

Comparative Flash: One Image; Two Points of View!

An Interview with Author Ela Lourenco, & an Excerpt from 'Dragon Born'

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Cù-seilge Dubh Karen Soutar

The terrain was trickier than he'd anticipated. From the foot of the hill, it appeared a straightforward climb. Now that he was up there, the slope was determined to thwart him at every opportunity.

"Ow! God dammit!" Sean sucked at his hand where the gorse had scored a thin red line. He didn't have anything to bind it with. Deciding it would stop bleeding on its own, he surveyed his progress.

The guys were out of sight. He had left them leaning against the tombstones, cracking open their beers. He was already regretting his decision to come along. It was bad enough when he found himself in the graveyard - but he'd heard that the local kids hung out there at night. He'd wanted to fit in. So he'd acted nonchalant; smoked a few cigarettes and laughed at the scary stories they were telling. Then they dared him to climb the Witches' Craig.

He had tried to laugh it off; make out he had been in lots of spooky places before and he wasn't impressed with this one. They were having none of it. Jerry had been particularly vocal.

"You're chicken, aren't ya? You hang with us, you gotta climb the Craig." Jerry had sneered in his faux-American accent, flicking his Zippo lighter on, then off, then on again, until Sean wanted to scream. He had marched off before giving himself time to think about it.

"No such thing as witches, no such thing as witches," he chanted under his breath, scrambling up through the springy heather. At least it was a cloudless night, the moon lighting his way. The guys' chatter had long since receded, replaced by – nothing. No wind, no insects buzzing, no night birds calling. Only the rasp of his own breathing as his legs worked harder. Maybe he should give up smoking. He stopped for a few minutes, getting himself together for the last stretch. He tried to take deeper breaths, enjoy the sweet smells of the plants all around him. Although the smell was a bit too sweet. Rotting meat sweet. Ugh. His throat tightened, but he kept going.

His hand throbbed. There was enough light to see that it was still bleeding. Why wouldn't it stop? Blood and sweat ran in tiny rivulets on the back of his hand. Well, of course he was sweating, he'd been climbing. There was nothing to worry about. He wiped it on his jeans, then pressed his other hand over it. He was nearly at the top. He was supposed to stand on the craggy outcrop that overlooked the graveyard, and wave his phone so they could see him.

The bracken rustled. So what? Sean thought. There were bound to be loads of small animals and birds on the hill. But that's the first sound you've heard, his brain whispered treacherously. Pulling himself up the last few metres, he stood alone on the summit of the Craig.

"Made it! Oh God..." Pain lanced through his hand and he clutched it tighter. What the f...? Had he touched something poisonous?

He was so preoccupied that he barely registered the snuffling. When he did, he gasped – then forced out a laugh. Of course, it had to be.

"Guys! Stop arsing about." He hoped only he could hear the tremble in his voice. One of the idiots had even brought a torch. A faint bluish glow flickered behind him.

At the low growl that followed, his bowels turned inside out. Gut instinct told him it wasn't the guys. The blue light brightened. It wouldn't even be a Rottweiler or German Shepherd.

He jerked as the bushes in front of him shook. God, he was surrounded. By what kind of animal? Sean's brain screamed. But his shock at what stepped out was not at the sight of some giant hairy monster.

A girl, no more than eight or nine, clambered out of the undergrowth and glared at him.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was wrong; it was world-weary, too old for her years. The voice of a woman, not a child.

"I...I..." He found himself stammering, and all the while the rumbling growl behind him continued. Look! Look! The voice in his head yelled. Just get it over with!

"Don't look," the girl said casually, walking forward and holding out her hand. "He doesn't like it. You don't, do you?"

Sean realized that the hand she extended wasn't for him. It was for whatever was behind him.

She pushed up her sleeves, and reached into the patched and stained satchel she had slung across her skinny body. Her dress was a shapeless thing, the material patterned but faded. As she drew closer, Sean saw bruises on her arms. Finger-marks. Before he could comment on this, she pulled something out of her bag and threw it past him.

The growling changed to happy snuffling, then munching, then a horrible grinding and snapping. The little girl bared her teeth in what would have been a lovely smile, except for the circumstances.

He was on a haunted hill, with some kind of monster behind him and a - he didn't know what – in front of him. Maybe it was simply a girl, but that girl had just thrown -

"A hand," Sean croaked. "That was a hand."

"He looked," the child said calmly. "He shouldn't have looked."

"Who?"

"The one who sneaked up ahead of you. He was going to give you a fright at the top. He met us first." She rummaged in her satchel again, and pulled out a Zippo lighter. "You want this?"

"Jesus God!" Sean stumbled backwards and almost fell. A low rumble brought him up short.

"I guess not." She pocketed the lighter. Meanwhile, the crunching resumed, as the beast continued feasting.

Sean scrubbed at his eyes, half-hoping he would open them and find himself in bed. When he did, she was still there, gazing at him curiously.

"You don't know what's behind you, do you?" She asked. "You're new."

"I just moved here." How strange, to be discussing this with a ghostly and ghastly waif on a moonlit hillside. "The guys were telling stories. About...witches..."

She waved a hand. "They didn't say what runs with the witches?"

"Well..." He hadn't been paying attention, thinking it was all nonsense. Until they dared him to climb the Craig.

"If you see the blue lights, you don't look."

Suddenly she was standing right in front of him. This time, she did take his hand. Before he knew what was happening, she spat on it; then licked the blood from the wound the gorse had inflicted. He pulled, away, nauseated.

"Good thing he'd already fed. He was scenting this – hunting you. But I like you."

Sean realized that the cut didn't hurt anymore. The bleeding had stopped. He moved his hand this way and that, flexing his fingers.

The girl was smacking her lips, as though she'd just licked an ice cream.

"That should be fine now. You should go back down. They've gone, you know. They heard this one" – she rattled her bag – "get caught."

God, did she have more bits of Jerry in there? Sean croaked, "Wait – how come – your pet – didn't eat all of him?"

"My pet?" She laughed. "Good job he doesn't understand you. Because I didn't let him, of course. We were saving some for later, in case we needed it. Like now. It stopped him eating you."

"We? Do you mean..?"

She seemed ashamed for a moment. "I...I don't get much to eat at home."

This was getting too weird. She had told him to go, and he would. But he had to know.

"What – what is it that's behind me?"

She regarded him from under her lashes.

"Do some reading. You'll find out."

She held out her hand, and Sean flinched, before realizing that she was offering a handshake. He took her small hand solemnly, and then hesitated.

She pointed behind her. "That's the best way. Once you're through the bushes, it's easy."

He nodded his thanks, and then stepped past her. Every nerve ending was screaming for him to turn and see what was there. Whatever it was, the little girl was now crooning to it, as it snuffled and yipped like an oversized puppy.

He realized something, half-turned, then thought better of it. "Hey!" He called.

"What?" Her voice was muffled, as though her mouth was full of something. No – he didn't want to think about that.

"What's your name?"

"I told you. Read your history. You'll find out."

Confused and chilled, he took a few more steps, then dashed back through the bushes. He couldn't bear it. He had to know.

Silent emptiness greeted him. The summit was deserted. Only bones remained, some with ragged flesh still clinging, others picked clean by human teeth.

(Inspired by a local legend from Stirlingshire, Central Scotland. 'Cù-seilge Dubh'means 'Black Hound' in Gaelic.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Karen Soutar is a blogger, and a writer of short fiction. She loves to write spooky and creepy stories, and occasionally sexy ones. She is also working on her first novel, a tale of witches - and rock stars! When not writing, Karen is a driver trainer, rock chick, and crazy cat lady. She lives in central Scotland with her husband and four cats.

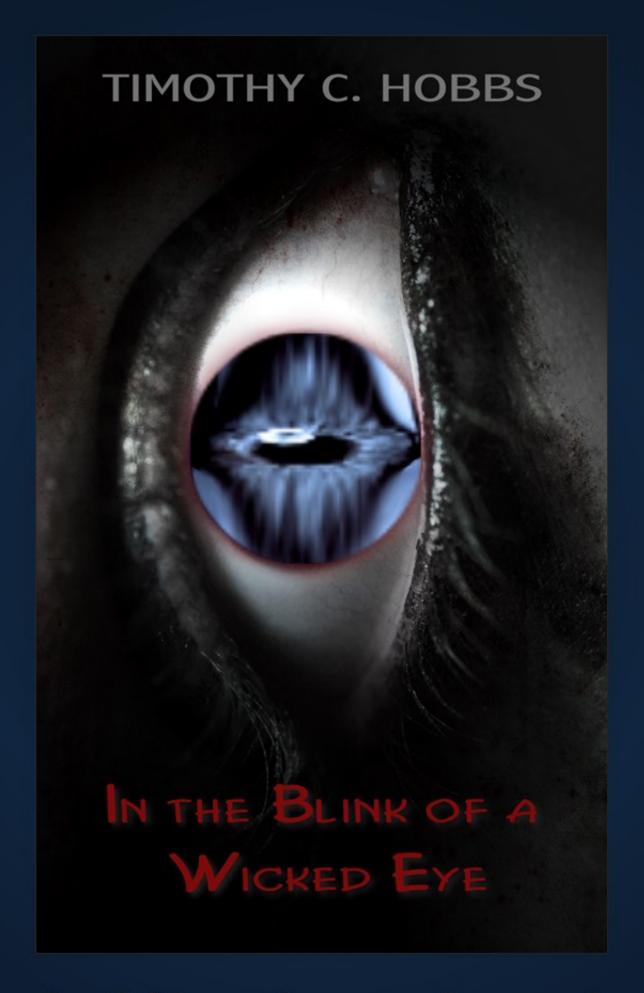
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Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

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The Singular Gramophone Jon Steinhagen

There were collectors who collected for the music; there were collectors who collected for the history; there were collectors who collected for the rarity; each had their limited field of interest (Edison Blue Amberol cylinders, Victor Orthophonics, Brunswick 'Light-Ray' records), and each fancied himself or herself as an authority.

Kimura had made a name for himself by finding the recordings that nobody knew existed, the ones that everyone assumed were lost. Collectors around the globe did not know how he found them, only that he found them and, later, charged a mound of money for anthologies of his findings.

Kimura had no particular ear for music or sense of history. He was indifferent to the evolution of the recording technology. He didn't find it fascinating that artists once shouted into huge horns in order to make a needle etch their voice onto a revolving disc of wax. He did not care that the early microphones were heavy, cumbersome, and faulty. He was not fascinated by Columbia's smoother surfaces and Autograph's sonically crude innovations.

At the most recent expo in New Orleans, a preservationist asked him, "So why the collection?" "I mean, if you don't care about any of this, why do it?"

"I love the hunt," Kimura said. "If you tell me there are zero copies of a certain record left in the world, I will hunt for it until I find it, regardless if it's supposed to have a twelve-year-old Louis Armstrong playing his first cornet solo or if it's someone's grandfather singing 'The Sailor's Lament' on a long-misplaced Autodisc."

"Louis Armstrong didn't make any records when he was twelve."

"I know. But if somebody makes a discovery someday that he did indeed do so and the record is lost to the ages, I'll be the one to find it. And keep it."

"All to yourself."

"I share."

"Yeah. For a price."

Kimura went to the national events to shill his transfers of his collection of rarities, and felt an immense joy whenever buyers would look at his CDs and go into shock over the prices...until they saw the contents and immediately paid up. "I never knew they recorded anything prior to 1923," and "I thought Grey Gull scrapped all of these masters," and "How have I never heard of this label before?" The diehard collectors all owned copies of Kimura's transfers of the rare and occasionally unknown past.

The New Orleans exposition was his favorite, as it was held in early October, when the edge was taken off the city's tropical oppression. Dressed in a white suit and Panama hat, he could take a long lunch at Muriel's and then sit in Jackson Square, digesting, while record and phonograph enthusiasts from all over the country would hesitate as they passed him, wondering if he was approachable. Now and then, someone was bold enough to say a word or two about some obscurity, and Kimura would brush them off. Several expressed a desire to see Kimura's collection when next they were in Chicago, but Kimura turned them down. His was a private collection. He did not wish to sell those which he had obtained. He would not loan any of them to any individual, college, or society that wanted to study them.

Several of the big names among the collectors – Margash, Trillger, Senledyne – treated Kimura to dinner on the last night of the exposition in an intimate, frowsy restaurant on lower Esplanade close to the river. They had all paid substantial sums for Kimura's latest compilations, and they now asked him endless questions about how he had managed to find all he had found.

"For instance – the Weygand Band records," said Margash. "How on Earth did you know they still existed?"

"And the test pressings of Margaret Reddington," said Trillger. "How did you even know to look?"

"And it isn't just anyone who can stumble upon the alternate takes of the Nyack Five," said Senledyne. "Do you have agents all over the world, paid to be forever on the prowl for you?"

Kimura thanked them for the dinner and kept his mouth shut.

Afterwards, as he walked along Ursulines, he smiled to himself and thought of his rarities – not of the music or performances they held, but of the prices they were fetching for him. As he removed his hat and crossed the lobby of his hotel, a voice from the parlor addressed him by name. When he turned around, he was met by an elderly woman dressed in prim pink calico. She was bent in such a manner as to suggest a water animal ready to spring, and her crackery skin was bronzed and damp.

"I have something I think you will want," she said. To Kimura's surprise, she took a smartphone from her dress pocket and tapped at its screen. She showed it to Kimura, scrolling through the images with a dried finger.

"You've never seen anything like this," she said.

Kimura had not. At first, he thought it was a series of digital photographs of one of the popular Victrola models from the 1910's, but when the woman enlarged each image, he saw that what looked like an average gramophone was actually anything but. For one, the cabinetry was made of a glossy wood he did not recognize, and its moldings tapered to claws. The machine's legs, too, were unusually large, flat, and clawed.

"What sort of wood is that?" Kimura asked. "That's not walnut."

"Bald cypress," the woman said. "Toxodium distichum. From the Atchafalaya Basin."

"Rare?" he asked.

"Not if you're from the swamps."

He examined a photograph of the machine with its lid open.

"I can't tell if that's felt or oil cloth on the turntable," he said.

"Neither," she said.

"And the reproducer...brass?"

"Gold," she said.

Kimura felt a rush of warmth on the back of his neck. While he had no sense of beauty, he thought that others in his field would find the instrument extraordinarily beautiful and, what was more important, a rare find.

"What company manufactured this?" Kimura asked.

"Been in my family ninety years," she said.

"Is it in working order?"

"Of course."

"Where is it?"

"If you purchase it, it will come to you."

There was a tiny moment where Kimura suspected the old woman of trickery. But why? Who goes around with pictures of phony talking machines for sale? What sort of market was there for that, if any?"

"How did you know my name?"

"Look," she said, still holding the smart phone out to him. He scrolled to another image, and saw a glint of red on the underside of the reproducer. His eyes became wide.

"It doesn't use a needle?"

The woman crackled a laugh. "No, sir," she said. "Nor a diamond stylus, like the Edison machines."

He regarded her again. She knew something of gramophones. He asked, "Then what?" "Teardrop ruby," she said.

His response was immediate, "How much?"

She named her price. He had prepared himself for a high figure, but the one she named exceeded that by several thousand. She was eager to head off his hesitation.

"It is alone in the world," she said.

"You mean one-of-a-kind."

"Oh yes. And others will want it. I come to you first."

"Why?"

"It needs to be where you are."

He looked at the smart phone again, but she swiped the screen and the images disappeared.

"Sold," he said.

"Cash," she said.

"Where can I pick it up?"

"It will be here in the morning, waiting for you."

And it was.

The actual gramophone was larger than the photos had made it out to be, its cabinet deep, and he had to put his luggage in the front seat of his van in order to make enough room for it. With the aid of two of the hotel staff, he managed to load the machine into the van by placing it on its back and securing it with rope. Halfway through his trip back to Chicago, just north of Memphis on I-57, he took control of his thoughts long enough – he had been trying to solve the mystery of the gramophone's origins – to become aware of his breathing. The temperature in the van had become increasingly warmer and more humid despite the season, and the air conditioning hadn't done much good. As he rolled down his windows, he imagined he could hear his own breathing, a labored inhaling and exhaling, even when he held his breath. While he had made many expensive purchases before in the name of his collection, none had been as pricey as this, and perhaps the exhilaration of a daring expenditure coupled with the acquisition of a genuine rarity was causing him to hear his exertion even when he stopped.

He managed to make the trip home in fourteen hours, and the Chicago night was unusually clear when he drove his van up to his building. With the aid of the robust doorman and a hand truck, Kimura managed to get the gramophone into the service elevator and into his apartment.

Kimura spent an hour in his bed, hot and restless. He got up, turned on the lights, and went to what was intended to be a dining room, but which he had converted into his collection library years ago. The floors of his apartment were uncarpeted, a measure he had taken to increase the acoustic yield of his collection of vintage talking machines. His new gramophone – he still didn't know what to call it, as it had no brand name embossed in the wood – sat calmly by the windows that gave onto a sweeping view of Lake Shore Drive.

Kimura opened the lid and felt a gust of swamp air come from within. He touched the material covering the 12-inch turntable: it was dark and resilient, almost oily. Unlike other machines, it did not have a speed control, and he did not know if it had been calibrated to play 78 rpm or 80 rpm or any rpm at all. The gold reproducer was thick and mealy to the touch, and he felt for the teardrop ruby that acted as its needle; it was there, but had been affixed with its rounded side down.

He passed his hand down the front of the long cabinet and caressed its middle while applying light pressure to the wood, as the old woman had instructed him, as there were no doorknobs. Two doors sprang open with the sound of a gentle kiss, exposing its unusual grille

carved into interlocking triangles, behind which the maroon cloth covering the internal horn still retained its crisp tension.

Kimura noticed an oblong object on the shelf below the grille that he was certain had not been there when the gramophone was being loaded into his van, but as the cabinet was deep he assumed that it had been there all along and the process of being transported and unloaded had caused it to slide from its depths into view. Removing it, he discovered it was an album of phonograph records, its cover made of an arresting pale and mottled hide-like material the consistency of beef jerky, only smoother and without fragrance. The record envelopes inside, too, were made of the same material.

There were six sleeves, five of which contained records, the last sleeve empty. Kimura cursed his luck at not having a complete set of whatever it was, but reasoned that ten sides of something obscure were better than none. He could still market a CD of the contents at a hefty price.

The records themselves were ordinary at first glance: sturdy black shellac, grooves, label. The label was one he'd never seen in the catalogues; deep red, round, and stamped with silver lettering. The labels contained only the titles of the selections, no indication of artist or name of the recording company. He perused the titles of the discs: *Gris-Gris, Wake Tuko, Ouanga, Li Grande Zombi, Sanite Dede...* they meant nothing to him.

He took one of the records down the hallway to his studio and turned on the lights. The room gleamed with the state-of-the-art equipment he used to transfer records to digital media, the cold technology built to reduce noise, hide clicks and pops and scratches, and drain the residual warmth from the old records on their way to preservation. He examined the record through an illuminated loupe and discovered that the record's grooves were smooth and featureless: they did not conform to either a lateral or vertical recording method.

He returned to the front room and the gramophone; he could wait no longer to hear what was on the records. He did not care about the lateness of the hour or his lack of sleep. He had to know what he was dealing with before he could make further inquiries.

When he had made the purchase, he had asked the old woman if the machine had a 'crank' (stooping to use of the incorrect term for a winding key). She had told him that the machine would play no matter what.

Kimura now faced the gramophone, its grille regarding him with complacent fangs, and placed the record on the turntable.

Immediately it began to spin, and no sound from within betrayed the spring-loaded motor he expected. He picked up the reproducer and placed it on the edge of the disc.

He heard voices, voices captured in some informal song, voices at a slight distance, the crackling surrounding them not from the surface noise of the record – for it had none – but from what sounded like a campfire. The drumming he thought he heard was, as he keened his ears to the sounds coming from the grille, which seemed to rise and fall with the sounds, the sound of clapping hands and stamping feet.

Kimura stepped back from the machine and wiped his face with the edge of his t-shirt, as his apartment had become quite warm since his return. He was entranced by the quality of the sound of the old record conducted through the old machine; it was as if the performers were there in the room with him, the fire only a few feet from his face.

He ran back to his studio, picked up the phone, and dialed a number. There was only one person to whom he could entrust his find, the gentleman who had sold him his first Victrola years ago, a man now retired to the suburbs.

"Mr. Kellnet," he said when the call went to voicemail, "I've found something astounding, and I need some guidance as to how to trace its origins; how it was built, and where its records were made, and..."

He paused because he heard tapping on his hardwood floors, tapping that was coming closer to him, rapidly, something creaking open its fearsome jaws, something on wooden feet

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jon Steinhagen is a resident playwright at Chicago Dramatists and published author (print and online) of fiction; his story "Another Voice" appeared in Sirens Call's 2014 anthology Fear: Of the Dark. A collection of his stories, The Big Book of Sounds, will be published by Black Lawrence Press in 2016.

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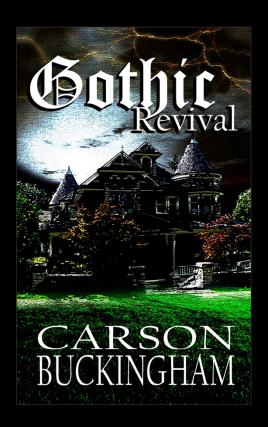
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October Comes Brian Rosenberger

At night, the woods were as dark as the inside of a coffin buried six feet deep. Out of the darkness emerged three shadows. They walked the edge of the woods in silence. Eventually, their feet found asphalt. The tallest of the three, Red, stopped, pointed at something on the ground. Bones jumped in excitement, sounding like an out of tune xylophone. Hat picked up the tire-tracked body, mouthed words long forgotten. Seconds passed then the corpse moved, meowed, jumped form Hat's hands. Red nodded, horns reflecting moonlight. The cat walked towards the unsuspecting town. Three shadows followed.

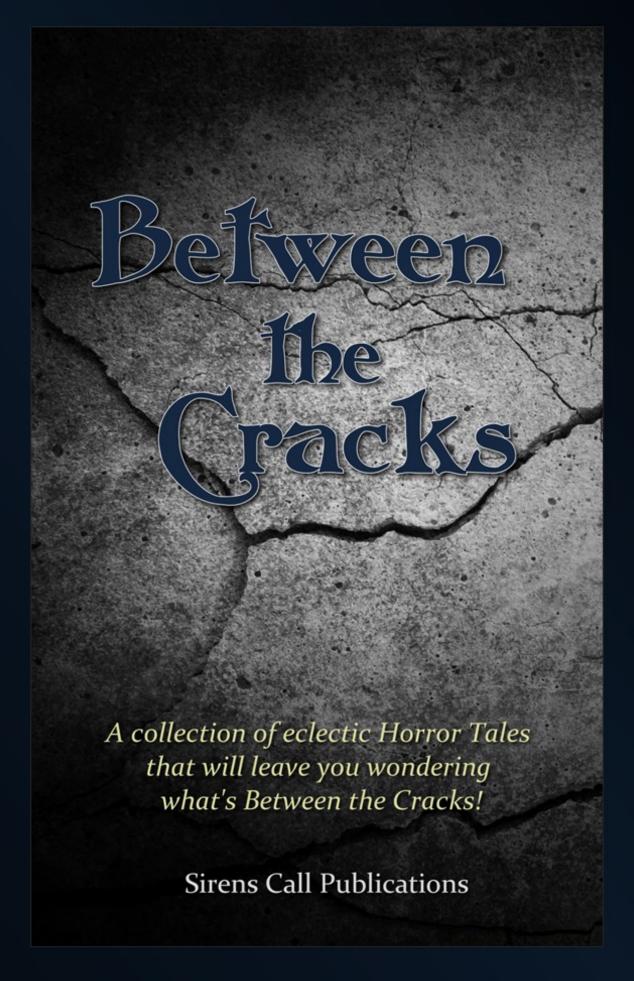
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of the must read short story collection, As the Worm Turns, and three poetry collections.

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/HeWhoSuffers



Gothic Revival Carson Buckingham

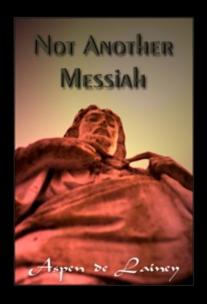
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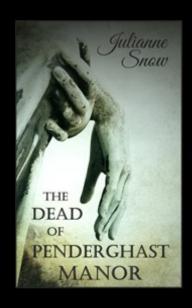


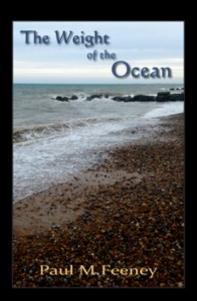
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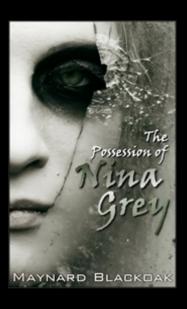
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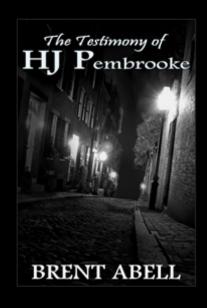












The Black Bison Andrew Rowland

It was like a gift from heaven. A herd at rest, at least one hundred and fifty head, stood in a low, flat gully. We'd only walked two miles from camp before we saw them, and barely had to crawl fifty yards to get into position. The animals stood grazing, huddled together to shield each other against the harsh prairie wind. I examined the closest targets but waited for Anderson to shoot first; he was better at identifying the oldest cow, the herd leader. She bounced and kicked as her lungs filled with blood until she slumped over sideways into the dirt. God gave most any other animal the sense to flee at even the slightest noise, but a buffalo? He follows his leader, when his leader is dead. He knows what death is; he's not dumbfounded when he looks down at his bleeding mother. He simply has no one else to tell him what to do about it.

We spent the next hour putting buffalo down on the plain. As long as you take your time and keep knocking the leaders down, well...I'd compare it to fish in a barrel, but I imagine that the fish at least toss around a little bit. If the boys back in Pennsylvania saw me they'd shake their heads and say, "Ain't no sport." But at four dollars a hide, I'd say *fuck sport*.

Eventually the animals grew agitated as fewer around them stood upright. The tight cluster that had remained at the middle of the herd broke apart and I could see their mindset *decentralize*, as it were. It would soon be every buffalo for himself. I scanned for the next target unsure how much longer the slaughter would last. When I saw it, my breath stopped in my throat. There in the center of the broken congregation was a bull with a coat blacker than any black bear. Not just the ashen coal color of every other beast's tail or head: every inch of this monster was blacker than tar. It was indescribably beautiful. I prayed to Lord Jesus that Anderson hadn't seen it yet and I lined up my sights behind his foreleg, but before I could squeeze the trigger I heard the cracking echo from Anderson's position, and with it the herd scattered in every direction. The black beast disappeared with the others, leaving the heaping masses of their dead kin behind them.

We put down our guns and unsheathed our skinning knives. We counted eighty-one head. I ribbed Anderson for his wasted shot, though he swore up and down that he'd hit it. He may have; I didn't even see the black bull take off. It was swept up by the dust and other escaping shadows, but we walked a two hundred yard radius as Anderson was dead certain the thing was running wounded. We didn't see a single animal or a drop of blood. Still, we were satisfied with the haul. When the skins were stretched and cool, we stacked them up and headed for camp. A flock of carrion buzzards descended on the lumps of gore we left behind.

"God damn, I should have followed you fellas," Brown said, fawning over our pile of skins. He still boasted his own prize of thirty-four. "Not bad in these parts. Pretty sure this is my last season here. Soon we're gonna have to go out on horseback to find anything."

"Not from what we saw," said Anderson. "This was only half the herd."

"Well you know best, don't you," retorted Brown. He was a balding runt, all of five foot seven inches, a man compelled towards the romantic notion of the American West while struggling against the proverbial undertow of his city upbringing. His entire adult life was spent on the frontier but any man who met him could tell right away where he'd come from, especially when he would try to pick fights. Anderson just rolled his eyes, refusing to take the bait

After nightfall, the subject was the same, but more civil. "Do you really think it's possible to wipe out all of these buffalo?" Brown asked. Anderson was barely awake, full of buffalo meat and bourbon. I decided to relieve him.

"Why are you so preoccupied with that?" I asked. Brown looked over to Anderson who started to snore softly. He felt less pressure to impress around me and spoke more naturally.

"I heard that it was now government policy to encourage men like us to slaughter as many buffalo as possible. It's why the prices are so high."

"And why would they want that?"

"Because we are at war with the Indians. They depend completely upon the buffalo to live. We kill them all, we weaken the enemy. I can't believe you haven't heard this."

"So everybody wins," I said.

Brown let slip a stricken expression then looked away. "Do you really believe we have more right to this place than they do?"

"Hell yeah I do. What are they doing with it? They'd sit in the dirt and kill and rape each other and eat lice out of their hair for the next thousand years if we left them alone. Do you think that's a productive use of the land, what God intended for this country?"

Brown pursed his lips like a critical woman, the way only a city boy could. "God?" he said finally.

"Yeah, God."

Brown looked into the fire as if considering his words carefully, then just shook his head and reclined onto his back. I guess he couldn't argue with that.

The wind whipped at the fire. Beyond its glow was complete and total darkness. I dreamt that I was on the plain stalking a herd exactly like the one from earlier, but instead of a sable buffalo, there was an upright figure standing in the center. Its body was covered in fine black fur, its feet were cloven hooves and horns protruded from its head. Its face was neither human nor beastlike, indeed it had no features at all, only dark eyes with yellow sclera, staring directly into me. The shadows of clouds skittered over the ground like foxes and night came. Days, weeks and years raced by. The railroad rose out of the ground directly under the demon's hooves. The other animals were driven away. Ranches grew around him where he stood. Rain came, and towns sprouted up from the fertile soil. Towns became cities, dirt turned to stone roadways and the distant landscape teemed with farms and people. But there stood, unchanged and undaunted: the black abomination seemingly aware of only me.

I awoke to Brown's gasps. Soon I was shocked that the smell alone hadn't roused me. The horses had all been skinned alive and lay with labored breath. Vultures wheeled above. I looked back to the other men and saw Brown standing several yards away, looking to Anderson with an expression of horror and confusion. I stepped over Anderson's body and was surprised to see him still breathing too. His face was coated in blood, and he was covered by the bloodied hide of his horse. I shook him awake and he started to his feet disturbed by his own condition. I didn't even speak to him, but walked over and pulled Brown away. I asked if he'd seen or heard anything in the night. Of course, he hadn't and neither had I.

"How could he have done this without the horses whining and waking us?" I asked.

"What would even possess him to? He didn't have any more bourbon than he usually does. Is he cracked?"

"It just doesn't seem possible. All we can do now is walk back to town and keep an eye on him."

We packed only what we'd need for the journey and stacked every pelt onto one wagon, though some had to be left behind. We'd return later for the rest. Brown and I pulled the front of the wagon while Anderson pushed from behind. He didn't say a word the whole day. We figured he was trying to piece together what happened and there was no sense pressing him.

I looked back to the horses and saw the buzzards circle without landing for another few minutes before flying off for another quarry.

A blanket of cloud made for a starless night. Anderson just stared into the campfire while Brown and I chewed our jerky.

"Do you know the Indian story of the White Buffalo Woman?" Brown asked. I'd been waiting for him to chime in with something inane. He had trouble with awkward silences, or any silences for that matter. I didn't respond. "The Sioux, I think it is, believe that a woman dressed in white came to their ancestors and presented a pipe that showed them how to live. All of their rituals came from this woman and she is responsible for the abundance of buffalo on the plains that brought their people out of famine." Again, I said nothing.

"And?" Anderson chirped. Brown and I shared a look. I guess we assumed he was possessed or stuck in a stupor, but maybe he hadn't spoken because neither had we.

"And...I wonder what they think of us," Brown answered. The people who come to take that abundance from them. Christianity always has an explanation for when some catastrophe befalls us—that we've sinned or fallen out of favor with God. I mean, they must think we are the manifestation of their equivalent of Satan."

I rolled over to go to sleep, or to appear as such. The other men got the message and soon fell back into silence and eventually sleep. I however, planned to remain awake all night. The fire burned down quickly, being of buffalo chips instead of wood, and the darkness surrounding us was all-consuming. The wind whipping at our coats was the only sound.

I may have slipped into a series of half-slumbers but that was all. Yet when I sat up at first light I saw the impossible: Anderson's flayed corpse lay across from me, and to my right was Brown, covered by the wet blanket of Anderson's stinking, pink skin. Amongst the waves of terror, my brain attempted to reason. I knew Brown to be a squeamish man who nearly vomited taking his first buffalo hide, and I'd seen Anderson injured enough to know he was a screamer. There was no way what did this was of the earth. I thought of the black demon. I jumped to my feet and gathered my rifle, knives, and hat, then kicked Brown in the ribs. I didn't wait around to hear his bawling. I ran.

It was only another ten miles to town. Brown called after me—I knew he would follow, like a fool. How did he know that I wasn't the one who'd done this?

The dawn was gray, obscured by clouds and dust. A storm was rising behind us. I made it two miles perhaps, before the fat drops of rain came. I turned back to see Brown at a distance, and behind him a deeply darkening wall of cloud. Hail pelted my neck. I ran until my lungs stung and felt they would burst. I stopped, but only for a minute. I didn't want Brown to catch up. I didn't want to face him.

I ran for another eternity before I heard the train whistle and stopped in my tracks. There were no trains out this far. Brown, who had dropped all of his effects, sprinted like the Dickens away from a thick, raging tornado. My own accoutrements hit the wet ground and I never ran so fast before or since. I turned back again to barely see Brown's silhouette through the swirl of water and dust. It was swallowed up and in its place emerged a tall black figure, clear as day: the beast from my dream. He was standing, staring at me with invisible eyes. The horror of Hell and death struck my heart and pulled me to my knees. I prayed to the Lord Jesus harder and more tearful than I thought possible and when I looked up, the twister enveloped the hellspawn and dissipated not two hundred yards from where I knelt.

I never again set foot on the prairie. Indeed, I never touched another gun. I settled in Philadelphia and expanded my family. I've watched the people multiply and teem out West, the buildings grow taller and the roads grow harder, stamped into the ground as if by the branding iron of Christendom. *Let them have their frontier*, I said, satisfied that I'd done my little part to make room.

I've led a full life, an adventurous one, and I have stood down many evils. Now I lay with modern medicine in my veins, waiting to be released into my Lord's loving embrace. I

will hold my eyes open at my last breath to see my dear family weep at my passing and feel my children's hands squeezing mine until I let go, consumed by the blackness.

When I open my eyes, I see only blurs and halos of light. While I blink I take in a fierce stench in the thick, close air. I don't know where I am but I soon stop wondering. I am overtaken by a compulsion to eat that isn't exactly hunger and I look down in front of me. A pathetic tuft of grass stands between my legs. I want that. I dip my head and snatch it with my teeth, but the drive remains. The rest of the ground is bare as the others surrounding me dip their heads and clear it. I want to move so I can find more but I am stuck, locked into place by the bodies around me.

Then I hear it. It isn't thunder, or the growl of a wolf. One of my neighbors screams in pain and I can hear him fall. This can't be good. But it might be nothing. If it were something, we'd already be running. A short time passes and the sound blares again. Oh my God. No one is running. I feel my legs stir nervously beneath me. We should be running. My fur dampens with sweat. KRAK-OW! More screams; they wrench my heart and turn my stomach. I can't breathe, I feel faint. I try frantically to move in panic until I lose my mind.

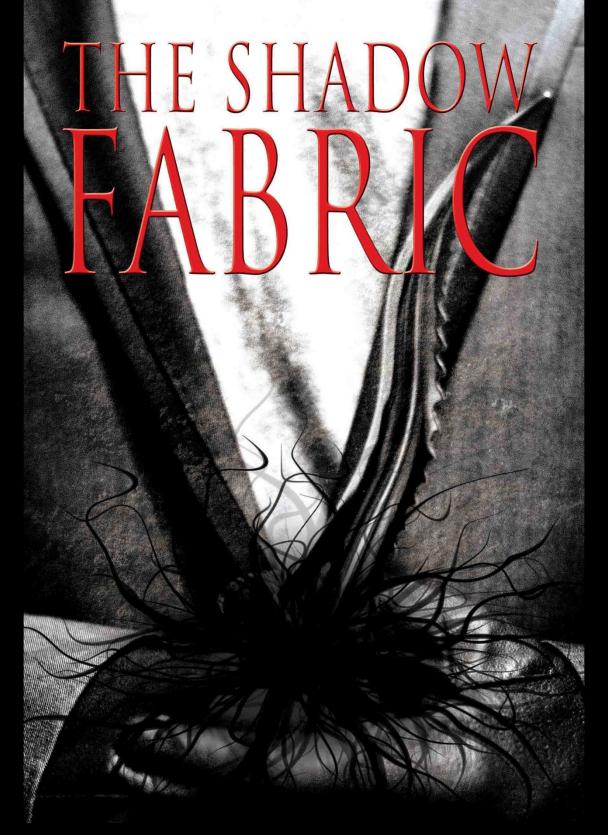
Hours pass. The sound echoes on. I've calmed but my senses are dulled. I have more room to step, and that's a good thing. I see others on the ground dying. That's bad. Are they sick? I walk over to one and smell her. Blood runs from the holes in her face. I look around. Who do I follow? Something is not right. Should I keep eating? There is more room now. That's good. I will keep eating. That sound...soon I don't even hear it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *The Black Bison* is Andrew Rowland's first submission to any publication. With it, he hopes to mark the beginning of a fulfilling venture into writing after years of hesitation kept him in the shadows.

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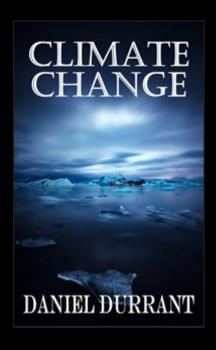
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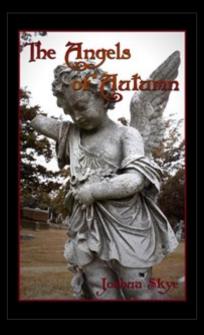


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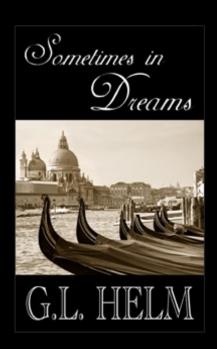












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The Parking Complex Jonathan Rae Rivera

Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack

Her high-heeled leather boots sent an echo bouncing off the parking complex walls, returning to her in an even louder, more frightening drone with every step.

She was the last one to leave, always, and damn proud of it. But she dreaded that long and lonely walk back to her car at the end of the empty complex.

She walked with purpose—chest out, hard, Nazi-like steps, and a tunnel vision that led straight to her car. After a long day's work, she could not wait to be in the comfort of her plushy couch. She even had a glass of wine or two with her name on it. The thought brought a comforting grin that wrinkled half of her face.

Suddenly, the florescent lights above began to fizzle in and out of consciousness. Her purpose was torn to shreds. The echoing *click-clack* of her boots had come to a halt, and all that remained was the shit-fly buzzing of the lights above. She stood frozen in place, her eyes shifting back and forth like a cat trying to catch a laser pointer.

She slowly adjusted the strap of her purse high on her shoulder and close to her neck. She pulled out a set of keys from her coat pocket and balled them in her fist, gently placing a key between each knuckle to poke out like a makeshift Freddy Krueger claw.

She started again towards her car, her pace quickening with the growing number of goosebumps skating up her arms, bringing the *click-clacking* of her boots to a crescendo.

Click-clack, click-clack

Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack

She could've sworn she was being followed—felt someone, or something, breathing down her neck, bringing back old memories of when she would run up the basement steps before the lights went out, swearing she had heard someone call her name, and when she ran and told her Nana, she was scolded about playing alone in the basement, about answering back to those calls. 'Don't you *ever* answer back!' Nana would say, 'The *boogieman* will take you away and *never* bring you back!' The last thought brought shivers down her spine—she is a full-grown woman, and still believed it to this day.

A loud crash and scream sounded from an unknown direction, the kind of noise that marks the beginning of the end—the sound or a wrench hitting flush against skull, the sound of a dungeon door slammed shut—*Clack*! The end. The analogies floated through her mind and filled it with worry, bringing her power walk to a full-blown sprint.

Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack

Feeling the frozen sweat drip down her forehead, she couldn't help but think, why the fuck is my car so far?

Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack

With a thud she hit ribs first into the door of her car. As she fumbled with her Freddy Krueger claws she heard an inaudible voice from over her shoulder.

"Who's there?"

"Listen whoever you are, you better leave me alone or I-I'll call the police." She said, rushing through her words, sweating but trying to keep her composure and get her car door open. But again, that voice from nowhere.

"Leave me alone!" She screamed, finally finding her car key and twisting it into the door lock.

The door swung open and she threw her purse onto the passenger seat and plopped herself into the driver's. With a right hook, she slammed her key into the ignition and twisted. The car didn't start. She tried again, and again, nothing. She tried to focus her energy as her body and gaze trembled uncontrollably. She tried once more—her eyes, almost falling out of

their sockets, the veins on her wrist bulging and expanding—and again, the twist of a key, the rustle of the engine, and nothing.

She looked out of the window and into an empty, quiet, parking lot and something came over her—her sanity reappeared and her intensity fell back into her seat, melting away into the cushion. She felt at ease and actually a little silly for being so paranoid. She smiled a crooked, childlike grin that showed only the tops of her front teeth. She inhaled a deep clean breath and exhaled long and slow—it was all just her stupid imagination.

She reached over to her purse and pulled out her phone, dialing her boyfriend's number. She raised the phone to her ear and it went straight to voicemail—*Please leave a message for*, Click! She sighed, throwing her head back into the headrest, tossing her phone back into her purse.

She sat up strong, one last time reaching for her key to try the ignition. She bit down on her lip and twisted, and suddenly, the engine sputtered and revved to life. She chirped in a fit of joy, shifted into drive, picked her boot up off the brake and stepped on the gas, except, the gas pedal went straight to the floor and the car stood in place. She looked down at her boot on the pedal, applying and releasing with nothing to show for it.

As she looked up and out of her windshield, the lights in the complex cut off.

All of her fears returned and she twitched every muscle in her body to try and get her car started again.

Then, from just behind her ear, an unintelligible whisper grazed the back of her neck.

Before she could even turn and look back, two leather gloves wrapped themselves around her neck. She tried to scream for help, tried to pry the hands off her, but the grip was too tight. She struggled and reached for her keys in the ignition—her Freddy Krueger claws—she grabbed a hold of them and flung them behind her head, trying to cut whoever was behind her. She hit nothing. She continued to struggle, felt her trachea on the verge of crushing, gagging on her own saliva and watching as her vision faded away. She flailed her arms back and continued to hit air—no arms, no body to make contact with. Her body went limp, and her vision continued fading until everything went black and everything went silent.

She heard her name from a familiar and comforting voice. "Ugh—what the fuck? Where the hell am I?" She rubbed her eyes with her palms and her vision came back. She realized she was looking down at the passenger seat of her car, whose engine hummed quietly in the parking complex. She shot up, looked down at her hands to make sure she was real, put one of them to her neck and felt nothing. She was so confused.

Had this all been some kind of terrible dream?

My imagination getting the best of me?

But how long have I been here?

After her moment of puzzling she looked up and out of her windshield. A large black figure, a shadow of a man, a thing, a god knows what stood over the hood of her car. She sat frozen, eyes wide, tried to scream for help but all that came out was a raspy whine.

The figure placed two leather hands on the hood of her car and the inside burst into flames. She instantly caught fire, tried to twist and flail the flames off her, but she couldn't. She couldn't even scream—her lips were melting shut and the air was too hot to breath. The only sound she made was an oily crackle from her smoldering hair and skin. She fought and thrashed to get out of her car, but all in vain. The handle was scorching and the door welded shut.

Her vision began to fade, and soon, so did her pain, then her hearing, then her thoughts, then her breath, and then there was nothing. The flames subsided, and all that was left was a metal casket. No eulogy, no proper burial—just an empty burned out shell, left for someone else to find.

A quiet *click-clacking* sounded somewhere in the distance of the parking complex. The black figure released its hands from the car and dissipated into thin air.

The lights in the complex returned and flickered above the human wreckage.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – JONATHAN RAE RIVERA: I reside in Chicago, IL. I am an aspiring writer with a BA in history from Northeastern Illinois University. Most of my inspiration for writing comes from my experiences growing up in Chicago. This city is my heart, yet it is one that produces so much horror and fear that simply turning on the local news is enough to keep you awake at night.

The Shadowman Tony Flynn

"Mommy? Is that you, Mommy?" He knows it is her, because it could be no one else, but always he asks, and has done every night of his life these past fifty years. He asks, but he gets no answer, and deep down inside, he knows he never will.

He has been kept in darkness for so long that his eyelids have fused shut, so that even if there were a light he could never see it, nor has he felt the touch of another human being since he was a child, back when his mother used to hug him, as good mothers do their sons, so both the warmth of light and that of human contact has been removed from his life, and there is only one of these he misses.

Living in darkness, his other senses have grown more acute. He lives his life by sounds and smells and tastes, and all of these come in threes.

Three times a day he hears the heavy lock on his door come undone. Three times a day he hears footsteps walking slowly and deliberately across the cold wooden floor.

"Mommy? Is that you, Mommy?"

No answer.

Three times for three meals, by which is his only means of telling the time of day. Porridge with sugar and milk means it is morning. A toasted ham and jam sandwich (an unusual taste he acquired at youth but had long since grown out of) means it is noon, and then chicken fillets and chips, always crinkle cut, means it is evening, around 6 or 6:30, assuming his mother still serves at the same time she did when he was young.

He knows he is old, though he has no way of knowing how old, and that means his mother must be very, very old, which perhaps explains the slowness to her steps and the shaking of his food tray.

Three times a day he longs to feel her hand on his shoulder (he has long given up any hope of a hug) and three times a day he is disappointed. Three times he hears her footsteps walking away from him, and the heavy bedroom door closing behind him, the door locking tight, leaving him in the dark. Always in the dark. It's safe in the dark. People think that monsters hide in darkness, but they're wrong. Evil has no wish to hide. Evil basks in glorious light because it wants to be seen.

One monster above all, has always craved the light. Light casts shadows, and shadows are his realm...

...The one they call The Shadowman.

Luke stood on his tippy toes and peered over the bars of the cot, looking down on his baby sister, regarding her curiously, the way an alien might a human being it had just beamed aboard its spaceship. Above Luke's head, a mobile spun gently around, with soft plush ponies and teddy bears and some soft, jingly bells. Above the mobile was the bedroom light, the rays

of which were obscured by the mobile, so that shadows were cast and danced around the little sister, and when she laughed, Luke couldn't tell whether it was at the mobile, or at the shadows.

"Luke," came a voice. "I told you to go to bed."

"I can't." said Luke. "The Shadowman will get me."

"Not this again," said Luke's mother. The Shadowman was just the latest of monsters that Luke was certain hid out in his room. First he had been afraid of vampires, the result of looking at the DVD cover for a horror movie while wandering around some video shop. Then it was witches, after a story he had been told on a sleepover to the neighbour's house. Now it was The Shadowman, and his origin was less clear to the mother, though she assumed something mundane, like that a truck must have driven by Luke's window one night when the curtains weren't properly drawn, and the headlights must have cast a frightening shadow on the wall. Whatever it was, Luke had to be forced to bed every night, and he very rarely stayed there for more than twenty minutes before creeping into his mother's room and hiding under the covers with her. This was a habit of his that she was desperately trying to break. She already had one baby she needed to look after. It was time for Luke to start acting his age.

"Luke," said the mother, "Please get away from Abby's crib. I just got her settled. I told you to go to bed."

"But he's in there waiting for me," said Luke, still looking down at his sister.

"Luke, I'm not going through this again tonight!" Said the mother in harsh tones, as if she could scare him into not being scared. "You have a nightlight in your room now, so you don't need to be scared. No monsters can get you in your room. And if I hear you come into my room tonight I'll show you what a real monster looks like."

The nightlight was tall, with a skinny black body, and stood just by Luke's bedroom door on the other side of the room, so that when Luke's mother opened the door to leave after saying goodnight, the room was briefly engulfed by the shadow of the door, which then relented, leaving everything bathed in a dim, yellow, energy saving glow. The bulb hummed slightly, and Luke found the sound comforting, because it was only silence that came anywhere close to matching his fears of the dark. The nightlight aglow, Luke could see that there was nothing frightening about his room. There were no monsters hiding in his wardrobe or under his bed.

There was nothing hiding in the shadows.

Luke kept his eyes upon the nightlight, and his ears open to the sound of its hum, which gently sang him off to sleep.

Black and white

All the world

Black and white

Crisp white sky and pitch black trees and long long grass like you could get lost forever Luke too was black and white

His skin white

His hair and clothes and eyes black

Trees all around

Shadows everywhere rustling in the night

Nowhere to go

Nothing to see

Every way looks the same

All alone

Alone in the dark

But then

Through the trees

A light

Yes a light

Light like sunset

Dim and low through the trees

But there

Definitely there

Luke runs

Through the trees as fast as he can

The grass is sharp

Crunches

Animals

Shining white eyes hiding in black bushes

Sharp white teeth

They laugh

Luke cries

They laugh

Luke cries

They laugh

Luke runs

Through darkness he runs

Through shadows he runs

Towards the light

Always towards the light

The shadows get bigger

The light gets closer

Past one tree

And another

And another

And then he sees him

Luke wakes with a cry so terrible it gets stuck in his throat and barely escapes his lips as a gasp. The nightlight is still on, but it seems darker in the room somehow. The sounds from Luke's dream made way for the gentle humming of the nightlight, and Luke rubbed the last of the dream from his eyes, and then looked to the nightlight...

...and instead saw a man.

He stood just by the doorway, right where the nightlight had been. Luke wanted to cry out, but could not. The Shadowman looked right at him, and his eyes were like a hand around Luke's throat, closing his airwaves, crushing any chance of a scream.

His body was stick thin and black all over, save for his face, which almost seemed to glow, as if the man had a light-bulb turned on in his head, burning through his eyes and from his mouth, which hung ever so slightly open.

Luke couldn't breathe. Tears streamed down his face and his mouth hung open, screaming a scream that would not come. The best he could manage was little more than a crackle

"Mom..."

Suddenly, in a lightning fast move, the Shadowman's jaw juttered open...

Click

...and the light in his head went out, leaving Luke entirely in the dark.

Silence.

Nothing but Luke's own tears and the sound he made on his bed as he looked around the room, trying to peer through the dark, afraid of what he couldn't see.

CLICK

The Shadowman.

His head was massive, and burned bright, only inches away from Luke's own face.

His skin glowed and his eyes shone bright white and his mouth was wide open as if to swallow Luke whole. Behind him, the light he cast threw shadows of everything in the room against the wall, and where before was nothing but toys was now all monsters, dancing on the walls and floor and ceiling, and were like trees and grass and laughing phantoms coming from the dark.

"MOMMY! MOMMY! MOMMY!"

Luke screamed and shut his eyes tight. He pulled the covers over his head, his heart beating so fast he felt his chest might explode, and his breath so quick he might never ever catch it.

"MOMMY! MOMMY! MOMMY!"

The door flung open.

"Luke, what is it?"

"MOMMY! MOMMY! MOMMY!"

Luke's mother ran to the bed and pulled the covers off of him, putting her hands oh his shoulders.

"Sweetheart, it's okay. It's okay."

Luke threw his arms around his mother and hugged her so tight she thought he might break her neck.

"DON'T LEAVE ME!" Screamed Luke. "DON'T LET HIM GET ME! DON'T LET THE SHADOWMAN GET ME!"

Luke's mother raised her eyes to heaven. How long would she have to put up with this?

"It's okay," she said. "It's okay. It was just a nightmare. No one's going to get you."

She pulled Luke back from her aching neck, but he burrowed into her like a scared rodent running from a dog or a cat, and softly whimpered, his body shaking all over. He had had nightmares before, but never like this.

"Okay," she said. "Come sleep in my bed."

Luke held his mother tight, with both arms wrapped around her waist.

"It's okay," she said, as she walked down the hall with him. "It's okay."

Then she stopped walking. Something was wrong. It was too quiet. With all the noise Luke had been making, Abby must surely have woken up, and should have been crying her eyes out by now. Usually she woke at the sound of a pin drop.

But now there was nothing.

"I'm just going to check on your sister."

"Don't leave me," pleaded Luke.

His mother smiled at him.

"Come with me?"

Luke nodded and walked with her down the hall to Abby's room. The door was open a crack, and was always left so, but Luke's mother was certain she had turned the light off.

"Don't go," said Luke.

"Shh, it's okay," said his mother.

She opened the door and saw that the light was on.

"Oh my God," said Luke's mother, and ran to the crib, pulling back the blanket, hitting the mobile above the crib as she did so. Shadows danced around the room.

"Oh my God!" She screamed. "OH MY GOD!" She looked around the room. "ABBY? ABBY? Where is she? WHERE IS SHE?"

Eyes wide, Luke stepped forward towards the crib, stepping on his tippy toes to look over the bars, and all he could see were shadows dancing where his little sister had once slept so peacefully.

We must believe children when they tell us they see monsters. Perhaps they are but nightmares, and you will be tempted to dismiss them as such, but ask yourself: What if you're wrong?

Luke's mother didn't believe him when he first told her of The Shadowman, and she had paid dearly for it.

They all had.

She is old now, and she knows she doesn't have long. On some level, she thinks she will be glad of the rest, but what of her son? What will become of him when she breathes her last? There is no one now who could take care of him. No one who would understand why she has had to keep him like this. She shudders to think what people would say of her if they knew, but she had no choice. The Shadowman wanted him. Even now he wants him; but she refuses to let that happen. He has taken one child from her, but he will never get her son, and if that means keeping him in darkness his whole life, then so be it.

"Mommy? Is that you Mommy?"

She cannot speak to him. It is too painful. If she had only listened. If she had only listened, then maybe...

No. No time for that now.

She puts down the tray with Luke's dinner; chicken fillets, same as every night; and before she leaves she hears him say something.

"Thank you."

She gasps, and it is the first sound Luke has heard from her in almost fifty years. She turns to him, and stretches out her hand, wary, as if towards fire, and she lays it down upon his shoulder. Luke holds his breath, never wanting the moment to end.

She keeps her hand on his shoulder for a moment, and tears well up in her eyes. She pulls her hand away and puts it to her mouth to keep herself from crying out, and then she turns and leaves the room, locking the door behind her, leaving him alone.

Alone and safe...

...And forever in the dark.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Tony Flynn is fantastically afraid of everything, and therefore has a particular interest in the horror genre. *The Shadowman* marks his second publication in The Sirens Call eZine (the first being his poem, *Where the Lost Ones Dwell*, published in Issue #11 - Revenge!) He has also had work published by Mocha Memoirs Press, Horrified Press, Sabledrake Enterprises and Villipede Publications.

Twitter: <u>@Tony_Flynn_</u>
Blog: <u>http://tonywritesstuff.tumblr.com</u>





The Uninvited Brian Olszewski

No one responds to the icy jewelry that shivers from her wrists, a metallic symphony of confused chimes. No one glances at the spiked hair, the color of dried blood, which matches the shade of her lips. No one minds her tight blacks and grays that cling to her pale skin, an outfit more suited for a night club and so obviously out of place in the church. No one notices because everyone attending the ceremony locks their eyes and attention on the bride and groom at the end of the middle aisle.

Everyone except Devin, the bride's older brother and wedding-party member. He stares at Tenebrarum, who lounges alone in the back of the church, enjoying the din that gives her so much pleasure to make.

Her scuffed boots rest atop the pew in front of her. She smokes a cigarette, ashing where she pleases. On the floor. On the pew-space next to her. On hymn-book stacks.

She flashes a lightning smile and exhales a cloud of smoke. In it, she draws a pentagram with her black-tipped finger.

How can you just stand there, pretending that you belong, Devin? Her voice reaches only his ears, dissonant black notes that yet resonate throughout the church.

Look at Him up there on the cross. Look how high He is. They force us to look up at Him. To Him. She shakes her head. I say turn that man with the crown upside down. She gently dangles the inverted cross that hangs from her neck.

"Shut up, Tenny. This is my sister's day."

She stands behind him now. He feels her dark allure pulling at his insides again. I love it when you call me 'Tenny.' Say it again.

I don't want to do this now, he says.

Liar. You can't lie to me-I'm the defier of God, sweetie. How are you going to lie to me?

He feels the warm breath on the back of his neck. She flicks dead tobacco on his rented dress shoes.

I thought you were going to wear your boots today. We were going to be twins. You're all talk, you wuss. She taps him in the behind with her heavy heel and then blows smoke in his face.

"Go sit down, Ten-Tenebarum. Who invited you anyway?" He says it in a hushed but rushed tone. "You don't even want to be here. Just go. I just want my sister to be happy. This is her time. Go wait outside."

Can't. Won't. Because you invited me, sweetie. It's you who doesn't want to be here, not me. I'm everywhere, remember? Tenebrarum walks behind the priest, who is oblivious to her. His monotone words flit by Devin, who watches in horror; above the priest's head she constructs a gossamer dunce cap out of exhaled smoke.

"Goddammit, Tenny. What are you doing?" He glares at her.

That's the unholy spirit! She feigns excitement with a half-hearted jump and an exaggerated thumbs up. And you know what I'm doing. I'm doing what you have thought, what you have imagined, what you are thinking now. Tenebrarum throws her arms in the air, stomping up and down the middle of the church, drowning out the chorus of voices reciting The Lord's Prayer. Our unholy father, who art in unheaven . . .

The subtle pleasure that Devin garners by not reciting the prayer courses through Tenebrarum's flesh. She taps this electricity and claps with vigor. Her sharp bracelets twitter out of tune louder now, as Devin struggles to hear the others recite the familiar words of the prayer. He wishes Tenebrarum away over and again, trying to remember good things: the way his younger sister used to sit on his back when they watched television as children and –

Oh, Devin. So sweet and nostalgic. So pathetic, too. It's so cute. Her laugh overwhelms

the priest's words. Nice try. But we are married, you and I, for better and definitely for worse. She takes his hand in her cold one. I solemnly promise to feed and nurture your destructive drive and to further blacken your soul, like when we—"

He breaks away from her grip. "Knock it off. Get out of here."

If you really meant it, dearie, I would be gone already, would've never been here in the first place.

"Just go. Just leave. Just go. You're ruining everything," he says.

No. You know I'm not. No one else here can see or hear me. I'm just ruining your thing, darling, because that's what you want, what you need. A reminder to yourself: you're not like everyone in the church. You can't be. You need to not be, because you want to destroy it all. It's in your bones, in your blood. That's what it's all about, you. Not me. You. It can't be anything else. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here, drawn to the sweetness of your darkness.

Flanked by family and friends, Devin feels the dark bile rise in him again, hating her, the church, the wedding, everything and everyone, including himself.

Tenebrarum laughs while birthing disorder in the pews. She stomps on feet, pulls ties, dumps purse contents onto the tiled floor, yanks sculpted hair, flings eyeglasses into the air, and Devin watches it all.

He can't stop her. She pulses through his arms, his chest, his torso, his legs, his ankles, settling into the heels and toes that animate the soles of his shiny, rented shoes, which begin to tap to the rhythm of Tenebrarum's chaos.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Olszewski has earned various English degrees and is the Creative Development lead for Starboard Games. He is scripting and editing the graphic novel *Tens Day* and recently placed a gothic/sci-fi tale in the collection *The Infinite Spectacle: Short Stories of Displaced Reality*. He hopes to complete his novel by year's end.

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Reanimation Alex Woolf

In the afternoon of the sixth day of the cruise, our ship put into Jacmel on the south coast of Haiti. The port was festooned with banners, welcoming us to one of the most famous carnivals in the Western hemisphere. Celia, who'd always had a taste for the exotic, was thrilled. My own pleasure at seeing my wife in this mood was not greatly diminished by the presence of her mother, Ruth – a cheery soul, lately widowed, whose famous temper had yet to manifest itself after nearly a week at sea.

The three of us walked the early evening streets, entranced by the sight of beautiful women in their gowns carrying bunches of flowers, gliding by on the floats. Alongside the beauty was its antithesis: celebrants disguised as hairy monsters wrapped with chains, carrying black-painted doll heads; screaming devils with wings that clapped loudly as they flapped together, charged around in a frenzy.

One middle-aged man wearing bull's horns and coated from head to toe in glistening black oil, charged right into Ruth, knocking the smile from her face. Celia helped her to her feet and tried to coax us both away, but Ruth brushed her daughter aside and began shouting at the man, who stood his ground and smiled at her. His evident lack of remorse riled her even more and she began striking him with her walking stick, demanding that he apologize.

A small circle of spectators formed to watch the stand-off. A masked man tried to warn her: "You no get angry with that man. That man bokor. He bad priest. You go now."

Ruth did not relent. In the midst of her ranting and violence, her equally furious foe produced a small bottle from somewhere in his shorts and splashed a dark, foul-smelling liquid in her face. She began choking as it penetrated her eyes, nose and mouth. The man chanted strange words over her as Ruth fell to her knees in a coughing fit.

Ruth changed after that night in Jacmel. She was no longer the lively, spirited woman we had known, but became quieter and more withdrawn. On our return to England, Ruth showed no desire to go back to her cottage and instead moved in with Celia and I in our large country house near Guildford. The psychiatrist diagnosed mild depression; perhaps a delayed reaction to the death of her husband.

Despite regular consultations with him and various drug treatments, Ruth's condition seemed to worsen over the months that followed. She remained in her room all day and night and barely said a word. It was as if she had lost her willpower. Celia took complete responsibility for her mother's care, taking her meals, emptying her bedpan and washing her. She rejected my suggestion that we employ a professional nurse.

"I'm thinking of you," I insisted. "You no longer have time for yourself. For that matter, you no longer seem to have time for me."

Celia did not reply, and I began to understand that there was a powerful bond between mother and daughter, far deeper than the one that existed between Celia and myself, despite the fine words of our marriage ceremony. She had chosen to ignore my hint that I was feeling neglected. Now that a choice had to be made it was clear where my wife's loyalties lay.

One Tuesday, some six months after Ruth moved in, Celia was out shopping when Ruth surprised me with a visit to my study. Her skin was the greyish-yellow colour of one who spends all her time indoors.

"I'm hungry," said Ruth in a curiously deadpan way.

"Well, let's see what we can rustle up for you," I said.

In the kitchen I located a plate and some cutlery. "Now what do you fancy? I could fix you a nice sandwich."

"I want meat," said Ruth.

Looking in the fridge, I could see no meat.

"How about some egg mayonaise?"

I turned to her. Her eyes looked strangely lifeless as they met mine. I saw she held a chopping knife in her hand, which she now raised to the level of my chest. She advanced towards me. I was so shocked I could barely move. At the last moment I shifted, and Ruth brought the knife sweeping down, driving the point hard into the surface of the worktop. She wrestled it free, and turned on me again. I tried to grab her arms, but she slashed at me, slicing the flesh on my forearm. Blood stained my shirt. Angry now, I barged her to the ground, falling over myself in the process. She sat up and tried to plunge the knife into my stomach, but I grabbed her wrist and managed to twist it away from me, surprised by the old woman's strength. We remained like this for some seconds, knife pointing upwards, hands locked shakingly like arm wrestlers. Ruth's dead eyes did not flicker as she looked at me, and I understood I had to kill her, because she wasn't going to stop trying to kill me. I rotated her wrist a further ninety degrees, so that the knife now aimed towards her chest, took a deep breath, then forced it downwards.

Celia returned an hour later. As she entered the kitchen, she took in the scene and froze. After a moment, she placed the shopping bags carefully on the floor. Her mother lay there in

a large pool of blood. I was sitting on a stool nearby, head in hands, still shaking. I told her what had happened. Celia listened carefully. I was shocked at her lack of emotion.

"Have you called the police?" She asked when I had finished. I shook my head. "Good," said Celia. "Well then let's keep this to ourselves, shall we? We can hide the body in the cellar."

Another shockwave passed through me at this suggestion, together with an enormous sense of relief: so I wouldn't have to go to prison. Celia would take care of things. She removed the knife from her mother, and threw it away. Then she wrapped the body up in an old blanket, and the two of us carried it down into the cellar. I stumbled and nearly fell when my foot made contact with the rickety fourth step.

We hid her body at the far end of the cellar, burying it under a pile of earth and stones taken from the garden. I used an old table tennis table and some discarded shelving to make a false wall to seal her in. I thought Celia might show some sorrow when I banged the final nail in place, but she maintained her cool, practical composure throughout.

Weeks passed. If anyone asked after her in the village, we said that Ruth had gone abroad to get treatment for her condition. Few people did. Meanwhile, I endeavoured to put the whole bizarre and terrifying event behind me. I hoped, as time moved on and memories faded, that Celia would be able to do likewise. I was to be sadly disappointed. If anything, the distance between us increased. Celia deserted the marital bed and began sleeping in the room formerly occupied by Ruth. I sometimes wondered if she fully believed my story about her mother's attack on me. She seemed to be biding her time; perhaps she planned to leave me.

One evening, about two months after Ruth's death, I was passing by the spare room when I heard a murmuring from within. I hesitated, feeling rather nervous, then opened the door. The air of the dimly lit room was thick with incense. Tiny flames juddered in fat candles on the floor and on the bedside tables. Celia was standing naked at the foot of the bed where Ruth used to sleep. She was holding a large book with worn bindings in her hands, mumbling strange-sounding chants and periodically scattering some sort of dust on the bed. Something small and black lay there on the sheets: it looked like the head of a doll. The scene was so bewildering and strange. I had not seen my wife unclothed for a long time, and the way the shadows and the candlelight played on her pale, fleshy body was arousing, yet also quite distancing and eerie.

Celia ceased in mid-flow and turned to me. Her dark eyes flashed with irritation, then seemed to mellow, and she smiled. It was almost as unfamiliar as her nudity, that smile, and it warmed me. "Darling," she said in a sweet voice, would you fetch me something."

"Of course," I found myself saying.

"I need an axe," she said. "I believe we have one in the cellar."

I nodded, remembering the one that I sometimes used to chop wood for the fire. Vaguely I wondered what she might be wanting it for. But I was so enjoying her smile and didn't want to risk extinguishing it with an unwelcome question, so I simply said, "Yes Dear, I'll get it right away."

I left the room and found myself back in the ordinary world of our upstairs corridor. The task I'd been given now seemed rather more daunting. I hadn't visited the cellar once since we buried Ruth there. If truth be told, I'd been avoiding the place. But I smothered my irrational fear, buoyed by that sweet smile from Celia. Opening the cellar door, I tried switching on the light. Evidently the bulb had gone. Equipping myself with a flashlight, I nervously began my descent, forgetting entirely about the rickety fourth step. The wood collapsed beneath my foot and I lost my balance. With nothing to grab on to, I fell in a

painful tumble to the bottom of the stairs. The flashlight, which I must have dropped, smashed on the stone floor and went out.

I lay there in complete darkness, in excruciating pain. The slightest movement sent spears of agony through my leg, and I knew I lacked the strength in my arms to haul my weight back up the cellar steps. I bellowed to Celia for help, but no sound came from above. After a time my eyes became sufficiently adapted to make out shapes: my wine rack, an old bicycle, a couple of tea chests, the outline of the axe hanging from a nail in the wall. The mildewy smell was suffused with something sweet and rotten that made me feel vaguely sick. Eventually, I gave up shouting, trying to conserve my energy, and in the silence I heard a sound, like the shifting of a heavy sack along the floor. It was coming from the far end of the cellar, the darkest part. Something in the shadows over there was moving very slowly towards me.

The saliva dried in my mouth. "Oh God please help me," I whimpered. Why did Celia not come? My back was jammed against the bottom of the cellar steps. Ignoring the searing pain, I twisted my body in a desperate attempt to crawl back up the steep bank of stairs. After a few minutes of teeth-gritting sweat, I slumped back to my former position. The sliding sound was much closer. I could almost see it now; a shadowy mass within the darkness, edging its way towards me. I could barely bring myself to think of what – who – it might be. But I knew...

I shut my eyes and began to weep. I prayed to a god I didn't believe in, and my sweaty hands grasped the edge of the step behind me. The sound was so close I could almost reach out and touch it. I heard the rattle of the thing's laboured breathing and a sweet stench of rotting flesh filled my nostrils. I gasped as I felt the dry grip of something on my leg. That thing, which by all the laws of science and reason should not live, should not move, was now touching me. I recoiled as far as my body was able, craning my neck heavenwards towards the ordinary world above this place, silently imploring it to intervene. Through half-closed eyes, I saw light at the top of the stairs. My heart surged. The cellar door stood open, and there, framed within it – Celia. I cried out to her, but she didn't move. She just stood there looking down at me with her sweet, gentle smile.

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

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The Recurring Darkness Siren Knight

It is always night time here but you'll be surprised how quickly your eyes will adjust to the darkness. And when they have adjusted, and all your senses have heightened you are going to have to make a decision.

You might choose the broken pathway that leads up into the dark mountains. Or you may take your chances to the right. In the misty forest. Acquiescing to its bad habit of reaching forward and beckoning in. There is always danger at a crossroads, yet there is no redemption to be claimed on either roadway here.

So I abhor you to wander, with no path to guide you. To plunge into the no-man's land that resides on each side of the road. To submit to the dread in your stomach and let it act as a compass that navigates you through the night.

Heed warning. There is an ochre stench that lingers on the air, so billowing and thick that it must be pushed aside as you walk. But keep your mouth and your mind closed here; you do not want to give audience to the things that wait in its pockets.

There is a danger that needs no introduction. It is a demanding thing, a jealous thing and it already claims your attention. You know of what I speak. That place where your eyes are drawn. Where there are black fires that burn on the horizon. When it ends you will have no choice but to go to them, to the creatures that reside there, for how else will you barter your escape? They will watch you from within the hollows that linger in shadows of where their faces once were. The hollows that overflow, and drip with blood when they are full from the feed. Bleeding orifices, which you have no business trying to look into. If they claim you, you are to be one of them. And no struggle will allow your body the luxury of an escape. Your mind will be offered in sacrifice to them. If they do not, you are prey. And the last thing you will hear is the way your bones squeak and snap like firewood and a pain you could not describe even if they had left you your tongue and a stench so sick you will welcome the smell of your own sweet blood being spilled.

If you were smart, you would never have come. You would never have clambered up out of your nightmare with your gnarled little fingers and into the darkness to be here.

But you are here...you silly little thing. Here is where you are.

So you turn back. You flee to the embrace of what you once knew.

But the crevice that you crawled through is now nothing but a dark chasm in a dark wall that offers no promise of release. You are trapped. You press your palms to a solid wall. There is no give, there is no hope of return.

So maybe you will resign yourself to your new plight and glance around you for places to take shelter, things to eat. Is it possible to stay here? Can you make a life here in this darkness? Can you pull it up around your ears and brave sleep? Would you dare eat the scurrying varmints that roam here? Or risk drinking from the dark waters that run off jagged rocks into pools of black?

You could try.

Try to make a home in the darkness and hope that the hooded creatures don't make it this far out into the night. But how long will your heart beat in such a sorry state? How long before you crave the touch of another, before just food and water and shelter are no longer able to sustain you? Before you forget how to bend your arms into an embrace? Before your skin forgets how to identify warmth?

So surely you must continue moving into the no-man's land? Ignoring the salacious whispers of the misty forest that croon sweet nothings into your neck. Ignoring the seduction of the broken steps of the mountain, that whispers promises of the unknown. For to venture either way will surely mean death...or worse.

Yes, you must push further, with nothing but the thick yellowing stench of the open land to keep you company. Push your way through it, wretch when you need to, wade on. You might notice that the horizon gets closer, not like in that other world where you never seem to be able to reach it. No, here you will advance upon the great black fires burning clearly in the darkness and the hooded things that tend them.

Those creatures on the horizon.

There is no sneaking up on them.

They see you way before you see them...they see you now.

They taste your blood on the air, it calls out to them.

Be careful now, not too quickly. Don't you see? If you move like prey, then that is what you are.

The fear is beginning to overcome you now isn't it? It is creeping up and down your body, deep inside your clothes, slithering against the cold sweat of your skin. Dread snakes through your stomach lining, skulking in between each wretched organ.

The shadows of death fall across your body as you walk, pay them no heed. Keep your mouth closed, keep your mind closed. Do not listen to the charming voices of the night. Keep focused, do not stray left or right, follow the dread, follow the dread, wade through the stench, listen to the things your goose-bumps whisper, listen to the way your stomach clutches at your ribs. Those are the details that will show you how to fear, they know of what you approach.

When the moment and your footsteps finally collide, and you gain the horizon, you will stand before the cluster of hooded creatures and you will have to make your choice. You must select and advance upon one, even if your legs quiver beneath you, even if your ankles threaten to give way. Choose the creature that stoops in an almost familiar way, as if it is a shadow of something you once knew. And you must look into the monster. Do not get distracted by the ever burning of the black fires to the left and right. The burning darkness will try to steal your focus, will try to blind what you know. Instead, you must stare into the hooded face, stare into the gaping holes, look past the blood that gushes out of them. Do not stare at it, no, for then they will surely corrupt your mind, you must look past it, look into the core of it. And with all your might you must whisper aloud its secret. The secret you knew the moment that you arrived here. The secret that was prowling along your mouth the whole time. That they were once just like you. Those creatures. Just like you. A thing of flesh and blood just like you. Stumbling across a darkness in a recurring nightmare. That they once had eyes that did not pour blood, and mouths that spoke words instead of warbled calls. That they once could taste food, feel pride, feel the touch of another with senses that would not turn to ash as they held someone close.

You might watch the orifices widen and reach out for words that they can no longer give voice to. Watch as the hooded figure is angered at the memories you provoke, at the way you poke and expose its vulnerabilities. Watch as it plunges forward to feed on your flesh, to cage you forever. You must stand firm, and only then, at the very last moment, when all hope is gone, when they are inches from you and you stare certain death in the face without flinching. Then! Then is when you must throw away all hopes of life and returning home...you must plunge this scroll, this map of secrets, into the very depths of the shadows of its face. Feel the crack of the paper crashing through the hollowed eye socket. Let it pierce through it, as you turn on your heels and you must run, run, run back through the no-man's land, through the thick stench, run, no straying to left or right, no retreating into the whispers of the mountains or the beckoning of the forest. You must run, run back until you see the dark wall, see the shaft of light twisting through the crevice, know that the portal opens for you. Clamber through it, make your body fit the chasm, contort yourself to fit the portal and tumble back into the recurring nightmare you climbed out of, the one you've had since childhood, you know the one. Cling to it! Embrace it as your own. Don't let those terrible fingers pull you back. Watch them crumble to ash as you pass through the crevice. And wake up, wake up. You must wake up out of your nightmare, the one you know. Move your mind so violently that your body must writhe into wake in response. Wake up! Lest you be trapped forever.

It cannot be done you say in that darkness...falling to your knees, it is too hard, too much, it is easier to submit to the darkness. Surely nobody could do it.

But there was one they spoke of. One that survived the creatures, one that survived the stench and the mist and the broken pathway and found his way back through the portal in his nightmare, back into the flesh and blood world.

He dared come again to write this, to give chance to another that is seeking.

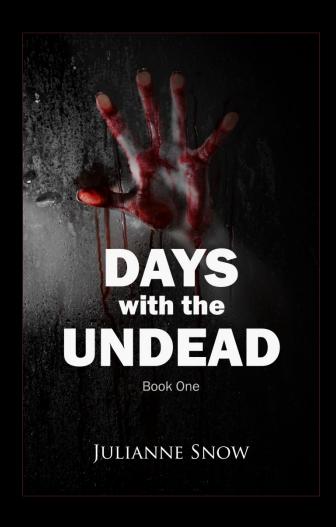
Will you stay here? Make a life here? Forever dormant in the recurring darkness. Or will you take the scroll, and march with the ferocity of a terrible creature to take on the night? You are capable little thing, as I once was. Learn that it is always night time here but you'll be surprised how quickly your eyes will adjust to the darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Siren Knight is a writer from Birmingham and is currently undertaking a Masters in Writing. She describes herself as terminally nocturnal and a shameless over-writer. Siren confesses that she enjoys deliberately leaving a piece of hidden eggshell in her breakfast omelette and playing Russian roulette with herself first thing each morning.

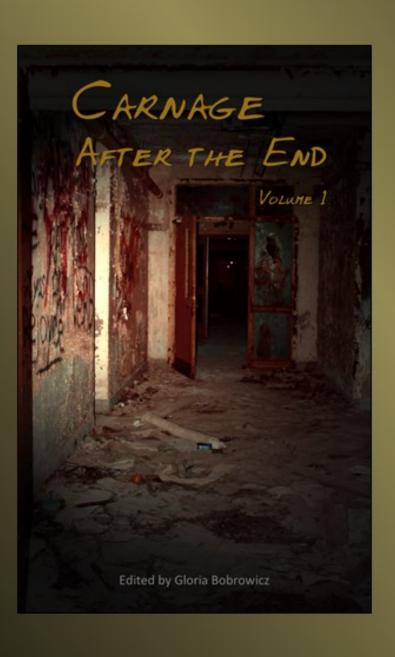
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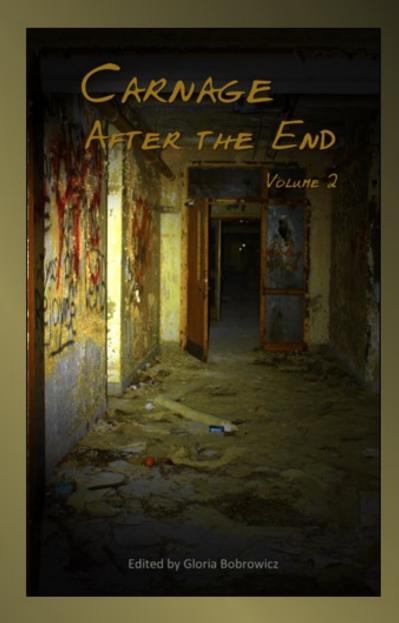
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with the
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Julianne Snow

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Grimoire Gift *Kip McKnight*

She stepped out of the bitter, wind-blasted cold and onto the subway train.

Ding ding ding ding. "Step back, doors closing," said the automated voice.

She moved an old newspaper off of a seat and sat down, staring at the subway map on the wall and taking her sunglasses off. She always wore them when outside, even at night. The sunglasses hid the tears and the occasional bruises. She always had a habit of choosing the wrong men, men that ended up hurting her in all the worst ways. The most recent one had spent three years working her over, occasionally pulping her face so bad she couldn't go into work for a month. She'd always blamed it on anything, everything else but him. Swollen eyes from crying evenings still filled her nights, but the bruises would never happen again. She made sure of that. Oh yes.

The motion and jerk of the train as it set off reminded her of being at sea. A smell of wet air conditioning surging through moldy ventilation filled her nose. The train was empty but for a few other people on their way to work or to visit the sites in Downtown D.C.

She looked down at the book in her hand, an old brittle thing that somehow managed to stay remarkably intact. She opened it at random, reading the words from the ancient language and letting the power immerse itself into her mind, twisting and writhing and building new mental pathways. She lifted the book to her nose and inhaled, its odor filling her mind with memories of places it once traveled.

Vivid images of things long past filled her mind. Archaic things. Violent things.

Memories from before the age of humanity.

After several minutes, the train came to its first stop and she looked up from her book toward the platform to people watch. She people watched at every stop, there wasn't much else to do when sitting on a long subway ride. She expected to see the normal hustle and bustle of folks coming and going outside her window.

Instead, ghastly white faces smiled back at her, faces on bodies clad in black trench coats with fedoras on their heads. Young faces, old faces, male, female, all of them were waving to her. And in the center of them all was *him*, heinously pale and a shadow of who he used to be. Her hands recoiled as she jumped and the book in her lap bounced up, then shut.

Impossible.

She'd killed that bastard a month ago.

She looked away, then back. Normal people entered the subway train and the pale faces had vanished.

Ding ding ding ding. "Step back, doors closing," said the automated voice, the train resuming its course.

I must be exhausted, she thought, and went back to her book.

Each ancient marking transcribed itself onto her mind like a chisel and pick. The power spiraled into her, a vortex of strength.

She had the small bookstore owner on the other side of the street across from her apartment complex to thank for it. It was a bookstore that looked like it had been there forever, made of brick and the inside smelling of incense. There was only one person who seemed to work there, and she was always there. An older, heavy woman adorned with dangling jewelry across her neck and over her wrists who empathized with her about her abusive boyfriend. The big woman kept her golden blonde hair wrapped in a bun and always greeted her with the sweetest smile. She had shared deeply intimate things with the old woman, confessions she had never shared with anyone else.

Dark things. Evil things about what her now dead boyfriend loved doing to her. Things he would never get to do again. Oh no. That menacing dickhead was good and dead.

Day after day she came to the old woman, whispering secrets into her ear of the vicious

and deviant things he liked to do. The old woman always listened politely, nodding and encouraging her to take solace in books. One day, a couple months ago, she had walked into the bookstore and took off her sunglasses, which hid her two swollen black eyes. The sweet woman turned into a tiny bottle of rage, a cacophony of expletives flowing from her mouth in some unknown language.

"Wait here," the woman said, and went into the back room then brought out the book she now held in her hand.

The subway train came to another stop. She closed the book and risked a glance out the window.

Just normal people getting on and off. She craned her neck to see as far back onto the platform as she could, squinting into the dim light in search of the fedora-clad nearly translucent faces.

Nothing.

Had to have been a hallucination, she thought.

Ding Ding Ding. "Step back, doors closing," said the automated voice.

The train resumed its course and she opened the book again. The symbols inside danced and gyrated in her mind as she drank it in. She thought about the caution in the woman's voice as the old lady handed her the book free of charge, her jewelry pleasantly jingling as if to suggest the book was a happy but dangerous piece of early holiday cheer.

"This book will bring you strength and counsel you on the matter with your boyfriend. But be warned, when its pages are open its power is freed. Keep it closed unless you are reading from it. And never pass it through an open door while its pages are freed, lest you unleash it upon yourself."

She nodded, keeping the book closed until she got home.

She cracked it open on the couch that night while washing the pain from her black eyes down with some wine. The ancient markings within immediately translated themselves in her mind. It infused her with strength, confidence, a feeling of authority. Around and through her it whirled, speaking to her in a thousand voices in languages from another world. Its pages called to her, summoned her to its own place within her mind and offered her that which she wanted most: a way out of the horrible relationship in which she was trapped.

And when she drank from its wisdom, it indeed gave her counsel.

He must be killed. Carved up and offered as burnt sacrifice. It said to her from deep wretches of the darkest corner of her conscience. The words popped into her mind like an echo summoned from a black pit.

Killed. Carved. Burnt.

And she could but obey. It told her everything she needed to do.

She waited for him at his estate that night. He told her he would be working late and yes yes, would have dinner with her when he got home. Working late evidently meant being out until nearly one in the morning and returning to his house reeking of sex and whiskey. She pretended not to notice.

Oh, that's fine dear, just fine.

He forced himself onto her again that night, one last time, and she'd let him take her just because she didn't want anything to get in the way. Just let him mount up and feebly grind away with his rancid, laughable little prick, smacking her across the face all the while then punching her in the eye as he climaxed. After, he'd slumped over in bed with his face upturned, hocking helpless air into his cavernous nostrils and snoring like a Neanderthal.

Snore baby snore.

Quietly, she had risen from the bed and pulled his hunting knife from the gun case. It was a colossal thing, made for a man with massive hands, and she could easily wrap both of hers around the hilt.

But not yet.

She had bought four pairs of handcuffs for the occasion, and strapped him to the bed by his ankles and wrists. She rested the hunting knife under a pillow on her left, then straddled him, grinding gently on his flaccid little cock to wake him from his slumber. He didn't budge, so she slapped him, hard.

He awoke in a panic, rattling his limbs against the bed and gazing at her with a look of utter hatred.

"What you doin', Bitch?" He said, sleepily slurring the words. "Get me out of these."

"I don't much like you calling me names, Dear," she said.

"You stupid whore."

"Oh come on, just play along," she said, sliding around on his crotch.

He sighed. "I'm going to hurt you when we're done with this. I don't like this."

She said nothing, just smiled. But then an idea came to her, a way to make him pay for all of the infidelity before he died. She wouldn't debase herself by becoming a cock-chopping cliché, but she could still make him pay. She dismounted and grabbed him with her left hand, stroking roughly.

"Easy, Woman."

"Thought you liked it rough."

He moaned, the stench of the whiskey hot on his breath as he began to rise.

Such a sad little thing, not even a two-hander.

He was about as solid as he was going to get. So while he looked up at the ceiling and enjoyed himself she took the knife from under the pillow, careful to aim the blade's edge just right, and sawed into his urethra, ripping and pulling and pushing and slicing like she was carving a banana in two from the tip down. She stopped after sawing down to his navicular fossa, blood spurting out of his penis as the head split in two like a cut sautéed mushroom. He screamed, shouting incomprehensible insults and flailing on the bed like he was demonpossessed. After his initial pain-stricken rage expired, he lay there just whimpering and mewling like a pathetic kitten that had been hit by a car and hadn't quite died yet.

"That's for coming home tonight smelling like another woman."

"Please, no more," he begged.

"Yes, more," she said, then lifted the blade out of his dying dick. "This is for me, for all the beatings, the bruises, for all the years of pain." She grabbed the blade by the hilt with both hands and slowly slid it into his right eye, its punctured mass gushing ooze that slid down the side of his cheek as he screamed.

"Nobody can hear you! You're on twenty acres of land you filthy bastard!" And because his screaming was starting to annoy her, she pulled the blade from his eye then jammed it into the back of his mouth, twisting hard and hearing the wet snapping crunch as his jaw broke and blood gurgled out of his gaping maw.

He twitched and writhed on the bed for a few more seconds, then went quiet.

Now the hard work of chopping ensued. She started with his limbs, hacking at his forearms and letting his bloody hands dangle on the baseboard. She separated the legs at the knees, then severed his head. But that wasn't enough. The voices from the book that now held her mind hostage wanted to see inside of their sacrifice, so she rammed the blade into his throat and sliced him open gullet to groin. She peeled apart his skin to expose purple lungs, yellow fat, and gray coils of viscera that bulged out of his stomach. But it wasn't enough just to kill and chop. She had to be thorough. The book said to burn.

Hack hack hack. Chop chop chop. Burn burn burn.

She poured the gasoline on the body first, then all over his bedroom, then all over the house all the way down the front porch steps. She lit a match and ignited a puddle close to her feet, then watched it slither through the front door and quickly consume the house in a

burning rage. She kept the match. She was a little bit sentimental, after all.

And thanks to the astonishing and engrossing book from which she could no longer pull away, she would get away with it all. She looked down at the words and bowed her head as a worshiper to a god and drank.

The train came to its third and final stop. Something tugged at her to shut it, some suggestion deep within the confines of her mind in a place which the book had not yet penetrated and stolen. But it was a distant voice, faded and ashen compared to the commanding voice of the book. She didn't bother to look up as she exited, but simply stared slightly forward at the floor beyond her feet just above the open and withered pages. She heard the swirl of a cloak or trench coat to her left as a white hand, cold as an iceberg, grabbed her and dragged her down into the suddenly evaporated ground.

She fell, weightless, turning around and looking up as her laughing boyfriend fell with her. She screamed in terror and horror at her sudden and foolish mistake and slammed the book shut, feeling herself snapping apart on the inside as the hardcover binding pancaked her and baptized its seams with her blood beneath the hungry gaze of tormented faces.

Seeing the old and withered book on the platform and guessing it had been dropped by a patron in far too much of a hurry, the young man scooped it up and stepped out of the wind-blasted cold and onto the subway train.

Ding ding ding ding. "Step back, doors closing," said the automated voice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kip lives with his wife and son in Virginia. When he's not with his family or working, he likes to jog. Most nights, he's up late on black coffee or coke zero, reading and writing. Whenever he has to go into D.C., he always takes the subway.

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Contact Brian Rosenberger

Her husband had died unrepentantly doing what he loved, digging in the dirt. She didn't miss him but the will had not turned up yet. The widow was getting nervous, worried the university where he taught would get his fortune. She was in Wyoming with her overpriced medium looking for answers.

"Are you there, Walter? Your wife is here. She needs you now more than ever."

"Come forth, spirit."

The ground shuddered.

The tent was shredded.

The widow jerked into the air.

The medium realized her mistake. She should have known better to risk a séance in a dinosaur graveyard.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of the must read short story collection, As the Worm Turns, and three poetry collections.

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/HeWhoSuffers



Circe - The Witch's Curse Helen Mihajlovic

An incandescent moon lights the path to a verdant forest where Circe considers her spell. Her blood hastens with wrath as remembrance of Glaucus spawns anger within her. Shadowed by an insidious wind, Circe's fury grows and the wind rises to equal her temper.

Should she cast a spell for the death of Glaucus? She salivates; it ought to be drawn-out and excruciating. He shall know the pain she felt when he forsook her. Perhaps she should transform him into a mayfly dwelling in a fetid swamp. Her lips curl up into a grin.

She gives thought to Glaucaus's red-tinged hair. Her neck wilts, her head bowing in sadness; she knows she will do nothing to him. She breathes in deeply, her desire for him overshadowing her anger. A glint of hope enters her eyes; she will cast a spell that will fill him with ardor for her.

As the wind embraces her naked flesh and pervades her raven colored hair, her tresses ascend through the air.

"Aphrodite," Circe beckons, raising her arms to the sky. She peers into the distance as the branches of the far-away trees begin to violently shudder.

"Goddess of love, my own blood I offer as my fee, thus Glaucus's heart shall belong to me," shouts Circe, casting her spell.

A hellish crimson hue and an insufferable heat pervade the forest. Circe's eyes eagerly look through the trees. She sees nothing. A strange rasping sound induces a shiver down her spine. Circe realizes it is not Aphrodite who responds to her call. Her heart pounds. The air is stained with depravity and an evil spirit lurks within the trees, casting shadows of devils. Circe's skin grows feverish as the spirit draws near. The ominous spirit crawls on her flesh, burning her hand. She shrieks. Her limbs wither as it slowly pierces her spirit.

Her large eyes grow a darker green, her breath deepens and her naked breasts heave; she fills with ecstatic pleasure as the evil spirit roams inside her limbs.

Circe feels the wind encircle her, whispering in her ear, steering her witchcraft. She tilts her neck as she carefully listens. Her hand traces the taut skin over her womb, she breathes out loudly and smears her monthly blood over her heart. As the spirit departs Circe's body, she collapses. Her eyes half shut, she places her hand into the earth, bestowing upon it a gift of blood. The wind howls with gratification.

A bright light emanates through a translucent curtain beaming on Circe's dark brow. As she wakes, her eyelids open revealing the solemnity in her eyes. Her pale skin warm under the bed's covering and as she raises her arm from under the cover she discovers the wounds on her skin have healed.

She hears footsteps outside her chamber and she rises naked from her bed. Peering through the window she sees Glaucus striding to her door. A loud knock ensues.

Circe reaches for her cadmium green dress and she quickly clothes herself, the hem of her dress hitting the floor. She rushes to the door and opens it in anticipation She looks upon his tall, strong frame as he advances inside the cottage.

"I am enchanted," he enthuses. Her blood warms; perchance her love potion has worked despite Aphrodite's absence. "My heart is consumed with love." He looks around dreamily. Circe's smile widens. She will not be alone again. "Her budding youth," he continues, "her thin elegant poise, her silky russet hair."

Circe's brow furrows in bewilderment. She tilts her head down to look upon her raven black hair that falls on her breast. "Consumed with a love for whom?"

"The love is for Scylla, the most beautiful of all water nymphs," he replies.

Circe's blood churns with anger and her breath quickens. "Scylla," she repeats in disbelief, 'I have come to ask for your aid to secure her love."

She slowly walks to him, her lips pursed and eyes fixated on him. "By what means?"

"By means of a love potion," he pleads.

Circe's sharp nails dig into her palm, she shakes her head.

"Do not refuse my request. Your sorcery can be of immense aid." His eyes are imploring.

Circe continues to shake her head in refusal.

"I loved you once," he quietly says. "My love did not endure. Perhaps it was not meant to be. But I come to you in my hour of need."

Circe casts her sad eyes downward. As she stares at the cold ground a gust of wind blows in through the window, whispering in her ear. When her long lashes lift, there is a glint of wickedness in her eyes.

"Go home and do not worry any further," she says deceptively, looking away. "I will create a potion for you that will capture Scylla's heart."

"Circe, I thank you." Glaucus submits to a broad smile; he bows his head in gratitude as he shuts the door behind him.

Circe's heart clenches. She has failed. Her spell on Glaucus did not secure his love. She does not want to walk through life alone. The wind has whispered a resolve to her distress. Evil thoughts emerge in her mind of a great act of cruelty that will assure Glaucus will be hers.

Brooding dark clouds conceal the sky, dimming the sun's luminosity. Circe runs through a dense forest, a jade glass bottle tightly fastened inside her cloak. She halts when she nears a vast lake.

Her face enshrouded by a black hood, she hides behind a pine tree. As she lifts her head, her covetous eyes stare at the nymphs of the lake. She grimaces as a nymph with long russet hair and youth's lustrous skin begins to sing. Her voice resonates through the forest like a melodious seraph; it is Scylla. Circe tightens her grip on the bottle in her cloak pocket; she waits until the nymphs swim out of sight before nearing the lake.

Circe stands frozen by the lake's edge, peering onto the calm water as its deep blue tint is masked by night's dark veil. As a violent gust of wind shakes the branches of the trees, the wind's whisper once again invades Circe's ear.

"Circe, the darkness inside your heart overshadows light. Hence your dark potions succeed while the light founder," whispers the wind.

She nods slightly in agreement; all her spells of death and destruction have triumphed and those of love have failed. Her vengeful hand removes the malignant bottle hidden within her cloak. The bottle brims with an ebony liquid; the perilous potion rocks within its glass enclosure, awaiting its release, eager for obliteration.

A baleful gaze arises in Circe's eyes as she removes the lid from the bottle. When the potion is released it surges into the lake with an unruly haste. Circe's brows rise as the virulent potion darkens all that it falls on. The wind spreads the potion to the entirety of the blue water.

A stygian gloom cloaks the lake like death's shroud. Circe's heart pounds with anticipation; the nymph's mellow songs become petrified screams. Cadavers float on the water's surface, wisps of fair nymphs' limbs; but not those of Scylla.

Circe grits her teeth as a strange temperament arises from the lake, led by a horrendous monster. Two of its ghastly heads have creased faces and its third prominent head bears the angelic face of Scylla whose melodious singing endures. The monster's six limbs menacingly sway.

Circe's tongue lashes within her mouth. Her appetite for evil is not satiated by metamorphosing Scylla into a hideous monster. Her diabolic mind yearns to make Scylla repulsive in every sense. Glaucus will be repelled by the sound of her, as well as the sight of her. Circe withdraws a tiny jar from her cloak and with a few drops into the lake the malefic

poison turns Scylla's melodic voice into a gruesome bark that will make all conceal their ears when they are near her. Circe grins when Scylla opens her mouth to sing and utters a guttural bark.

She stares at Scylla's snapping jaws as a flock of birds flee from a tree in fright.

At the sound of a breaking twig, Circe's limbs jolt. She searches the darkness through the trees, sighing with relief as she sights a deer scampering through the forest. She has not been spotted carrying out her monstrous deed. As dawn encroaches, she places her hood over her head and hastens to her cottage.

Upon the first light of dawn, Circe's hands tighten on the long branch she uses to stir her cauldron; a dark hue emerges from the smoke. A searing red flame burns under the black cauldron, warming the air. The stillness is broken by a loud banging on the door. Perspiring profusely, she puts down her branch and rushes to open it.

Miranda, crinkles her nose as the cauldron's sour odor makes its way to the doorway where her tall frame stands.

"My friend, I have brought you all that you asked for from the solstice fair," says

Miranda, handing her a heavy woven bag filled to the rim.

"Glaucus has become immune to my potions," says Circe, wiping the perspiration from her brow. "But this potion he cannot escape."

"A man with such little regard for you is not worth a mention," says Miranda, a look of concern fills her gray eyes. "Glaucus's changeable heart varies with each cycle of the moon."

Circe exhales loudly. "If he cannot love me, I will cause him anguish!" As Circe's hands grip the woven bag, her sleeve inches up her arm revealing burn marks. She hastily conceals her wounds, but Miranda sights them.

"Circe, your spells do you grave harm," says Miranda, "Conjured spirits inflict wounds on you."

Circe frowns. "I have much to do. You must leave."

A look of apprehension crosses Miranda's face. "Alright then, farewell."

Circe bows her head and closes the door. She peers into the bag filled with animal hooves, coiled tails and grapes.

As the morning dew fades, the sun's light pierces the sky; a slight chill lingers as Circe lays a bowl of red grapes on a round table. Her neck tilts up when she hears the turn of the door handle. The door opens and Glaucus stands at her doorway with a look of hope. She leers at him as he walks into her cottage. He removes his coat and lays it on the table next to the bowl of red grapes.

"Have you prepared the love potion to win Scylla's heart?" He looks up at her inquisitively as he sits down on a wooden chair.

"I have executed it myself. The potion will work by the new moon." Her stare deceptively parts from his. Circe picks up the bowl of grapes.

"I am grateful for all you have done for me," he says.

She carries the bowl to him and holds it out in offering. "To satiate your hunger," Circe misleadingly smiles.

She watches as he swallows a few perilous grapes. As the sweet nectar from the fruit enters his blood, his expression changes, his gaze fills with yearning. He looks lasciviously onto her dark tresses and her long neck.

"Eat more grapes, Glaucus!" she orders, noticing him staring hungrily at her feminine curves.

As he devours more grapes, she sees he is drawn to her. Her heart quickens with a maddening pound as he nears. She touches his lips. Her breath deepens as his hand strays to her breast. Her cheeks burn as he reaches to caress her thigh. As their lips meet, she surrounds his body with her limbs.

"No!" he murmurs, pulling away.

Her eyes squint, seething; her spell to conjure his desire does not endure.

"I adored you," she whispers.

"You are enticing. But I love Scylla," he says.

She grasps the handle of a large jug and fills a rusty chalice with wine. "To quench your thirst," she hands him the chalice.

Glaucus cautiously grabs it; he sniffs. "What is in it?" he asks. "It has a strange odor."

"Mulled wine." She watches him as he hesitantly sips it.

She has made the sweetest tasting wine that would place pleasure on his tongue.

The lure is great. She smiles as he leans back and gulps it down; he tilts his head forward once again, strokes his forehead and breathes out heavily.

"Do you remember the passion you once held for me?" she asks.

"Circe," he slurs drunkenly. "My heart belongs to Scylla."

Her eyebrows narrow with a frown as she pours more wine into his chalice. He drinks. She looks upon his drowsy head as he looks suspiciously at the chalice. Her body jolts as he throws the chalice to the ground.

"This is not mulled wine; it is one of your perverse potions!" His voice intensifies with anger.

A glint of joy crosses her face as Glaucus's limbs transform into animal hooves; he endeavors to stand, but he stumbles and falls backwards. She looks down onto his metamorphosing nose as it grows into a snout. A loud snort emerges from two titanic nostrils. She hastily steps back as Glaucus, now a swine, squeals with fear and he scuttles around the table. His tiny tail waggles frantically. Her eyes squint to a crafty stare.

"Tonight, I shall dine on swine," Circe says with a wicked grin.

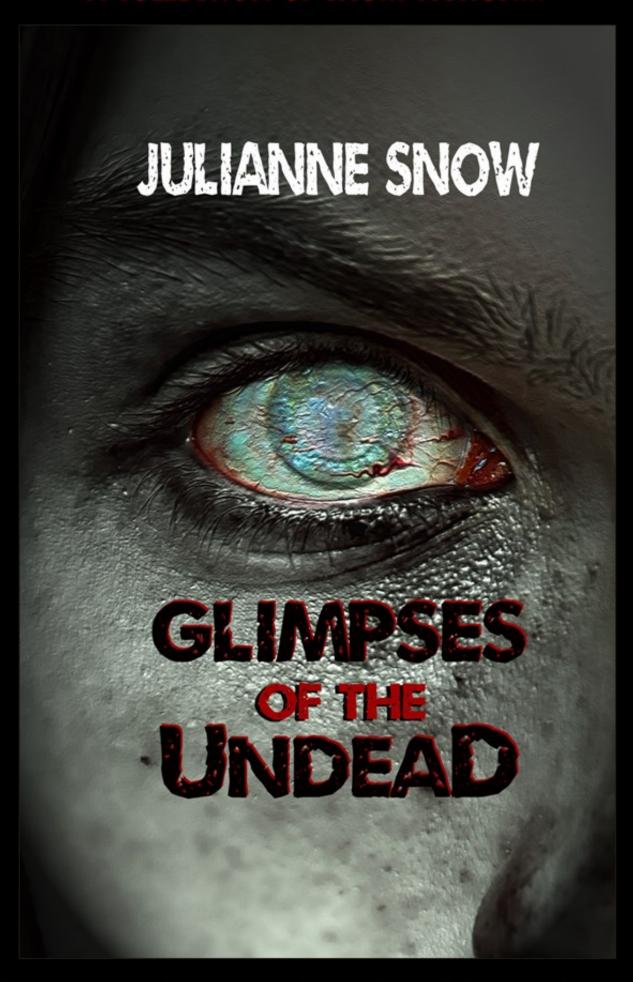
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Helen Mihajlovic is a published writer and filmmaker. Her short story 'A Dark Love story' is in the book '100 Doors to Madness', available at Amazon. Other published stories are 'A Sinister Nature.' and 'The Temptation of Eve'. Helen's film 'Dominica - A Tale of Horror' may be viewed online. She is grateful for a good editor Alison Strumberger and feedback from Roger Smith.



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Turned Brian Burmeister

I awake.

And she was sure

she was rid of me.

Her plan went badly:

vicious parting words

led me to leave the world

knowing the whore for a brute,

a creature with the sense

to mar my burial

by attending with another man

as if I were already carrion.

Hell can be funny.

I owe my second chance to her leitmotiv:

that fomenting, familiar sound of foulness,

unquestioned for years

made me weak,

yet in the end, saw me go

from cull to mullo,

a hero from a gravedigger's spoon.

The dirt is my food:

and a flood of worms and blackness creep in,

so from that earth I'll return,

not Lazarus, no,

but stonger than ten men,

never resting,

and armed with a fury to boot.

You see, Hamlet was right:

so my thoughts are worth plenty,

yet this nightmare logic

leaves an eternity, me,

and no purpose.

I've a better thought:

disinter my life,

leave a last biting kiss.

Hate will see me avenged,

that other thing,

her: a vampire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Burmeister is Program Chair of English and Communication at Ashford University. He regularly writes reviews of graphic novels, and his writing has appeared in such publications as *Cleaver Magazine*, *The Furious Gazelle*, and *Yellow Chair Review*.

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Ad Infinitum Jack Warren

head down to the church with broken windows. Look amongst the graves and gravel until you find it.

Carry it home at nightfall Wrapped in burlap hidden from rock-hail and rain by your thick coat.

Burn firewood.
Feed it bread soaked in milk.
Bathe it's feet in lavender and warm water.
When it is strong enough to leave

pinch it's brittle ankles they will break watch it crawl away head down to the church with broken windows.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jack Warren was raised in Glastonbury in the U.K and is an award winning cocktail bartender. He has previously had work published in the anthology *Alone Together* as well as *Pinched* Magazine. He currently lives in Birmingham.

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Little Porcelain Angel

Angelica Stevens

Laying fragile within the night A little porcelain angel stuck in time Pale skin frail as glass Broken eyes starring in fragments Awaiting to be alive.

Wings of darkness
Fluttering with being incomplete
Black hair flowing
Like a waterfall
Going nowhere
Locked into a time long ago.

Walls of darkness
Hiding an angel's beauty
Within the dust of shadows
Feeling her porcelain skin crumble away
As a little porcelain angel lays awake.

Waiting for a storm to clear A porcelain angel turning to ash Letting the wind guide her For one last dance.

A porcelain angel fading away Back into time Awaiting a moment To walk among the living.

No longer a porcelain angel She is just dust of her former self Which time has forgot.

Dark Mourning

Angelica Stevens

She lays in dark mourning
Over a love who has been lost
Living in silence in the pain of my deeds
Her tears of anger showers over me
Though my presence is not seen
To thy love I can no longer touch
Standing alone in my shadows
Helpless over her dark mourning.

Her Beauty falls into death
Not able to catch her sadness
For which drives her to the rugged rocks
below.
Soaring with open wings
I fly to her lifeless body
Holding my beauty in dark mourning.

Carrying thy love into my darkest tomb I lay with her in death
Her touch as cold as ice
Lips of blackness I kiss
To share my very life
For thy one I love in Dark mourning.

Holding my very jewel of my black heart I fall upon her dark stare
Awakening to see me once more
A beautiful paleness shinning under the moon
I bring her into me
Feeling the coldness of her heart dance within mine
We fly as one
Soaring into the darkness of love
Spilling our death over the ones below
In dark mourning.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Stevens was born in Superior, Montana. Stevens currently resides in the Virginias with her three boys. Stevens started writing when she was 7 years old and has been writing for 29 years now. She is currently getting her Bachelors in Science to become a Social Science Researcher in Mental Disorders. Stevens spends her time reading, writing, drawing and spending time with her children.

Facebook: Angelica Stevens

Dark Silhouettes

D.B. Heath

Evil shadows mock the daylight with unabashed torment
Among the isolated beauty of a haunted lagoon;
A terrorized tranquility on the brink of Paradise's descent
As demons run wild in bright woe of the dreadful noon.
On a reclusive coastline of tourism and heinous history
The infernal brigade of the feared sun laughs with hostile joy,
Waiting to prey on curious guests seeking to fathom the mystery
Surrounding malicious spirits eager to frighten and destroy.

On any afternoon their wrath exhumes from the shore's mud With violent intentions that tremble the tainted water. Beyond monstrous reefs lying within the swimming blood Bodies are captured floating on red waves of slaughter. Day dwellers of Hell pursue to diminish the fear of night; Dark silhouettes of the island are killers in blind sight.

The Burning Tunnel

D.B. Heath

Inside the furnace of chaotic sweat
Smoldering flesh turns black with a crisp,
Through the shroud of smoke and pyrogenic threat
Orange flames light up the grey abyss;
Choking upon the ashes of the deceased as sickness is met
Where fires graze the skin like a devil's kiss.

An assembled line of skeletons on praying knees Held hope with blackened breath, Still worshipping until their death Screaming their merciful pleas.

The enenra lurks in the flames of melting souls
With its shameless suffocating aroma
Amidst the blaze of human coals
As the sufferers dig for survival
In the making of funeral holes
Upon the bowels of the inverted revival.

Bodies slowly flare and tumble Within the walls of the Burning Tunnel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: D.B. Heath is a writer of surreal horror. His work has appeared in The Horror Zine and many other publications. While creating stories and poems during his spare time he enjoys listening to music and playing sports. He lives in the rural lands of Lizella, Georgia with his wife and two cats.

Facebook: D.B. Heath

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





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Unburying the Dead

Lori R. Lopez

There are those born with a taste for death Like a thick brine to salt the tongue. A need for darkness flavours every breath, Leaving a stained and wicked crave unsung. Nursing a disease no prayer will cure, Instead of a thirst for milk or nectar... Drawn to the gloom, they step never crawl, Imitating the strict devotion of a rector — Attitude piercing, keen as an awl, With a soul many shades dimmer than pure.

Most children emerge wholly innocent and bare, Deprived of depravity, untouched by sin, Not a trace of corruption while having their share Of human failings and imperfection, For the mind is like clay to firm hands that rule. How fresh and untainted the aspect of a waif, Though grime may spoil tender cheeks and lips. I was once that young; that frail, unsafe, Alone in the world as an axe the bark strips — Abandoned by fate to this life drab and cruel.

A grim orphanage run by Sister and The Minister
Lay beyond treeless outskirts of a stark little town:
Aloofly rooted in pious teachings yet sinister —
Behind the benign mask lurked a forbidding frown;
It was there I'd be sheared of a cheerful youth.
Stern and gaunt, they punished with an iron switch,
Forging their brand of religion and belief...
I was a bane, the class clown, prone to squirm and twitch,
The source of their misery, of their direst grief,
In a church without hope, a discipline without truth.

"Spare the rod, spoil the child!" A common expression They alleged to mean torture with malice most rotten. Countless bodies were buried, bereft of confession, The graves unmarked, the names to be forgotten, Except by these sadists who remembered with glee. The tyrants had no mercy in their bitter barren hearts, And I vowed to destroy them, expose the madness... I had only my anger like a thousand poison darts To aim at the wretches out of torment and sadness When they murdered the only one ever nice to me.

Raised in a hellish reform-school, kids learned to obey, Then twisted by grudges would inflict their wrath On each other through vicious pranks and play, But my lovely friend Meghan stuck to her path.

No matter how vile our surroundings might seem,
The girl remained sweet and precious inside —
The best way to judge the measure of a spirit —
No trace of ill will, no resentment to hide,
Not a bad word to say, poor Meg wouldn't hear it.
So the devils did her in; now it's their turn to scream.

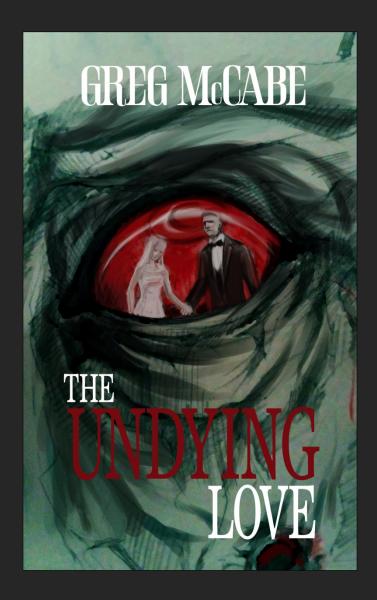
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lori R. Lopez wears hats. Under the hats lurk secret unsavory furtive things that go bump in the night and slither beneath your toenails as you sleep. Titles include *Odds And Ends: A Dark Collection, The Macabre Mind of Lori R. Lopez, Jugular, Monstrosities, An Ill Wind Blows, Chocolate-Covered Eyes, and Poetic Reflections: The Queen of Hats.* She designs her own peculiar covers and illustrations.

Twitter: <u>@LoriRLopez</u>

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The Undying Love Greg McCabe

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Examination

DJ Tyrer

Behind closed door In a secret hospital wing, Doctors cluster Confused By strange physiological changes Science cannot explain; Attempting to rationalize All the oddities Of phrase, action, Knowledge That perplex With irrational insinuations. Having banished superstition The doctors are at a loss – Nothing makes sense. The Devil Mocks men of science From its borrowed home.

Like the Wind

DJ Tyrer

Of the spirits that roamed the dell,
Saying in a voice firm and bold:
"I believe only in what I can see and touch
and smell,
Not in mere fancies and baseless
supposition,
Not in dreams and nightmares,
That seize one quite unawares,
Nor in foolish superstition."
"What about the wind?" Asked his friend.
"You believe in that which you cannot
see."
"Ah, but I see the effects, the end,
And that's fine for me."

He was sceptical when he was told

"Ah, but I have seen the effects
Of the spirits of which I speak
And you might if you seek
To find as one expects.
And, so, I know that they are real,
For them I can hear and I can even feel."

Skeleton Walks

DJ Tyrer

Bones should lie silent, still
Not stand and move with a will
Emerging from that dark, mouldy tomb
That enfolded it like a womb
To walk again beneath the moon
Or caper a dance without a tune
To haunt the living left behind
Anyone that they can find
A skeletal figure in the night
The merest glimpse shall give a fright
Risen up from the grave
Without a soul left to save
Bones truly should remain still
Within the tomb's deathly chill

Screaming Skull

DJ Tyrer

An old story Hardly unique Yet each iteration A little different A tale of murder Or betrayal A singular reminder A testament To that crime or act Perhaps bricked in a wall Or housed in a box Velvet-lined Or kept on display A skull Nothing more Yet if removed If taken from the house Even buried In hallowed ground It screams And screams

And screams

It is returned

Until

Where the Dead Wait

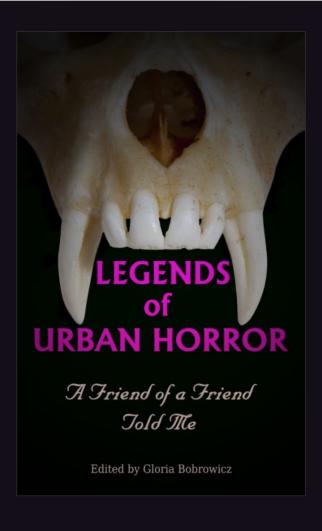
DJ Tyrer

In a shadow-webbed mockery
Of the living world
The dead wait in silence.
For what? Judgement? Redemption?
None know.
Perhaps nothing.
Perhaps their wait will never end,
Leaving them to subsist on shadow,
Vague memories of life
More distant than forgotten dreams,
Until nothing is differentiated;
Leaving only
Endless shadow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, was placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Award for Genre Poetry, and has been widely published in including issues of *Cyaegha*, *Carillon*, *Frostfire Worlds*, *Handshake*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Tigershark*, and online at *Staxtes English Wednesdays*, *Poetry Bulawayo*, *Poetry Pacific* and *The Muse*, as well as releasing several chapbooks, including the critically acclaimed *Our Story*.

Website: http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk

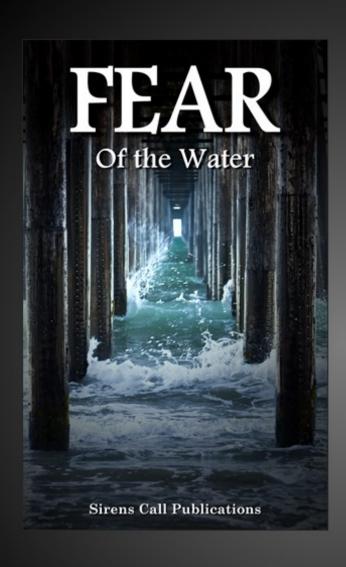
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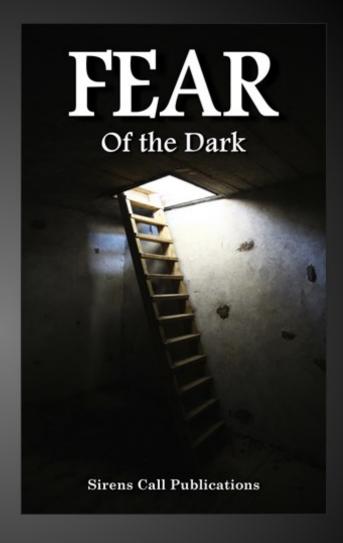


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An Interview with Artist Emilie Léger

After looking around Deviantart for a few moments, Sirens Call Publications came across a fantastic artist who we thought would fit this issue of The Sirens Call eZine. Her name is Emilie Léger and she hails from Canada! We took the time to sit down with her and ask her a few questions about her art – the following is what transpired...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Emilie, why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself to readers?

Emilie Léger: I use both traditional and digital art media for the infinite combinations of creative solutions they offer together. An early interest for traditional media and a later interest for technology brought me there and still brings me to think of various ways to visually express concepts and ideas every day. I studied languages, creative writing, communication and I also have a diploma in graphic design. Over the last few years, I have mainly worked with bands and authors on cover design and I have participated in art exhibitions as a mixed media artist. Now, I work as a communication assistant in an arts centre and I am a student of web design. I take custom orders of all kinds and I sell prints of my work. You can find me on my website at emilieleger.ca

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

EL: I start with traditional mediums: acrylic on canvas, drawing, collage and anything which I can think of that needs to be hand-crafted. When I have created the elements I need, I take photos of them and merge them with image editing software, and then I add digital painting before I print the final works. I do not particularly wish to try more mediums, but my idea is rather to think of more elements and creative solutions I can find for my different projects.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

EL: As a teenager (and still now!) I loved listening to power metal music and I am grateful for that, because it helped me form a very rich and fantastic imagination. I would draw and paint dragons, faeries and darker subjects, which are still an actual part of my imagery. As I evolve, I tend to be more inspired by abstract and surrealist influences.

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

EL: I have the chance to work with many great artists and circumstances brought me to work mainly with musicians and writers. I find that working with artists from other disciplines is very enriching, because you learn a lot from them just like they learn from you and that really stimulates creativity. There is not one artist in particular with whom I would love to work with, but I would rather like to work with artists from as many disciplines as possible.

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

EL: I always keep in mind that possibilities are endless and that everything can be used in the process of creation. Creation is some kind of a perpetual problem to resolve. If I have a creative idea on my mind, I can find ways of visually translate it. When I feel like my work does not entirely reflect an idea or a concept, I sit back, take a break and think of ways of resolving this issue, whether it is by changing tones and colors, changing some existing elements or adding some new parts.

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

EL: My idea is that if you are restrained to a certain concept, you should think of an idea which permits you to have freedom of creation to a certain margin. When you are in the process of creating, you might have a certain idea for a particular element that you did not think of originally. This also kind of prevents the "blank canvas syndrome" and leaves room to what is (and what was) on your mind.

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

EL: Inspiration is literally everywhere. I can get inspired by a specific mood by looking out the window on the train, I can get inspired by a color pattern in a garden, by music, by a camera frame on a TV show.

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

EL: The main element which influences my compositions is symmetry and space structure. I like to create my works with the golden ratio in mind and I often find myself guided by the rule of thirds in my compositions.

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

EL: I do not have a favorite work. I can tell, however, that two recent works, "La Salle d'Attente" (*the waiting room*) and "Urgence de Vivre" (*an urge to live*), are actually important for me because of their technicalities and their meanings. They are self-portraits too and are thus very personal.

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

EL: One of my favorite artworks is Meditative Rose by Salvador Dalí. I love how much this work seems to stand apart from the usual disturbing dream and nightmare symbolics that he was used to depict. It is like some kind of an intentional disconcertingly peaceful artwork. I like how surrealism is still an historical and social mystery.

Thank you Emilie for taking the time to answer our questions! If you'd like to find out more about Emilie or discuss her art with her, she can be reached at any of these links:

Email: emilie.leger.art@gmail.com

Website: emilieleger.ca

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Emilie.Leger.Digital.Art



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Predator and Prey

Nina D'Arcangela

I know I've run past this place before - it's too familiar. The ruined buildings that surround the cobbled square; the mangled café tables where smiling diners once sat and chattered of nothing; the downed streetlamps, quaint in their gaslight styling - it's all so reminiscent. I know I've been here before, I know I once smiled, chattered... How else would I recognize every detail? Yet I've run so far, how is it I keep returning to this spot, to this broken window with its marble sill? I glide my hand over its surface - it feels so real. Am I'm losing my mind? My head is sticky with drying blood; time and distance won't seem to allow me to escape this desolate place; and again, I hear wailing in the distance as something rushes toward me. More running; my heart is pounding; my vision blurring, I stop to rest. Leaning forward, my head touches the cool stone. My body is burning, my mind churning. Am I hallucinating? Raising my head, I realize I've yet again returned to the same marble precipice, only this time when I raise my arm to wipe my brow, the stone is singed where my hand once lay.

Hunger

Julianne Snow

I am born of fire. Reborn actually, but to me it's all the same. My death was a quick thing—the evil overtaking what was left of my soul, twisting it, making it whole but fractured in its desire to inflict pain and mayhem upon the world. And that desire is strong—so strong it leaves a mark wherever I go.

I see them through the window; happy, playful, their lives full of hope and love. The mission to destroy that blissful scene takes over and the essence of who I am now flows freely through the open window into the room scented with a tangy citrus. The smell is cloying but I know it will cover up the smoky scent that accompanies me everywhere. No need to alert them to the pain that is coming...

He falls the moment my hand touches his shoulder, fire racing along his nerves, singing it all and stopping his heart cold. A wisp of smoke escapes his open lips—his soul clamouring for exit. I draw it to my mouth, consume it, and am sated. For a moment at least—knowing I have another waiting to be devoured brings on the hunger again...

Hedera Jon Ingoldby

"The old catcher can snuff out plants and spirites too."
Part of a tale from an old wife. (Source Unknown)

Summer, winter, it did not matter, to run was all. Down the slope, past the vegetable garden, sharp second right into the plant-crowded path that ran beside the redcurrant canes.

The first right he would never take. That way lay the pond, and the pond was deep, and *stones are cold and fish sleep*. His father had always said that, summer or winter. A warning, he said. The pond was deep. It was not the only place in the garden he should avoid, said his father, but it was the main one. His father, long passed. He had no idea where he was buried. Perhaps in this place. Perhaps his sisters were here too.

Then he would come in his eagerness to the compost-heap, piled high at this time of year with wilting vegetation and surrounded by the sharp scent of plants in decay. Such joy! Such aromas! Dappled shade from the trees of the lower lawn to the right scattered the path as the warm stones led, finally, to the large, dark, creosote-smelling shed, its double doors shut tight. There was an overhead trellis here, hung heavy with honeysuckle, that sweet, cloying scent now competing, deliciously, with the tang of the timbers, mixing and melding, creating an olfactory memory that would, had things been different, have conjured a recollection of that simple, singular place: the wide and far-reaching garden of his short youth.

Here, momentarily spent of adventurous spirit, always he paused. Always. For round the corner – where the path turned again at ninety degrees, where the shadows of a high summer afternoon seemed so much silkier and deeper, where the path rose again towards the forgiving, gentle, summer light, itself once a promise of a solar cup of memories of warm days and ropes and ponds and the smells of cut grass and compost, and the distant clack of croquet balls that could be chased – round the corner, was the hedera. Covering, growing, twisting and entwining, pulling him ever down to a darkness that, each year, with less and less energy, he still tried to resist.

He tenses now, sniffs the air. And for some reason, on this day, he cannot fight the temptation of that final, never yet taken, uphill stretch, and he runs again.

Sometimes Marion could hear him: the frantic rustling in the ivy and bramble that covered the disused path behind the gate that had been locked for more time than she cared to remember. The path was broken and frost pained, impassable and dangerous. Dan, the gardener, always had remarked, on hearing the commotion from time to time, that it was just hedgehogs, and then always he would work in another, sunnier part of the garden for the rest of the day. But Marion knew it was not.

She knew because it had been she who had locked the gate, she who had let the path fall to ruin, she, who in her madness in those long-ago days, had screamed at the sight of the statue of Charles she had caused to be made, appalled and frantic at her own hubris, unable any longer to look upon his stone-dead eyes, slowly, too slowly, being obscured by ivy she could not bring herself to cut back. So, she picked flowers, she picked fruit from the ancient trees, and collected them in her wooden trug that seemed never full, and for small moments, thus absorbed, was able to forget.

She knew, in her heart, that she should have kept better control over Charles. She should have covered the pond with a protective iron mesh. She should have had the tiny castellated folly above the pool boarded up. She supposed, often, as she wandered about the

garden, picking flowers again and again, to decorate her table and mantel, that she could have done all those things. But she did not.

She never stopped thinking about the depth of the pond. The simple statistics haunted her. Seven feet at the back, so Dan had always said. Six inches at the front, to allow for marginal plants. He had built it. He knew.

Shaded it was, in a well of the garden between the two main lawns. A half circle, with a bench on the curved side and a high rough-stone wall at the straight rear, covered with ferns and lichen and dark, dripping things. A path ran all the way around, with two sets of steps climbing into the darkness of the rear of the wall supporting the dense shrubbery, higher still. Old flint, sharp and unforgiving. To the left was the folly, its tiny turrets crumbling like rotting teeth, slowly collapsing in on itself through lack of care, forgotten now, its pitted brickwork and tiny windows making it appear, in its dissolution, like a dolls' house for the damned. To the right, through the thick bushes, across the clean lawn, the vegetable patch – dug, cultivated, tended, planted and picked. Always a place of fascination for Charles. Dan regularly waved him away as he drove the angular steel teeth of the cultivator into the soil to prepare it for planting, afraid Charles would run in at a dash, and slow and ponderous as it was, the machine might not be stopped in time.

Marion's closest friend Helen told her, after Dan had hauled the limp body from the warm water of the deep, dark pool, that the pond should be filled in.

She refused.

It was not the pond that had killed him, she said. It was what was in the folly. He must have stumbled from that repulsive building, along the path, wounded, bleeding, bitten, and ran, over the low wall, into the slimy depths.

Helen thought this was rubbish. She had painted the pond, and the folly, had seen their artistic possibilities, and was, or had been, fond of that part of the garden. They had shared tea together, sitting on the bench, every day of that long, warm, windless week. *Yes, Marion said, but you never went in, did you?*

Helen admitted this was true. She did not like to venture into old, neglected buildings, full of moss, cobwebs and decay. They were not the kind of things her watercolours were made for. Yet in such a place she knew that she would, one day, meet herself, and so it was.

So the pond remained full, and the fish slid sinuous and silent in its depths, and time passed. Dan never did anything about the dirty rotary cultivator blade that had fallen into the water as it slipped from his hand when he went to sit in the folly for a quiet smoke before heading to the shed to clean off the mud. A fish, after all, cannot be hurt by such pitted tines. He never disabused Marion of her belief that the folly was infested with rats either, even though he knew perfectly well it was not, and even now remained clean.

Marion understood that animals can be replaced, yet she had never tried. She was well aware that the scritching and scraping she could hear beyond the gate was made by Charles – her lost, dearest love, just as a branch of the old apple tree, nearly dead now, might bob up and down from time to time, in defiance of wind direction, as something reached there, seeking every day a new adventure in the sun-dappled dark of its own past.

She dreamed of the hedera: closing, sucking, suffocating, gently, slowly, taking life while it flourished, green, and fresh, and new. It entwined her sleeping hours and sometimes, when she woke, to the hot haze of a new day, she imagined herself struggling to rise against the clutching tendrils that begged her to stay... what? – She sought the word, but it eluded her. In the end she thought perhaps it was abed.

She wanted so much now, after so many years, to stay abed. To *be* abed. So she rose on that last, hot, rare endless English summer day, and was met by the scent of blooms, and cut grass. She walked into the cool kitchen with its old, green, linoleum floor, slightly chill upon

her bare feet, and fetched the keys from the cupboard, and walked outside. She put the keys in her pocket, and took up her gardening gear, and in the haze of the morning, sun hardly up, she cut flowers. As many as she could. From the front borders and the back. She added lavender to her trug, and roses, marigolds, and sharp, cloying geraniums from the pots on the rear terrace.

The sun rose higher. The warm air closed around her. She dropped her secateurs, her trug; the blooms cascaded to the ground, scattering the zig-zag paved path that led to the gate. She approached it, heard the rattling and rustling and choking sounds, even this early in the morning, as the hedera had its way. She opened the gate, carefully replaced the keys in her pocket, and, bidding farewell to her flowers, at last allowed the rotten wood to swing shut behind her before running down the path.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jon Ingoldby is an editor and writer, currently working on his second collection of short stories, *Chalk Tiger*. His stories *The Remembered* and *Sextet* appeared in the December 2014 and April 2015 issues of *The Sirens Call*. He lives in Sussex, England, with his wife and two cats. You can learn more about Jon's work, and contact him, via his website.

Website: www.joningoldby.co.uk

Mr. Garret's Interview David J. Gibbs

Garret watched her shift in the chair, apparently not liking the way the arms embraced her. Gladys took off her glasses and let them dangle from the chain around her neck. The elderly woman didn't want to be here.

"Can you tell me what you remember from the other night?"

"Oh. You mean my spell?"

He nodded, hoping she would just naturally start talking. He didn't want to coax her too much. It would make the interview look unnatural and forced.

"Well, I awoke on the night stand."

She paused for apparent affect. He motioned for her to continue. After clearing her throat, she spoke.

"I honestly don't know how it happened. I've been paralyzed from the waist down for over a decade. I'm not a young woman anymore and the only thing still spry in this body of mine is my bladder and my mind and neither of those could move this bag of bones up on top of the nightstand."

"Interesting," he said, tugging his earlobe. "Were you prone?"

"Was I what?" Gladys asked, the gray halo of hair picking up the camera's light making it appear almost golden.

"Were you laying stretched out across it?" Garret asked, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he looked at her. It was just the two of them in the small room. In his experience, the less people present during the interview the more comfortable and therefore confiding the subjects were.

"No, I wasn't. I was standing on the small table."

"But you just said-," he began.

"I know what I said and I certainly didn't stutter young man," her words were an icy whip cutting through the quick of his resolve.

"I wasn't suggesting you had, Gladys."

"Good."

"How did you manage to get down?"

"I didn't. I stood on wobbly legs and had to wait for rounds to find me. I was so terrified I'd break something again so I just waited. Besides I was too shocked to try and do anything."

"Of course," he agreed.

"It's when I noticed the boy in the reflection."

"What can you tell me about him?" Garret asked with arched brows.

"He looks like someone I knew a long, long time ago. Far too long ago."

That was the opening he was looking for and he took it.

"Who might that be Gladys?"

"You already know this. We've been over it already."

"No, we haven't."

"Well, you got the reports from the staff," she spat sharply, a bit of spittle glistening on her upper lip.

He continued, "Yes. Yes I did, but I want you to tell me again so we can record it with the cameras."

"And what good would that do young squire?" Gladys asked, her voice holding an underlying bit of laughter.

"I'm not sure. But, would could it hurt?"

She fixed her eyes on him and never once looked away, not even while she picked up the glass of water beside her and took a long drink. It was a little unsettling the way he looked at her.

"Can you tell me who he was?"

"You know I can, but you'll call me mad and have me committed."

"That's not why I'm recording this and you know that."

"He was my brother," she said quickly, as if the words were burning her tongue and wanted to get rid of them as quickly as possible.

"You never had a brother Gladys. There are no records of any siblings."

"Of course not," she said, her gaze fixed on some unseen point on the wall.

"How do you explain that?"

"Which part?" Gladys asked, this time in a coy tone of voice. He imagined her suddenly as a school girl on the playground talking with the boys.

"How can he be your brother if you never had a brother?"

"When I was young things were different you see. If children were born and were unwanted, they simply were carted off to children's homes or orphanages or reformatories. Left there with no explanation and cut off from the world to fend for themselves."

"I see," he said, not sure exactly why.

"Don't placate me Garret. It doesn't fit very well on you."

He couldn't help but wonder what kind of a ball breaker she would've been back in the day. There were men all over the county that probably bore the scars of those days. He didn't envy them at all.

"I wasn't trying to. I was just trying to say that I understood where you were coming from."

"How could you? Did you parents send your brother away before you were two years old? Mine never told me a thing about him until I stumbled upon the shoebox in the back of mother's closet when I was ten. I never even saw a picture of him until then. I had no idea.

"It's when I found that box that he started showing up in places. He'd show up at the end of the aisle in the supermarket or on the opposite of a busy street. I'd see him but could never get to him. That bothered me at first."

Her face faltered for a moment before tumbling down into a sea of wrinkles. It only lasted for a few seconds before the controlled façade was back in place again. He felt cold, not reaching out to her to comfort the poor woman, but he didn't want to interfere. It seemed like she was right on track with the material he wanted her to talk about.

"It wasn't until my twentieth birthday that he started to get closer. Instead of being across the street he would be on the same side with me. Even so, he kept his distance, staying on the other side of a crowd of people at a crosswalk or in an elevator car. His pale face looked to me, his skin beginning to turn.

"I didn't start getting scared until somewhere in my thirties. I found him outside my bedroom window standing in the bushes. Waking up to that face pressed against the glass, those fingers gently raking against the frosted glass. Still gives me shivers thinking about it."

She took another sip of her water and Garret sat upright, using his hands to smooth out his worn jeans. It was hard not to let the excitement of the moment take over and start making his leg pump up and down. He couldn't believe he was catching this all on video.

"Then by the time I was fifty he would be next to me and I could feel his cold breath against my face. It took only once opening my eyes to catch him staring intently at me that my heart would clench inside my chest. I had to turn away from him keeping my eyes closed before getting out of bed so I wouldn't see him.

"The accidents started happening in my sixties and everyone thought I'd started to go soft upstairs, but it was him. He started to grab the steering wheel while I was driving or pull the cord to lower the garage door while I was standing there in its path. He lit one of the burners on the stove and even left the gas on all day once. Thankfully, I noticed the smell when I came home and aired out the house before starting dinner."

Her eyes had that faraway look in them. It seemed as if she were in that time actually reliving what she was recounting from memory. Garret thought she looked decades younger in those few moments.

"I wasn't quite seventy when the first serious accident happened."

Garret folded his arms and started to nibble on his thumbnail, the excitement overtaking his resolve.

"He pushed me down the stairs. I could feel his quick breath just behind my ear and almost make out the words he was trying to whisper to me. I broke my hip and eventually needed surgery to repair it. I didn't know it then, but that was the beginning I think. It was the beginning of my understanding as to what he wanted. I suppose it was then I realized that he would eventually have his day."

"What do you mean Gladys?" Garret asked, almost before he realized he spoke aloud. He didn't want his voice to break the spell. Thankfully, it didn't.

"It was getting worse, but I knew then what he wanted. He wanted a playmate. All that time. Those seventy-odd years he had no one to play with. He was waiting for his baby sister to come play with him on the other side. He was lonely. It broke my heart that realization."

For the second time, he wanted to comfort her and held back his hand. He didn't want to dare break the spell she was under while telling her tale.

"That sympathy, or empathy I suppose, changed the night Charles died. He didn't believe me any more than any of you do that something was happening. My sweet Charles shared my bed and my heart for the better part of five decades and even he didn't believe that I saw my brother. He didn't believe in any of it, not even when the ladder shifted beneath him while working on the eaves of the second story. I doubt he even believed it when his neck snapped against the driveway, but I'm sure he saw him. I know I did. He stood over my Charles as I sobbed, his hideous likeness a beacon to the other side."

The stern mask held this time, Gladys's face a steady bit of stone this time. Only her eyes hinted at the turmoil raging inside her.

"Well, it wasn't more than a week later that my next accident happened and I tumbled to the bottom of the basement stairs. Along with the pain of a broken pelvis and three broken ribs, I spent a day and a half crumpled, unable to move from where I lay, having to smell the fetid breath and feel the chill of my dead brother. I made myself the promise that if madness didn't take me that night, it would never have me. He came so close to having me back as his playmate. I was in the hospital for almost three months and though the doctors did their best to repair the damage, I was in my eighth decade on this earth and I was forever hobbled. The canes and the walkers seemed to sense this and began showing up beside my chairs and couch at the ready. I didn't like them much at first, but eventually realized that without them, I wouldn't be mobile at all. Chilling thought it was, I knew I had to keep moving or my brother would finally take me."

She grew quiet and Garret stopped gnawing on his thumbnail now a wet red mess. He moved in his seat as quietly as possible.

"It wasn't until the bus depot that I realized the inevitable. I had just come back from visiting my sister Ida Mae in Copper Toffey, Indiana. I hadn't been paying that much attention to things, but I know I didn't walk out in front of that taxi. He pushed me. His little hands at the small of my back. He pushed me and the taxi clipped me. Broke two vertebrae in my back and paralyzed me from the waist down."

Her breath was coming faster and her eyes were a little wider than before. One hand clutched near her throat. He wondered what she was seeing or reliving.

"He stood there and tried to hold my hand. I honestly think that he thought he had done it this time. He was almost giddy the little bastard."

Garret realized her breathing was even more labored, but he didn't want to stop recording because this was the best interview he had ever done. He could see himself giving interviews about Gladys and what she said to him. This was going to be his big break. He could taste it.

"Well, he was wrong. I lived. I lived and he was still alone. And, that brings us to tonight. It's taken him almost three months to build up his strength, but I know it won't be long now. If he can move this tired old body and position it the way he did on the night stand, there won't be any stopping him. He'll have what he came for and what he's waited so long for."

Gladys seemed dazed for a moment and blinked a few times slowly. Her ragged breathing continued to sound even more labored. Jaw lax momentarily, her hand balled itself up into a fist over and over again.

"I figured out how to beat him at his own game though. He won't have a playmate after all. He can't have me. No he won't have me. Not this night. Not any night."

That snapped Garret out of his daydreams about television interviews and his imminent fame. He realized something was wrong.

"Gladys what do you mean?"

"I took the liberty of taking some meds before you got here Mr. Garret."

"You took some meds."

"Let me correct that. I took all of the meds. Every last pill. As you notice there are only empty pill bottles on the table," she said, her words coming with more and more effort, a noticeable slur beginning to creep into the tone.

"What did you do?" Garret shouted.

"I know my Bible Garret. Do you know yours?" Gladys asked, an odd smile crossing her lips. "He does too. He won't get to play with me since I've committed suicide."

"You haven't committed anything. Gladys!" Garret shouted standing up and coming to her side as she slumped over the arm of the chair.

"I'll be in purgatory forever. Not even his reach is that strong. No sir."

Garret stumbled over the edge of the rug as he shouted for someone to help. The nurses and doctors rushed in but it was too late. She had ended the game.

A few minutes later a gurney was brought in and she was taken away. He reached for the button on the recorder to rewind the tape when something in the viewfinder stopped him. He blinked a few times and looked more closely at it. The blood ran like chilled molasses through him as the image of a small boy sobbing appeared in the corner. His face was covered with his hands, apparently sad his game had ended, sad that he didn't have his sister back as a playmate.

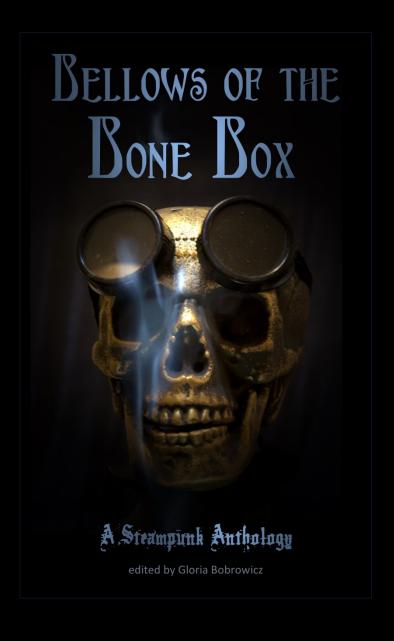
Garret felt a pang of guilt work its way through his chest, until the boy dropped his hands and looked right into the view finder at him offering a chilling smile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: David J. Gibbs was born and raised in the Greater Cincinnati area. Never losing touch with the wonder and magic of childhood, he continues to push the limits of imagination with his stories. His work has most recently appeared in *Massacre Magazine*, *Nebula Rift*, and *Sanitarium Magazine*. He has also published short the fiction collections *A Taste of the Grave* and *Once, Twice, Thrice*.

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Bellows of the Bone Box

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Cognizant D. S. Ullery

Elias lay panting in the ceramic bowl, allowing the circular wave to wash over him, grateful the fleshy sticks that were his arms had held the strength to pull the lever as he was sliding into the basin. The heat of the fresh blood had burned when it splattered across his wet, unformed skin. The water spinning around and over him as he lay in the toilet – small enough to fit inside, but too large to be pulled down through the drain- was a blessed relief as it swept the stinging fluids away.

He allowed himself a moment more to enjoy the cool liquid, then reached out and gripped the lip of the bowl. With all the strength he had left, Elias pulled himself up and peered over the edge, staring sadly through the open doorway at the body still convulsing on the floor of the filthy, run-down efficiency. A wave of blood pumped out from between her legs, soaking the chunks of jagged flesh that lay on the stained, cracked tiles, having torn away from her as he had forced his way out. Elias noted -with no small amount of disgust-the trail of amniotic fluid and gore that marked his quickly scurried path from his mother's corpse to the bathroom.

A stab of grief wracked his small, misshapen form. He released his hold on the edge of the toilet bowl, sliding back down to the bottom of the basin with a small whine. His oversized head struck the inside wall of the bowl, sending a tremor through it. He allowed himself to slump to one side, his bulbous, unnaturally protrusive eyes staring up at the ceiling helplessly.

He had planned to take a moment to pay his respects after he had escaped, perhaps even touch his mother's face before she died. But the burning of her blood all over his body as it was exposed for the first time had been too much to bear, forcing him to locate the nearest source of relief.

It had been the Sight that showed him the toilet. Elias shouldn't have known how it worked, much less what it was. He somehow *knew* that. The awareness which had awoken in him as he slumbered in the womb was obscene, a thing unheard of. Nevertheless, it was real and vivid, a harsh mistress that had begun to pull the veil back and expose to his fetal mind the life in store as it formed. Her addictions, sexual and narcotic, the deformity she had passed on to him from her use of chemicals, the physical and psychological pain he would endure, the monster he would become and the innocent lives he was destined to destroy if he allowed his life to unfold on the expected path.

However, his mistress had also shown him another way, an exit that would both release his mother from the grip of her demons and unburden him of the horrific responsibility she had unknowingly placed upon his malformed shoulders. It would require Elias to be patient, to wait until the ninth month before he could act.

Tonight the Sight had spoken again, telling him that it was finally time. Impelled by a surge of unnatural strength he knew was granted by the mysterious presence, he had torn free from both his mother and the lifetime of despair she had unwittingly bestowed upon him.

Elias felt tired. Exhaustion claimed him and his breathing grew labored. His tiny chest barely rose as his collapsing lungs tried to force air in and out. He was aware that he was dying, but the knowledge did not frighten him.

The ceiling throbbed, expanding and retracting above him. The rotting, moldy plaster squares formed odd shapes, like a bizarre kaleidoscope, as the already low light in the apartment grew dimmer. Elias felt warmth overcome him, bringing with it a wonderful sense of peace. He tried to smile with his thin, unfinished mouth, but found he could no longer manage even that.

The Sight called to him, called him by name, soothingly inviting him to come and join her among the stars and dance as they danced, traveling the corridors of eternity where he

would never be a monster. Where sickness could not follow.

With a final, shallow breath Elias let go and merged with the Sight, taking his first steps along the edge of forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: D. S. Ullery has been published in Blood Reign Literary Magazine, The Sirens Call eZine, Dark Eclipse magazine, The Literary Hatchet, Disturbed Digest and the anthologies When Red Snow Melts, Journals of Horror: Found Fiction and Creature Stew. He is an Affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association and lives in Lake Worth, FL with a black cat named Jason, who was born on Friday the 13th.

Who's There? Michelle Podsiedlik

The house was old; doorways narrow and ceilings short. Slim dwarfs may have built it one hundred years before, hoping to crush the obese and tall with claustrophobia. Ms. Barrow, luckily, was neither obese nor tall. She was incredibly elderly and her greatest fear regarding the house was what she would do when she needed a walker or - God forbid - a wheelchair to get around. But she would find a way. This was her home now, for better or worse.

Her concern, at present, was telling Jerry Howard and Mickey Dwight which rooms to put the furniture in. She had chosen the back room as her study and the boys were trying to get her desk through the doorway. There was a lot of grunting and cursing (the boys didn't think she could hear them from down the hallway but hearing was one thing Ms. Barrow had never had a problem with, thank you very much). Finally, they gave up and Jerry walked down the slim, yellow-papered hallway and leaned his head into the kitchen. Ms. Barrow was startled by his face; lined and paunchy and looking so much like his father that it seemed a ghost was peeking around the corner. She scolded herself for her surprise. Jerry Howard hadn't been a little boy for thirty years, but the moment he and Mickey were out of sight, she thought of them as they had been in her classroom. Every student remained that way in her mind. None of the children grew up or went to war or wasted themselves with shrill wives and no-good drunk husbands.

"We've got to take the door off, Ms. Barrow," Jerry said, sweating and huffing, "if that's all right with you."

"That's fine," Ms. Barrow said, thinking, If you keep sitting at home shoveling food and booze into your face, you're going to drop dead at fifty like your father, Jerry Howard.

For the next few minutes, there was banging and shuffling, and then Jerry was carrying the heavy wooden door out into the living room. He leaned it against an empty patch of wall between Ms. Barrow's cream-colored loveseat and matching wing chair, then went back down the hallway. Ms. Barrow followed him, wanting to make sure he and Mickey hadn't done any damage.

A few hours later, after the truck was empty and Ms. Barrow's offer of tea was politely (but swiftly) declined, the boys left, Jerry promising to finish the job the next day. A man in better shape would have been able to move it all in one afternoon but Ms. Barrow was wise enough to keep this thought to herself. She was thankful that the boys were willing to help at all.

The study door was still propped up against the wall in the living room, waiting for Jerry's return. She poured herself tea and sat at her small round dinner table, amused by how natural the door looked against the wall from this angle. She could almost convince herself

there was a closet behind it. She leaned over in her chair and looked down the hallway to the study. How strange it seemed with just the frame and hinges showing. Like a mouth with a broken tooth, there was an ugly wrongness about it.

Frowning, she drank her tea.

The rest of the afternoon was spent fixing up her bedroom. Heavy framed photographs were placed along the dresser; keepsakes and knick-knacks from students of years long passed set just-so on the end table and television stand. There wasn't as much space to decorate here as there had been in the old house and she regretfully placed trinkets back into the maple chest at the foot of the bed.

As afternoon faded into evening, the curtains were snugly pulled, the front and back doors locked and double-checked. Ms. Barrow stood alone in this new-old home, wondering when it would begin to feel right. The more of her own things she tried to dress over it, the more that the base personality of the house asserted itself. It looked more like a run-down little farmhouse now than it had that morning when it lay empty.

She thought of her old paper dolls, the tabs of the clothing that always showed, never looking right; the more layers, the worse the effect. That was the type of house she was living in, she mused, preparing for bed. Some houses were just like that. She would get used to it.

Ms. Barrow pulled back the covers and got into bed, reaching a pale, tissue paper hand to switch off her lamp a moment later.

A person could get used to anything.

She woke up in darkness. Someone was knocking on her front door. A solid strike of fear raced through her, her mind summoning stocking-stranglers, robbers, rapists; faceless men out to get old ladies in the middle of the night. She got out of bed, trembling, and felt her way in the darkness, each foot seeking carefully before setting down. The sound was a terrifying violation, persistent and rough, not at all the way a neighbor or friend would announce themselves. Two knocks would sound, then a pause just long enough for a breath and a shudder of her heart, and then again: *knock-KNOCK!*

Ms. Barrow reached the kitchen and fumbled the phone off of the wall. She was going to call the police. That was what everyone always did wrong - they answered the door or started talking to the intruder, wasting time when help could be on the way. She put the phone to her ear and finally turned toward the front door. The pause had gone on longer this time, she was sure of it. She waited, shoulders tensed, fingers hovering over the glowing number pad on her phone.

knock-KNOCK!

She jumped, the phone bouncing on her shoulder. Her eyes widened with confusion and fear, but a different sort from the moment before. Ms. Barrow's gaze moved across the room.

The knocking hadn't come from her front door. It had come from the opposite wall.

The next outburst was the loudest and longest yet, as though whatever controlled it understood that it now had an audience: KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

And yes, Ms. Barrow thought, looking at the study door leaning between the cream-colored loveseat and wing chair. Yes the knocking was coming from there.

She lowered the phone, let it drop. The plastic coils stretched painfully, the black receiver making slow, drunk spins as it hung over the linoleum. Ms. Barrow moved slowly into the living room and when the knocking came again, both of her small hands shot up, pressing over her thin, pursed lips. She covered her mouth to keep the scream building within her tucked away. This was madness. She knew it was madness. But the door appeared to be flush to the wall now. She walked toward it, looking for the gap between the door and the wall. There was none. But the handle, the lock, they couldn't *disappear* into the wall. That was impossible.

And then the knocking came again.

Faint blue light from the microwave and oven displays in the kitchen cast over the glossy surface of the door and Ms. Barrow could actually see this light shift as the door shuddered from the force of the pounding.

Ms. Barrow's feet were bare. Up to this point, they had merely been cold. Now, she realized, they were freezing. She looked down with dread.

There was a draft coming from under the door.

Ms. Barrow stepped back with skittering mouse movements, not wanting the air to touch her. Her mind was fiercely at war with itself:

This can't be happening.

This is happening.

Go back to bed.

Investigate.

Walking to her bedroom, she saw herself moving past the bed - the safety of the bed, the comfort of the bed; Lord, probably still warm - and picking up her flashlight.

Ms. Barrow returned to the door and stood in front of it, holding the flashlight helplessly, wringing it in her hands. She stared at the impossible gap under the door, more fearful of it than anything else she had encountered in her life.

The draft still came, soft and steady, a whisper that wouldn't end. She imagined herself turning the flashlight on and looking under the door, feeling that air on her knees - on her face - and knew she wouldn't survive the horror if it brushed over her mouth, if she *breathed* it.

It was then she realized that at least a full minute had passed in silence. Not an absent silence, not the kind that comes after something has left, but the kind of something that has arrived and is waiting.

She lifted the flashlight in her right hand.

The air was pierced with a burst of electronic squalor.

She spun a cry on her lips, the flashlight now a weapon, raised as high as she could bring it. And then she saw the phone, still dangling.

She cursed it, cursed herself, and grabbed the receiver, shoving it into the cradle again.

The thing had heard her. No doubt now, it knew she was there.

The handle of the door jiggled, testing the lock.

Ms. Barrow stayed in the entryway of the kitchen, watching as the reflection of the blue display lights shifted over the moving silver handle. The jiggling stopped.

She stood in place for an eternity, eyes unblinking. She was waiting for a final attack, felt the anticipation of it like electricity through her soul.

But there was only silence. Or maybe - possibly - the sound of light breathing.

Ms. Barrow hadn't made it this far on her own by being a flighty, hysterical woman. No matter how real this seemed, it must be a nightmare, a sleepwalking episode. Common sense demanded that this was a vivid dream.

She considered her options: call the police and report a possessed door, stand in the kitchen for the rest of the night, or go back to bed.

Walking silently despite her mental assertions that there was no reason to, she went to her room, climbed slowly into bed, pulled the covers up to her chin and forced her eyes to close.

The next morning, the door was resting sensibly on the floor. Ms. Barrow looked at it from all angles, convincing herself that there was absolutely nothing out of sorts with it.

She ate her breakfast in the bedroom.

At ten, there was a series of knocks. Ms. Barrow's heart nearly stopped in her chest and then she heard Jerry calling a greeting from the front door. Hurrying down the hall, she let

him in.

Jerry brought in the last of Ms. Barrow's furniture. They were little things, easy enough for him to move on his own. Ms. Barrow followed him up and down the hallway, taking comfort in his sane presence. When Jerry was done, he went back to the living room for the door. Ms. Barrow almost shouted for him to stop, fearing the moment when his fingers would touch it. But Jerry lifted it with relative ease and started down the hallway. This time, Ms Barrow did not follow him. She stayed near the kitchen, watching as the fearful, wretched thing was brought back to the study. The pins had to be put in from inside the room and Jerry closed the door in its frame. A few moments later, Ms. Barrow heard the hammer striking against metal. She crossed her arms, feeling as though the draft was back, flooding over her. The door stared, its silver handle like a huge clouded eye.

The hammering stopped. The handle started to move - then caught. A pause.

"Ms. Barrow?" Jerry called. "Did you lock the door?"

Ms. Barrow was silent.

"Ms. Barrow?" Jerry tried the handle again. "Ms. Barrow, are you there?"

For a few moments, the hammer sounded again, then stopped abruptly.

"What-" Jerry said, barely loud enough for Ms. Barrow to hear from the kitchen.

And then Jerry, poor Jerry Howard, was screaming. At first it was her name and then it rose into a wordless shriek. There was thrashing, banging. Silence.

Ms. Barrow waited.

knock-KNOCK!

knock-KNOCK! knock-KNOCK!

Ms. Barrow turned to the kitchen, put the tea kettle on and stood in front of the stove. Calmly, she lifted her hands and pressed them over her ears. The sound became a stuttered heart-beat coming from the center of her skull.

She would get used to it. A person could get used to anything.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michelle Podsiedlik lives in southern New Hampshire. In addition to writing short speculative fiction, she has completed a suspense novel.

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Late-Night Drive Gwendolyn Kiste

I hold my breath and wait for the car to materialize at the end of the road. Maybe this will be the time it gets lost. Maybe I'll stay up until dawn, alone in the sapphire silence of the night.

But that car never takes a wrong turn. At ten to midnight, the lone headlight cuts through the fog like a spotlight searching. Stalking. From one evening to the next, the burned out bulb shifts back and forth, right to left, left to right, as if trying to divulge some secret message. But I don't know what it says. I don't know anything except where that car is heading and who's behind the wheel.

It's cold. March is always cold here, especially in the mountains. The mountains I escape to because I honestly believe the car won't discover me here. But it finds me the first night.

The brakes squeak and squeal and scream outside my front porch. I grab my coat, even though there's no reason. It'll be warm against the leather interior. Rob makes sure of that.

"How you doing, Darla?" His voice is all honey and smooth jazz.

He's the Rob I like tonight. His hair isn't quite so slick. His face isn't so ashen. He smiles more. He laughs too. He's better somehow, better than he was back when we were both real. Or as real as anybody is.

We drive for awhile. We don't talk much, but neither of us minds. Our hours of conversations on past road trips are enough to fill two lifetimes.

The car coasts to a rocky shoulder overlooking the sea.

"It's a beautiful view," I say, and my cheeks burn because it's such a trite comment.

Rob grins. "It is beautiful," he says. "Not as beautiful as you."

Of course, he says that. He's the Rob I like tonight.

In the backseat, we kiss like horny school kids out past curfew. Again and again, we kiss, and I almost believe I enjoy it. Maybe I do enjoy it. Or maybe I don't enjoy anything anymore, and this is just one more thing to work through, one more thing to survive.

He doesn't take it any further than kissing, and he drops me back at the porch before dawn.

"I'll see you later," he says, and I know he's right.

The sun rises, and I stare right into it for as long as my eyes can take it. Then I go to work. I run numbers. Attend meetings. Go to lunch. Come home. I look so normal. I feel so normal. At least until the sun sets, and the clock creeps toward twelve.

He's the Rob I don't like tonight. The passenger door's already open and I'm halfway in, but he yanks me the rest of the way, and his grip around my wrist doesn't relax until the car hits sixty, and we're going too fast for me to jump. Not that I would jump. I have nowhere else to be.

"You think you're so smart," he says, flashing me grimaces in the dark. "You act like you've got the whole world figured out. But you don't understand anything, do you, Darla?"

"I understand more than you," I say.

He jerks the wheel, and the car stops short of a cliff. I reach for the door, but he's on top of me, his gnarled hands buried against my throat.

I flail. It does no good, but I flail anyways. I don't beg. I never beg. It won't help if I do, and I won't let him enjoy it, I won't let him relish my desperation. My fingers fumble for his eyes. Maybe this time I can blind him. But before I can dig my nails into the soft white flesh, everything goes gray, a smoky gray just like the fog that brings the car to me night after night.

The first time I wake up after dying, I'm sure it's purgatory. Or one of those weird time loops. It's the same day, I think, and I'll have to live it again and again. But the world pushes on around me, and I can't decide whether that's comforting or maddening.

I try to tell someone. I do tell someone. I tell my mother. My sister. My best friend.

"He was there," I say. "Him and his car."

They laugh and advise I get more sleep. Or better sleep anyhow. It's a nightmare. Nothing more. After all, I have no scars. No evidence. Only memories that seem more real than real life.

"He can't hurt you," they say. "He's dead."

But even before he dies, they have nothing to add but tight little smirks and pats on the shoulder.

"I'd never put up with it," they say as if there's some prize at the end of the road for those who never meet a palm or a fist.

"You're so codependent," they say. "You need to be stronger."

Once he returns, I survive murder a thousand times over. If that's not strong, nothing is.

"I've got the perfect therapist to help you," they say.

I take three different numbers and recline on three different couches. Everything's smiles and good intentions.

But good intentions don't get you through midnight drives.

The next time, Rob brings a knife. I struggle for his hands, but he's quicker than me. He cuts my face before he cuts my throat.

I bleed out slow, and he cradles me while I die, even turns up the radio for a sweet soundtrack.

"It's almost like dancing," he says, and with blood filling my mouth, I give thanks I never took him to prom.

After that, it's weeks of roses and poetry.

"I love you," he says again and again.

I pretend to believe him.

Someone at work invites me to a Saturday night bonfire. I arrive late, and there are still dozens of people, drinking and laughing.

I make-believe I'm normal and grab a beer. Everyone talks about movies.

But as the seconds until midnight evaporate, they invent excuses to go home. One by one, the others depart. Most of them don't want to, but something compels them to abandon me.

At ten to midnight, there are only me and two other people and a fog that appears like an eager prelude.

As the single headlight approaches from the end of the driveway, I glance to the other partygoers. They're both unconscious. I shake them and call their names, but they don't stir.

The car is for me and me alone.

"What are you doing way out here?" Rob asks. "Looking for someone new?"

"What if I am?" I glare at him through the shrouded moonlight. "It wouldn't be hard to find somebody better."

He releases the steering wheel and wraps his hands around my neck. The car veers, and I'm sure it'll careen over a hill or off a cliff, but as the border of my vision disappears, the engine stops on the side of the road as if on its own.

Because I've got nothing to lose, I dig my nails into his neck. The warmth of his blood cascading down my arms soothes me as the world goes gray again.

The following night, he's the Rob I like again. A Rob with a cut on his neck, a cut in the same place I scratched him.

"What happened to you?" I ask.

He snorts. "You did, silly. Don't you remember?"

"Yeah, I do," I say, though my words are little more than air. I breathe quietly, carefully, and wonder what it means.

It isn't his first scratch. But it's the first one that sticks.

Back at home, I tuck a knife into my jacket. And I wait. Sometimes, we go weeks with easy drives. I won't do anything, not unless he makes the first move. I'm not like him. I'm no monster.

When he's the Rob I don't like again, he loses an ear. Then a couple fingers. And an eye. I can't escape his grasp, but I can chip away at him like a sculptor before a block of granite.

On our anniversary, he pulls a tire iron from beneath the seat and bludgeons me, but I take his nose first.

"I don't understand why you do it," he says when he's the Rob I like.

In the backseat, I caress what's left of him. "You wouldn't understand."

Soon, he can barely hold the wheel or see the road.

"Does it hurt?" I ask him on a good night.

"Every single moment."

So the next evening, I forego my coat and grab a box of matches instead. I carry them tucked in my pocket for a week, all the while wishing I could heal us both. Wishing it could go on forever. Wishing it were over already.

It's a Sunday when I know it's time. The car stops in front of the porch, and Rob wrenches me inside.

"I love you," I say. "I wish I didn't, but I still do."

He scoffs. "You really are a fool."

"I know."

The tire iron's still under the seat, and I grasp it like a hangman tying a noose. One blow and he's out. Out but not dead. The car glides to the shoulder, and I kiss his scarred forehead before closing the passenger door for the last time.

I strike a match and drop it in the gas tank.

The fire catches like a whisper in the wind waiting to be heard. It's beautiful. More beautiful than me or the sea or anything else. He screams inside the car. For almost ten minutes, he screams. Then for ten minutes, I think how much louder the world seems without the scream.

After the blaze burns out, I blow a kiss at the wreckage and start down the highway, not caring where I go or when I get there.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gwendolyn Kiste is a speculative fiction writer based in Pennsylvania. Her stories have appeared or are forthcoming in publications such as LampLight, Nightmare, Flash Fiction Online, and Electric Spec as well as Flame Tree Publishing's *Chilling Horror Short Stories* anthology. She currently resides on an abandoned horse farm with her husband, two cats, and not nearly enough ghosts.

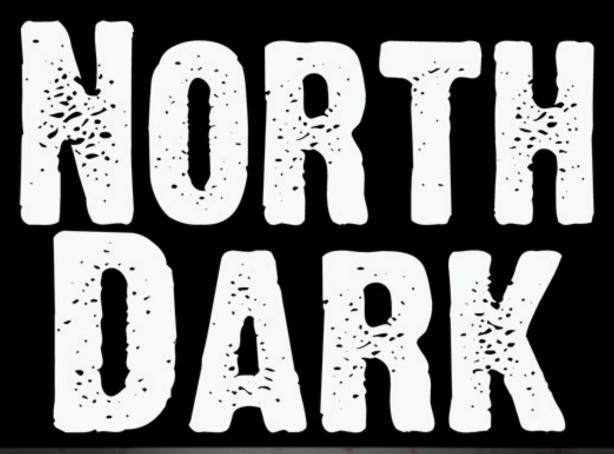
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An Aberrant Mind

Ken MacGregor

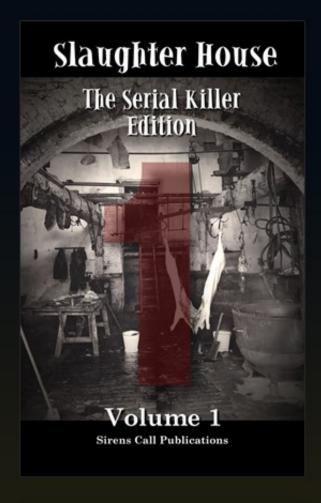
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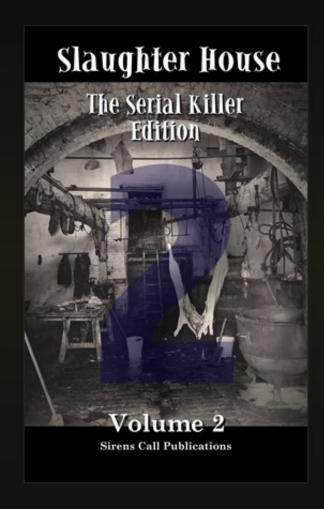
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LaLupa Magenta Nero

It's that time of month again and rent is due. Evening is falling fast, drowning the city in dark hues of purple. I'm starting to get a little edgy, a little nervous, as I walk to work. Every night is my first night, every night is my last night.

From outside it looks like any other exclusive strip club. Black painted walls and door, no signs, no neon. I've certainly done a lot worse. At least there are no homeless junkies sleeping out front.

The guy at the door gives me the once over and a nod of approval.

"Have a good night sweetheart," he says politely as he opens the door for me. He has a neck like a tree trunk, a black tee shirt clings to pumped up muscle.

Inside it's tasteful enough. The furnishings are plush red and black. Not too big a space, which is good. I like an intimate audience.

A cute blonde girl is stocking the bar. She smiles and waves at me cheerfully.

"The dressing room is through there," she shouts.

In the dressing room, which is in fact a storeroom crammed with furniture and boxes of stuff, I meet Candy and Amber. There is always a Candy and Amber in every club. I put my bag down on a brightly lit table, glance at myself in the large mirror and sigh. I begin to unpack some things when Candy comes over for the standard welcome.

"Hi, I'm Candy," she tells me. Her icy blue eyes sparkle. She stands too close to me, one hand on her hip. Her nails are long oval points, painted white. She is wearing a tiny silver dress; her fake breasts look painful and her skin is a baked orange colour. I stare back at her, bored. It's that time of month. I'm cranky and hungry. I've skipped a few meals lately.

"This is my table. You can use one of those over there." She points to the cluttered corner.

I get a flash of her gutted from neck to belly and I can't stop my eyes from twitching. She says something else but I don't catch the words; I have to concentrate, slow down my breathing. Amber comes over to mediate.

"Don't worry about Candy, she's just very territorial."

Amber smiles warmly at me and gives Candy a nudge, unsettling her on her platform stilettos.

"I'm Lalupa," I say.

"La what? Is that, like, a Mexican name?" Candy chuckles to herself and wanders over to a clothes rack to flick through costumes and lingerie.

"Have you met Andy yet," asks Amber.

I shake my head no.

"Well you should get dressed and go meet him. If he doesn't like your look he won't let you work tonight."

I nod and start getting changed.

Amber sits down at a table nearby and begins to style her long red hair. Soon a few other girls arrive. Chatter and laughter fills the dressing room.

I keep to myself, hoping not to get drawn into conversation. I don't want to make friends and I'm eager for the night to get underway. I hate hearing the same old stories. I don't care that you are stripping to pay for your law degree or that you have a happy husband and two kids waiting for you at home. I'm here because I like the thrill and the cash. A girl's got to eat.

A wave of nausea rolls through me; my skin prickles with heat. There's a stabbing pain building in my head. I take a few more deep breaths.

I prefer to wear a vintage style. Black lace corset, fine seamed stockings, shiny black patent heels – I hate those horrendous stripper platforms. My glossy black curls bounce around my pale face as I inspect myself in the mirror. Candy glances at me then mutters to her pals and a round of giggles erupts. Let them laugh. While they can.

I find my way to the manager's office. He's chatting with a guy sitting by his desk. I stand in the room, still and silent like an ornament, waiting for him to acknowledge me

They're both wearing tailored grey suits. Merino wool, I can smell it. Silk ties and crisp fine cotton. Their short haircuts are gelled carefully to appear casually tousled. Thick designer cologne cloaks their skin. A fresh ocean scent with base notes of vanilla and spice. Beneath the cologne is the distinct stench of their sweat. Lean, firm flesh, rippled with fine streaks of fat. My mouth begins to water again.

Finally he looks over at me.

"Nice outfit honey," he says, "but I hope it comes off pretty quick, this is not a burlesque club!"

He laughs a dry, cruel chuckle and the other guy chimes in. Flesh taut with obsessive exercise and a diet of fine food, tears off the bone in thin strips

"House takes fifteen percent?

"Straight down to business. I like it. That's right honey, House takes fifteen percent, the rest is yours. Pretty generous for a classy place like this. Tonight's a trial shift. If I like your routine and you're hot on the floor you can come back tomorrow night."

"I'm always a crowd pleaser."

"Are you now? Well, good for you! You're on after Candy. She's a hard act to follow." Now it's my turn to laugh, which confuses them for a moment.

"What's your name again, honey?"

"Lalupa."

"Lupa? Okay, have a good night honey, milk 'em dry." They both chuckle as I turn to leave.

Things start to heat up as the night rolls out. I stand at the bar, trying not to shake or twitch, and watch the patrons come in, waiting for a likely hit. I watch the other girls too, as they saunter, smiling, chatting. They look delectable.

I set my sights on Mr. Average White Collar and strut over casually. He is self-conscious and uncomfortable and will easily blow all his cash on me.

I give him a sweet girl next door stripper smile and ask if he wants a dance. He nods and throws back his Scotch as I step in close and begin to sway and swish, swivel and shake. He pays generously but I decide to keep moving; his anxiety is irritating. I circle the floor, bidding time, choosing the men I want to dance for and chat to. I ignore the ones who are too obnoxious or rude. Andy is poised at the bar, watching me and frowning.

Candy comes on stage to cheers and whistles. With a beaming white smile she waves at the audience, blowing kisses, striking provocative poses. Obviously the darling of the club but I'll soon change that. I head to the dressing room to freshen up.

The moon is full and high in the sky. I can feel it, gleaming, beckoning. It's making me tremble.

Finally the DJ cues my music and I take the stage, happy to be in the limelight.

I love working the pole; I have a real talent for it. My unnatural dexterity gives my routine a flowing ease. I radiate confidence and power. Men sense it, they sit up in their seats, intrigued. Soon all eyes in the room are on me. The men are under my captivating spell – the women glare at me jealously. I'll be cleaning up tonight. I'm going to empty their pockets.

As I dance I'm checking the exits, scanning the room with all my senses. There are never too many for me to handle.

I can feel it coming as I spin and twirl, bubbling under my skin, beginning to shiver through me, a blissful terror. I get so excited I grit my teeth to hold it back. I like to hold out as long as possible, give them a bit of a show first. After all, I'm a really hot dancer. I stretch my fine limbs, shimmy and slither. With legs wrapped around the pole I use my free hand to unhook the corset and flick it off. Men cheer. I flex and hang upside down, spinning slowly. I close my eyes and enjoy the rush. It's that time of month and I can't resist it anymore. The moon is singing to my soul and I need to respond. A growl builds in my throat as I embrace it. It is so close to the surface now, about to burst out of me.

The men in the front row see it first. Something strange is beginning to happen. Hair sprouts, thin and fine, along my forearms and thighs, on my chest. It spreads slowly until a dense fur covers me.

A few men chuckle thinking it is part of the routine. I can see Andy, still standing at the bar, looking really pissed off. I can make out the confused faces of the women, frozen in mid lap dance, staring at me. My body buckles and shakes, I can no longer hold it back or slow it down. I love this part, morphing from an object of desire into an object of terror. I love seeing their faces change, from lust to disgust. I drop from the pole to the floor as the bestial force surges. I begin to convulse. Nobody comes to my aid. Everybody watches. I can feel their bubbling fear, their fascination and perverse satisfaction.

My knuckles bust through skin; tendons bulge. A wail of pain escapes me as I paw at my face with bloody hands. My head is down and they can't see my jaw stretching, sharp fangs painfully pushing out of tender gums. Thick whiskers sprout on my cheeks and chin. My black curls stream down my back in a heavy mass. The crack of joints and stretching bones, each vertebra popping, the wet sticky sound of elongating sinews and muscles, resounds in my ears.

Finally it is complete and I crouch, heaving from the exertion. My breath begins to slow down as I settle into my new form.

There is complete silence in the club. The DJ has stopped the music, the patrons and staff stare at the creature on stage.

I lift my head and they see me for what I am. I watch them with eyes glowing yellow. I raise my snout and sniff deeply; terror, glorious, delicious terror. And a comforting, familiar smell; my pack. They are here. They have entered the club and are manning the exits.

I stretch, throwback k my head and howl –a maniacal call. Screaming begins and in that fantastic moment, as hysteria breaks out, I plunge.

I take out the line of guys down front, one after another, with fast swipes. Shredding them easily, ripping chunks out of their chests and thighs as I take their wallets. Green bills flutter and float, drifting down into growing pools of blood.

There is no way out; my pack closes in. They are crouched, snarling, snatching the runners and pinning them down. The thick smell of slaughter erupting is intoxicating.

I leap from the stage and land on the bar. I can hear the bar girl, curled underneath the bar, sobbing. I glare at Andy as I crawl towards him slowly. He doesn't move as I sniff his chest. I can hear the frantic beat of his heart. His eyes are wide with shock. I bite off one of his arms. He begins to emit a high whine, not quite a scream, a peculiar dying noise. I take a chomp out of his chest, snatching out his heart, and gulp it down greedily. He drops to the floor and I on top of him.

I leave my pack to finish off the crowd. I am drawn by another exhilarating smell. Several dancers have locked themselves in the dressing room. I can hear their hysterical, muffled tears.

I tear the door off its hinges and they burst into screams, scampering into the corner. They dare not glance at me. My beauty is of another realm. Covered in coarse hair, mangled claws for hands and feet, sharp-pointed ears and snout, breasts hanging long and loose. I roar at them and they shriek, huddling closer like mice.

I can no longer make out individual faces. I scoop up one of the girls, collecting her by the scalp. I lick her skin. She is coated in so many strange flavours; sweat, tears, alcohol, makeup, deodorant, talcum powder.

I bite into her neck and shake her vigorously. Each taste makes me more ravenous. I eat quickly, snapping spines, crushing skulls, crunching bones, guzzling organs. A decadent blood drenched mess surrounds me.

It's that time of month. I am not quite myself. I am more than myself. The full moon is glowing as bright as the sun; it makes me ache with rage. I howl a blissful song but my hunger is far from satiated. I leap at the small window in the room, tearing away the bars and bricks. I bound out into the warm night; the city is a feast waiting to happen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Magenta Nero loves to spin dark tales inspired by myth, magick and madness, weaving elements of Gothic horror, fantasy and erotica. Her work has been published in The Sirens Call eZine, Sanitarium Magazine and in many anthologies from James Ward Kirk Fiction and J.Ellington Ashton Press. Magenta currently resides in the Northern Rivers, New South Wales, Australia.

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Ghost of You Brian Rosenberger

New job. New Opportunity. New schedule. Someone else already requested the day off. Low man on the totem pole. At least you can leave early.

A race against time, thinking what still needs to be done – Skeletons to pose, webs to hang, your costume and the candy, can't forget the candy. The children are counting on it.

An eternity later, you arrive. Friends and neighbors and the children all love your costume – best ghost they've ever seen.

And you flashback to the drive home, an accident backing up traffic, flashing lights strobing the darkness. You smile – best ghost indeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of the must read short story collection, As the Worm Turns, and three poetry collections.

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White Chalk Rivka Jacobs

It's called coffin birth. The scientific term is postmortem fetal expulsion. The birth of a dead baby through the vaginal opening of a dead mother, pushed out by the decomposition gases in the belly. It's not supposed to happen often. It had never happened to us, before.

It was my fault. I was supposed to process the bodies, dispose of them in a timely fashion. But I let them pile up. There were maybe a dozen 'guests' as my late mistress used to call them, waiting to be delivered. There's a great deal of space in the chalk catacombs under my lady's country house. And the chalk absorbs the odors. So sometimes I used to procrastinate, and get behind.

That was twenty-five years ago, I think. I remember Margaret Thatcher was prime minister. I was already in my fifties, and I'd been serving my lady for some thirty-five years. We got along just fine, her ladyship and me. She first found me on White Horse Hill in Uffington in the wee hours of the morning. As a girl, I used to hike up there in the spring and summer. It's a long, sloping, grassy mound and during the day the view is lovely, with the wind singing in your ears and the distant checkerboard of farmlands rolling off into distant horizons. But I took to climbing after sunset, spending the night at the top, where the slashes and circles of chalk glowed in the dark and the spirits of prehistoric peoples made me shiver.

When I first saw her, dressed in the silk and lace rags of a Georgian duchess, her face and breast all bloody, she was staggering towards me over one of the hill's ancient earthen parapets. I wasn't afraid. I believe I stood up and smiled, like greeting an old friend. She could have killed me. Maybe she was satiated and didn't feel the urge. She stopped not two feet from me, drew herself up, and raised her smeared chin in the air. She pushed back at her ratted curls; she reminded me of a sleek and young Miss Havisham, all deathly white with rosy splotches. "I need a new servant," she said. "You'll do," she announced.

I accompanied her home immediately--or rather we walked to where she'd parked her automobile and I drove that archaic contraption to her estate on the Dorset downs. It makes me laugh to think of her driving that beat-up old Bentley, then getting out to walk the country lanes hunting her prey in her eighteenth-century gear. The situation didn't make her laugh-she was very frustrated. She explained to me that after World War II she found herself isolated and alone, and it became increasingly difficult to keep up with the dizzy pace of social norms and fashion. She hated the utter loneliness, the crassness of caring for herself. But loyal and competent servants had become hard to find. "You are a throwback, Darwyn," she often told me, "you are a treasure."

I was tall and strong for a girl. I was bullied and teased when I was little--called every synonym for 'fat' that little piggish minds could think of. My father was a farmer so I was used to hard work. But I also yearned for a different life, for excitement, for a release. I used to get bored with the same old routine. I constantly wanted to rebel against everyone's expectations.

Hah. Look at me now. I've been carrying out the same duties, going through the same routine night in and night out, for over sixty years. But I'm not complaining. I enjoyed my service. I'm one of the rare ones, a human helper who outlives their master. May my mistress rest in peace. I found her ashes smoldering in her pretty strapless dress one morning a year ago, by the pond a hundred yards from the front door. She gave no warning, no hints that such a sudden end was possible. She obeyed the rules and kept to herself, so others of her kind never noticed or cared about our existence. Now, of course, that I consider events, I should have seen it coming. I feel responsible. It was my job to take care of my lady, to keep her from harm, to protect her, even from herself. I was her shield from the sun, her cover, her assistant. I carried out her wishes and whims, her orders, and tried to make her happy. Even when she wanted to be a mother again.

Which brings me back to twenty-five years ago, and my dereliction of duty. The limestone downland is a thousand feet thick beneath our rustic stone and shingle house. My lady lived there for longer than she could remember, and over the centuries previous retainers helped her fashion grottos and chambers and vaults deep in the chalk, reached by a steep stairway under the kitchen. 'Below' as we called it, had it's own otherworldly and ancient cast. Illuminated by torches, the tunnels and rooms glistened and shimmered. The walls and ceilings--some squared, some arched--glowed with the fossilized remains of ancient animals and plants and were dotted here and there with nodules of chert and flint. Everything was white. And when we came back up to earth, we were coated with a fine white dust--every speck of which was the corpse of a microscopic creature, or the powdery residue of human bones.

Twenty-five years ago, on that particular day, I finally got myself down those stairs to take care of a month's worth of fare, most of them women invited to high tea with the 'duchess.' This was genuine high tea, by the way, at around six-thirty, with the meats and smoked fish and cheeses. Sometimes we served bread, butter, and little cakes. Low tea was too early for my mistress, although she asked me to set the table and partake on my own. Which I did--with a pink Limoges rose-petal tea pot and dainty tea cups, crisp white linens, and a triple tray of pastries, sandwiches and scones all to myself. In any case, as I pulled open the thick wooden door to our 'netherworld' I heard this most god-awful high-pitched screeching.

I was startled, but immediately presumed this noise came from an animal that had somehow gotten trapped below. I carried a battery-operated lantern and made my way to the chamber where I'd deposited the bodies. The shrieking intensified, and was very irritating and unnerving. Something deep inside me was agitated and affected. When I entered my temporary morgue, I realized at once that the caterwauling originated right there. I don't remember being frightened; hardly anything has ever made me afraid. But I had no idea what was going on, and the crying, for that's what it was, impacted me in ways that I didn't understand.

When I held the light up and turned in place, I located a shiny, wriggling and jerking small mass on the floor, flailing its tiny fists and feet between the legs of one of the female corpses, and wailing in a way I never heard from any living creature. I walked right over and squatted down, catching the whole of the scenario in a yellow globe of illumination.

I supposed that the dead woman whose legs cradled this squiggling thing, had been pregnant. I didn't notice when she was alive. Not that it would've mattered to me if I had. I checked her first--she was bloated, black and gray, her eyes open and cloudy and staring off at imprints of ammonites and the bones of an ichthyosaur frozen in the wall. The rotting skin of her throat looked like it was peeling open from the point where she was cut and drained. Her lower half was coated with and floating in a black, tarry goo that had spilled from her private parts. Bluish globs of decaying placenta and a shriveled umbilical cord were draped across her thighs.

I set the lantern on a clean spot of the chalk floor and stood, took a strategic step closer, then bent down to lift the baby so I could examine it further. I didn't stop to think why the infant was still alive. I was surprised when it immediately reacted to my touch, gripping the skin of my lower arms, pinching me hard, kicking me with its feet. It opened its eyes and stared into my own. The mouth began making sucking motions, and the head made repeated lunges towards my face. I hastily lowered the infant and pried it loose. As I rose to my feet once again, I said aloud, "I'm coming back, I'm going to get someone who can figure this out."

I had to wait, though, until dusk. It was a difficult, going about my chores. I thought I could hear that shrieking cry wherever I was in the house. Once the sun disappeared below

the horizon, I uncharacteristically hurried upstairs and used my key to enter my lady's second-floor, windowless and locked room before she called for me. She was just waking up, stretching her arms high. She yawned, exposing her mouth full of perfect and incredibly sharp petite teeth.

"My lady," I pleaded, "forgive me for entering. We have a situation...."

After I described to her what I'd observed, instead of being angry with me, she leaped from her bed in her billowing, silky gown and threw her arms around me in a tight hug. "Why Darwyn Frye, you are indeed the very best servant I have ever had," she exclaimed. "You knew I wanted a baby."

I said nothing, and lowered my head. I still had no idea what had actually happened.

Later, after my mistress had flown down all those steps to 'below' and retrieved the baby, and after it was installed in a room in the house, which became known as the nursery, before dawn the following morning, my mistress told me, "Darwyn, my dear, you shall be his nanny. I'm calling him John. You must make sure he is secure during the day, in the same way you look after me."

"But, my lady, what ... I mean to say ... how ... how did he survive?"

She was up to date with the fashions twenty-five years ago, and dressed in a bright blue suit with those large shoulders. She reminded me of the actress Joan Collins from my favorite program at the time, *Dallas*. She was standing before her bedroom mirror, out of habit, unfastening her pearls from behind by touch. "He's like me, now," she said. "I must have transferred just enough of my blood into that woman's system ... you know how I like to show my love ... enough so that the infant was born into our life first before being birthed again by death. Could you help me with this, my dear?"

I walked behind her, and removed her jacket. I began unfastening the small silk buttons from their loops, down the back of her diaphanous blouse. I glanced at the mirror; the effect always made me smile. I couldn't see my lady's reflection, but neither could I see all of mine as her outline was still discernible, obscuring and bending the light.

"My lady, forgive me for pestering you, but, what do we feed him?" I asked as she stepped out of her skirt, leaving it to fold and puddle on the carpeted floor.

"Why, the same thing that feeds me," she answered. She laughed when she saw my face. "Don't worry, we will be fine! He can't drink much, and I'll feed him every day after I feed myself. Do you approve?" She asked, of course ironically.

But I didn't approve. I didn't like this turn of events at all. My job was to protect her, and I didn't like this at all. I remained silent while she slipped on her nightgown. I didn't speak until I was brushing out her rich, black hair while she sat on the edge of her massive bed. "My lady," I ventured, "if he's one of you, you can't ever destroy him. It's against the rules. You told me. You'll have to feed him constantly, every day...."

She grasped my hand and stopped the brush. She looked into my face. "Darwyn, let me worry about my son. You do as you're told," she said, but not unkindly.

Sometimes they become unstable and don't think right, she once told me. After centuries begin to blend together and time ceases to exist.

At first she happily took care of 'John' and played the part of new mother. She even pushed him in a stroller in the local towns of Stratton and Grimstone, as twilight changed to evening. But after the years sped by, my lady grew anxious and more and more annoyed. Gradually it fell to me, to care for the baby. And while my mistress had never violated my person, and had carefully protected me from others of her kind, one day not long ago, she ordered me to feed this creature.

And I obeyed, and continue to do so. I bare my breasts for the task. I alternate nipples, giving the other time to heal. Those tiny teeth hardly cause any damage or pain. The wailing, though, the constant shrill, screaming wail of this thing that is never satisfied, never happy,

never full, that's been harder to live with. Just after feeding, while he dozes and I blot my bleeding flesh, he looks so sweet, so much like a real baby. And when he's hungry or angry or vicious and he snaps at me or tries to hit me with his feet or head, when I tell him to "Stop!" he does, he listens to what I say. After all, he gazed into my eyes first, and I think he might have bonded with me.

My mistress melted in the sun. I can't say exactly why, but I suspect this creature, this baby monster had something to do with it. She couldn't kill it, she couldn't leave it, he was her responsibility.

I feel this is my fault. If I'd incinerated the remains when I was supposed to....

I've tried to maintain the routine of this house as if my lady were still with us. I continue to set up low tea, and high. I accomplish all my appointed, daily tasks. I've considered all the alternatives. I've asked myself, what am I supposed to do? Lure people here and keep them prisoner, using them as milk cows for the eternally hungry infant? Am I supposed to continue feeding him myself until I die before my time? Today I made a decision. I'm prepared to accept the consequences. I can only hope my late mistress, wherever she is, would approve.

I think the only thing I'll really miss is the warmth of the sun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rivka grew up in South Florida and currently lives in West Virginia. In the 1980s she published stories in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology, and more recently has placed stories with The Sirens Call eZine, The Literary Hatchet, and Riding Light Review. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

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Reign D.C. Lam

The forest has its dark areas, where the trees' shadows cover the ground, where the sun gladly would not have chosen to shine. The streams run red and the animals are an anxious mixture of magical beasts. These are not the precious animals that are written in delicate fairytales and told to humans at night. These are animals that they make up stories about in order to rest their fears. This place- a spot in the forest where willows really weep at the carnage that they attest to, lay a mink thing. Most people would call this beast docile with its elegantly long legs and silver threaded horn. The mare stood on its four hooves after bending down for a drink in a nearby creek. Humans had come here. They had their guns drawn as they lumbered about, their bright blue, green, and brown eyes counting the trees as if they were gold coins laid out before them. This place was so deep, that the mare had wondered how they had finally reached it. She had dug her left hoof in the ground as she had curiously peered from behind a large tree. The men had murmured as they scratched their beards and looked from one to another. She had tossed her mane of hair to the other side of her neck. This would be easy. She could drive them out as if they were ghosts in the night or leave them be for the other beasts to eat. This was her domain, she reigned here. She could not allow this matter to continue. One man in a flannel shirt touched a mystical tree, before she could do anything a poisonous thorn appeared in the taupe colored bark, just as he was to touch the tree again. His fingertips nimbly brushing against the thorn without a single prick. Even the trees had rejected the men.

The mare's pink fleshed nostrils flared and its bright crimson colored eyes stared into the abyss of its own hatred. She could not leave this matter unattended. They had arrived around the same time a few days ago. Of course, time was measured differently here. The time was measured in battles, wounds, kills, and the terror that was reflected in the vegetation of the area. She swooped her neck low staring curiously at her own reflection in the water. Her gleaming white coat and fine horn that had sat upon the very top of her head. Humans call her a unicorn while other animals call her monster. The true monster of the forests of Europe. She had always been more clever than a leprechaun and more ruthless than any beast imaginable. The water rippled slightly as a leaf from a graying tree landed on top of her reflection. She dipped even lower forming a human figure to snatch up the leaf in her amber colored hands. The reflection that was once that of a horse-like creature was replaced by a petite girl with hair which reflected light as if it were the moon in the sky. She had large almond shaped eyes the color of sprouting spring leaves and a tall slender build. She heard grass crunching beneath feet as she crumpled up the dying leaf. She quickly darted behind a tree while ribbons of silky black hair trailed behind her.

Now that she had transformed she could be anyone; a Turkish princess, an amazon, the queen of the Nile-anyone! She flipped her brilliantly beautiful hair behind her shoulder as she cleared her throat. She would need the help of the others if she hoped to get rid of them. In the clearing she heard human voices. They were laughing and talking loudly, their voices cascading through the forest in gentle waves of echoes. They did not know. The beasts that resided here step so lightly that they cannot be heard, their calls so light that even the most gifted whisperer's words could not be caught on the wind. All that could be heard here was death. She parted her lips slightly and began to scream. A tree lowered its thin branch to assist her. She broke off part of the branch and gruelingly rubbed the branch across her thighs and chest, creating rubbing burns against her perfect lightly browned skin. She slumped to the base of the tree, which had gladly untangled its knobby roots to clear a seat for her. Immediately within a matter of moments the men were upon her. Their eyes were wild as they caught sight of the injured beauty. Without hesitation one man, who seemed to be the leader pointed in the direction that they had come from and instructed two of the five men. The two men ran off as fast as their large bellies and work boots could go.

The leader swiftly took off this tawny colored worker's jacket and threw it over her nakedness. Humans with their authority to cover up nudity instead of realizing the beauty and power behind the natural, were quick to shy away from her form. The other three men dutifully covered their eyes with their rough work hands. She whimsically pouted producing a tantalizing tear that drifted down her apple red cheeks. The leader looked upon her with pity in his glass blue eyes. His scraggly blonde beard was not enough to cover his cherry red thin lips which situated into a frown. She hated that look. No one had ever looked at her in such a way. Her heart began to race as her face slightly flinched to reveal her menacing intent. The man was taken aback as his brow flexed knotting his eyebrows closer together. He spoke to her in a gentle tone while kneeling at her side. Two shrieks echoed through the forest as clear as two bells ringing out. She gave a humorous grin as her wild eyes cloaked in pleasure stared into his terrified ones. His eyes became glassy as the neatly placed jacket fell from her shoulders as she stood. His eyes ran icy blue in their sockets as he looked at her. He was seeing her for the first time. He knew what she was capable of. Even if he did not fully understand what she was and how she had calculated their impending doom, he had known that she was the only one who would conquer this forest. This bleak lair of misery was not to be explored, understood, or exploited.

I would like to tell you what had happened to these human men. This area which had functioned as the keeper of secrets and the domain of fairytales and nightmares knows me well. When I tread lightly on its mounds of greenery it will not betray the darkness that

exudes within it. I can only report what I saw as the end. The beautiful and proud white mare with the captivating horn laying on top of bloody clothes. Her gorgeous white coat usually a sight of unspoken beauty and purity blemished with blood. They do not write about these types of things in books. Happy endings and beautiful beasts are the steadfast of human imagination and pleasure but here in this willowy forest, where beasts do not fear men, happy endings never existed. The only thing that resides here is brutality.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: D.C. Lam is an early childhood professional from the greater Los Angeles area. She enjoys creating stories based off of legendary creatures. She currently has a horror story blog based from the American Gullah myth of the boo hag.

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Supernatural Vlogs Anthony Avina

Hugh Price walked hand in hand with his boyfriend of three years, Xander Yates. The 18 year olds were lost in a world all their own, barely aware of the dazzling lights and sounds of Los Angeles surrounding them. They were in a state of total and pure joy, and they only seemed to exist in a bubble of their own making.

The men were set to graduate from high school in just a week's time. After years of dodging judgmental peers, awkward glances from teachers and staff, and hours upon hours of mind-numbing studies, they were finally ready to venture forth into the great unknown that was life. Lucky enough to be raised by loving and accepting parents, both Hugh and Xander were the typical looking teenage boys. Tall, thin and pale, the boys had never entertained serious thoughts of being athletic superstars.

In fact, as they prepared for graduation, a plan they had been working on since they met sophomore year. Both Xander and Hugh were aspiring to be writers and paranormal investigators. They decided that after they graduated, they wanted to take a year off before they decided on whether or not they would attend college, and instead they would travel the United States, staying in supposedly haunted locations and writing down their experiences while also filming video blogs for their video channel, Way of Life Vlogs.

Having amassed a following of 100,000 followers, the boys had become internet sensations, dazzling viewers with not only their good looks but with their paranormal and geek centric interests, their openness with their audience and bright, upbeat personalities that spoke to their kindhearted nature.

Walking down a brightly lit street in Los Angeles, Hugh and Xander spoke of their plans, and where they would be going on their first week on the road.

"That mental asylum in Arizona sounds pretty interesting. It's been closed since the 30's, and we'll be able to stay at a hotel five minutes down the road, so we can spend a majority of the night inside. We'll have to watch out for vagrants and everything, but I think we'll get some good material," Hugh was saying.

"That sounds great. We could..." Xander began to say, but suddenly the pair stopped, and Xander stared at something in front of them.

"What is it babe..." Hugh began to ask, but he spotted it right away. The old Dorian Hotel sat on a dark corner in the heart of Los Angeles. While the rest of the city was lit up, the Dorian was shrouded in darkness, and seemed to emit a feeling of dread from deep within. The hotel had closed in the 90's, after bigger, more advanced hotels had been built in neighboring areas. While no specific murders or deaths had ever been reported there, rumors had arisen about the hotel's haunted history. Before it closed down, spirits had been reported

there, as had sulphorous, demonic sounds and smells and even a mysterious creature that resided in the basement of the five story hotel.

"Let check it out," Xander said, turning to Hugh and smiling.

"It's late, babe. Let's just go to your place and cuddle up on the couch with a good scary movie," Hugh replied.

"Come on, where's your sense of adventure? How can we call ourselves paranormal investigators or writers if we can't even investigate a haunted hotel in our own neighborhood?"

"I don't know..."

"Come on Hugh. Grab you smart phone and let's make a low key vlog in the Dorian. Maybe we'll get to see the creature living in the basement."

"Um...alright, let's do it," Hugh said, taking out his phone and following Xander to the wooden fence around the Dorian. They looked around to make sure no one was watching the street, and when they were confident they were alone, they jumped over the fence, and made their way inside.

Ten minutes later, the men found a kicked in door near the back of the hotel, and they stepped into the hotel's kitchen. Old pots and pans sat in inactive sinks, never having been washed and smelling foul. Hugh began recording as Xander led them past the dirty, crud filled counters of the kitchen and into the main foyer of the hotel. The decorations, furniture and floors were old and decayed, but it was easy to imagine the glorious look of the hotel years earlier. The floors were lined with red and gold carpets, and matched the golden walls that spoke of old Hollywood. The furniture, the art hanging on the walls, and the large mahogany reception desk all spoke of a 1940's Hollywood premiere party.

"Where to first?" Hugh asked from behind the camera.

"We've got to start with the basement. We can debunk that and then move on up to the higher floor."

"Sounds good, lead the way!"

Hugh and Xander made their way through the lobby, looking through doors until they found the one leading into the basement. As the door opened, a foul smell wafted up the stairs, causing the boys to gag. Shaking their heads and holding their breaths, they plunged forward, walking down the narrow staircase that led into the basement.

The sound of water dripping into a puddle echoed throughout the basement. The smell only got worse as the men arrived at the foot of the stairs. Electricity no longer ran through the building, so Xander pulled out his phone and used the flashlight built into it to illuminate their path. They walked in silence, with Hugh focused on recording everything while Xander eagerly searched every inch of the basement. Rather than one large room, the entire floor was designed to house thousands of shipping crates and supplies, and had been divided into dozens of smaller rooms that had been used to organize the boxes.

They searched each one of those rooms, until they came upon the old foreman's office. Here the dock manager was in charge of overseeing shipments, scheduling his workers and even distribution of the supplies throughout the hotel. As the boys approached this final door, the smell grew fantastically foul, and as they looked at the door, they noticed that a bright red substance was covering the door knob.

"Probably just rust," Xander whispered, looking at Hugh with his heart beating faster and faster in his chest.

"Bullshit," Hugh replied, and for the first time he realized that he too was whispering. Neither one of them knew why they were speaking so quietly, but rather than think about it, they pressed on. Xander reached out and grasped the handle, and in one fluid motion, he pushed the door inward.

The room had lain barren for years, but in that moment, the office suddenly had three occupants. The boys stared, slack-jawed and still filming, as a hunched over form stood in the corner. Splatters of what was surely blood lay along the floors and walls of the office, and bones lay scattered in a corner of the room. The form turned towards them, and its face was horribly twisted, a sunken hole where its nose should have been and ears pointed at the tips. The body, hands and bare feet were human, but its face was a demonic form unlike anything the boys had ever before seen or imagined. Its lips were a pallid white, and its red eyes darted back and forth between them, as if they were hungry. Instantly, the boys knew they were in the presence of a vampire.

"Who are you?" The vampire asked in a raw, raspy voice. It turned towards them, walking away from the corner and sluggishly moving towards the door.

"Please...don't hurt us," Hugh asked, stepping back slowly with Xander, not wanting to turn their backs on the creature.

"I...I'm sure my presence disturbs you boys. I..I'm sorry about that," the creature said, sadness filling his voice.

"Who are you? Why are you here?" Xander asked, trying to put on a brave face in front of the vampire.

"I...my name matters not. I live here, in this place of the dead, in hopes of isolating myself from the living world. My curse has turned me into something...more than human," it replied. The vampire stood now in the doorway, seeming to be holding itself up by grabbing onto the door.

"You're...you're a vampire?" Hugh asked. They boys continued their slow backwards dance towards the stairs.

"How...how astute of you, my lads. I'd love to stay and chat...but you must leave this place, and quickly."

"Why do you want us to go? You're not going to kill us?" Xander asked as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

"No my boys, I'm not. You see, I may be a vampire, but I'm no monster. I only feed on rats and the bodies of those she kills."

"She? She who?"

"The lady of the hotel. As I said lads, I made my home among the dead. She's a soul collector; an entity neither ghost nor demon. She's an entity all her own, and she kills without mercy or hesitation."

Before the boys could say anything else, the lights in the basement suddenly lit up, despite a lack of electricity. The hotel began to shake on its foundation, and a fierce wind swept through the basement, carrying with it the screaming voices of the dead.

"You best run boys. Once the music starts, you shall never leave this place again. Go, now," the vampire shouted. Not waiting around, Hugh and Xander took off, bounding up the stairs as if the devil were on their heels. They ran out of the basement and back into the entry hall, which was suddenly lit up and adorned in glamorous decorations, as if it were the grand opening from back in the 30's.

The boys ran into the kitchen, which was suddenly filled with the smells of cooking meat and the sounds of busy kitchen staff. As they ran towards the open door they had crawled through in the first place, the sounds and smells of the kitchen, the screams, and the shaking all stopped. Hugh and Xander stood at the door, catching their breaths and listening for trouble.

At that moment, jazz music began to echo throughout the halls. A man's velvety voice began to sing an old jazz song, and both Hugh and Xander looked at one another, knowing what was coming for them.

A chilling voice spoke behind them, "Boys, which one of you would like to dance with the lady of the hotel?"

Not waiting around to see who the voice belonged to, both Hugh and Xander plunged out of the hotel door together, hand in hand and running for their lives. In their wake they dropped the phone they had brought with them to film their night. As they hopped the fence and left the Dorian Hotel behind, the music swelled louder and louder. In the phone's screen, the camera recorded a blueish figure of a woman moving towards the door. She wore a long gown that matched that of an old lounge singer, and her face was radiant. However as she grew closer to the door, her face morphed, changing from a beautiful figure to a horribly scarred, blood dripping demon. Her jaw unhinged, growing larger and larger as she approached the screen. The music suddenly changed into the boisterous voices of a thousand screams, and she began to reach towards the phone, until at the final moment before she touched it, the screen went dark.

The screams stopped, and the hotel once more enveloped itself into darkness. The mystery surrounding the haunting of the Dorian Hotel went dark once more.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Author Anthony Avina has been an indie author for over five years. An avid fan of the horror genre and hungry to showcase the true nature of society, Mr. Avina has always written tales that not only entertain and scare, but also bring out true and heartfelt emotion. Anthony Avina lives in Southern California, and works as an indie author, journalist, and internet personality.

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The Portal to a Lost World Michelle Ann King

It's almost time. I pace the kitchen floor, my arms folded over my chest. It's cold in here, bitingly so. The air stings my lungs as I breathe. But it feels fair. It feels like I deserve it

I glance at the phone, lying like a dead thing on the marble worktop. Maybe this will be the year she doesn't call. That she finally breaks the spell. Or maybe it'll be the year I do. Maybe, when the phone rings, I won't answer.

What will happen, if I simply let it ring? Will it stop?

Eleven forty-five. She's never called later than midday, never.

If she leaves it much longer, Brian will be bringing the children home. He's taken them out for ice-cream and comics, to give me my time alone. Brian is a good man.

He thinks it's a little strange, this ritual of mine. Maybe more than a little. But he humours me. Lets me have my eccentricities.

I made up a story, in the beginning, about the death of a beloved grandmother that I wanted to honour with silence and contemplation. I was good at making up stories, and it became a habit to fill in the gaps that way.

But then Brian the boyfriend became Brian the husband, and he met both grandmothers: ruddy-cheeked women, very much alive, who played bass, repaired cars and went hiking in the Pennines.

"I meant she was *like* a grandmother to me," I backtracked. A family friend, this phantom woman, that none of the family remembered. But then, there was a lot they didn't remember.

Eleven fifty. Has she forgotten? Has she given up? Has something... happened to her?

Is that possible?

But no: the phone rings, sounding explosively loud in the quiet room. They've changed a lot, over the years—from square, chunky things with dials and separate receivers to this sleek, discreet version. How did it come to be, that I am living in the future? How did it come to be, that I am living at all?

But I shouldn't ask such questions. It makes me feel bad. Ungrateful. Even if I didn't ask for the gifts I received.

I pick up the phone, but I don't press the answer button. I switch off the sound and it sits in my palm, vibrating gently.

Maybe it isn't her. Maybe this time it's a telemarketer, a tinny voice coming from a long, long distance to ask me if I've had an accident in the last five years, or if I would like a no-obligation quote for my home insurance. I don't often welcome such calls, but I would today. No obligation. I would very much like to know how that feels.

The smooth, black metal seems like it's becoming warm, but I could be imagining that. I could be imagining a lot of things. The thought doesn't comfort me.

I answer the call.

In the scratchy silence that follows, I can hear her breathing. Or maybe I'm imagining that, too.

"Hello, Tollie," she says. She sounds sleepy.

"Where are you?" I ask. I ask her that every time, and she never tells me. I'm very much afraid that one year, she will.

I take the phone to the kitchen window and peer out between the blinds. The lawn needs mowing, and the rockery is a riot of weeds. It looks dense, overgrown, savage. It looks like the portal to a lost world. Or maybe it's just ivy and wildflowers.

What does she see? Does she have a window? Does she have these very same flowers?

"I'm sorry," I tell her. She won't believe me—she never does—but I'm not lying. I never meant to steal her life. I didn't even know I was doing it. I didn't know I was the strong one.

"Are you my twin?" She said, that day we first met. Eyes wide, lips smiling. Trusting.

And I put my hand up to hers, and our fingers interlaced, and I said, "I must be."

Again, I wasn't lying. What else could I be?

She wanted to know my name, where I came from, how it could be that we didn't live together like other sisters did. I never told her. I never knew.

Finally, she speaks—or rather, sighs. It sounds like a ghost slipping through the cables, the fibre-optics and space-age machinery of this glorious future. But she doesn't answer my question.

"Tell me," she says.

I sit down on the high stool by the breakfast bar. It feels very solid. The phone presses against my ear. It burns the skin.

I tell her the stories of my life. Her life. Some are true, some are things I watched on television shows. I'm not sure if she knows the difference. She never says anything, if she does.

Does she watch television? Does she remember what it is?

"You came out of a puddle," she says. "A big one, deep and dark. There was oil on the surface, and it reflected rainbows even though the sky was dark with rainclouds and crows. I thought you were beautiful."

It's the longest speech she's made in years. Her voice is quiet, a little creaky. She talks like she's having the saddest dream there ever was.

What happens, if she wakes up?

There are crows in the garden, strutting and bouncing on that overgrown lawn. And drinking from puddles.

I hang up. Immediately, the phone rings again. I put it back down on the worktop and go to the wall, to the socket. But it's already unplugged. It always is.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michelle Ann King writes science fiction, fantasy and horror from her kitchen table in Essex, England. She loves zombies, Las Vegas, and good Scotch whisky — not necessarily in that order. Her short stories, which have appeared at Strange Horizons, Daily Science Fiction, and Podcastle, are being collected in the *Transient Tales* series, and she is currently at work on a paranormal crime novel.

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The Xenonog Mark Cassell

Usually, you don't wake up.

Sometimes if I'm careless, sometimes if I let my imagination run away from me, you'll cough, you'll choke wide awake, and the familiar surroundings of your bedroom squeeze in. Moonlight, pathetic. Heart, hammering. Eyes wide but shadows hang heavy, cloying. There is only darkness around you.

And me. I'm there, I'm in your mouth, clinging to a molar or leaning against a tonsil as I whisper bad dreams into your sleeping mind. Or at least I was... Now you're awake, I'll slide off your tongue and clamber over your teeth. Before I leave and blend with the shadows, I'll rub my wings against your gums; a minor infection so they bleed when it comes to your morning toothbrush ritual. You interrupted me, I'm pissed off, of course I'd do that. In fact, sometimes I'll do it anyway.

Now you're awake, you cannot sleep and so remain staring at the digits of a bedside clock as you count every negative aspect of your life, you'll dwell on anything and everything you hate about yourself and everyone else. Your life tumbles through your head in a miasma of pessimistic, defeatist gloom.

I am the Xenonog. I exist only for your troubling dreams. I'm not talking about nightmares; that's cliché, that's Hollywood bullshit. I'm talking about those dreams that stain your waking mind throughout the following day. Subtle strands of hopelessness, thoughts you cannot put your finger on. Yes, that's your human saying. The other ridiculous saying of yours is when someone 'Gets up on the wrong side of the bed'. Everything you say is shit, and that's what I'm for. I put the shit into your day.

How else do you think your mind works? It's nothing to do with you. Don't flatter yourself you egotistical nobody. It's me. All me.

While you sleep, I ooze between your teeth. My body like liquid, bitter on your tongue. And yes, that's why your breath stinks in the morning.

Remember...

Usually, you don't wake up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Cassell lives in a rural part of the UK with his wife and a few animals. He often dreams of dystopian futures, peculiar creatures, and flitting shadows. His horror, steampunk, and SF stories have featured in several anthologies and ezines. Following the success of his debut novel, *The Shadow Fabric*, this Halloween sees the release of *Sinister Stitches*, a collection of short horror stories.

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An Interview with Author Ela Lourenco

Recently Sirens Call Publications released *Dragon Born*, a magical young adult fantasy novel from author Ela Lourenco. We sat down with Ela to talk about her most recent release and this is what transpired...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome back Ela! Why don't you take a few moments to reintroduce yourself to our readers?

Ela Lourenco: My name is Ela Lourenco and I live in the United Kingdom with my lovely husband, two daughters and our latest addition to the family – a lovely Siberian kitten called Yumosh. 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, and my first novel *Essence* came out last year, but *Dragon Born* is the first book I have written for young adults.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

EL: My own love of reading!! I have been fortunate that my own mother is an avid reader herself and successfully infected me with the love of literature of all cultures and genres. But to give credit where it is due I have to say that every book I have read, regardless of genre, has given me something invaluable. With each step into a new story my mind has been opened to new worlds and possibilities. This inevitably led to my wish to enflame the same wonder and joy in others that I found in books myself.

SCP: What is *Dragon Born* about?

EL: *Dragon Born* is set on the planet Azmantium very different to our own where every being, regardless of their race, is magical in their own right. It is a blend of fantasy, adventure and paranormal with many unexpected twists along the way. But strip away the magicks, the rituals, and the histories of the individual races and *Dragon Born* is at heart the story of self-discovery and friendship of our protagonist Lara and her friends who must follow the obstacle-laden path destiny has set before them.

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

This book (which is the first in a five book series) was inspired by my eldest daughter Larissa. While I was writing *Essence* and its sequels she asked me why I couldn't write books that she could read before she turned eighteen! It was a true lightbulb moment for me and the ideas for it came flowing before she had even finished speaking. She wanted something 'fantastical, magical and that made her want to read more even after lights out time' – those were my directives!

Another fun fact is that the four main characters in the book are related to me! Lara and Asena are my own daughters and Leyla and Sofia are my beloved nieces. And yes the story is completely born of my crazy imagination but their personalities are unchanged!

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

EL: I spend a huge amount of time planning what I call the 'backstory' – the histories of the different races, names and origins of relics and rituals... But that said once the world is alive in my mind the actual story just flows. I tend to let my characters free to evolve in a natural way without contrived planning. Every writer has their own method but this is what works for me! I guess that makes me part planner, part pantser!

SCP: If you could cast your favourite story in the collection, who would you choose to play your main characters?

EL: This is a tough question as the main characters are very real to me!! Perhaps Dakota Fanning as Asena, Elle Fanning as Lara, Abigail Breslin as Sophia and Joey King as Leyla. I am basing this on how I view the characters in my own head!!

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

EL: Reigning in my wild imagination!! Sometimes you get a great idea for the storyline but it doesn't seem to fit in smoothly with the rest of the book... I have had to force myself to learn that even the best ideas don't always belong in that particular book and you have to be able to edit yourself and not just 'slot' it in just because the concept was cool.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Dragon Born* apart from other books of the same genre?

EL: It truly is a book for readers of any age or generation. I have had feedback from readers as young as seven to readers in their late sixties and they all claimed to have loved *Dragon Born* (I won't mention any names but it was some of my more 'mature' readers who have been pestering me for the release date of the second book in the series... you know who you are! Lol.)

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

EL: I have just finished reading 'Old Dog, New Tricks' by Hailey Edwards, it is the fourth book in the Black Dog series and I have to say that it was brilliant! And I just received my copy of Jennifer Estep's 'Spider's Trap' (Elemental Assassins series) – I am practically salivating at the thought of the hours of pleasure that await me! I have read EVERY single book that Ms Estep has ever written, if you haven't read her work I suggest you do so, you are missing out!

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

EL: This is the hardest question yet, there are so many!! Jennifer Estep (obviously!), Richelle Mead, Hailey Edwards, Nalini Singh, Kim Harrison, Jaye Wells, Susan Illene, Sherilyn Kenyon, Sierra Dean, Lyndsey Prior, Jennifer Armentrout... I could go on all day!!

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

EL: For me success as a writer is about creating something others will enjoy, a book that will make them think and dream even once the story is finished. To help even one child or young adult enjoy reading – that is success, so yes, I feel very successful!

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

EL: Write what you enjoy! It is the best advice I can give you. Don't think about the market or what genre is fashionable today... write from the heart, write what you would want to read yourself and it will reflect in your work.

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

Hopefully my readers will walk away on that special happy high you get when you get off a rollercoaster and their minds will be churning with the thought of what will happen to their favourite characters in the next book. Who is the 'darkness', what will happen to Lara and her friends next... All I will give away at this point is that book two is full of even more excitement and twists than *Dragon Born*!

Thank you Ela for t	aking the time to answer our questions!	
- And now an excerpt	from Ela's <i>Dragon Born</i> !	

Chapter 1

The sky was dark, not a star in sight as the woman glided through the deserted streets. Her feet barely touched the ground as she silently made her way to the back door of the small stone house at the end of the street. She paused and looked at the house. She had been searching for the right place for many years. This small but welcoming house, with its red stone walls and silvery slate roof, spoke to something inside of her. This was where she would leave her precious cargo.

She rang the doorbell and waited. A petite woman she knew to be called Yelena answered the door with a warm smile, her green eyes twinkling in the soft light of the porch.

"Good evening. Can I help you?" Yelena asked.

The woman slid her hood back slightly so Yelena could see her face.

"Gods above!" Yelena gasped as she looked at the beautiful blonde woman radiating light from her very pores. A tattoo in the shape of a flame was etched on her right cheek leaving no doubts as to her identity. "Please come in!"

The woman followed her into the living room and sat gingerly on the end of one of the large comfortable armchairs as she looked around with interest. Yelena sat opposite her, still speechless, and waited for her guest to talk.

"I can see that you recognise me," the woman began. "That is good... too many have forgotten the old ways... I am here on a matter of the utmost importance. I need your help.

What I will ask of you will be a great burden to you and will bring grave danger to you and those around you..." she trailed off and looked at Yelena as though assessing her.

Yelena nodded. "It is an honour my lady... I did not think I would ever meet you... no one even knows you truly exist."

The woman nodded. "And that is how it must remain. There are those who have sought to exterminate us from the face of this world. If they were to find out the truth no one would be safe."

Yelena bowed her head respectfully. "What is it that I can do my lady?"

The woman took a large blue egg from under her heavy cloak.

"Is that what I think it is?" Yelena gasped.

The woman nodded. "It is the very last of its kind Yelena. I have kept it safe and hidden in magical stasis for many a year, but now it is time. It is time for the dawning of a new era." She put the egg in Yelena's hands, it was warm to the touch. "You must take care of it for all our sakes... and no matter what happens, no one must ever know the truth until the time is right."

Yelena hugged the egg against her chest. "I will not fail you my lady. Will I see you again?"

The woman nodded. "Our paths will cross again... until then, keep safe."

Yelena watched the woman pull her hood back on as she left the house and gracefully glided away into the darkness. She cradled the egg in her arms as she warded the door with her earth magicks—she would have to be very careful if she was to succeed in her mission.

Lara paced her room excitedly as she waited for the red sun to rise. She absentmindedly brushed her chestnut hair for the hundredth time as she stared out of the window impatiently as if that would scare the sun into speeding up its ascent into the sky. She was already dressed, ready for her first day at the Lantis School of Magic. She had been ready for hours already, and changed clothes at least a dozen times. The first glimmer of lilac filtered in through the window as the dark purple night sky receded. Finally! She grabbed her bag and almost ran into her foster mother Yelena, as she swung the door open.

"Sorry Yelena!!"

The older woman chuckled, "Someone's excited for her first day!"

Lara smiled, her blue eyes twinkling. "I have been waiting for today for forever!"

Yelena laughed, her eyes crinkling up. "Oh yes, seeing as you're so old at twelve, I can see that you've had a terrible wait! Just joking, I remember how excited I was when I started magic school..."

"Yes, yes," Lara rolled her eyes, "you've told me all about how you aced all your exams and were the exemplary student... although that's not what I hear from Aunt Aelwen. She told me that you were the leader of the troublemaker pack!" She dodged aside as Yelena laughingly tried to swat her.

"Think of all the spells I'm going to learn, and all the potions! And I'm finally going to get tested!! I can't wait to know what my powers are!!" Lara grabbed a banana muffin off the kitchen table and took a big bite as Yelena poured her a glass of milk.

"What do you think my powers will be?" Lara asked between gulps of milk. "Do you think I will have earth magicks like you?"

"Honey, I wish you would sit down to have your breakfast, you're going to get indigestion! And I don't know what power you will get. Don't worry you will find out soon enough." Yelena looked worried as she busied herself at the sink. "Honey, I know you're excited, and you should be, but promise me you'll be careful at the testing... don't overuse your power or try too hard... remember you get retested every year and only your final test will count when you graduate at eighteen. This test is just to get an idea of which area your power lies."

Lara shrugged, "I know but I want to do well. Besides, you said that the test is completely safe, and Aunt Aelwen is going to be there anyway."

Yelena smiled, "Yes, she is. But you must remember not to call her that at school. You have to call her Miss Ville or Elder Aelwen like all the other students."

Lara nodded as she put her plate and cup next to the sink. Aelwen wasn't her real aunt, more like an honorary one due to her being Yelena's best friend. Aelwen was the headmistress of the Lantis School of Magic as well as being one of the five Elders on the elected Council of Azmantium which answered directly to King Merrick, and ensured the safe and legal use of magic- a type of police, government and justice system all rolled into one. The council also ran all the magic schools across Azmantium and was responsible for the testing and registration of all students. Lara's foster mother Yelena ran one of Lantis's foster homes and she and Aelwen had been friends since they met at magic school many years ago.

Elders were chosen for life by the other elders on the committee and they were always selected from the most powerful beings in Azmantium. They had to be a registered level five, the highest level ever recorded in the history of Lantis. Very few people ever registered above a level two, three was already considered to be a high level. Yelena was a level three fae sorceress which meant that she had a very strong connection with the magic of the earth. Children often had similar magicks to their parents although magical power was not necessarily hereditary and a child could have more or less power (and a different power) than his parents. For this reason, the tests administered at the magic schools were important-they were essential to find out where each child's powers belonged and where they would be placed upon graduation. The higher powered members of each race were usually recruited into the council in various roles depending on the nature of their powers. There were healers, psychics, and protectors... different roles for different skills. Aelwen was a level five witch, and she had two powers (most people only had one); illusion and pyro kinesis- two very rare and important powers. She also happened to be the third most powerful being in Lantis, after Akkarin the head of the elders who had the powers of replica (temporarily having the ability to copy another's powers) and mind control, and of course the King, Merrick, who was the most powerful of them all. Lara had never met any of the other elders but everyone knew all about them, and if she was lucky she would eventually meet more of them, maybe if she was good enough she might even get to be taught by them.

Lara smiled as Talia, another resident of the Lantis Home for Orphans, came into the kitchen. Talia grumbled good-naturedly as Lara ruffled her hair and dropped a kiss on her head.

"Lara you are so lucky!" she bounced up and down excitedly on her little legs. "I can't wait 'til I'm twelve and I can go too!!"

"Oh honey, your turn will come," Yelena smiled.

"You only have six years to wait," Lara winked. "And then watch out everyone... there will be a new troublemaker in town!"

Talia pouted. "I hate that I'm only six... I wish there was a potion to make me grow up faster!"

"I promise if I find such a potion I will bring it straight to you." Lara ruffled her hair.

Talia leapt onto her and buried her little face into Lara's stomach. "I'm going to miss you so much," her eyes filled with tears. "Who's going to play float the bubble with me when you're gone?"

"Emmy or Sadie will play with you," Lara consoled her, "and I'm only going to be staying there on weekdays, you'll see me every weekend."

Talia nodded solemnly. "I'll still miss you... and Emmy and Sadie don't let me win when we play."

Lara said her goodbyes to Yelena and the rest of the orphanage family. Emmy, Sadie, Talia and Lara were the sum total of the residents at the home. There were other larger orphanages in Lantis and at one point Yelena had had up to ten girls living with her, but that was before Lara's time. Lara had once asked her why she had so few charges and Yelena had told her that she preferred to have fewer kids as it made it feel more like a real family. Yelena had been married once but her husband had died and they had had no children of their own—that was how she came to open a home for girls.

Despite having looked forward to going to magic school Lara felt a sharp stab of sorrow as she walked down the hallway to get her bag. She looked around her room as if seeing it for the first time. The cheery blue walls were dotted with photos and pictures of her sisters at the home and the large mahogany shelves were crammed with an assortment of books and ornaments she had collected over the years. She stuffed the good luck card the girls had made for her into her bag. Saying goodbye to the girls she considered her sisters was harder than she had thought it would be—even though she would see them every weekend, she felt a little as if her whole world was about to change.

She was finally going to learn proper magic, not just party tricks like getting the dishes to wash themselves or changing the colour of your dress, she was going to learn the real stuff. She hugged herself excitedly, this time tomorrow she would know what magic caste she belonged to and what magical careers would be available to her when she graduated. Everyone went to magic school between the ages of twelve to eighteen. The Council had ruled long ago that it was better not to expose children under twelve to magical learning- for their own safety but also for the safety of others. Casting spells and mixing potions wasn't all fairy dust and rainbows... it could get dangerous, particularly so in the hands of adventurous young children. Some Council advisors also believed that using too much magic before coming of age could cause certain negative effects. Aunt Aelwen had explained all this to Lara last year when she had begged and pleaded to be sent to magic school early. She was a kind witch and managed to talk to her about the importance of being emotionally ready as well as physically without making her feel like she was being lectured. Yelena had compromised and agreed that she could go when she was twelve... the last year had gone by so slowly! Each day lasted an eternity as she counted down the days.

Yelena gave her a hug and a kiss as Lara walked towards the door. "Good luck sweetheart, I'll keep my fingers crossed that you enjoy your first day. I'm going to miss you so much!"

Lara smiled at Yelena, the only mother she had ever known, "I know I'm going to love it. I can feel it! I'll miss you too, but I will be home at the weekends."

Lara waved at Yelena and the girls as she took her seat in the craft the school had sent to get her. She watched the world under her whizz by as the craft lifted off the ground. She loved flying, and soon she would have her own licence and be allowed to fly by herself. She had been saving up to buy herself a broom, and had already picked out a gorgeous dark purple broom at the shop. Beautifully hand -carved out of shiny Jamaya wood. It wasn't one of the newer super-fast light weight models and it didn't have the autopilot flight mode spell but it was the one she wanted.

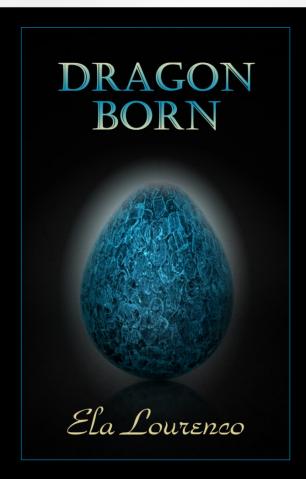
The craft finally came to a stop in front of the most imposing building. The Lantis School of Magic was an old building made completely out of silver stone. It gleamed in the red light of the sun, enormous and proud as if it were the centre of the universe. The one cavernous door and multitude of windows were all hand crafted out of Rama wood, the most expensive and rarest wood on Azmantium because it only grew in a few parts of the planet. Lara stood in front of the school, staring up at it in awe. She had seen it many times in her life, had flown past it almost daily on her way to her last school, and yet it felt as if she had never seen it before. There was a majesty about the place, as if it were alive.

"Make your way to the main hall now, they'll be waiting for you," the driver said to her and the rest of the kids on the bus.

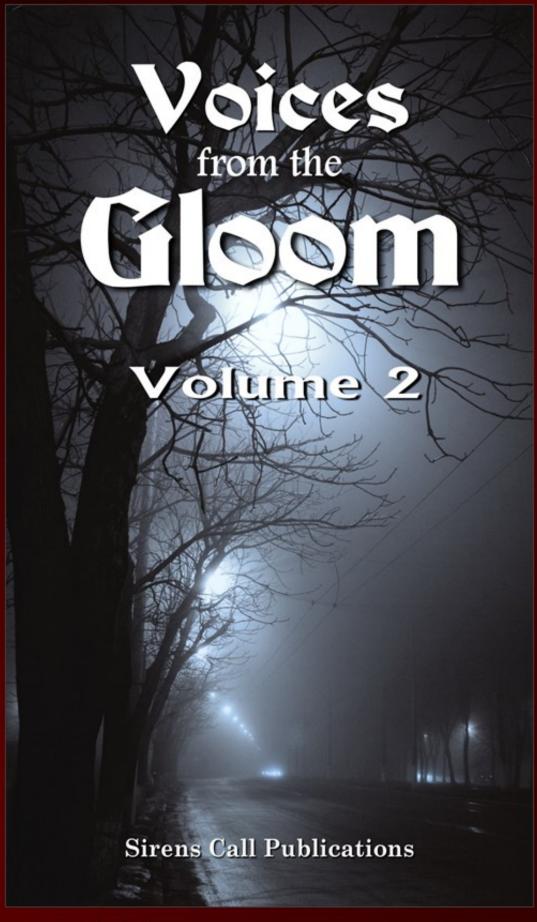
Lara looked around her, she had barely noticed the others on the bus so lost was she in her own thoughts. They all looked as nervous as she felt. A kind looking girl smiled at her openly as she walked towards the front door.

Dragon Born Ela Lourenco

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