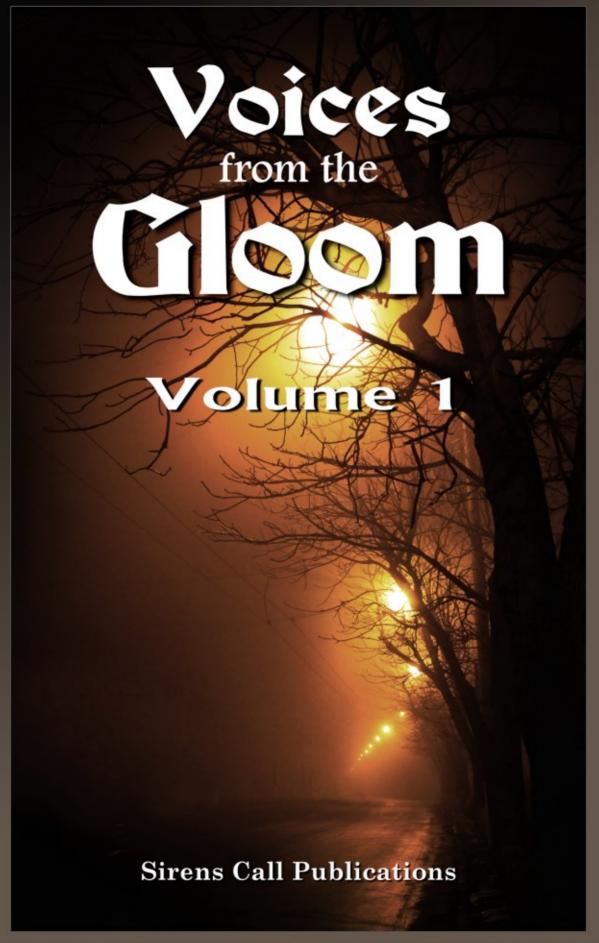


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THE BECOMING Brent Abell

Ben stepped out on the fallen hotel wreckage and scanned the horizon. Six years after a rogue regime in the Middle East launched its warheads into Jerusalem; the morning skyline still looked like it burned. He thought back to the news that the missiles were approaching the US's eastern seaboard and his school evacuated into the subway tunnels. Overhead, the sky's reddish hue hanging over Boston Harbor reminded him of the mornings he rode his bike to school and played in the park until the sky darkened from blue, to red, and to twilight's purples. For miles, all he gazed out at were the burnt out and decaying husks of civilization.

Without realizing it, he scratched the spot on his shoulder where one of the military doctors gave him a booster shot two days ago. The liquid burned his veins like his heart had begun pumping lava through his system. They told the group of teens the shots were to help them adapt to the changes in the environment. Ben understood why, food and shelter was quickly becoming more and more scarce in the underground tunnels. Last week, the military put ration policies in effect to stem the tide of their rapidly depleting food stores.

"Hey Ben, I knew I'd find you up here," the red headed girl said taking her place at Ben's side.

"Oh, hey Lacey," he said and nodded to her. He felt his cheeks redden. Since he met her in the shelter two years ago they'd become friends and he'd developed a crush on her.

"Why do you always come out to this place? You know they tell us it's not safe to wander around out here," Lacey whispered and took Ben's hand. She squeezed it tightly and he returned the small form of affection.

The spot on his shoulder twitched and he dropped her hand to scratch it again. "The place where the doctors gave you your shot, does it bother you any? Mine burns and the itching is fucking terrible. I had to force myself to stop messing with it. Here, check this out," he offered and rolled up his shirt sleeve.

A low gasp escaped Lacey's lips. The skin around the injection site looked puffy and red. A blood and pus mixture dripped in yellow and crimson droplets down his arm. Several deep gouges criss-crossed the tender flesh. Something about the spot didn't sit right with her. The place where she got her injections bothered her, but not to the extent it did Ben.

Quickly, she covered her mouth and muttered, "Oh my Ben. Have you told the meds about it yet? They said the injections were to help us get ready to live up here full time again so we can straighten everything out, but if there are side effects, you have to tell them!"

"I don't have to tell them shit! If they knew, they'd want to, to...I don't know, experiment on me or something!"

"Aren't they doing that now?" she asked shrugging her shoulders.

He reached over and grabbed her arm. His fingers pressed into her injection site and she winced. She tried to hide the pained expression on her face, but Ben noticed.

"Hurts huh?"

"Look," she said pulling away from him, "nightfall is in a few minutes and they're going to shut the vault doors."

He stared at her for a moment and relented, his sudden angry burst subsiding. Ben stood and watched her head to the checkpoint to reenter the underground. He rushed behind her so they wouldn't get shut outside the thick concrete doors built at the mouths of the subway tunnels that kept the radiation from the languishing citizens below.

Hearing the massive doors drag closed behind him, he felt tired and very, very hungry.

The sensations were the same as the dreams before, Ben's mind felt blank and he moved like he was on the ground. He only reacted to the burning in his gut and the prickling of his skin. His vision blurred, but he continued to shovel the food into his mouth. The stench assaulted his nose, a mix of rotted fruit, dirt, and piss from the refuse systems: but it tasted like honey. Spoiled juices ran down his chin and his tongue slurped it up from his lips, drinking down the rank liquid. Dragging his arm across his face, he stopped when the bristles scratched his cheeks. Slowly, he dropped his arm down and looked at the food he'd been stuffing his face with.

His stomach lurched and he threw down the trash in his fists. Suddenly, revulsion turned his guts inside out and he doubled over. With a quick twitch, he glanced at his arms and stifled back a scream. Thick, coarse, black hair sprouted from his pores. Reaching up, he ran his fingers over the irritated places on his face and he felt the skins edges pull up from the muscle. Grabbing on to a piece of skin, he ripped it back and his face fell away...

"You look like shit Ben," Lacey noted with her trademark smirk and scratched her shoulder.

"You don't look any better yourself sweetheart," Ben retorted. He studied her as she worked her fingers across her sleeve, trying to rip through the shirt's fabric and tear into the skin beneath. The rash on his arm looked worse than it did when he woke up. It blistered and the coloration reminded him of a lobster fresh from the pot.

"Asshole, you don't tell a girl that! Where are your manners?" she said and playfully punched his arm.

Ben didn't respond directly. His eyes stared blankly out across the dining area where the residents of Boston Shelter A-4 march in to get their morning ration of stale bread and dirty water. The debris floating in the drink reminded him of the fish food he'd give his goldfish when he was a kid. Throwing in the aquarium's top, he watched it float to the bottom and land atop the rainbow colored gravel. The soldiers told them it was safe to drink. He refused at first, but eventually the thirst overtook reason and he greedily gulped down the first glass they handed him. Then they approached him about the program and explained his life would be worth living again on the surface.

"You ah, scratching at the arm a little bit?"

Lacey glanced down and noticed the crimson droplets streaming out from under her sleeve. Turning away, Ben grabbed her and spun her around.

"Having nightmares too? What else aren't you telling me? I thought we had something going," he sneered angrily.

"Yes, I've had terrible nightmares, I think my skin is falling off, and I feel something in my gut that hurts so badly," she yelled and buried her face on Ben's shoulder sobbing.

He patted her head with his hand and caressed her back. Where his fingers ran over the sheer shirt she wore, he felt welts and raised places covering her entire back. Examining her neck, his blood ran cold. The patch of skin looked blackened and small black spines stuck out from her pores. Instinctively, his hand shot to the scruff of his neck, frantically checking his own flesh.

Just below the skin's surface, his fingertips felt the sharp protrusions below the epidermis. A blazing hot flash rushed through his system and he dropped to his knees.

"Oh my God, Ben!" Lacey shouted before a blood-curdling scream exploded from her lungs and she fell to the floor.

Reaching out to grab her hand, Ben heard the claxon blaring up and down the corridor they were in. Pressure built in his ears and his muscles contracted and flexed involuntarily. Cracking, his knees buckled backward and he shrieked in agony. Fighting through the pain, he rolled his head around to check on Lacey.

Her head flopped to the side and her body jerked around in the throes of a seizure. Rips and tears criss-crossed the flesh on her arms and face. Black oozed from her mouth and something tore free of her cheek and flexed outward. The pleas she made were garbled and he couldn't understand what she was trying to say. Her voice sounded like she had a mouth full of cotton trying to speak underwater.

The alarms died off and the cadence of marching boots echoed down the hallway. Blinking trying to clear his eyesight, he saw a man in a bio-suit kneel next to Lacey and inject something in her arm. Trying to shout at the men, something shredded his bottom lip and wiggled in the air. A sharp point slammed into his shoulder and the burning liquid ran up his arm setting all his nerve endings on fire. His head swam and his twisted reflection in the soldier's helmet was the last thing he saw.

The dreamland sun blazed across the sky as he roamed the wreckage around Fenway Park where he

and his father shared their happiest times. The Green Monster's remains lay in a crumbled heap and the massive outfield Coke bottle had fallen forward, resting in the centerfield weeds. Paper and other debris swirled around the silent empty stadium from the breeze blowing in off the harbor. Around him, Ben heard others clicking around and saw movement in the dugouts and the ruined concession stands.

The stale air reeked of decay, but he found the aroma delicious. Moving across the right field seat, he sniffed around the chipped concrete and licked the faded seats with his tongue. The dirt tasted wonderful and he spied a pile in the corner that looked like popcorn boxes and crushed drink cups. Quickly, he scurried over and reached out to grab the sweet trash.

Grabbing hold, the skin on the back his hand split. His middle two fingers hung limp and folded under the flesh pulling away from his arm. No blood poured from the wounds and the other muscle layer fell from his bones. Turning his head away quickly to avoid looking at his arm, he saw the others in the field.

Trying to vocalize the scream failed. Dropping the trash and bringing his hand up to his face, he shrieked in horror and left the dream world behind.

Waking up, the words in his ears were muffled. At first he didn't understand everything, but the conversation around him clarified.

"The experiment is a success doctor?"

"Yes, the two subjects were injected with the recombinant DNA has shown the beginning stages of metamorphosis. Soon, you can deploy them to the surface."

"This had better work."

"I assure you, they will help get the surface prepared for us to leave these damn underground hovels." "Excellent, the president will be...wait, they're stirring."

Ben relaxed and the fog cleared from his head. The edges of his vision remained blurred and the light above him looked like a prism. He struggled to move his hands so he could wipe his eyes, but he felt them bound to the table he laid on. Squirming around, he noticed his chest was also strapped down.

Focusing as hard as he could, he stared in shock at where Lacey lay strapped to a table. Her fingertips broke open and dark brown claws slid out of her skin. Two shapes ran around her and frantically tried to tighten the leather straps holding her down. An unholy cry erupted from her lips and they broke apart, onyx mandibles pushing the skin away. Her head flopped over and faced Ben.

Her scalp split and her flesh formed cracks down the center of her face. Large feelers grew from underneath her hair and extended into the room and waved wildly around. The mandibles opened and closed like scissors and the skin broke free of her face and sloughed off to either side. Her deep amber eyes gazed at him and a vacant look crossed her new insect face. Ben felt his insides rumble and he knew it was only a matter of time now before his final transformation began.

Lacey's arms tugged at the bindings and broke free. Flailing her arms in the air wildly, her arms fell off her body. Large armored appendages flexed with pointed pinchers opening and closing. A wet ripping came from her midsection and her new body rose from the molted human skin remaining on the table. Rolling back with her shoulders, wings unfurled and she flapped them once. Ben cringed at the sound they made in the air.

The two men in the room screamed and she reached out with her pinchers and grabbed the one in the white lab coat. The claw's serrated edges dug through his coat and tore into his flesh. The white quickly turned red and she jerked her arm hard severing the doctor in half. A crimson spray shot into the air like a geyser and his top half toppled to the ground. Lacey shook his intestines free of her pincher and got to her feet.

The other man stood by the door and pounded on it loudly screaming for someone to open it. Reaching to his holster, he whipped out his pistol and squeezed off three shots into Lacey. The bullets slammed into her thorax and bounced harmlessly to the floor. Pushing down on her thin and barbed legs, she sprang toward the man and buried her mandibles in his neck. The blood showered her head and she drank deep of his life. Ben heard the familiar sounds of the change emanating from his own body. A cold sweat covered him and the heat in his core rose. Opening his mouth, his jaw dislocated and his face slid backward from his head. Tearing free from his mortal shell, his mind reset to his baser needs. Looking across the room, he saw Lacey drop the soldier's corpse and turn toward him. The only thing his mind recognized was his hunger and his lust.

The two monstrosities scrambled to the middle of the room and embraced. Holding each other, they became aware the temperature rose rapidly. Flames roared from ceiling vents and the cloth covers on the beds burst into flames. The room filled with the aroma of the dead scientist's bodies smoking and cooking in the heat.

Ben and Lacey's eyes met and something flashed through their new insect minds. A brief remembrance from what seemed like a lifetime ago and a final understanding of their fate.

Beneath their new shells, they felt their own insides boil. Lacey reared back and her abdomen exploded from the expanding internal gasses. Ben rolled on the scorching tiles and crawled toward the door. Climbing over the charred doctor's remains, he reached out to the door and then a low guttural moan escaped his mouth. Underneath his exoskeleton, his flesh ignited and flames exploded through his armor. With one last gasp, he turned back toward Lacey and reached out to her outstretched arm. Falling to the floor, his pincher landed in hers and he took his last hot, burning breath.

The men stared in the observation window and scribbled down some notes. Inside the room on the other side of the glass, the flames finished consuming the failures. Dying away, the cool down cycle kicked in and the fans blew air in so the clean-up crew could finish eliminating all trace of the experiment.

"What now Dr. Warren?"

"I believe what we are doing is right. If we can perfect the process, combining the cockroach DNA with some of the dead weight around here will allow us to create a workforce for the surface and find food."

"Should we go back to the drawing board?"

"No, find two more for the injections, I believe we are getting close," Dr. Warren noted and closed his notebook. Once his assistant closed the door behind him, he reached down and pulled out a zip drive. Scrolling through the files, he found the details from the president about *Operation: Reclamation* and began to write out his report.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Brent Abell lives in Southern Indiana where he survives with his wife, sons, and a pug who traded a ball for the US nuclear launch codes. His work has been featured in numerous anthologies and eZines. *In Memoriam*, his debut novella was released in 2013 and in August 2014, his first collection, *Wicked Tales for Wicked People*, will be released. Currently, he is in the editing stage for his second novella and his first full novel.

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SANITIZED Ken MacGregor

"It's not enough to clean, Jimmy," I told him. "You have to *sanitize*. You have to kill the germs. Then, it's really clean." I swept the cloth across the counter, spraying ahead with the disinfectant. Jimmy was watching me, but seemed distracted. I waited.

"What?" Jimmy asked. His cheeks reddened.

"This is not just a job, Jimmy," I said. "People are counting on us. Not just in this room, but the whole building too. Some of the germs in here can kill a person. You understand?"

Jimmy nodded. He was paying attention now. I walked him through the rest of the routine. We'd do it again tomorrow. It's not hard work, but there's a lot to remember.

"The other thing you need to know, Jimmy," I went on, "is to stay out of the way. Some people here work late, so you might see them sometimes. They have important jobs, and they don't need any problems. Capiche?"

"You Italian?" Jimmy asked.

"Nope. Polish/Irish. I just like the word."

I pulled the Stouffer's pizza out of the oven. It was sitting on a steel fish-shaped platter; my hand wore a yellow oven mitt. Both things were Veronica's. I made a point of using the things she loved, now that she was gone.

While the pizza cooled, I surfed the TV: Sitcoms; reality show; country music concert; news. I didn't much care for country, nor have much use for what passed for entertainment. I watched the news.

A high school girl, fourteen was gang-raped and stabbed; terrorists had blown up a market full of people; a man shot children in a school. They wrapped it up with a puff piece about a dog show. I wished I'd watched a sitcom.

I cleaned up, drank a large glass of water and brushed my teeth. I still had all my teeth; taking care of them was important to me.

I let Jimmy work while I supervised. We learn by doing, my mother always said. Jimmy was mopping the floor, looking down. I unlocked the cooler where they kept bad things. Keeping an eye on Jimmy, I slid a glass vial into my pocket. If my plan failed, I had a convenient scapegoat in the room.

At the end of the day, Jimmy had a good grasp of what to do. I walked him out and clapped him on the back.

"Been nice working with you, Jimmy," I told him.

"You're working with me tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Depends," I said. I watched Jimmy walk away into the predawn haze. When I could no longer see him, I pulled out the glass vial and opened it. I couldn't see anything, but I knew invisible, airborne, rampant death was in that tube. I coughed, once.

"It's not enough to clean this world," I said aloud, my throat already sore and scratchy. "It's too sick for that. You've got to *sanitize* it." I fell to my knees as blood leaked from my nose. Nearby, I heard coughing.

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

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UIRUSU Talisha Harrison

"It's Sunday, June 8th, 2014. The time is 1:23 A.M. My name is Dr. Ian Efron and this is my last will and testament. We've had a breach and I don't think we will make it. I am recording and uploading this for the world to see. To warn and prepare you for the destruction and horror that is to come should I fail here today. We were so wrong. We were so wrong...

I along with my fellow colleagues Dr. Yuka Akiyama, Dr. Michelle Huang, Dr. Stephen Kimura, and Dr. Rin Miyamoto, were working on a secret project. It was something that we hoped would change the world for the better. We created nanoprobes-microscopic machines that inhabit a subject's body and bloodstream-who were designed to heal the body and the mind of any physical and mental illness.

Our initial experiments on our animal test subjects were very successful, with 95% success rate. Despite this, time and time again we were denied permission to test on human subjects...we decided to take matters into our own hands. Using the yakuza as our primary supplier in addition to certain businesses who had donated to help fund our work, we were given human test subjects.

While some were corpses-as we were also testing our resurrection theories-the majority were those who were breathing. Many were from human trafficking networks, while others were prostitutes who owed their pimps money. There were even children. At first we questioned and protested the origins of our supply, but as more money was given and we began to see positive results, we looked the other way.

Our living subjects were treated with the utmost respect and were fed, clothed, and housed very well. Some were-specifically the children-secretly released with money and supplies for their safe return to loved ones and those who cared about them. But not without being severely threatened if they spoke out about what we were doing.

Those who remained were subjected to our tests. Whatever ailment they had carried with them were healed. Those who had no sickness, were given some. From club foots to fibromyalgia, from graves disease to cancer, all were injected with some form of disease that we were able to heal. We were also able to correct and regrow limbs and organs. Those who were afflicted with mental illness were also tested on and we saw great results. Our biggest breakthrough, however, was when we cured the HIV virus in the few patients who carried it.

With this revelation, we began to push boundaries even further. We created new nanoprobes that were stronger and better than the original. With all of our successes, we were ready to go public with our results. Unfortunately, since we were part of a government entity we could not go any farther than within the government structure. With our allies we were able to avoid prosecution for our violations of the law.

The government wanted our research to create so called 'super soldiers'. These beings would replace soldiers in the Japan Self-Defense Forces aka JSDF, Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force aka JMSDF, and the Japan Air Self-Defense Force aka JASDF. World War three was on the brink of starting and Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution had been rescinded. The military needed many soldiers to fill their ranks. And our nanoprobes were just the miracle that they sought. They sped up our research and we were given more subjects. Thankfully none were children. The majority were men while the rest were women.

Military officials paid us well for our services but we weren't satisfied. When my colleagues and I began our studies, we wanted to make a difference, not become part of the military machine. We tried many times to get out but there wasn't a way. The lives of our families and loved ones were threatened on a regular basis and for that reason and also due to our curiosity, we continued our experiments.

After injecting countless subjects with the nanoprobes that inhabited their bodies and bloodstreams, the super soldiers the military demanded came to fruition. These men and women's strength and endurance increased ten-fold. They were much stronger than regular humans. The probes performed the function of maintaining and repairing damage to all parts of their body. In addition, the probes generated new biotechnology inside the soldiers in order to protect them from various forms of disease and viruses. Each nanoprobe was the size of a human red blood cell. In fact they looked very similar to them. They traveled through the soldier's bloodstream and latched onto individual cells where they rewrote the cellular DNA. This altered the soldier's biochemistry and eventually formed larger more complicated structures and networks within the body such as neurological pathways. Everything was working well and as the war

began, the soldiers went into battle and performed perfectly.

Wanting out of the government's hands, we returned to our yakuza contacts who through threats and intimidation bought out the government. Since we owed the yakuza families big time, we had to work for them creating super soldiers which they sold to the government, private security firms, and used for their own personal gain. We went from one monster to another, not knowing that we were creating the worst monster of all...

It was too late when we discovered the flaw. The war was in full form and the shit had hit the fan. Every country's nuclear warheads had been disarmed a few years before by a terrorist who created a nuclear disarmament device which had worked too well to even the terrorist's surprise. More manpower was needed, so demand increased and the soldiers were sold to all three sides. With the huge need we were forced to speed up the process and the latent defects soon sprung forth into the open.

The nanoprobes became self aware and evolved into a living biological weapon within its hosts. It attacked the host's body in the attempt to enhance and perfect it as an efficient killing machine. As a result of this deadly enhancement, soldiers all over the world began to show and express signs of mischief. These folks also had a high body temperature and were unaware of the change in their bodies and went on with their daily activities.

At first, the infection affected a small number of soldiers, so the countries who had bought from us were able to keep it a secret from the public. They were quarantined and concerned military and government officials called upon us to study the soldiers who they deemed 'roki'. As we observed and ran tests, their mischievous behavior gradually went from silly pranks to outright dangerous stunts and then to uncontrollable violent aggressive behavior. Unbeknownst to us, one of our lab assistants was bitten by a soldier and that's how the infection spread to the civilian population. We learned later that if someone has been bit, the infection took 24 hours to spread throughout the body.

Among those who were infected, we discovered that the method by which they had come into contact with the 'uirusu' virus differed slightly. Each infected person had contracted the virus via direct fluidic contact. This meant they had either been bitten, had direct contact previously with an infected person's wounds or remains with open wounds on a person. If they had had unprotected sexual intercourse (including anal and oral sex) from an infected individual, they would contract the virus. If they had received blood transfusions or used hypodermic needles from an infected person, they became infected. We also learned that some bodily fluids, such as saliva and tears, did not transmit the uirusu. Also, the virus was not airborne nor could it be transferred to animals.

The infection spread at a rapid rate when the infected began to bite and eat the uninfected. The situation then went from dire to horrific as some of the infected who died within the 24 hours of their infection began to reanimate and join their colleagues in devouring the human race. The war stopped and treaties were signed. A bigger threat now faced humanity. Theses 'zonbi' as they were called were slaughtering us. We had gone too far trying to play god and now we're paying for our sins.

Free of the mob, my colleagues and I were given a new assignment by the newly formed government. We were to find a cure. In the weeks and months to come, we studied and learned as much as we could about the mischief. We discovered that though mobile, the infected were technically dead. They had no heartbeat or other vital signs. They were vulnerable to destruction of the brain, which killed them and also anything that will kill a human. As they seemingly felt no pain or fear, more damage than normal was needed to stop one.

During this time we all lost our families. We only have each other now, as we continue our quest to find a cure to stop this madness. Our time is getting shorter and shorter by the day. I don't think we will make it but our work must go on to find a cure! Humanity's survival depends on it! Learn from our mistakes, failures, and sins...I have to go. They've broken through our defenses. I have to destroy as many as I can now.

I am truly sorry for my part in all of this. I hope history will find the time to forgive us. God please forgive me! Oh Rie, Sakura and Mitsuru! I'm so sorry...I'm so-"

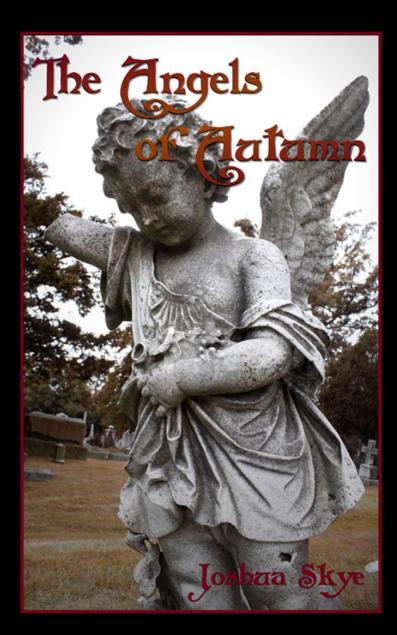
The remains of Dr. Efron, his colleagues, and their lab assistants were later found by the JGSDF. -The Saki Files

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Self-published Author. An Outsider, A Freak And A Geek. Writes About Music, Poetry, Comics, Anime, TV, Movies, Writing, Fashion, Food, Love, Life, The Pursuit of Happyness, & Wherever Her Imagination Takes Her. Contributor over at GonnaGeek,com where I post news articles, sometimes reviews, and write my Musings of a Blerd column. Creator of new Wordpress blog Geeking Out...At Night!

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The Angels of Autumn By Joshua Skye

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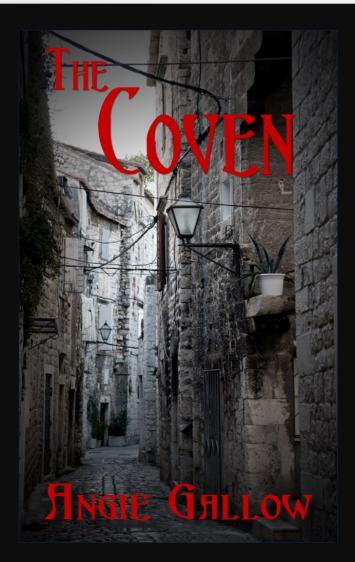


WEST NILE Tabitha Thompson

This was not happening. The numbers were increasing by the day and there wasn't too much the doctors could do. People whose lives were full of joy had to fight to maintain them from something that became so much worse from a simple mosquito bite. Reports of the scorching hot weather here in South Florida during the summertime which attracted mosquitoes were nothing new but reading reports of them carrying the West Nile virus was a bit surprising; it was even more surprising when I found that people including my husband was infected with the rare case of the virus that causes neurological illnesses. Seeing my husband and so many others become disorientated with seizures and then quickly falling into a coma made me feel so helpless with my mind wondering if there will ever be a cure. With over 200 people and counting here in Fort Lauderdale being infected and dying from the virus along with the continuous hot weather I'm afraid that my husband wasn't going to last long. Being barricaded in a hospital for now almost 2 weeks was making me paranoid and restless about the future state of what was going to happen to the remaining 100 people including myself who weren't infected. With no specific treatment for the virus all we could do is wait, wait for any sign of hope that there would be an end to this horrific epidemic. From the collar of my shirt feeling what I thought was a minor tingle on the back of my neck became an unknown mosquito bite, tears flow down my face as I realized what my fate would become.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - My name is Tabitha Thompson, and I write from a laptop in South Florida. I like my horror with splashes of shock and suspense along with edgy, sarcastic characters. Despite being a hippie at heart, I used to be timid of the darkness until it became a part of me.

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The Coven By Angie Gallow

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and iTunes

AWAKE Lori R. Lopez

"I'm so tired. Could I just sit here a moment and talk?" The man wore a black hooded sweatshirt zipped to the chest, his head exposed. Wet spikes of hair stuck up like bristles and his complexion was exceptionally pale, an unhealthy shade. But the eyes were what stood out, with haunted gray irises and the darkest creases carved underneath.

"Sure." His presence had startled me out of a sullen reverie. I moved over, wrapped in a cloak of selfpity. It was a public bench; if he was fool enough to sit in the rain, I had no objection. Hunched there nursing my wounds, I figured that his were deeper and lent him an ear. I had two, after all. He seemed to be lugging the weight of the planet and its moon upon his shoulders.

He told me his name, Mephisto. "Ain't that a kick? Named for a devil. I didn't know till a teacher informed me at age nine. It explained why people shunned me, turning tail or swerving to avoid my path."

"Must be a burden." I chose my words carefully. "Your folks named you that?" It was out of my hands. There could be no minding my own business.

"Nah, they abandoned me. I was found as an infant, crying on the altar of a church like a sacrifice. The minister said it was a sign I had been born cursed. He christened me, intending to murder me. To save humanity, I guess. But his housekeeper stole me and I survived. She raised me, called me Mep. Once I knew the history of my name, she imparted the rest of it."

"That's quite a tale. I've heard crazier. Is it true or are you making it up?"

"It's the God's Truth. Or the opposite." A wry tug of his lips.

He had a sense of humor regardless of his woes, which made me like him. There was a grim charm to his manner. Also a quiet earnestness. I was intrigued, but a female on the street at night has to be cautious. If he needed to talk, I was willing to listen. We huddled in watery silence, entranced by the rhythm of the storm.

Mephisto's chin sank to his chest.

"Dude." An elbow nudged him.

Eyelids flapped. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." I wasn't doing him a favor. He appeared in dire need of a snooze. I caught his shadow-ringed eyes observing me.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in the rain?"

I shrugged. "You might say I'm drowning my sorrows."

"Can't be that bad." His mouth was a terse line.

When I didn't respond, he sagged onto my shoulder. "Hey." I poked him. "Hey! Get off me." I was sensitive about contact, especially with men. It was a harsh gritty world I lived in. And it wasn't getting any better.

He sat up blinking.

"Everyone carries pain inside," I conversed. "There are levels. A hangnail can be a hassle. A papercut." "I hope your troubles are as small."

"Here you are worried about me, with what you've been through ..."

He laughed, dry and humorless. "My future is far worse. I'd rather worry about something I'm able to change. Is there anything I can do?"

"You want to help me?" Wary and confused, I became defensive. "Don't bother," I spurned. "I'm fine." "You don't look fine."

Abruptly I stood, crushed by enormous pressure, my angry fists buried in the pockets of a hooded nylon jacket. If I stayed I might have to kill someone. I plodded a cement river, furious with myself for not being able to trust. I had languished alone for so long.

Footsteps splashed behind. Then he was at my side, matching my gait. We strode a few blocks. The rain was coming down like brick walls. He pulled me into a covered bus stop.

"You'll catch your death," he muttered, soaked and dripping.

"You should talk. I don't need a guardian angel. Or a devil watching my back!" It was a cheap shot. He bowed his head. I felt awful. Why did I have to add to the guy's grief?

"Can I at least buy you a coffee?"

My noggin shook. A gulf stretched between us, a chasm of distance. "I don't drink coffee. I could use a rootbeer float."

"Is that a beverage?" His expression was guileless, blank.

"You've never had a rootbeer float?"

"No. I drink a lot of coffee."

"Even as a kid?" I couldn't believe it. Then remembered his childhood had not been typical. Neither was mine. Flashing a ragged grin, I exclaimed, "You must be cursed!"

"Yeah. Maybe I am." He ruefully smirked.

"How old are you?" A desperate attempt to switch topics.

"Twenty-five."

"No way!" His grooved and worn mug suggested late thirties or forties. Surprise was the natural reaction. "I am too."

He remarked that I looked younger.

"You look older."

We dashed across empty light-drizzled pavement to a diner populated by denizens of twilight and a stray couple. Occupying a window booth, I requested two floats as a gum-chewing waitress slapped menus on the table. "Want something else?" The fiftyish blonde scratched her dark roots with the butt of a ballpoint pen.

"Grilled cheeses and fries." Mephisto spread a pair of digits in a V. I protested. "Please," he insisted. "I hate to eat alone."

Rolling my eyes, I consented with a nod. The lady bustled to the counter, delivering our order to a cook. She planted her rump on a stool to continue a cell-phone chat.

The guy's lids were drooping when I first saw him. Now his cheeks were flushed, and there was actually a sparkle in the smoky blood-veined orbs. I could almost glimpse the ghost of Mep's true self.

"You never told me your name." He folded his arms on the table.

"Anastasia."

"Really?"

"No, that's what I give nosy people."

A bark of mirth. "Okay."

"I didn't mean you."

"Yes you did."

"All right, fair enough. I'm Ginny. Short for Eugenia." I groaned.

"It's sweet. Old-fashioned. I like it."

"Well, compared to yours ..."

We perched on padded benches, facing each other like friends. I nervously picked at an X engraved on the tabletop, probably with a butterknife, scarring the surface.

"I wish I could sit here with you forever," he murmured.

My brows arched, and I nearly made a wisecrack. But he was so serious. Melancholy. I restrained my tongue, literally biting it. I couldn't bear to hurt him again and imagined the sharp cry of stepping on a puppy's tail. He was gentle and deserved to be treated with kindness. I noticed his hands tremble resting on the table. "Why are you so jittery?"

"I haven't slept in awhile."

"Like, how long?"

"I don't know. Weeks. A couple months. It's a blur. Sometimes I can't concentrate, or see straight. I've had visions. Giant woodlice. Purple and blue pyramid clouds. A desert of nothing but flat sand and telephone poles."

"That's tame. My dreams are wild. The ones I remember. Usually I don't." I was babbling.

"These were hallucinations, not dreams. I was wide awake." He smiled, wanly, morose. "Or I'm afraid everybody's out to get me — casting suspicious glances, concealing daggers, planning an assault."

"Wow. That's paranoid." I cleared a hoarse throat. "Is it a disease?"

"Not sure. I doubt it's contagious." He leaned forward, lowering his voice. "I woke up one day and knew, if I go to sleep the world will end."

I stared at him, experiencing a range of emotions, then settled for shock and incredulity. His features were solemn. "That is pretty heavy," I managed to croak. "So it isn't that you can't sleep. You don't want to." I debated commenting that I had become an insomniac.

The sandwiches and sodas arrived. I gawped at my plate as if it landed from Outer Space. Mep picked up his grilled cheese and took a large chomp.

"How can you eat?" I asked.

"Like this." Mouth full, he crammed in a fry and chewed.

"Are you sure?"

"Mmmmm. It's good. You should try it. Could be your last meal."

"I've lost my appetite." Traitorously my stomach rumbled.

"Fibber."

"Okay!" I grabbed a triangular half of my sandwich and devoured a corner. "Satisfied?"

An amused chuckle. He munched and swallowed. "I'm used to it. And you learn to appreciate things, every little detail, when it could be your final hour. Yes, I'm certain. I can't prove it. Ironically, it's like faith. Religion."

"So you're telling me we're on the brink of the Apocalypse?"

He winked. "Perhaps not that apocalypse. A variation."

"And you think you're a prophet?"

"More like a doomsday device. An instrument of the lord, the devil. I'm undecided whose finger is on the trigger."

"Could it be random — the hand of Fate?"

"This experience has taught me, anything is possible."

I gulped my rootbeer float. He savored his slowly, then laughed at me.

"What's so funny?"

He indicated his upper lip. "You have an ice-cream mustache."

There was such innocence to him. Tears filled my eyes. It was the worst part of any disaster, that the innocent must perish.

"I'm sorry." His gray eyes glistened, dull and weary. Infinitely sad. "You were better off not knowing."

"At least I can make the rest of my life matter. Compose my last will and testament. Write a Bucket List." My tone was a mixture of sarcasm and regret. "Why?" The obvious question.

Mep drained his glass. "I've been puzzling that myself."

We toyed with our fries, sharing a glum mood. He asked if I wanted the slice of dill pickle on my plate. I gave a head joggle to the contrary, then studied him crunching it: visage puckered, tasting every morsel of flavor. Like the cold and sugary float, he seemed to absorb the sourness and sting of the vinegar.

"I figured it would be Global Warming. Or a meteor," he remarked.

"I thought either zombies or a nuclear holocaust. How is it going to end?"

"If I knew that, I might warn them. Preach on sidewalks. Paint it on buildings."

My gaze wandered over our fellow patrons. I peered out at rainswept pavement. A car swished past. "They have no idea."

"Imagine if they did."

"You're right. There'd be pandemonium. They'd try to cure you, then they'd get rid of you, hoping to prevent it. Do you suppose they could? Cure you?"

"I went to doctors. They had no accurate labels for my condition. I can't blame them, not believing it. Generally, they wanted to lock me up and medicate me. I was forced to escape a few psych wards. I've been begging for coffee money and mooching amphetamines from the people I do convince. I've been on a steady diet of stimulants. Caffeine and uppers." He whistled to signal the blonde. "Coffee to go. And the check."

Scowling, the broad kept talking while she poured a murky brown fluid. She laid her phone down and waddled over with the covered cup and our bill. As she retreated to her roost, my companion slapped a wad of crumpled cash onto the table. He and I stood, awkwardly preparing to depart. I trailed him outside where we hesitated in the doorway's shelter. I zipped my jacket, lifted my hood. He uncapped a pill container, rattled a pair into his palm and tossed them to his mouth. Removing the lid from the coffee, Mep gulped the steaming brew. He sighed with relief.

Didn't it burn?

I shuffled damp sneakers. "Thank you." A polite mumble like I assumed we would go our separate directions.

"I apologize for entering your life." He sounded sincere. "You never told me what I can do for you."

"The food was plenty."

"You barely ate."

My guts were in knots. I blurted that I hadn't been completely honest.

His gaunt aspect contorted. Clutching his abdomen, darting forth, the guy vomited over the gutter from the curb. He wiped his mouth on a diner napkin stuffed in a pocket at the table. Then wove crookedly through a torrent of precipitation to rejoin me. "It happens." A bleak statement.

I discerned he meant throwing up. I had to wonder if he even heard me. "Must be rough." I didn't have words of wisdom or consolation. The entire situation made me tense — what he had revealed and what I knew. What I was expected to do. "I'm your sister!" I divulged. "We were born thirteen hours apart."

Our gray eyes met. It was his turn to be stunned. My brother gaped at me, gasping for air. "I didn't recognize you."

"We're not identical."

"How did you find me?"

"There's a connection twins have. I could tap into it because I knew you were there. I was sent to slay you."

It flickered in his eyes, a dour acceptance. He wasn't going to resist. "Why?"

"Why do you think?" I gripped his arm. "Come on."

We trudged in the deluge to the canopied bus stop across from the cafe. Shivering, we parked on the bench. Drops hammered above us. Hugging himself, Mephisto stared at a drenched street that bled streaks of light. "I don't understand. Why would you want to kill me?"

"It isn't about me or you. It's bigger. Our parents were planning to sacrifice you as a baby."

My heart lurched. He had begun to sob.

I couldn't endure the torment, the anguish I was heaping on his frail form, yet I had to finish my story. "I grew up in a cult, an obscure cabal summoned to guard a vessel. Our mother, who was pregnant. She would give birth to a son of the dark and a daughter of light, conflicting halves of a whole. One had to be destroyed to protect the other. A member of the group smuggled you out and left you on a different altar. Our father searched for the cult member and eventually arrived at the church. He then hunted for the housekeeper who abducted you. Months ago he tracked her down. I'm the bloodhound unleashed to sniff your trail and eliminate you. But you located me."

My long-lost brother sprang up. Disturbed, he paced around the bench. "You're on a divine mission?"

"Sort of. They taught me that our purpose was to thwart Satan from devastating the world, reaping mass quantities of souls. It's all very biblical."

"And you agreed to carry out this plot to assassinate your brother."

"A stranger! I was brainwashed since I was born, drilled with the imperative that it was necessary. For the good of Mankind. Except you're nothing like they said, and now I don't know what to believe!"

"You and me both, sister." He collapsed onto the bench, his burst of energy depleted.

Side by side we glared at the rain.

"Where does this leave us? What are we going to do?" He was as baffled as I felt.

Mentally I groped for a strategy or clue, struggling to reconcile what had been drummed into me by repetition and what could be seen for myself. "I haven't figured it out. I was raised for one thing, to be the angel of your demise. Whatever good was in me is gone. They reduced me to a machine. I don't know whose side to be on, yours or theirs. What is right?"

He squeezed my hand. The touch jolted me. "I am glad you came. There was such emptiness. I don't feel that anymore. I prefer to know of you than exist another day in ignorance."

"What if it's lies, the piety an act?" I whispered. "What if their chants weren't even prayers, but incantations for some unholy worship? It could so easily be reversed. We could be the pawns in a vile conspiracy."

His grasp tightened. He reached a conclusion. "The fact remains, I have to sleep. We will all of us be doomed unless you kill me. It's the only chance, the single hope left."

"Don't say that."

"I wish it could be otherwise. If only we had more time to spend together."

"We'll make time."

Shaking his head, he exhaled. "I can't go on. The pills and coffee don't work. You need to do this. There's a reason you discovered me tonight. I have my destiny and you have yours."

"No. You're family. We're twins, we have a bond!"

"A death bond. You must play your role."

"How can I? It was never possible. I could never actually do it. They were the strangers, not you. We have always been fused." I held up our laced fingers. "To kill you would be killing myself."

"It isn't a choice." He had ceased caring, slouched on the bench. His voice drifted off: "I feel so at peace, as if ..."

"Mephisto!" Releasing a limp hand, I frantically jarred him. "I haven't been able to sleep for weeks. I'll keep you awake!"

"It's a losing battle." His speech was slurred. "I can't do it anymore. You have to ... kill me." His gourd dipped, then flopped backwards.

I hadn't the heart to jostle him again. Perhaps a quick nap. If he could catch a few winks, everything might be okay.

The diner's customers slumped over their plates, knocking porcelain cups or water glasses to the floor. Behind the counter the cook and waitress keeled. An apocalypse had commenced, and I had a front-row seat. Panicked, I endeavored to rouse my sibling to no avail. Then waited for a thunderclap to strike. The only thing descending from the heavens was rain.

I mulled why I should be exempt. An answer reared like a cobra out of a basket, wavy, hypnotic, as the bodies framed by ample windows twitched and revived. Swaying to their feet, they shambled the aisle dividing counter and tables with arms outstretched, heads angled. They were dozing — somnambulant! I was immune because I couldn't sleep.

"Mep, the world didn't end! They're alive!" I hugged him excitedly. "Mep?"

He didn't stir, wilting dormant in my arms. I frowned at him. Was it slumber or a coma? Would he ever open his eyes? I feared he was Patient Zero for a plague.

The sleepwalkers bumped, milling at a side of the diner. They grappled, blindly wrestled. Initially it was stiff and clumsy, then the scuffle grew vicious. I gawped as the waitress posed with a foot on the chest of the cook, his torn-off head upraised, dangling from her fist by an ear. The others brawled, snapping limbs, yanking appendages. Unconscious, their strength was practically unlimited. The mob shifted to attack the waitress. She crept to the door and was brutally maimed, sprawled on its threshold. Combatants emerged, staggering over the woman to lumber down the street.

Their eyes were all closed.

My heart racing, I drew a brief curved dagger and unsheathed the blade. "I love you," I breathed. And

sliced with cold steel. Mep's throat brimmed red, grinning, blood spilling to his jacket and shirt.

The mad bunch hobbled jerkily away.

A bizarre notion occurred. What if he was putting them out of their misery? A merciful sleep to spare humanity the tribulations and turmoil of an apocalypse. Maybe I was the catalyst ... a dark horse making them rise and slaughter each other.

Tears streaming, rinsed by the shower, I dragged my sibling from the bench and buried him in a patch of mud. It had been too late, I mourned. I missed him already ...

The truth? I'm not sure I will ever know. My mind is congested with theories. It doesn't function so well anymore from lack of sleep, a losing battle. I can't go on forever without it. And then, I'll be one of them.

I need to end it myself before that point. I'm simply too much of an optimist. Hoping to find more insomniacs. Or coffeeholics. Praying for a cure. For redemption, a pardon. Believing I'm due some good luck for a change.

The world I knew was filled with suffering — terrible crimes against children, women, animals. The very thought of it makes me shudder. Yet there has to be good in it someplace. I just haven't found it yet.

The weather leaped from monsoon to heatwave. I'm sweltering as I travel deserted roads by foot, alert for sleepers. A rootbeer float would be nice.

I realize that I did taste something sweet in life. Whatever tomorrow brings, it wasn't a total loss.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Lori R. Lopez is the author of CHOCOLATE-COVERED EYES, AN ILL WIND BLOWS, THE MACABRE MIND OF LORI R. LOPEZ, DANCE OF THE CHUPACABRAS, THE FAIRY FLY, OUT-OF-MIND EXPERIENCES, a book series based on her POETIC REFLECTIONS column and more. Residing in Southern California, she is also an artist, designing her own book covers and illustrations.

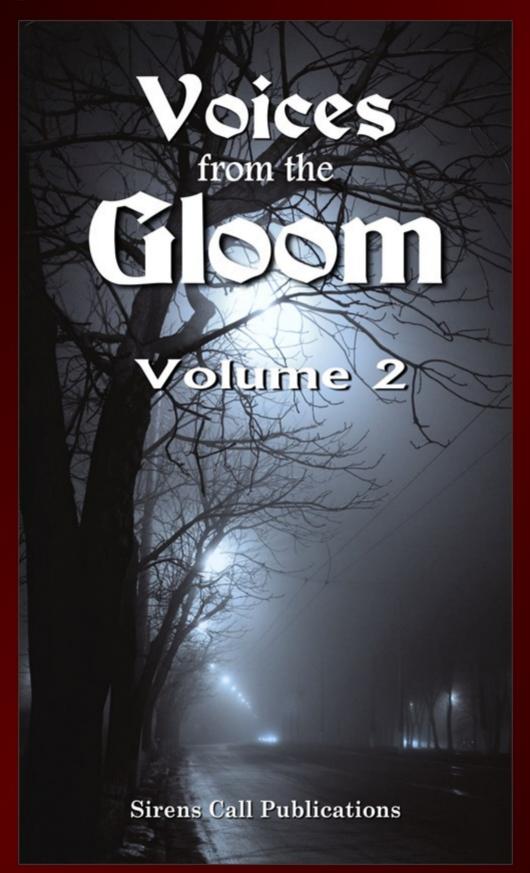
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AN INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR ELA LOURENCO

In this issue of The Sirens Call, we're pleased to feature an interview and excerpt from Ela Lourenco, author of the recently release *Essence*. We sat down with Ela to ask her a few questions to learn more about her and her debut novel.

Welcome Ela; please take a few moments to introduce yourself to our readers.

My name is Ela Lourenco and I live in the United Kingdom with my lovely husband and two daughters. Although I now live in Scotland I have had a somewhat nomadic life having lived in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Catalonia, Switzerland, England – something which has definitely opened my mind to the amazing cultures and people around the world. I have had many jobs thus far in my life, interpreter, translator, political journalist... all of which have involved writing in some shape or form. I have had poetry published previously too but 'Essence' is my debut novel.

What made you decide to become a writer?

Reading books from all over the world has played a huge part in my desire to becoming a writer as I was exposed to such a variety of different books and styles of writing – almost like different flavours of icecream. I have to give a special mention to my mother who also played an important role in my love of books – my bedtime stories were Greek myths and legends, Russian folktales, Czech folklore, Enid Blyton, Ursula Leguin... all of which contributed to setting my imagination on fire!

What is Essence about?

After years of vague ideas swimming around in my head the story that I wanted to write suddenly came to me and 'Essence' is the result. Many have asked me what 'Essence' is about... well, there's no simple answer to that. In my opinion it is the compilation of all the genres and styles I myself love so much, fantasy and paranormal with a hint of science fiction and romance – there are legends, prophesies, magical beings, whole other worlds... most importantly though there is a quest for identity.

What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about Essence before they read it?

I think it's important that my readers know in advance that when I wrote 'Essence' I saw it as a fantasy tale for the over eighteen audience – why should children get all the fun? Why not write a story that has the same fantastical elements found in many children's books albeit in a more adult tone? I love to read fantasy/paranormal books so much myself that I had to write one.

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

The idea for 'Essence' literally just came to me out of thin air and once I began to write the story just flowed, but that said there was a huge amount of planning involved in the preparation behind the writing. There were months of work creating the characteristics, philosophies, and histories of each race, not to mention the amount of cataloguing for each ritual and relic and weapon! If I had to describe my writing methodology I would say that I spend an inordinate amount of time preparing the details and backstory (mainly for my own use) and then just go with the flow of the story – so I guess that makes me a planner and a pantser!

If you could cast *Essence*, who would you choose to play your main characters of Katra and Blade?

This is a great question! I can easily picture a raven-haired Chris Hemsworth as Blade and Milla Jovovich as Katra. There is an air of nobility to Chris Hemsworth that perfectly portrays Blade in my mind (the fact that his stature fits the bill doesn't hurt either!) and Milla Jovovich has always been one of my favourite actresses due to the intoxicating blend of vulnerability, strength and sheer power she brings to her characters – it fits Katra to a T.

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

Writing is more than a job for me; it is my passion – the air I breathe. I have always written, whether for the school paper or stories for myself and my loved ones. I won't claim that it is an easy occupation though, as much as the creative process is thrilling it can also be equally frustrating at times. The hardest challenge for me as a writer has been finding the balance between family life and writing time – there is nothing more aggravating than having to step away from the computer in mid-sentence or idea when the story is really flowing!

In your opinion, what sets Essence apart from other books of the same genre?

I didn't just write 'Essence', I lived it. On a more positive note though I think that my complete immersion into Katra's story is what makes 'Essence' what it is. I lost myself in her world, I could taste the magicks, feel the power coursing through me as though I were there myself. I wrote what I loved which inevitably led to a complete blend of genres – something I love in books I read myself.

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

As for what I like to read... well, it's a long list! I love Jennifer Estep, Richelle Mead, Kresley Cole, Gena Showalter... I could go on all day!! I do have to give a special mention though to Kim Harrison. I recently finished her 'Undead Pool' and it was amazing – I literally stayed up all night to finish it. Another favourite of mine is Jennifer Estep – she has never written a book I haven't gobbled up! Her Elemental Assassin series is thrilling and new (I love Gin Blanco!) and her Mythos Academy series is equally riveting.

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

If I can even entertain a few people through my books and transport them to another world far from their own lives then I have truly made it. Of course all writers would love to have millions of readers – no one will deny that – but my personal goal is to give others the same enjoyment that I have found in the many books I have read myself. I have also written a series for a younger audience (and no, I won't reveal the title yet!). One of my beta readers was a boy of nine years. His mother came to see me one day to thank me for getting him to love reading as he had previously refused to read as it was 'boring'. Hearing that... well, that is success to me and the biggest compliment I could receive.

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

What I would tell any writers out there who are just starting out is to not second guess themselves. Don't

write what you think others would want you to say – stay true to what you enjoy, don't be afraid to take chances and don't shy away from letting your characters guide you even when your initial story plan was different. Be flexible and enjoy the spontaneity that comes from creative writing and it will all come together. Then find a publisher and editor that really gets you and with whom you can have a great relationship (I really lucked out on that score!) and the sky's the limit!



What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

My greatest wish is that those that read 'Essence' will walk away hungry for more (yes there are two more coming in the series!) and that they will have passed a few hours in my fantasy worlds finding respite from the normalcy of everyday life. I hope I will have made them turn the pages with bated breath feeling a range of emotions and given them some laughs in the process – if so my job is done.

Thank you Ela!

And here's an excerpt from Essence, Ela Lourenco's debut novel...

Chapter 1 Katra

The shadows crept closer. Misshapen and twisted, growing as they slipped under the doorway. Silent tendrils of darkness reaching out toward them... A breath hitched, someone whimpered. They huddled together, soundless cries caught in their throats. Each hoping they wouldn't be picked tonight, each hoping it was all a bad dream. All, except for one girl, she held them; her arms around them, eyes open in defiance, daring them, taunting them back. The shadows pointed to the smallest girl. The girl stood up in front of the little one.

"Leave her alone. You will not take her," she growled at them.

They ignored her and reached around to grab the little one, who was shivering with fear behind her teck.

back.

"I said you will not take her," the girl forbade.

"Or what?" one of the shadows laughed, "What will you do to stop us?"

The grey curtains began to twitch as a wind appeared out of nowhere. The shadows watched with interest as the girl summoned a gust powerful enough to push them backward.

"Oh look, how sweet," mocked a shadow, "a little breeze to cool us on this balmy summer's night." The wind slowed, the girl tried to hold onto it... she just couldn't do it.

"Nice demonstration," said the other shadow, "you are learning. We are only trying to help you all and to teach you." He grabbed the little girl's wrist roughly and yanked her forward.

"Don't let them take me!" screamed the little girl, clutching desperately onto the other girl's arm. "Please, help me!" she sobbed as they pulled her away from her friend. The older girl crumpled onto the floor, drained, as the shadows won again. The door slammed shut and as her mind descended into the void she could still hear the little one screaming for her... "Katra!!!!"

"Katra! Katra!"

She sat up drenched in sweat and disorientated and looked around the room. Clothes were carelessly scattered on the Persian rug, books piled on the antique mahogany desk by the window. She rubbed her pounding head.

"Katra!" Maya opened the door. "Still in bed? I thought we were going to practice this morning?" She looked at her and her smile dropped. "Are you ok honey? Did you have another dream?"

"You could say that," she muttered.

"I brought you a cup of my special brew; it will get rid of the headache."

"Thanks Maya," she said inhaling the calming steam of the tea.

"Come downstairs when you're dressed," she said, as she busied herself trying to tidy the mess that was Katra's bedroom. "I bought you some apple and cinnamon muffins from that café around the corner that you like so much."

"You didn't have to do that," Katra complained half-heartedly while Maya tossed her clothes into a basket and started down the stairs. "I was going to do the laundry today."

"Sure you were honey," she laughed over her shoulder.

Katra sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes while sipping her tea. She knew that Maya liked to look after her - it came to her so naturally that it was sometimes easy to forget just how much she had already done for Katra. Maya had found Katra wandering the streets two years ago. Katra had been only eighteen and alone with no memory of her family, no memory of who she was, where she was from - the only thing she seemed to remember was her name. She had been wandering aimlessly through the streets looking for a sign, anything that would trigger a memory. She had walked around for hours until her feet hurt so much they had become numb, when she had finally stumbled upon a small shop. The sign on the door had said 'closed', so she hadn't seen any harm in seeking refuge from the pelting rain under the doorway. She rubbed her hands together and created a small fireball. It was cold and foggy outside and her stomach was growling. She didn't know how she knew magic, she couldn't remember, but it seemed to come to her instinctively. She never did it in front of anyone else, sensing that it would attract unwanted attention. She jerked to a stand when the front door suddenly swung open, ready to be told to go away by an irate resident, worried that she had been caught using a spell. It was an older lady, Maya, silver grey hair glinting like a halo in the light of the doorway. She took one look at the young girl and the glow in her hands and invited her inside. She didn't ask any questions or tell her to leave. She simply went to the kitchen, made a big pot of tea and offered her some scones straight out of the oven. It was almost as if she had been expecting Katra.

Maya went slowly with her, never asking too many questions or making her feel uncomfortable. She told Katra that she could stay a while until she was back on her feet. Sensing the girl wouldn't accept charity, she offered her room and board in exchange for some help in her shop. Over two years later Maya had become a mixture of mother, friend and mentor to Katra who was still living in the apartment above the shop. It was in fact a magicks shop and Maya was a witch, an elemental. Maya was not just a witch selling magicks although it was a convenient cover for her true purpose as advisor to the supernatural council, the Jura. Her job was to help the council deal with threats to the peace, and to ensure humans never find out about the magical world. There were many supernatural races in the world, vampires, mages, shifters, oracles... each race had a representative, a senator, on the council. It was run very much like the human government and justice system rolled into one. There was a whole different world the humans didn't know about, supernatural clubs, hospitals, businesses... The leader of the council was an oracle elder. The oracles were the most powerful and respected of the supernatural community and had the abilities of foresight and prophesy. They were known to be just and were in fact responsible for ending the thousands of years of war between the races.

"Are you coming down anytime today?" Maya called up.

"Be there in minute!" Katra quickly pulled on her last pair of clean jeans and a top. She yanked a brush through her hair and ran down the stairs to the kitchen.

"Mmmm," she sighed appreciatively as the still warm muffin melted on her tongue. "What's on today?"

"Something has come up Katra. I heard through my contacts at the council there has been some trouble lately. A young earth witch was found in a catatonic state at her home. They are running tests at the hospital as we speak, but the prelims show dangerous magicks in her system."

Supernaturals didn't get sick in the same way as humans; their illnesses tend to be magic related.

"What kind of magicks?" She asked between bites.

"My friend at the Council has mentioned that there seems to be a new drug on the market. No one knows what it is made of yet, or how dangerous it is. This is not the first case apparently, but the witch in question is the daughter of one of the Council members..."

"Right, so now they are going to take it seriously."

"I know how you feel about the way the Council works Katra, but they are trying... there are regulations and procedures."

"I know, I know. Decision making takes time; they have to vote on everything." She rolled her eyes.

"Katra, this is serious. The witch they found is only sixteen and there has been no improvement in her condition. The best shamans in the city are baffled. We have kept it quiet for now, the last thing we need is mass panic but if we don't stop whoever is doing this..."

"Sixteen! I hate to break it to her family but at that age there is no way she will recover."

If someone out there was selling magicks to underage kids... well, there would be a lot more occupied hospital beds. Earth witches didn't come into their full powers until they were eighteen, which meant that until then they were completely vulnerable to the effects of strong magicks. In short, a dose of such magicks will fry their magical networks, essentially killing the flow of magic to the brain. Where humans had blood in their veins, supernaturals had magicks. Cut off the circulation and...

"And what is the Council doing about this problem?"

"They notified all hunters to be on the lookout for dealers. The council told parents that there has been some slight trouble in the area recently and suggested a curfew for all minors."

"That's just like the Jura, of course they will sweep this all under the rug for as long as they can. Do they really think that a few 'minor' problems and a curfew will prevent teenagers from going out to the clubs? Look, I'll head to a few clubs tonight and see if I can find anything out. I'll see if I can talk to the girl's friends too, see if they know anything."

"Just be careful dear... I have a feeling that this job will be more dangerous than what you've done before. It needs to be dealt with discreetly," Maya looked worried. "And you cannot let your glamour slip."

Maya worried about Katra when she was hunting, despite knowing how tough she was. Katra was part elemental, part fae and already a powerful witch. It wasn't a lack of faith in her abilities but the unanswered questions that niggled at her. Elementals and fae both matured magically at eighteen, but Katra was almost twenty-one and her powers were still growing, and at a speed Maya had never seen before. That, together with Katra's inability to remember anything before the day they met, was a constant source of worry. Something had obviously happened to her, but what? And who was involved? Despite her trust in the council Maya had never registered Katra as an official hunter, she didn't want anyone to find out about her yet. There would be too many questions, especially if they saw her violet eyes and silver hair. Not greying hair, pure liquid silver... Maya had never seen anything like it, and neither Katra's fae nor her elemental heritage could justify the colour. She had taught Katra how to glamour the day after she arrived and as far as the world knew Katra was just another brown-eyed brunette. A gorgeous one, no glamour could change that, but at least she stood out less.

"Ouch," Katra rubbed her sore hand as the backlash from the spell hit her fingers. She smiled at Maya, "I'm ok I just wasn't prepared for the kickback."

"Your powers are growing too fast," Maya spoke, as if talking to herself, "they should have stopping growing by now."

Katra released another fireball spell. This time the ball of fire grew as big as a basketball when she lobbed it at the dummy in the training room. With her other hand she drew an ice spell which covered the fireball and neutralized it before she set something on fire, again.

"Well done!" Maya clapped, "At least your control is growing too... but I still think we need to figure out what's happening here. I don't know what any of this means..."

"It's not a problem Maya," Katra shrugged. "The more power I have the better I can do my job. You should be less worried not more." She grabbed a towel and wiped off the beads of sweat on her face. "I should grab a shower before I head out, and I have to get my stuff ready," she called over her shoulder as she went back up the stairs. Maya went into the back of the shop. They didn't keep regular shop hours as most supernaturals were nocturnal. Not because they couldn't go out in daylight or anything as Hollywood as that. They just simply preferred coming out at night, and they didn't need as much sleep as humans so the day could feel quite long. In fact, vampires didn't need sleep at all if they fed regularly.

Once she was sure that Katra was in the shower, she pulled out a box from the back of the bottom shelf. Inside was a large grey pearl. She closed her eyes and placed her fingers on it.

"Maya?" a deep voice whispered in her head.

"It's me Antonio," she thought back at him as the pearl linked their minds together.

"Is something wrong?" he sounded worried, "We were not due to talk until next week."

"I don't know... I have a bad feeling, there is a darkness coming. I'm worried about Katra. She has been having those nightmares again. She tries to laugh it off but I can see the shadows in her eyes."

"When did she start having them again?" Antonio asked.

"She has been having them for a month, they are getting more vivid and her powers are growing so fast I can't keep up. I think it's all connected... Antonio, I have to tell her the truth."

"You cannot!" he burst out in her head, "It is not safe! You don't know what it will do to her!"

"She has lived with me for over two years! I know her; she is strong, and she will handle it! I know the dangers, but isn't it worse if she remembers by herself?"

"What about Jessie?" he asked. "Don't you think she will look for her once she knows?"

Maya shook her head. "Antonio, Katra is a smart, independent young woman... of course she will want to find her, but Jessie is almost eighteen. She is almost fully matured, once she is, it will be safe."

"What about Katra? You keep telling me that she is still growing in power even though she's older."

Maya sighed. "I don't know Antonio... there is much we don't know, but we owe them what we can tell them. I'm tired of lying."

"Maya, she will be twenty-one in a week, and Jessie will be eighteen. Please wait until then at least. I hate lying to them too..." Antonio sighed. "I'll speak to you next week."

Maya took her fingers off the pearl and dropped it back into the box.



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