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Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, and Poetry
from multiple Horror
genres!

Featuring the artwork of, and an interview with, Betty Rocksteady

An Interview with author Ela Lourenco and an excerpt from her latest release 'Child of Fire'



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She Walks at Night | *Nate Ealy*

I haven't slept much since I killed Melissa last Saturday. I haven't written much either. I still have her body in the basement, and in case you're wondering, it's not because I'm into necrophilia. I just don't know how to get rid of it. I'm a romance writer so these thoughts don't usually find their way into my head. Friends and family have started to ask where Melissa is, and I keep telling them she went to visit France. Eventually I'll have to add that I don't think she booked a return flight.

We weren't married so that story should be believable. Couples break up all the time. There's nothing weird about it. That is, until someone wanders downstairs and discovers my story is total bullshit of course. Hopefully by then I'll have a better plan figured out. I just don't think well when I'm mad.

And boy, was I mad last Saturday. That was the day I finally found out she had been lying to me. I finally found out that she had been screwing my buddy behind my back. Melissa said she was grocery shopping. Mark said he was Christmas shopping. They were both screwing each other in the guest bedroom of Mark's grandma's house. Mark's girl Lindsey texted me the unneeded details.

I've been running everything either of them ever said to me through my mind trying to find all the times she lied to me. I think the first time she said she loved me she was actually thinking about Mark and not me. I'll never find all the times she hid the truth from me of course, that'd be crazy to think, but I wish I could have seen this sooner. Otherwise I wouldn't have her body in the basement.

Let's see... today is Thursday. The last time I got a full night's sleep was Sunday. I had way too much adrenaline in my system to sleep Saturday night after I wacked her, and Monday night is when I started to hear her.

She was dead for two days. Dead. I even went down to the basement a few times just to make sure the body was really there and I didn't imagine killing her. Every time I went down the body was laying on its back staring up at the ceiling right where I left it with her blonde hair splayed out like a halo. I left a few air fresheners to combat the growing stench of decay too. Melissa really started to have a smell about her after a while.

But Monday night everything changed.

I was lying in my bed, and right as my eyelids closed, I could hear a moan. Only it wasn't a moan so much as it was a word. My name. I could hear *Ted*, *Teeeeeddddd* coming from outside my bedroom door. I opened the door expecting to see Melissa's ghost haunting me, but there was nothing. The noise came from further in the house.

I put earplugs in my ear. That didn't work. I put my head under the pillow and tried to block it out, but that didn't work either. I could still hear it, and it sounded like a woman's voice. It wasn't one of those creepy anonymous voices you hear in a movie, but the soft voice of a woman. Gentle even. I slept maybe two hours out of exhaustion Monday night.

Tuesday morning I got up, quite groggy from my two hours of sleep, and tried to have a normal day. I turned my computer on to do some writing, and my eyes couldn't focus on the screen. They were too dry and scratchy to let me work. I instead poured a pot of coffee and paid Melissa a visit.

She was sitting up on the floor. The body that had been lying flat on its back two nights ago was now bent at the waist like it was sitting in a chair. I gasped when I first saw her, and then a cold sweat came over me. How did she sit up? How did she move? Those were questions whose answers eluded me.

I ran back up the stairs as fast as I could and slammed the door shut. The bright sunshine coming in through the windows felt cold. I was glad I hadn't eaten breakfast yet because I would have tossed everything I ate. I felt dry heaves coming on, and I thought I was going to lose my coffee before I could even absorb any caffeine out of it.

I sat down on the couch beside my laptop. She was dead Saturday night. I knew it. I had pushed her down the stairs when she got home from seeing Mark, and then smashed the side of her head in with a pipe for good measure. There was no way she survived that, but somehow she wasn't where I left her.

I wasn't able to write or even focus on much all day Tuesday. That night I turned the little lock on my bedroom door. I slinked into bed trying to believe everything was normal, but right as I was about to fall asleep, just like the night before, I heard my name again. *Ted. Teedddd*. And then it got louder, raspier. *TED. TEEDDDDD*. It sounded closer.

I pulled the covers over my face and stared at the black nothing all night.

The next morning, this would be Wednesday now, I got out of bed. I know for a fact I didn't sleep that night. I would get a little nap in later in the afternoon once the sun was fully in the sky. That morning I went back to the basement.

Downstairs on the cement floor was nothing. Melissa's body wasn't there anymore. Instead it was standing up face first in a corner. I thought I had a mini heart attack, and maybe I did have one, but I froze for a second before bolting out of the basement. I couldn't stand the thought of standing down there and that *thing* turning around to face me.

All day I paced around my house. I didn't try to write anything yesterday. I knew I couldn't do it. I'm in a kind of slow period right now, no deadlines to meet at least, so it's okay if I take a few days off. I couldn't stop thinking about Melissa's body in the basement and what it was doing.

Night always come fastest when you want the sunshine to last forever, and I didn't want the night to come. I locked my door and pushed the dresser in front of the door. I didn't even go under the covers. Instead I sat on my bed and waited.

At around eleven thirty I first heard the voice.

Ted. Teedddd. Ted.

It sounded so close. Almost as if it was –

SMACK. SMACK.

There was something hitting my bedroom door. I jumped back in bed and grabbed my pillow. There was another SMACK on the door, and then the sound of something sliding down its length. The dresser never budged. I was glad I put it there.

Ted. Ted. Forgive me Teeedddd.

I didn't reply, but screamed into my pillow. Melissa's body was outside my bedroom door asking for forgiveness. My lack of sleep must have been turning my mind into slop. I tried not to make a noise, but I couldn't help whimpering.

I'm so sorry Ted. I love you. Please forgive me.

My fear then turned to anger. I took a deep breath and then said, "No Melissa. I will not forgive you, you lying bitch!"

Then there was a wail from the other side of the door that sounded like death itself. I heard her hit the door a few more times, before the calls of *Ted*, *Ted*, *Ted*, *Ted*, *d* became distant and the room slowly lit up with morning sunshine.

That all was a few hours ago. It's now eleven, and I still haven't slept. I don't know what to do either. I need to get some shut eye, but I can't sleep here. I can't even *be here* with her in the basement, and I'm never going down there again because she might be standing right behind the door this time waiting to grab me.

I think I might burn the house down. It'd be easy. Houses burn down all the time. I don't need this house. I can write my novels from anywhere. I just hope it'd be enough to stop Melissa from ruining my life. So far death hasn't.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nate Ealy is a fun loving writer who lives in rural Western Pennsylvania, and when he is not watching the Pittsburgh Steelers or Pirates he can be found writing short stories. His stories have appeared in Grove City College's literary magazine The Echo, Schlock! Webzine, and Massacre Magazine. He is a recent graduate of Grove City College and loves to travel.

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Avemwood | *Lee A. Forman*

Brutality is the form of nature, raw and unrefined, terrible in its awesome power—and these creatures full of it, pecked at her face with ferocious vigor. Alvin watched from behind a tree as splashes of red covered their bony heads. The human bodies that carried them, dressed in black suits and ties, added a surreal quality to the gruesome scene he could scarcely believe.

The five creatures kept at it until the screaming turned to muffled gurgles, belching from the twitching body of Alvin's wife.

Tears streamed from his eyes. Elaine...

A crow squawked atop the limb above, the sound deafening in the quiet woods. He looked up, tried to wish it away, but it screeched again and again as if calling to its brethren, alerting them to his presence.

His lungs halted and he held them as long as possible. He strained against their natural urge to suck air, pursed his lips, and pinned his nose shut with two fingers. For the inevitable, he waited. The group of strange beings would surely converge on him and rip him to shreds as they had poor Ellie.

In a way he hoped they would. If Heaven existed he'd see her there and they would be together again.

Curiosity forced him to peek around the trunk. They continued to stab her body with knife-like beaks. The whole of their skulls had reddened and dripped with fresh blood. He glimpsed the dark annular sockets where eyes should have been, but no organic matter existed within, only voids which could *be* seen—but not *see*.

The crow took flight and passed over the five beasts finishing their meal. It cawed once as it went by.

They all stood at once, rigid and perfectly upright. Rivulets of red ran down their beaks and steadily dripped to the earth at their feet. They raised their arms as if to fly but only stood still. Their beaks opened to expose pointed teeth, and together they lunged downward and finished their feast. A crimson geyser rained down and soaked their pristine suits.

Alvin's jaw tightened as he stifled cries of guilt. I should have helped her. I should have at least tried.

The orchestra of gorging flesh stopped. The forest went silent, not even nocturnal insects sang. Alvin heard terror pumping though every vein. It pressed at his temples, the pressure building like a vice about to crush his skull.

The pain of brutal death instilled deep terror, willed his survival instinct to preserve his life. If not for that most primal part of mind he would have walked out from his place of hiding and went willingly into the circle of chimeric beings.

Instead he turned and ran through the brush, forcing his way through bushes of thorns, jumping over fallen branches, dodging trees left and right. He carried himself as he never had

before. His shoes grew feathers and the wind whisked his feet forward with every desperate step. Hope rose inside. Hope that he might get away, that the death behind would not catch up, and he'd see the sun again.

A blinding, amber light burst into the sky ahead, but not the sun he'd hoped for. It rained like fire on the forest floor as he covered his eyes against the pain. With it came a terrible heat that threatened to singe the hair from his forearms. He crouched and tried to shield himself.

Footsteps halted inches away from his fetal position. Death had arrived. He looked up to see the uncanny bird-men ablaze in the torrid light. The blood that covered them burned like fire. They'd become as the phoenix, all fury and power.

The brightness blinked out, casting the forest back into the shadow empty space brings to the night. All went quiet except for the breath of the creatures standing over him.

They stabbed repeatedly as he writhed on the ground. His view of the white moon turned to blood and the night darkened. Time slowed, and as his consciousness faded, he saw inside the empty, non-existent eyes of his tormentors. Inside he saw *her*, curled into a mangled ball that was once her beautiful form. All around her were strangers in similar position.

Elaine... Forgive me. I'll see you soon.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lee Forman is an author and fan of horror cinema residing in the Hudson Valley, NY. His work can be found in various horror magazines as well as in a Halloween anthology titled *A Shadow of Autumn*. He's also a writer for *Pen of the Damned* and *The Lift*.

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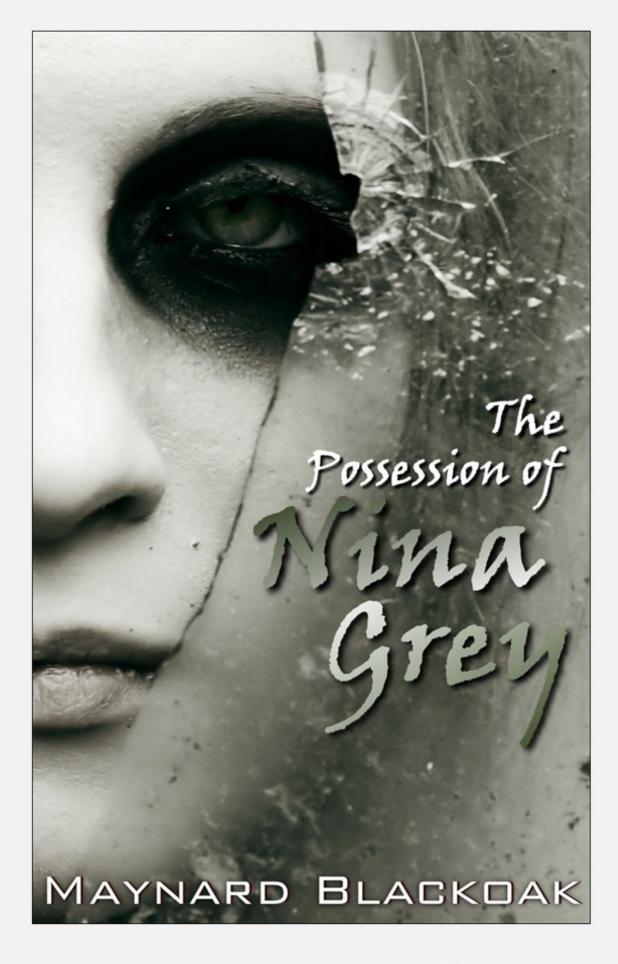


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Arthur's World | A. F. Stewart

The scent of the autumn season snapped a shiver across Arthur's small corner of the world. The wind tickled with that first hint of winter's chill, swirling, twirling, casting the familiar smell of dark loam and fallen leaves starting to rot. The rustle of more leaves—the few that still clung to the trees—created a syncopated rhythm with the last remaining birds and the chirp of stubborn insects. Arthur smiled, imagining whispered confidences and secret gossip as he walked to his backyard shed. Inside, he removed a rake and some garden gloves and went to work.

He started at the far corner of the lawn, near the wild edge of the neighboring woodland. A curious squirrel peered out from a treetop, and he waved hello; the squirrel turned tail and ducked into its hole.

Arthur shrugged at the rude rodent, pulling his rake with a swish, swish cadence and a lively two-step, humming a soft tune. The crunch crackle of leaves kept time as he slowly gathered them into a small pile. He raked in a pattern, always the swish, swish movement scraping, scratching the desiccated vegetation into a bigger and bigger heap. Until all the leaves were contained in that corner of the lawn, and the withered brown grass lay uncovered.

He smiled again. "There. That's better. Much better."

The sound of his voice carried, ricocheting a twisted echo off the trees, and from within the rooted shadows the woodland stirred. A crackle and crinkle, a patter of paws, a whish and a whine. And then silence. As if the raven dusk air swallowed itself into a vortex of deathly quiet.

Arthur chuckled, pleased with the reaction. "Soon. Soon. The night will come soon." The wind whisked at the top of the leaf mound, fluttering the apex, and he chuckled again.

"Not yet. Don't be so anxious." The waft of air drifted away, yet followed him with a sigh as he returned the rake and gloves to the shed.

The huff and puff of the breeze still teased his footsteps walking back to his front door, bumping the glass and wood with a rattle when he closed the entrance behind him.

Safely inside, he muttered to himself. "Impudent. Too impudent. It needs to settle down. Have some patience. The time will come. No use in stirring things up before then."

He slipped off his shoes and padded across the slightly warped wooden floorboards to his *parlor*. Not really more than a small cubby of a room, but he enjoyed the fancy affectation. His small sanctuary, sparse with only an overstuffed chair and a battered coffee table, yet he could sit by the stone fireplace, bask in its warmth, and stare out the slightly grimy window. Which he did, watching the woods until the sunset, when he closed his eyes against the fading flames outside and in.

Tiny flecks of sun danced across his eyelids the next morning, rousing him to rise and stretch into the morning. Routines and habits sailed him past the early hours and then past noon.

Late afternoon saw Arthur lazing in an old rocker on his front porch. He observed a bird take wing, soaring along the tree line into the horizon.

"Headed to warmer climes, no doubt. Birds always know when to get out."

A bit of dust swirled at his feet in response, and a few feet away, near the bumpy patch in the lawn, the grass shimmied. A little mouse peeked its head above the drab and dying blades.

"Hello, Mr. Mouse. Come to visit?" Arthur chortled. "You won't find much around these parts."

A frightened squeak, preternaturally loud, broke the soft, hushed air and the tiny creature scurried elsewhere, lost to the distance and undergrowth. A snaking shadow seemed to chase it for a bit, before melting into dim nothing.

"Not worth your time, eh? I understand. Such a tiny thing. Barely a mouthful." Arthur shifted in his creaky old rocker, the porch floor giving a groan and the chair a wheeze. "Don't you worry, night's coming. Yes, it is. Best night of all, come sundown. All Hallows' Eve, Halloween, Samhain, that old time when the spirits come out to play. Isn't that right? Time to play when the sun goes down." Arthur laughed, a zigzag shiver gliding like black ooze on white marble, all stain and sticky. "That's right. The best games happen tonight."

From the woods surfaced a whimper, not a quantity of misery, but something slithering from anticipation. And for a moment, a blink of an eye, a stitch just beyond time, the woods palpitated like a heartbeat with a thump, thump shudder.

"Patience. Patience. We got time yet. Not 'til dusk. Not 'til the gloaming. Then I'll send the call."

He sat back in his rocker swaying with the regular thwack, thwack of the chair's beat, staring towards the woods. He watched the greyish clouds float by, and smelled the undertones of a dying summer, served by the nip of a northern wind. And sure as if you could hear the tick, tick of a clock sounding off the seconds, the light of the day eventually faded into dusk.

Arthur smiled into the sunset, and a little rumble edged from his throat. A cavernous purr, a hint of challenge washed with contentment, sliding into the periphery of music and sallying forth into the world as a harmonious hum.

The melody skipped along currents of wilting sunlight and draughts of burgeoning night air in a ramble scramble of searching. Of hunting for just the right ear to squirm its way into and settle. A mile across the meadow, and a touch down the lane, the notes born of Arthur's throat found not one, but two sets of ears. A pair of boys, twelve or thereabouts, heard the floating, persistent hum, and it captured all of their attention.

"What's that?" The towed-headed lad—who answered to the name of Fred—stared down the lane, a sudden shiver creeping around his spine. He clutched a brown paper sack of eggs tighter in his fist.

"I don't know. It's—it's *haunting*." The word skidded out of the other boy's mouth, pulled like teeth. The lad—called David by his mother and Ace by his friends—took a step forward and

the roll of toilet paper destined for Halloween treetops fell from his fingers to the dusty ground. "Come on." He tugged at his friend's arm. "It's calling. We got to follow it."

Both boys ran, chasing the lead of Arthur's trill, hauled along on his invisible leash, right to his front porch.

"Hi there, youngsters. Come for a Halloween visit, have you?" He grinned, sly and slick, the smile of snake oil and used cars.

The boys stared, the haze of Arthur's control lifted. They glanced around at their surroundings, bewildered looks plastering their faces.

"How did we get here?" Fred asked Ace, skulking backward a few inches and yanking at his sleeve. "We were walking down the road. And then—and then..."

"We were running, and we ended up here." Ace finished Fred's sentence.

Arthur gave a low chuckle. "You're here because I called you boys. And you young rascals heard my call 'cause you were up to no good."

"That's ridiculous." Ace scoffed. "Besides, you can't prove nothing."

Arthur let out a belly laugh. "Oh, can't I? That one has the proof in his hand!"

Fred dropped his bag of eggs like they were on fire. A gooey, icky mess seeped through the paper and soiled the grass. Arthur laughed harder, until tears rolled down his cheeks. Strangely, the boys stayed still and silent, thoughts of leaving never entering their heads.

Laughter subsiding, Arthur took a breath and swiped at his face with the back of his hand, continuing his monologue. "Ain't none of that matters, though. I don't care about your mischief. That ain't why I brought you here. No. That ain't why at all."

Ace snorted. "You didn't bring us anywhere, old man." Words stuffed with bravado, yet he shot a nervous look at Fred. "I—I don't know *exactly* why we came here, but you didn't have nothing to do with it."

"Of course I did. You just ain't figured it out yet." Arthur gave a little hum, just a few notes, and both boys quivered. "I called you. For my Halloween fun."

Arthur rose from his rocker, still humming. He ambled across the lawn, his song tugging the boys in his wake as if they were puppets on gossamer string. Arthur stopped about halfway in the middle, the great shadowed pile of leaves keeping vigil by the woods. He ushered Fred and Ace to stand in front of him. Only then did he stop humming.

Ace shook his head, clearing out peculiar cobwebs. "Wait? Weren't we just—" Staring at the large, looming house now several feet distant, he clamped shut his mouth abruptly.

Beside him Fred whined, "I'm scared, Ace. I want to go home."

"But we ain't done visiting yet." Arthur stared Fred down, and the boy turned a shade of pale reserved for fresh winter snow.

"I know this place." Ace whispered, an odd tone saturating his voice. "It's the old Warwick house." He whirled his attention to Arthur. "But why are you here? I thought this house was empty. Abandoned. That the owner died or something. That's what I heard."

"You heard right, youngster. Ain't nobody *lived* here for close to thirty years. Not since I shot myself to avoid the law. See here," Arthur pulled back his hair to show them a small gaping hole in his skull. "That's where I put a bullet in my brain."

The two boys screamed, ready to bolt, any hold Arthur had snapped by a grisly, bloody gunshot wound. But before their feet shifted even an inch, Arthur snagged them both by their shirt fronts. Fingers scoured deep through cloth and flesh alike; powerful claws snatched the pair off their feet and dangled them as if they were skittering worms. The wind licked at their faces, and small whispers tantalized at their ears, describing coal dark innards and wet crimson tongues. They screamed louder, squirming and wiggling as they hung from Arthur's grasp.

"Ain't no use, boys. You've been fair and well caught. Now it's time to finish my Halloween game." He hoisted them up, pulling them in until his breath puffed in their face like a dragon smelling of putrid mold and rotting teeth. The boys shook, screams caught in their gullet by their fear.

Arthur grinned. "I was a bad boy in my day too. Played them Halloween pranks just like you. I even stole stuff. You boys steal?" They both nodded. "Thought so. You two are probably hellions, just like I was. And I was a right devil in my day. Found my calling, I did, in being wicked, especially when I started killing folks."

"K—Killing?" Ace's tiny stammered word slipped along a slice of terror and sudden despair.

"Yep. That's why the law caught up with me and I blew my brains out. Lucky for me, death wasn't a permanent thing." He smirked the grin of the demonic, his face melting flesh to skeleton bone and back again. The boys rewarded him with a shriek, a marrow chilling, soul piercing cry of terror born from nightmares.

"Now don't you fret, death ain't so bad. Besides, it ain't me you got to worry about. You see, the police never did catch up with my partner. Never knew he existed."

Snivelling and squealing, Fred still managed to spit out, "Partner?" His squeak nibbled the air, much like a mouse.

"Let me introduce you." A quick step, with a jerk and a swing, never loosening his grip, Arthur dragged the boys the rest of the way across the lawn, their twisting, writhing bodies leaving a trail of gouges and marks through the dirt and grass.

Between screams they pleaded, "Please mister, please! Let us go! We don't want to meet him! Let us go! We won't tell nobody, nothing!"

Arthur heeded none of it, simply brought them to the huge pile of leaves and pitched them on top in one great toss.

"Time for some fun!"

For infinitesimal seconds the boys flew, before hitting pillows of lifeless foliage and falling, falling into dark rotting damp. Clothes, hair, mouths all tangling with crumbling dead leaves. A mess spread over the lawn as the boys thrashed to be free.

"Now wasn't that a hoot, boys? Nothing youngsters like better than jumping into a big pile of fall leaves." Arthur cackled again, as he watched them crawl from the collapsed heap, shaking, coughing and spitting leaf matter. He turned his gaze to the woodland. "Ain't that right?"

An answering growl came from the edge of the trees.

"Well, I've had my fun. Now it's his turn."

Arthur spun on his heel and walked back to his house, still chuckling. Behind him, snarls and snaps clashed with screams of pain and fright, a cacophony of horror to bring glee to his heart. The smell of blood and warm bile rose in the air, touching the lingering hint of rot.

"Don't forget to bring me their bones for my collection, now! Don't you forget!" He flung the words over his shoulder, a command with the steel of unspoken consequences.

The words echoed as he went inside and shut the door behind him, leaving the night to the crunch and growls of his feeding Hell Beast.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A. F. Stewart was born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada and still calls it home. She favours the dark and deadly when writing—her genres of choice being dark fantasy and horror—but she has ventured into the light on occasion. She is fond of good books, action movies, sword collecting, geeky things, comic books, and oil painting as a hobby.

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The Wrong Guy | Zack Kullis

Jon stubbed out his cigarette and took a mint out of his pocket. The mint might have seemed odd, given the circumstance, but it was for his enjoyment rather than consideration for the man in the chair. He rolled the mint around his tongue for a minute before he pulled it out and placed it next to his cigarette.

It was time to get started. The leather of his imported loafers made a gentle scuff-tap sound on the aged concrete as he walked. Jon's cultured voiced bounced across the large room. "Greg. You've had enough time to think about what happened yesterday."

The man in the chair breathed unevenly through his nose. Jon knew Greg was exhausted. Certain steps needed to be taken before things could be corrected, but Jon was ready to be free of

this problem. "I need you to think about what happened four days ago, and I don't want you to respond until I'm ready for your input. Do you understand?"

Greg nodded his head. He was broken and compliant.

"Good. Four days ago you were driving down the turnpike shortly after 8:25. You were in a Jeep. You cut in front of somebody in a vintage Jaguar."

Greg's breathing sped up.

"The individual in the Jaguar briefly flashed his lights at you. Do you remember what you did next?"

A drop of moisture fell from Greg's nose as a quiet whimper sounded in his throat. Jon felt a sudden spike of heat in his chest and head. "Answer me," Jon screamed.

Greg sobbed through his nose and shook his head dejectedly. Jon backed up and cleared his throat. "I apologize. A refined man doesn't need to raise his voice. Besides, I should have remembered that you are not allowed to speak yet." Jon straightened his shirt and toyed with the cuffs until he was calm and collected. He opened a box of latex gloves and began to put them on.

"Back to four days ago, Greg. You slowed down, dangerously, and then pulled behind the Jaguar. Then you proceeded to follow the Jaguar, flashing your lights, driving erratically, and endangering other people on the toll way."

Jon's voice lost its refined tone and picked up an angry edge he could no longer hold back. His heart beat heavily as adrenaline started to flow through his system. "You followed the Jaguar into the city, pulled in front of him at a light, jumped out of your Jeep and began to scream obscenities. I want you to tell me the last thing you said to the driver of the Jaguar before you left."

Cold silence filled the room.

"Don't forget what happened yesterday when we did this," Jon warned. "I only want to hear one thing from you."

He turned on the industrial lights, filling the large room with their intense glow. There was a table covered with an array of dirty surgical instruments. The wood of Greg's chair was sprayed with stains, old and new, in a horrific mix of colors and odors. Greg's right foot sat in a dark pool of coagulated blood and gore. His left foot, ankle, and half of his lower leg had been carelessly removed. The frightful stump was still raw and stinking from being cauterized yesterday. Greg's arms were secured tightly to the chair's arms, his thighs tied down to the seat, and thick bands kept his shoulders pulled flush against the chair's back.

Jon's manicured hands deftly pulled a knife out of his pocket, slipped the curved blade under the dirty material tied savagely around Greg's head, and slashed through the gag. Much of the material had been tied in a large knot and shoved into Greg's mouth. Jon yanked the material and pulled the foul-smelling knot out with a dry flop. A soft mewling tumbled incoherently out of Greg's mouth.

"Now, Greg, tell me the last thing you said to the driver of the Jaguar. If you don't, I will cut both of your hands off at the wrist. It will hurt much more than what I did yesterday."

Greg moaned pathetically. His words passed over his dry tongue like sand over boulders. "I told him to watch who he flashed his lights at. I told him that one day he was going to fuck with the wrong guy."

There it was. Greg had admitted it. Jon felt the fury swell, but he did nothing to hold it back. He no longer needed to. The way was clear. Greg had admitted his impropriety, had exposed himself for the ignorant wretch he was, and now it was time for him to excise this cancerous growth.

Jon slipped the knife behind the dirty blind fold and cut it off. The rag fell from Greg's head. His eyes, hidden from light for the last three days, opened and shut sporadically as he tried to see where he was. He finally stopped squinting and looked at his captor. It was the guy from the Jaguar.

"Please no," Greg wailed.

Jon smiled as he felt his anger move beyond the point of no return. He only had a few more minutes of self-control before he lost all composure. Jon hated people like Greg, and he had known more than a few. He viewed this as a social service that he gave to educated and polite people who had to share their oxygen with human waste like this. His vision started to grow dark around the edges. His time for coherency was coming to an end, so Jon decided that he had better start now so he would remember some of the cutting. It was his favorite part.

He picked up the medical bone saw, something he was very familiar with, and turned towards Greg. His vision started to turn black as he spoke. "It was you that fucked with the wrong guy."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Author of dark fiction. Purveyor of profane parables. Formerly employed by the FBI, currently employed by another government agency, and is a budding screen writer. Zack has spent a significant amount of time in foreign countries, exposed to the dark tales from many cultures, and has had experiences that would keep you up at night.

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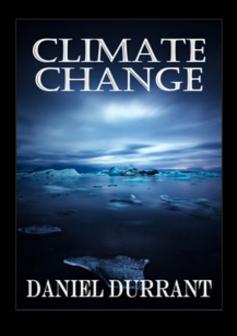
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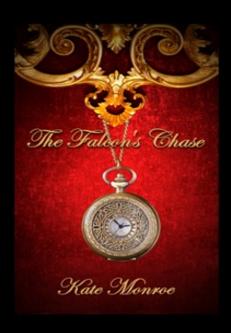


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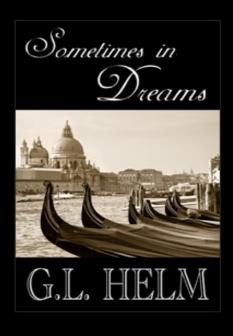












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Watching You | Daniel Braithwaite

Email from Shawn - August 24, 2016

Hey Leslie, I stumbled across these posts online, don't know what to make of them. It peaked my interest when I got a parcel in the mail, and I remember you telling me a similar story yourself, with what happened to you and all. I skimmed through his posts, from what I can tell a lot of these happenings fall in line with how you told them to me, and how I'm experiencing them now. I mean all of it the dreams, paranoia, the emails. Please respond to this ASAP

Monday, June 20, 2016 - 7:18 PM

So I'm starting this online journal today. I figure I'll chip away little bits of my life into this e-journal. Hopefully, I might be able to turn this into a profitable blog or maybe I'll look back at it and think it was a funny little goof. So anyway my name is Paul, not gonna put my last name on here just yet. Putting my last name on here could lead to family or friends finding these posts, that could cause tons of problems. Also gonna refrain from saying the company I work for, the reasoning for that is along the same lines as my previous sentence. This will be the end of my first post

Logging Out, Paul.

Friday, June 24, 2016 - 10:34 AM

Second post. woo woo . I've had two people stop by my post. Took the day off today, I'm gonna write this post then go for a bike ride, gotta enjoy that sun. Well, this thing happened at work on Wednesday. It was a bit of drama between co-workers (I wasn't involved). Andre and Clark are their names, they both work in the same department as me, think of the department as graphs and statistics. Andre made an off comment about the higher ups at a meeting not liking how Clark spoke during a presentation, So Clark got mad and told him that the whole office knows he's sleeping with the receptionist. That part hit me, it's kinda funny I don't know if it's true or not, so the whole office didn't know. What is that called when that happens, Ironic or irony? Clark and Andre then proceeded to ask my opinion on the matter, being rather spineless I said I didn't see what happened, which they called me on saying that I was present the entire time. This one moment that I happened to be present for ended up biting me in the ass, Clark then said that because I saw it all go down I had to pick a side, which would have put me in an awkward position, I declined. Now comes to confession time I was given a few days off because of this incident, I'm gonna have to end this post quickly there is a knock on my door.

Logging Out, Paul.

Saturday, June 25, 2016 - 9:00 PM

I don't know how to start this I've had an odd evening after yesterday. ... What do I say. Well, the package I received yesterday was a little on the strange end. The package itself had my name and address on it, but it had no return address. Now this is where things start to get

confusing, it had postage on it, so I decided to call the local post office. I spent two hours on the phone with the post office, they said they had no information on said package and that they don't recall it passing through their office. After all this it is still sitting by my door, I haven't opened it. Now I will, and I'm going to write about opening it. Ok, I opened it, it's a wooden box, more like a miniature cabinet compared to anything. This thing is heavy, for its size, that's very surprising. The wooden box looks burnt, I'm gonna open the wooden box now. Funny thing it has this old metal clasp on the front, it even has a little hole for a lock on the clasp. So.... the wooden box cabinet thingy is empty, but it's black inside, like true darkness. There doesn't appear to be anything inside, hold on, there is. Seem like carvings are on the inside of the wooden box, these carvings look old, maybe they are religious. I don't know, OK I'm genuinely freaked out, who sends someone a wooden box, with freaky carvings in it. Is this a joke? I'm gonna go, I'll write more when I look into the symbols on the box.

Logging Out, Paul.

Sunday, June 26, 2016 - 3:21 AM

Um, ok. I don't know what's happening. Just had a terrifying nightmare, I hope I can explain it. Best to start at the beginning, there I was lying in bed, out of nowhere I start to get this feeling like someone or something is present with me. Like a dam breaking I get filled with dark horrible thoughts about my life, I've never had that happen to me before. Somehow within minutes I'm fast asleep, I want to preface this that I seldom remember my dreams so this is very rare for me. The nightmare starts with me looking out the window of my kitchen, staring at my neighbor, then this booming sound in my head with whispers "KILL HIM, KILL HIM, KILL HIM". The only thought I could muster was I should, he's an idiot, who would care. I started to hyperventilate, every detail was so specific in this dream. My house was spot on how I keep it nothing out of place, figuring my room would be a place of safety. I ran down my dreamscape hallway, past my front door. That's when I saw HIM, a man or humanoid, He had deep dark sockets for eyes and extreme case of paleness. He was ghost white, but those eyes, I don't think I could ever forget them. Swinging open my door with anger combined with fear, the content of my room shocked me further. Everything was coated in blood, with a woman with black hair, in a white gown standing in the center of my room. All she said was "OBEY HIS COMMANDS". Then I was awake all of this happened at 3:19AM, I had slept for maybe four minutes. Anyway, writing this down made me feel a little better.

LoGGing OUT, PAUL.

Sunday, June 26, 2016 - 10:21 AM

My email must have been spammed or hack or whatever. I keep getting the same email every minute from the same person. All it says is HELLO in all caps. Maybe a reply is in order, saying if you don't stop this email will go public to my 6 readers.

LoGing Ot, Pau.

Sunday, June 26, 2016 - 10:45 AM

He is not stopping, every email says the same thing. "HELLO" that's all. How is this fun for anyone, do they get enjoyment from my annoyance. Well like I said, his email is going public. weseemany@gmail.com, there you go, everyone reading this see if you can get them to stop.

Logging oUt, PuaL.

Sunday, June 26, 2016 - 11:30 AM

Got the emails to stop. All that I had to do was reply "HELLO", it was really simple. The email respond back with "HE SEES ALL". DOn't know what to make of iT. Allso sPOKE to neighbor, God cant stand HIM. SOULD DEAL WITH HiM.

LOGing Ou, PAL

Sunday, June 26, 2016 - 2:21 PM

CountINED To RESPOND TO EMAILS, HE RESPONDED WITH "MAN WITH BLACK EYES SLEEPS BY MY SIDE". HELLO HELLO HELLO.

LOg Ot, Pul

Sunday, June 26, 2016 - 4:00 PM

HELLO. IT SHALL BE DONE. PAUL.

Email From Shawn - August 30, 2016

Leslie, you haven't responded to my email I'm beginning to worry. I found additional Information. The writer of these blog post, his name is Paul Ackerman, I found this out when the news played a story. Paul attacked his neighbor with a knife, lucky his neighbor survived. Once he was finished he proceeded to jump into oncoming traffic. The police also released statements saying Paul had carved a sentence into his chest. It was "MAN WITH BLACK EYES SLEEPS AT MY SIDE, HE SEES ALL". Please respond to me.

Email from Leslie - August 30, 2016 HELLO.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Daniel Braithwaite is a photographer, who in addition to enjoys all aspects written form, be it reading a book, to writing a blurb. If you're looking for handson experience with grim and ghoulish, he's your go-to guy.







Available Exclusively on Amazon

Blood River | Neal Privett

The strangers came.

They appeared on the red hills above the river; two silhouettes against the crimson sky moving steadily down the broken embankment. They stopped and gazed at our unholy sufferings with all the studious intensity of students at Bologna. Our damnable carcasses floated in the sanguineous river; enslaved to the boiling currents that swirled around our red flesh, cooked tender as fresh lobsters in the pot. The strangers could not tear their eyes from the horrors of our penitence.

Theirs was merely the bane of all wayfarers to our lost world. To stop. To stare. To drink in the horror as one would bitter wine. Ours was just to suffer and suffer more.

Such was our eternal punishment.

Their repulsion was matched with an almost morbid fascination for us and I laughed to see the centaurs move towards them with arrows drawn and ready. Secretly I prayed that they, too, might taste the salty sting of blood and anguish.

My compatriot Pico called to me from the center of the froth and steam. "Cosimo," he shouted. "Do you see? The poets Virgil and Dante Alighieri...they confer with our tormentors..."

I glanced over to the shore and there I saw the beastly centaurs speaking with the visitors. Yet the mythical beast-men were *not* piercing their flesh with the sharp arrows they reserved for us when we attempted escape. Bitterly, I felt the malingering hole in my side with my fingers, where not long ago an arrow shaft protruded. The wound still tingled with pain. Though we were the undead...mere shades, we felt the agonies prescribed for us just as surely as if we lived and my temper fairly rankled to see interlopers not sharing our torments.

When the centaurs turned their attentions to the living man named Dante, I took the opportunity to swim for the far bank and crawl from the boiling river of blood. My sinner's heart pounded furiously. The beast-men could not catch me in the act of escaping or I would suffer the direct of consequences. I clamored for the shore and collapsed to the sand with my flesh still smoldering. I peered through the steam that rose from my body and saw nothing to impede my race to freedom. I smiled for the first time in centuries.

All of a sudden, I heard the sound of splashing behind me and the desperate cries of my compatriot as he struggled through the burning foam on his way towards the bank. "Wait for me, Cosimo...in the name of the saints...do not leave me behind!"

He swam desperately in my direction but screamed suddenly, flaying around as a dying fish might, when a man appeared in his trajectory. It was the fleshly carcass of a body well done, with the meat gently peeling away from the bone and floating about errantly in the bubbling blood.

My compatriot's terror stricken cries alerted our guards and our deepest fears came to pass as several centaurs rushed over to where I lay on the river bank. Before they could send an arrow deep into my chest, I stumbled away on swollen feet that split apart at the ankle from the pressure of standing. I moved across the sand but left no prints, a fact for which I was wholly unprepared for. It was glaring proof of my own mortal demise. I truly was one of the dead now and this was not a midnight dream, nor an illusion that I might wake from at any moment.

I heard my compatriot's desperate howls and glanced back to see him running behind me, darting back and forth at angles as the arrows shot past his head and torso. By some miracle, my friend escaped the wrath of the beast-men and joined me beyond the nearest hill.

But we did not stop.

We ran as never we did in our former lives. I knew not where I led us; that was unimportant. What mattered was escaping the torturous slough we had been confined to for so long.

Pico ran alongside me. Behind us were the centaurs, crashing down across the burning sands at an alarming rate of speed. Their horse's legs carried them swiftly over Hell's seventh circle and their manly arms did fire sharp arrows like lightning bolts at our backs.

Just as I turned to shout encouragement to Pico, something took him away.

There was a savage impact and my friend vanished before my eyes. I heard him crash onto the sands behind me, yet I dared not stop to help him...coward that I was in life and even death.

I topped another hill and to my right, as if in answer to an unspoken prayer, was a small crevice in the heart of a boulder. I dove into it and pulled my legs up to my torso. I waited in silence, trying to still my loud and labored breaths as several centaurs galloped past. They did not see me. I heard speak their leader, Chiron...the greatest of the beast-men...who had taught Achilles and other heroes back in the glory of man's dawning before the great war with the Trojans.

He ordered the others to search the hill distant from my hiding place and he trotted away swiftly in the opposite direction. I blew a sigh of sweet relief. I was safe. At least for a moment. My skin still burned with the pain that only scalding liquid can bring. The only difference between me and the unfortunate mortal was that I could not die from the daily swim in Hell's fair river. The pain was nigh unbearable and I swore to fight until my soul was gone from me before I stick a single toe back in that damnable boiling blood.

My reverie was short lived; however, as a gut wrenching scream erupted from the red desert and sent a strange shiver resonating all across my naked body. Another scream, followed by a series of animal growls and grunts, wracked my throbbing temples and I tried to shut the terrifying sounds from my assailed ears. It was my friend, Pico, lost in his death throes. The poor man was being ripped apart by something I dared not imagine.

I sat there, as helpless as a newborn child. I soon saw Virgil and Dante traveling over the sands before me...en route to another circle of damnation. I wondered why Dante, the poet, was

here...in the domain of the lost. I cared not why. I just knew that he was my only chance for escape. If I could convince him to take me along...

There was no time to waste. I peered over the rocks above the crevice and studied the scene behind me. What I saw sent waves of sickness tearing through my stomach. I saw Pico lying on his back...with the horror of Crete...the Minotaur, kneeling atop of his lifeless corpse. The monster ate of my poor friend's flesh. It reached down and ripped the very visage from Pico with its terrible teeth and knelt there, chewing, while the bloody slaver rolled down its enormous bull-like face.

There was blood smeared across its nose. Its horns were drenched in red. It was a mindless machine, intent upon the kill and the flesh. Hell had given the creature full reign and it plied its unholy talents with a ferocity unmatched since the days of The Labyrinth. Pico had become yet another of its endless victims. The beast reached into Pico's chest and ripped the heart from its cavity. He bit into the bloody morsel as if it were a sweet apple and tossed the rest from him as he reached inside the corpse for more.

I did not wait any longer. I bolted from the scene, as fast as my legs would carry me and I rounded the crest of the next hill to find Dante and Virgil close by. I screamed and waved my arms in the burning air. "Masters! Please wait!"

Before I could take another step I heard the tell-tale sound of the centaur's hooves behind me and I felt the blow of the hunter's arrow on the back of my skull. I went blind in my right eye suddenly. And with my left eye, I could almost see my other eye dangling from the arrow's gore stained point. The sand came rushing up to meet me...

I remember next a great splash and I felt the scalding heat of the blood river cooking me once again, much to my chagrin. My centaur guards mocked me from the shore...kicking sand at my face and cursing me until I let myself drift away in the awful current.

When I rose again, to the surface, I noticed someone swimming toward me and the very breath caught up inside my chest. Pico came closer. I recognized him from the glistening wet crimson mask of torn muscle where once his face was. He croaked through mutilated vocal chords, "Welcome back, Cosimo. Let us forget our mad dreams of escape and suffer as the damned are wont to do. Abandon all hope, my friend...abandon all hope..."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Neal Privett lives on a farm somewhere in Tennessee, where he writes furiously, drinks too much coffee, and brews horror pulp in the barn. His work can be found in several upcoming anthologies from Pro Se, Sirens Call, and Horrified Press, as well as in the magazines Blood Moon Rising, Schlock!, Cheapjack Pulp, Sanitarium, We Belong Dead, and The Horror Zine.

Facebook: Neal Privett

The Mortician's Angst | Nina D'Arcangela

There was an audible twang. Turning back, he wrinkled his brow in disgust. Four! Four perfectly placed stitches had torn loose so far. He was baffled and more than a bit annoyed. Peering at the remainder of the skein, he examined it for defects; it looked perfectly fine. He wrapped a short length around his fingers and gave a hard tug. He received nothing but resistance for his effort. A bit perplexed, his fingers slipped between her lips to remove the defective stitch; he inspected it thoroughly with a loop before discarding it with the others.

Making his way to the old apothecary cabinet his grandfather had used many years ago, he opened each draw until he finally found what he was looking for - catgut. Sometimes the old-fashioned way was the only way. Threading the much thicker needle with the coarse sinew, he finished the sutures. He stood and stared in consternation for a good ten minutes willing them to stay fast yet daring them to break free. Finally satisfied, he turned to reach for the clay and began the final stages of reconstruction.

Two hours later, after finishing the cosmetic details, he gazed down upon the face he had just rebuilt and was pleased with his efforts. He'd done a fine job of reconstructing her crushed bones and concealing the bruised tissue. She looked peaceful, almost angelic, but the sedative would soon wear off. After a brief wait, a slight murmur reached his ears; one eye began to tear open. As his grandfather used to say, 'Death was just around the corner, one should always be prepared,' though he doubted his grandfather had meant it in quite the same manner.

With a deep sigh, he inserted a trocar into the femoral vein to drain the body, then moved to insert another into her brachial artery to introduce the chemical mixture. The art of embalming was one so few had the opportunity to experience, to appreciate. Apparently, she was not in an appreciative mood.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nina D'Arcangela is a horror devotee who likes to write soul rending snippets of despair, insanity, and pain. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter. She's an UrbEx adventurer and professional photographer whose wanderlust takes her to abandoned locations, decrepit buildings, purportedly haunted places, and old graveyards. Nina is one of the co-owners of Sirens Call Publications, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group PenoftheDamned.com, and the owner of Dark Angel Photography.

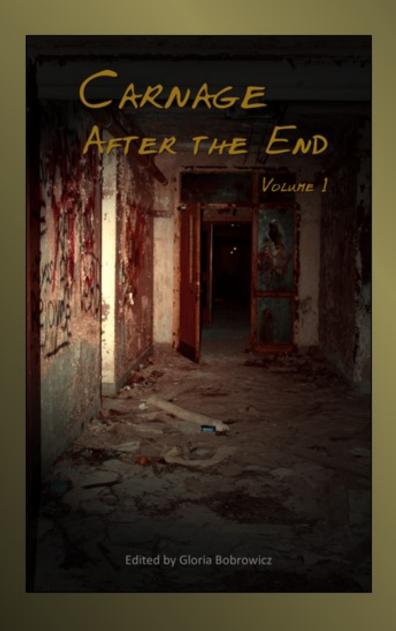
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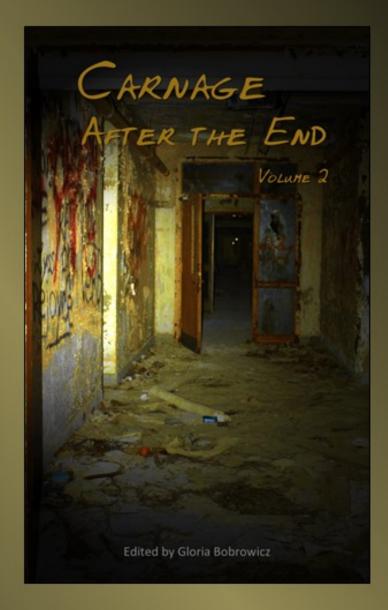
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In a world where society has collapsed and terror lurks around every corner, no one can be trusted and nothing can be taken for granted...





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

Aunt Ada | Adam Millard

There were no words to describe how much Cassie hated Aunt Ada. The woman was a disgusting cripple, confined to a wheelchair in the spare bedroom, but that was not why Cassie found her so repulsive; Lord knows, it wasn't Ada's fault some inebriated schmuck had decided to climb behind the wheel of his Volvo almost a decade prior. Back then, Cassie was just a girl, barely old enough to know what was going on around her—at least not with any certainty.

"Aunt Ada's going to come live with us for a while," Cassie's mother had told her one evening, a few weeks after Ada was discharged from the hospital. And Cassie had nodded because Aunt Ada was Mommy's sister, and it wasn't right what had happened to her.

Nine years later and Cassie couldn't stand to be in the same room as the old witch. The woman's very presence offended her. The way she drooled, the way she pushed food from her mouth quicker than Cassie could force it in, even the way she *breathed*—as if her innards were being driven by a hamster on a wheel—it all contributed to Cassie's hatred for the woman, and the reason why she no longer went into that room at the top of the stairs unless it was absolutely necessary.

Then there were the footsteps, which only happened when Cassie's mother was out of the house. *Thud! Thud! Thud!* From the room directly above the living-room... Ada's room. The first time Cassie had heard them, her heart had leapt into her throat, for it wasn't possible, was it? That a woman, restricted to a wheelchair for almost ten years, should be up and about and making such a row... it just couldn't be.

Cassie had slowly crept up the stairs, avoiding the third, seventh, and twelfth steps, for they were the ones which creaked like plaintive kittens, and at the landing she had stopped to listen, her eyes never once leaving the door across the way.

The thumping had stopped, and Cassie knew that, should she open the door and peer in, she would find Ada still in her chair, her eyes milky with cataracts and her lap full of drool. There was no need to check; the woman was a cripple, and cripples don't simply get up in the middle of the afternoon and waltz around the room.

"Mom, I'm telling the truth," Cassie said one evening at the dinner table following a particularly noisy day. "I heard it at eleven o'clock, and then again at three."

Her mother shook her head and snapped a breadstick in half. "I don't want to hear this nonsense again," she said. "I know you're bored, and that caring for a sick aunt at your age is unfair, but I can't take any more time off work—"

"I'm not asking you to!" She hadn't meant to shout, but her mother simply wasn't listening to what she was being told. "I'm asking you to call someone, someone to come and give Aunt Ada another look over."

"I don't need another doctor to tell me my sister is never going to walk again, that her brain is fried and that she doesn't even know what's going on around her," her mother said, crunching down on the breadstick with such savagery that Cassie feared for her dentures. "And you will stop these ridiculous stories right now, young lady, or it will be *you* that a doctor comes out to see."

Cassie knew when she was wasting her time; her mother would never believe her about the noises. She needed proof, concrete evidence that Aunt Ada was faking, or at least exaggerating her condition. To what end remained a mystery to Cassie. She would figure that out later, once she had the proof she required to make her mother see that it wasn't all in her head.

Later that week, with her mother at work and her chores for the morning complete, Cassie pulled open the bureau and took out the old Polaroid camera which hadn't been used for years. A small test upon the fruit bowl—and a lovely picture it came out too—proved it still worked, and so Cassie settled into an armchair and waited for the inexplicable footsteps to begin.

She didn't have to wait long. *Thud! Thud! Thud!* They were louder than usual, as if the perpetrator was angry with—or simply *mocking*—Cassie. Was it possible that Aunt Ada knew about the discussion Cassie had had with her mother earlier that week? Had Aunt Ada sensed a change in Cassie, perhaps noticing the grimace of antipathy upon the young girl's face as she spooned tepid broth into her dear Aunt Ada's puckered old mouth?

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Cassie slowly rose and made her way toward the stairs, Polaroid camera in hand. Her heart raced almost as fast as the inconceivable thoughts rushing through her mind. She climbed the stairs—once again avoiding three, seven, and twelve—and stopped at the top to regulate her breathing, which had become labored.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

It almost certainly came from beyond the door across the way, the door leading on to Aunt Ada's room, the room in which she slowly rotted as the world continued to spin and Cassie's hatred for the old witch grew and grew. And if the thumping emanated from that room, then there was only one explanation.

Aunt Ada was up and about.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Raising the camera to her eye, Cassie gently crossed the hall. She was terrified, and yet excited, too, for she was about to obtain evidence that her mother's sister was not, in fact, confined to that wretched wheelchair. Once Cassie had done that, Aunt Ada would have no choice but to confess, and then it was only a matter of time before Cassie's mother evicted the mendacious old cow, leaving the room empty once again, free of Aunt Ada's musty old stench. Though Cassie's dreadful memories of the past decade would take longer to fade.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Cassie reached down for the doorknob and flung the door wide open. There, sitting in the middle of the room—a vacant and weary countenance—was Aunt Ada. The camera flashed, as it was wont to do when you pushed the button to take a picture, but the snap would prove nothing.

Nothing at all.

Now Cassie felt as if she had wronged Aunt Ada in some way, as if this sudden intrusion deserved an apology, but Cassie simply stood there with the camera clutched in her hand as it noisily spewed out its useless photograph, watching Aunt Ada for any hint of betrayal.

After a few moments, Cassie decided to speak, to confront the old bag. What was the worst that could happen? *She could answer back*, Cassie thought, shuddering. Sure, that was what Cassie wanted, but for some reason the notion unnerved her more than a little.

"I know," Cassie suddenly said. "I know that you've been moving around up here, Aunt Ada. Do you think I don't hear you? Oh, I hear you just fine." She took a step forward, focusing on the milky-whites of her aunt's eyes. "Why do you wait for mother to go to work? Huh? Is it because you're worried that when she finds out, she's going to toss you out quicker than you can say 'quadriplegic'? Or is it because you like to mess with my head, to make me think I'm going crazy?"

Aunt Ada's chest rose and fell, rose and fell; Cassie had never seen her breathing so strenuously.

"What I want to know is *why*?" Cassie went on, taking another step closer to the desiccated old lady in the wheelchair. She looked like something you would find in a museum of Egyptology. "Why pretend that you can't move? Why would you want to spend your days up here, nothing but four walls and a blacked-out window?" Another step, and she could smell the old lady's sweat now; sweet and bitter at the same time. It caused bile to rise in Cassie's throat, and she began to cough.

Aunt Ada seemed to watch her through those opaque eyes of hers, her bottom lip quivering as it so often did, and yet she remained silent and unmoving as ever.

In that moment Cassie wanted to smash the woman's head in, just beat it in with the camera in her hand so that she would be dead and they could bury her and forget about her. She pictured it in her mind, and even found herself smiling as the reverie played out. She would bring the camera down on Ada's skull, cracking it wide open, then step back and watch the life drain from those horrible translucent eyes. She wondered if the old woman would make a last ditch effort to confess as blood geysered from her head and pattered down upon the carpet like rain. Yes! I admit it! I'm so sorry I deceived you and your mother! Please, call an ambulance! I need an ambulance!

"You're not going to own up to it, are you?" Cassie was now just a foot away from the woman in the wheelchair. She slowly dropped onto her haunches so that her face was level with Aunt Ada's. "You think I'm stupid, don't you? That you'll continue to get away with this, and that mother will never believe a word I say?"

Cassie wasn't sure but she could have sworn Aunt Ada nodded ever so slightly. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light.

"I'll catch you in the act, you sick witch. One of these days I'll catch you, dancing around the room, the way you so often do when mother is absent, and that will be the end of you and your twisted charade, you see if I don't."

Drool seeped from the corner of Aunt Ada's mouth, hung down from her chin like a string of transparent spaghetti. Cassie's face contorted with disgust; there was no way she was cleaning it up. Her days of mopping up saliva and massaging seized limbs were over. From now on, Aunt Ada would have to take care of herself.

If she's well enough to prance around the bedroom, she's well enough to wipe the spittle from her own furry chin.

"I'm going back downstairs now," Cassie said, straightening. "I don't want to hear another peep out of you this afternoon, understood?"

Milky-white eyes explored Cassie's face, as if searching for any hint of doubt.

"Mother will be back from work in a few hours. If you want to get up then, be my guest. I'm sure you two have a lot to talk about, and if you're honest with her, she'll probably understand. Mother was always the more sympathetic of the two of us." Whether she would accept this—that her sister had been making a fool of her for the best part of a decade—was another matter entirely. Cassie somehow doubted it.

"By the way, you've got dribble in your beard," Cassie callously said. "You might want to sort that out when I'm gone." She turned and marched across the room, only stopping to pick up the useless Polaroid snapshot from the bedroom carpet.

Leaving the bedroom and Aunt Ada to her own devices, Cassie stopped at the top of the stairs to glance down at the still-warm photograph in her hand. Her scream was only half-formed when the door flew open behind her, the emerging figure barrelling into her and knocking her down the stairs.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Linda stared down at the body of her daughter, her mouth agape and sobs already wracking her body. She must have fallen down the stairs. Cassie must have slipped or tripped and... and here she was, all folded up like a pair of discarded pajamas.

"Nonononono!" It came out as one continuous word. Linda dropped to the floor beside her daughter—her *Cassie*—and began to stroke the girl's face and whisper her name. It was too late; Cassie's eyes were wide open, staring toward the ceiling as if she had seen something there she didn't quite like. Her mouth was wide open, too; it was as if her jaw had been dislocated, for Linda could see every tooth in her daughter's head.

She sat there, stroking Cassie's face and telling her everything was going to be okay, until her backside ached and no more tears would come. She opened her eyes and her gaze immediately fell upon something clenched tightly in Cassie's fist.

A piece of paper?

No, a photograph; Linda could see the white border and the beginning of an image. That was when she noticed the Polaroid camera not three feet away. It was all smashed up against the

newel post, had obviously suffered the same fate Cassie had.

Linda reached down and slowly pried open her daughter's already-cold hand. She unscrunched the photograph and glanced down at it.

And then she screamed, for it was a picture of Aunt Ada, only she was grinning. A knowing grin. An evil grin. An *impossible* grin.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Adam Millard is the author of twenty novels, ten novellas, and more than a hundred short stories, which can be found in various collections and anthologies. Probably best known for his post-apocalyptic fiction, Adam also writes fantasy/horror for children, as well as bizarro fiction for several publishers. His "Dead" series has been the filling in a Stephen King/Bram Stoker sandwich on Amazon's bestsellers chart, and the translation rights have recently sold to German publisher, Voodoo Press. Adam is a member of the British Fantasy Society.

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The Other Side | *KL Dantes*

George pressed the call button and said, "Mrs. Whitfield, you have a visitor." In the silence of the room his voice coming over the speaker, garbled by static and almost ghostly in nature.

Mrs. Lynnette Whitfield, confined to a wheelchair, shoulders hunched, blanket thrown over her lap, sat before the window. The glass was grimy; the once brilliant blue curtains now faded and tattered. Her reflection, what little of it could be seen, revealed a frail woman with wispy white hair, a toothless mouth, and the wrinkles of a life well lived.

The room at her back proved to be as dreary as her thoughts, desolate and gloomy. Wallpaper, its original color long since lost, peeled from the walls in long curling strips. The carpet once lush and a bright white was now gray and threadbare. Dust covered the furniture, a neglectful snow tarnishing the wood.

"Mrs. Whitfield," George's voice crackled again, the room's intercom dangling by exposed wires from the wall. "I've sent the man your way."

Her old heart fluttered, her vision of the garden blooming in the backyard blurring as tears formed in her eyes. Hearing George's voice conjured up memories previously buried deep. An image of him, blue eyes sparkling, a mop of mahogany hair tousled by the wind, brought the

ghost of a smile to her lips. There had been a time, years long gone now, when he owned the keys to her heart, back when falling in love with the help was still frowned upon.

By now she could hear the creak of the wood as someone made their way up the stairs and along the corridor. Bony hands trembled in her lap. Tears slipped down her parchment like skin. In the cobwebs of her mind she tried to remember how long ago George left the world of the living, the victim of a late night accident.

Knuckles rapped against the doorframe. "Mrs. Whitfield?"

Rheumy eyes flickered over the room's reflection, alighting on the emptiness.

The soles of shoes whispered over the ancient carpet. "Mrs. Whitfield, I'm sorry to say, my dear, but it's time to go." A man appeared at her side dressed in an immaculate suit, his black wingtips shined, his tie perfectly knotted. There wasn't even as much as a single strand of black hair out of place. He crouched beside her chair, offering her a hand, skin so pale. "Come, Mrs. Whitfield, the time has arrived."

When she looked into his eyes she saw darkness, the unknown, and fear wrapped delicate tendrils around her fragile heart. Her next breath came out strangled as she gasped for oxygen. He took her hand in his, the metal of the skull ring on his finger cold against her skin. The nameless man moved, positioning himself before her, blocking out the view of the vibrant red roses and soft peach lilies outlining the base of the fountain, its water sparkling in the sun.

He took her other hand.

"Mrs. Whitfield," he said, pulling her from the chair, wobbly knees nearly buckling and her blanket falling away. He took a step back, then another, passing through the third story window as though it weren't even there. The chill of the decrepit room was swept away by a breeze much too warm and foul smelling. The man smiled the gesture sinister, his teeth sharp, stained with blood. "George is waiting. Waiting to repay you for pushing him down the stairs all those years ago."

Mrs. Whitfield felt her heart seize, a soundless cry on her lips.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: KL Dantes realized she couldn't be Batman so she started writing. She has now published over 30 short stories in various genres. She lives in southern Wisconsin.

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John Evers only wanted recognition... How could he know evil was only a snapshot away?



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Upset | *Patrick Winters*

Blinding yellow-white light was what Devon Foley first saw when he woke up and opened his eyes. It was a bit of a labor, as he still felt groggy from the drugs that had knocked him off his ass; he could feel where the needle had slipped into his neck before he was lost to unconsciousness. He immediately shut his eyes, though, the rays of light sending little knives poking into his eyes and up into his brain. He peeled them open again, slowly and slightly, letting his sight adjust. When it did, he realized the glare was shining down on him from a coneshaped light fixture hanging from a gray metal ceiling. Rolling his eyes about, all his field of vision afforded him was a look at more of the rusted gray ceiling hanging above him.

His mouth was hanging wide open upon waking. He tried to move it, to smack his lips, swallow, and get some saliva flowing back into a terribly dry mouth. He couldn't do it. There was a feeling of something hard and cold both in and against his mouth, and he couldn't shut it. He forced his eyes to look down and around at odd angles, trying to catch a frantic glimpse of what it was. It turned out to be a mouth prop, a tool in dentistry to stop pesky biters and talkers from doing either.

He tried to lift his head, to turn it and relieve the kink that was pulsing at the base of his spine. He couldn't do that either. When he tried, a strap of what felt like leather along his forehead held his head in place.

He tried to lift his hands up to pull the strap across his head and the thing in his mouth away, but he couldn't. His wrists were bound to some kind of cushioned armrests by similar straps with a leathery feel. He strained and shook his arms against them, rattling the armrests, but it did him no good. The same could be said for his legs; tightened bonds just above his ankles held them still and slightly spread.

It was then that Devon understood he'd been restrained in some sort of chair. The kind dentists or barbers used, the kind that reclined to where you could lay almost flat in them, as he was now.

It was then that panic finally came.

The gently-testing, shaking of his legs, arms, and head become outright violent thrusts and trembling, a moan of loathsome worry slipping from his propped-open mouth. He tugged and thrashed and shook and escape seemed utterly impossible. He moaned again in woe.

"Ah, we're awake!"

Just as the voice spoke up, a face shot into Devon's vision, indiscernible and silhouetted from the glaring light above. A halo of yellow-white surrounded the mysterious person's head, like some terrible angel looking down upon him and casting its judgment.

"I started to wonder if I'd given you too much sedative." The voice was distinctly male, not one that had a booming deepness, but an unarguable, steady strength and command to it, still. Almost sage-like, if not for the underlying sense of mockery in his words. "In my excitement, I

could have mucked up the dose. But here you are, awake, alert, and ready to piss your pants."

The kind of laugh associated with devils' joy—pleasure in pain and in power over the condemned—interrupted the silhouette's words. Then he continued: "Just the way I want you."

Devon blinked rapidly, hoping the process could aid his sight and to see his captor better. It didn't. Despite the mouth prop, he attempted to speak.

"Ooo eh uhck are yu?" Who the fuck are you?

"Err ah I?" Where am I?

The mystery man leaned back out of sight. The return of the light forced Devon to squint again. A sound of shuffling feet echoed in this odd room as the man moved away from Devon.

"I am a man quite upset with you, sir. And we are in a warehouse, long since abandoned and far from any wandering eyes and curiosities. Feel free to scream and yell for help, if you don't believe me."

Devon obliged. He shook his body again, aching to break free of his bonds, hollering and screeching as loud as he could, hoping and praying someone somewhere close by would hear and rescue him from this maniac. The echoes of his cacophonous cries resounded in the bare space of the supposed warehouse. When he finally stopped, his throat raw and burning, silence greeted him.

The man waited a moment before he said: "See, nothing. No one, nada, zilch."

Devon could hear the man's joints popping and a grunt of strain from the man as he bent over, as if to lift something up. The very faint sound of liquid slushing and sloshing in some hollow container followed.

"No one will hear or see you die, Devon. No one but me."

Devon groaned and felt a tingle dance up his spine. The man knew his name. He knew him, and wanted him dead. But did Devon know who this man was?

"I like to think I'm a calm, pleasant person under ordinary circumstances." The man's words grew louder as he came closer once more. "But in your case, Devon, you've just managed to irritate me completely."

The man's face hovered into sight again. This time, it was angled just right in the light for Devon to make out some details. Short, gray-white hair. Black rimmed glasses. Tanned, slightly wrinkling skin...

Holy shit. Devon did know this man.

"First, you don't bother to show up for your first appointment, without so much as a courtesy-call to say so. Then, after all the rescheduling, you show up late for the second appointment. And for what? Just for you to come back a third time, and to show me and tell me that you haven't been following my advice! Your teeth are filthy, you obviously don't floss, and it smelled as though you hadn't used mouthwash in years."

At this, Dr. George Daniel Evans, certified DMD and local dentist-extraordinaire, heaved

an exasperated sigh.

"And if that's not enough, last week after your last appointment, you dinged my Benz pulling out of the parking lot. Marlee—that cute little receptionist you always have your eye on?
—saw it happen and told me about it. I tell you, buddy, you're just itching to piss me off."

Dr. Evans turned his attention away from Devon, looking down at whatever he had in his hands. The *scritch-scratch* of a twist-cap being undone from a plastic container sounded in Devon's ears. Evans dropped the cap, its little plastic self bouncing and rolling across the cement floor. The distinct aroma of gasoline tickled Devon's nostrils.

Dr. Evans turned back to Devon. "Well, as a wise philosopher once said, "That's all I can stands; I can't stands no more!" You've proven that being a dentist is a thankless job."

Then Dr. Evans lifted a bright red gas can over Devon's restrained head. He tipped it, and gasoline poured out into Devon's gullet and splashed over his face. He gagged as it assaulted his taste buds with an indescribable and unwanted taste. His throat clinched, trying to stop himself from swallowing any of the fuel. Some of it found its way into him anyway, the power of the fumes burning his eyes and his nostrils, forcing quick breaths from his mouth as he struggled not to drown his lungs in gasoline. All the while he struggled to get free and not to scream.

When the can was emptied, Dr. Evans tossed it to the ground, plastic scraping the hard floor. Then he reached a hand into his pants pocket. He pulled out a matchbook and held it up for Devon to see.

Devon was no longer just ready to piss his pants. He let loose at the sight of the matches.

Dr. Evans, smiling bitterly, opened the matchbook and pulled out a lone, red-tipped match. With dreadfully steady hands, he put the match-head to the strip on the matchbook. As Devon began to plead and then yell again, the dentist struck the match, the head now a little flicker of flame.

"You may feel some discomfort," Dr. Evans said. Then he dropped the match into Devon's mouth.

The terrified man died with screams of fire and cries of flame. Dr. Evans watched it with a sigh of work well-done. Soon, Devon had stopped squirming and screaming; not long after that, the flames died down completely, and Dr. Evans' rage left with them.

The dentist, after an hour spent cleaning up the mess, went home for a good night's rest. He had six scheduled appointments to attend to the next day.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patrick Winters is a resident of Jacksonville, Illinois, and a recent graduate of Illinois College, with a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He's had several works published in various magazines, have self-published a collection of short stories, *Gravedigger: Six Feet Deep*, and will soon be releasing his first book, *I Was a Teenage Gila Monster*, with Frith Books.

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Copyright Betty Rocksteady

Jars | C.A. Verstraete

"Mabel, that kid needs to go do something and get out of this house. When I was his age..."

His wife shut out the oft-repeated recitation about what Harold said he used to do years ago. These days, she was lucky if he moved out of the recliner.

Despite his nagging, Mabel realized her husband had a point. Her lazy stepson did need to do something besides sit in his room.

"Ernie!" She yelled. "Take your bike out or go for a walk. Now!"

"Aww, do I have to?"

She looked up at the whiny voice coming from the stairs. Its owner stared at her from a round face wearing coke-bottle glasses. She shook her head. "Yes, you have to. Go do something."

Ernie waddled out the door, his stocky body perfect for football if he'd been at all athletic. He wasn't.

Ernie fumbled with the bike as he pulled it out of the garage, missing the kickstand and stubbing his toe. Mabel watched him and sighed. She wished the boy was more coordinated and interested in other things outside the house. He needed friends. She decided to see he got some.

Ernie returned from his ten-minute bike ride flushed and tired. He came in, drank nearly a quart of soda and raided the cookie jar.

Mabel frowned and moved the cookies. "Ernie, no more snacking. You should cut down, you'll feel better. Lose a little, maybe you'll make some new friends."

He started at her like she was the weird one. He'd tried making friends, but no one wanted to hang out with the nerdy, fat kid except for his one and only friend, Burt. He and Burt both liked playing video games. Maybe Burt was a little different. The other kids thought he was kind of strange, but he and Ernie got along fine.

Maybe he should go see what Burt was doing, Ernie decided. "I'm going over by Burt's. I'll eat dinner there."

His stepmother nodded in approval. "That's good, Ernie. Get out for a while. Have fun."

Burt wasn't surprised when Ernie showed up. "Playing a game," he said.

Ernie nodded. "What you got to eat?"

"My mom's working late," Burt said. "I was gonna have peanut butter and marshmallow sandwiches. Want some?"

"Sounds good."

Burt jerked his head toward the kitchen. "Take the cooler upstairs. I filled it with root beer and lemon-lime. Reload the game and log in if you want to play. I'll be up in a minute."

Ernie lugged the cooler upstairs and logged into the game before going back to the doorway. He peeked out and hearing nothing decided to take a quick look around Burt's room, something he never got to do since Burt hardly left for too long.

A light in the closet caught Ernie's eye. *Now that looks interesting*, he thought. Burt never left the door open. He pushed it and looked around in alarm when it squeaked. Luckily, Burt was still downstairs in the kitchen.

Ernie stood there in shock. Eyes wide, he stared at the closet's stocked shelves. He never knew Burt had a secret hobby. He wasn't sure whether he should run or throw up, but after a few minutes he leaned in closer for a better view. Row after row of jars met his eyes. Each jar held a different animal specimen. He stared, repulsed yet fascinated, at the various items. Some appeared to look back from dead, glassy eyes. He shivered.

A thump on the stairs told him Burt was on his way up. Ernie hurriedly closed the door part-way, thankful it didn't squeak again. He grabbed a book from the shelf and plopped on the bed. Ernie hurriedly flipped the book around so the title, *Undead Dinosaurs*, was right side up just as Burt came in.

Burt nodded at Ernie before he set the tray on the table. "Found some pizza rolls, why it took so long. I just got that book. Whaddya think?"

"Pretty awesome art," Ernie said and grabbed a pizza roll. He took a bite, making sure to block the image from his mind of the blood-red jars in Burt's closet.

More than once, Ernie found his thoughts going back to his friend's weird collection as they played the game. He knew he'd better get his mind on what he was doing when Burt swore at him a second time.

"C'mon, pay attention," Burt yelled. "You're screwing up the game."

After a couple hours of bad play, Ernie decided to go home. On the way he thought again about his friend's hobby, this time with new appreciation. It was a good way to expand his scientific knowledge, he decided. It could even prepare him for the taxidermy job at the natural history museum he hoped to have someday.

He walked in the door with an idea of how to develop his new hobby. Even his stepmother seemed excited when he asked her for some mayonnaise jars to start his collection.

"Why, that's wonderful that you're starting a hobby." She got a few clean jars from the pantry. "Isn't that great Harold? The boy's collecting things!"

Ernie found it easy to sneak out of the house in the wee hours of the night while everyone slept. No one even suspected he'd gone out.

Several days later, Mabel started griping about all the time Ernie spent in the basement. Her complaints turned to screams as she got a closer look at Harold still seated in the chair, his bloody face turned toward the TV.

Downstairs, Ernie hummed as he admired the pretty colors in his collection. The Jar of Eyes had a nice assortment of blue, green, and now brown eyeballs. The Jar of Toes had some pretty pink, purple and green painted toenails he'd collected on his nightly jaunts.

He sharpened the knife, thinking of his stepmother's bright red fingernails and the twotone manicure he'd seen on the lady next door.

Time to start a new jar.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: C.A. (Christine) Verstraete likes scary books and stories, but she doesn't always write this... creepy. She's had stories published in various anthologies and magazines including *Mystery Weekly* and in a previous *The Sirens Call*. She also shares the *real* reason why Lizzie Borden did it in her upcoming novel, *Lizzie Borden, Zombie Hunter*.

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The Angel of Death | Sheldon Woodbury

The shriveled old shape shifter sputtered out a smoky breath as it mused about what to become this one last time. A myriad of possibilities crept up through the ancient chambers of its crumbling mind, a haunting menagerie of the impossible. Its grumbling weariness was a burden it struggled to resist, but it accepted that death was an inevitable part of the cosmic design. It knew with an unshakable certainty its existence was nearing its end, so this last metamorphosis had a significance that made the burden even more profound.

It had become the mythic soul of this world, an unknown force that had unleashed a shadowy parade of creatures that couldn't be explained by the rigid boundaries of science or logic. It was the opposing foe to all that was dull and dreary in a world shackled with stifling bonds. It was a change agent seeking nothing less than to startle and astound on the highest possible level.

But its fabled strength and transformative powers were now just fading flickers inside the dying husk the world had never seen. It shuddered in its musty sanctuary deep underground, because it had changed too. Its presence had transformed this world, so the prospect of death was even more wrenching and sad.

It was a monster, of course, but only because monsters are defined by those without any knowledge of what real strangeness is. It had been borne in a place of mystery and magic, finding its way into this world through the last cosmic crack before the beginning of time. It had never been identified for what it was, but its deeds as an angel, a devil, and all the other mythic

creatures were the legacy it was leaving behind. It was the maker of myths, the creator of wonder and awe, bringing magic and mystery to this earthly realm. It had prowled for countless ages as a miracle worker, but now there was time for only one more.

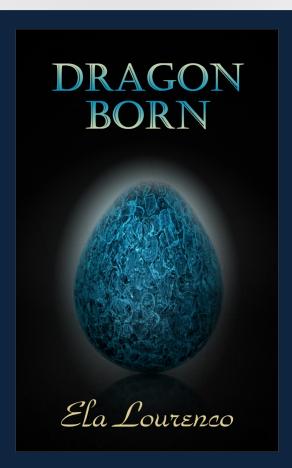
Its shriveled old form began the changing process that was always wracked with the howling wretchedness of a brutal birth. Its cherished life was almost gone, but billowing black wings suddenly burst out, along with the stench of fire and death. It grew and grew, staggering and stumbling through the twisted maze of caves and caverns to the sun drenched world waiting above.

It charged into the air with a thundering flap, soaring higher and higher through the swirling white clouds and blue summer sky, still growing and growing, until it hovered like a monstrous black angel above the world below. The heavens shimmered with a startling intensity as its gargantuan wings fluttered down and caressed the sun splattered orb with a surprising tenderness, cradling it like a newborn child. And then it was gone, gone forever, bringing to an end the haunting parade of magic, mystery, and myths. A colossal black shadow fell over the world like a heavenly funeral shroud, and a dark new age quietly began.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sheldon Woodbury is an award winning writer (screenplays, plays, books, and short stories) who also teaches screenwriting at New York University. His short stories and poems have appeared in many horror and dark fiction anthologies and magazines. His horror novel *The World on Fire* was published in 2014 by JWK Fiction.

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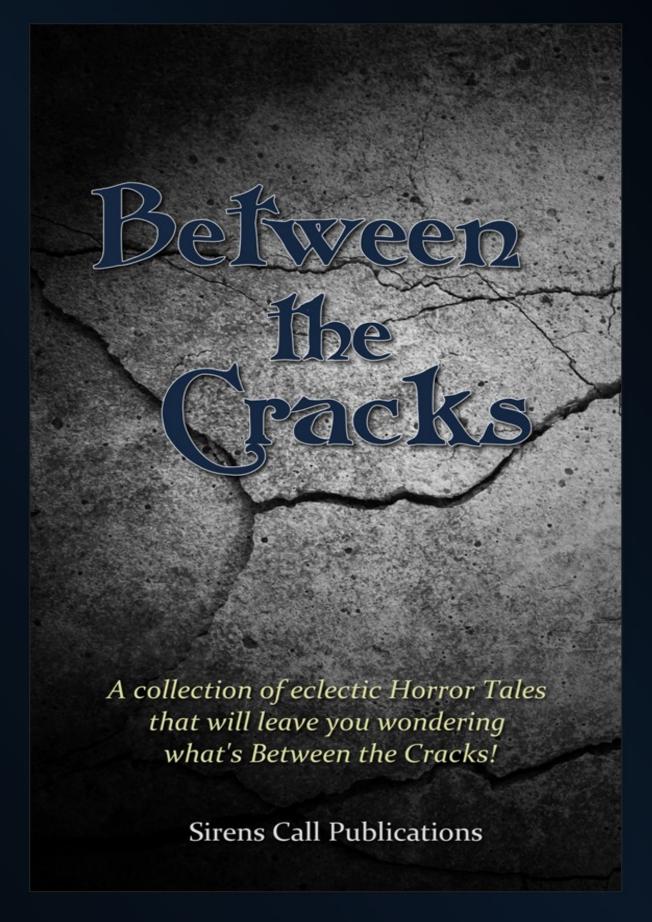
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R-Day for Mr. D | *Patrick Loveland*

The Earth loomed over New Jonesport like a huge moon... but Mr. D knew if anything was a moon, it was New Jonesport. It was actually an orbital platform in geostationary orbit, and his father had built it.

Para-gravity kept the inner, Earth-side surface of New Jonesport's gently curving oval shape the 'ground', which in turn kept Earth a constant fixture in the sky above the platform's gleaming buildings, smooth streets, and artificial lakes. All of this was encased in a ten-foot thick clear plasteel covering, sealed, and pressurized.

His father had wanted New Jonesport 'anchored' over Jonesport, Maine—but the physics of that didn't make sense, not to mention the politics. It was built in a locked orbit over Singapore.

Mr. D looked down from the view to see his underling's progress on his cocktail, if you could call it that. Tommy, the new barkeep, limped through finishing the drink while Mr. D watched, seated atop a padded stool at the bar in what amounted to an automated limousine the size of an old airplane tow tractor, but tall enough inside for people to stand up straight with a bit of headroom. The interior walls and ceiling of the moving VIP lounge were almost clear—camera paneling on the large vehicle's exterior transmitted a feed uniformly to the interior surfaces, creating an illusion of translucence.

Mr. D finally got his drink and he took a sip. He watched other automated vehicles riving on the black conductive metal roads, and he imagined how much every single person within twenty-two thousand miles owed to his father and him. It amused him for a moment, then a wave of dread tightened and spoiled his stomach. It was 'R-Day', after all...

"Scenery—relaxing-type... three."

The streets and cars faded away and were replaced by a simulated panoramic feed of dark, rolling waves in a stormy open ocean. Sounds of this scene rose in volume as well, howling wind and waves sloshing and crashing.

Mr. D sipped more of his drink.

The stormy ocean views blinked out when they reached his personal estate—a ring of posh buildings under a clear dome at the center of the orbiting station's sealed Earth-side surface. The highest part of the dome was a bump on the clear station seal exterior, and the dome's life support and gravity could be cut off from the rest of New Jonesport if necessary. On his worst days, Mr. D had considered locking the dome down and popping the seal casing off the rest of the city.

The lounge moved through the pressure lock's doors and drove onto an elevator platform that ascended diagonally up an artificial hill that the estate ring was built onto. Mr. D watched his estate security people seal the vault pressure doors and check their weapons, as he'd ordered

in his R-Day memo. The elevator crested the hill and the vehicle drove to a wide staircase that led up to the estate entry doors. The lounge doors opened.

"Wait here. I'm gonna need a couple-three more of those drinks and a ride to the best sex club we got when this is done."

Mr. D stepped out without waiting for a reply and walked up his estate stairs, currently flanked by over twenty bio-augmented mercs. He waved his neuro-chipped hand at the large front doors to slide them open. Some of those mercs were over seven feet tall, with bionic arms almost to the ground. *Good*.

Over his shoulder Mr. D said, "Remember—stay out here! You're backup!"

He went to his chambers on the second floor, changed into a special armored bio-suit, and entered his walk-in vault. He opened three different locks on a smaller safe on the back wall of the vault, and removed an insulated rubber case about thirteen by thirteen inches and two inches thick.

Mr. D held the case in his hands and said, "Revenge Day..."

At the center of Mr. D's estate ring was another, smaller dome. He walked down a lush garden path to the translucent hemisphere, then waved its doors open. He stepped in, holding the thirteen by thirteen square case in one gloved hand, and unslung a large particle beam rifle in the other.

At the center of this dome, there stood a circular plastic table topped by a wide, squat cylinder with integrated panoramic speakers and a needle-tipped arm resting on a small rest support. A rare throwback turntable from around the 2050s—it had taken many of his best connections and markers to get a hold of it... but he needed it, even if today was the only time he'd ever use it.

At the center of this turntable was a spindle. Mr. D propped his beam rifle against the table and code-released the locks on the square case. He removed a twelve inch vinyl record. It was a faded mix of sickly colored splotches.

Mr. D placed the record on the spindle, slid it down onto the platter, then picked up his beam rifle and walked to a control panel near the outer edge of the sealed dome. He pressed a sequence of commands into the control surface, then raised his rifle toward the turntable.

The platter began rotating and the tone arm swiveled over to the record and gently down onto the start of the groove.

The music sounded wrong and reverberated off the dome interior strangely. The record started to glow, casting an eerie light and darkening the view out through the dome. A luminous mist now poured from the record platter, spilling to the chamber floor and spreading across it.

The turntable disintegrated as it erupted upward in a geyser of glowing sludge that cascaded down to the cylindrical table, eating it away to nothing. The sludge poured out more of the mist as it melted the floor, leaving a mottled depression covered with baseball-sized gouges.

There was a flash and Mr. D blinked a few times as he tried to focus on the deepest part of the depression—

In the center of the depression, a figure had appeared, prostrate as if in prayer. Where its head touched the sludge-eaten surface, an intricate glowing sigil flashed, then came apart like ashes and vanished. The figure hauled itself up onto one knee—although, it seemed to have several. The figure's all-white robes and adornment were of impossibly beautiful materials.

Mr. D aimed the beam rifle at its head area.

"This is for my father..."

Its smooth mask or helmet snapped toward Mr. D's voice, a strange apparatus fused into the mouth and nose area. There were no obvious eyes, but deep within its multiple skull-like ocular openings a haunting light burned, glinting as it moved.

In a gravelly rasp, and like the sounds were formed backwards it said, "Ah, a Delamarre..."

The hollow but piercing eyes locked on Mr. D(elamarre)'s own.

"This seems to be a duel, so I will state my—"

Delamarre fired his rifle, the brilliant beam perforating the air and entering the ghastly figure's torso, then slicing up, severing its misshapen body open and cleaving its helmeted head at an angle. Cauterized cross-sections of inhuman organs, bones, muscles, and arteries glowed and the figure teetered, almost coming apart all the way as the separated parts slapped down on the scarred depression surface.

"Fuuuuuuuck you! That's the end for us!"

The raspy backwards voice laughed, coming from both sides of the flapped open figure's severed helmet head and throat. The open parts rose off the floor and their viscera slapped back together in one motion, the two parts sizzling back into one with a flash of ghoulish light.

"My name is Thri'sst'uhl—to finish my obligated duel announcement... Honestly, though, we'd thought your line was extinguished," the voice rasped and gurgled.

Delamarre just stared at the re-formed figure, his hands shaking and his insides shuddering in his special suit. He went to Plan B. He pressed a few commands into the control panel.

Big Gatling beam guns came out of sealed cases all over the dome interior, hummed up, and fired into Thri'sst'uhl, shredding it.

The pieces reformed even faster this time, and before the dome guns and Delamarre could fire again, Thri'sst'uhl jumped up toward one of the Gatling setups. One of its appendages disappeared into the gun, and Thri'sst'uhl aimed the weapon down toward Delamarre, firing a stream of beam bolts at him. Delamarre dove away, dropping his gun.

Delamarre sprinted for the dome's door. They slid open and Delamarre stumbled out, Thri'sst'uhl laughing in raspy taunt behind him.

The lush garden that lined the path Delamarre ran down burst into blue and violet flames as every surface of his estate ring darkened and seemed to pulse with malignant, festering boils.

Delamarre threw his warping estate doors open and used his special suit's built-in exoassist to advance through his home's first floor with long, quick hops. He didn't stop to open his front doors—he exo-lunged fifteen feet and busted out through them, rolling down his stairs as the bionic mercs readied for their fight, stims and implant-heightened reflexes and muscles giving them confidence.

"Kill that fucking thing!" Delamarre yelled as he bounded down the steps to his waiting lounge vehicle.

The doors opened and Delamarre threw himself inside so fast he slammed into the vehicle interior wall. He waved his hand to seal the vehicle and said, "Go-to, dome exterior, New Jonesport armory..."

The vehicle vibrated as its batteries whirred up. The vehicle walls went clear, and he watched the long-limbed killing machines flail and swipe and shoot at Thri'sst'uhl back up on the stairs, only to watch them come apart, torn open or heads crushed spraying blood and maintenance fluids.

The lounge started rolling away from the steps toward the hill elevator—but Delamarre watched the last few mercs fall quickly and with sickening brutality. He watched Thri'sst'uhl scan the area and see the vehicle they were in.

"Tommy—you got a strap?"

"Fuck yes, sir!"

Tommy reached under his bar and pulled out a flak-shotgun, then a plasma auto-pistol, which he threw to Delamarre.

Thri'sst'uhl crouched and jumped, sailing from the stairs in a high arc. Delamarre followed, aiming through the vid-feed plasteel. Thri'sst'uhl landed on top of the lounge—

Delamarre ordered, "Disregard safety mesh—bypass elevator—A-to-B—destination pressure door!"

The large lounge vehicle broke from its path to the elevator platform and drove toward the hill edge. As it rolled down the hill ring, its minimal shocks and suspension caused it to shake and rumble violently.

Even otherworldly as Thri'sst'uhl was, it had to crouch and grab a hold of the vehicle to stay on top of it. They barreled down the hill, Delamarre's estate guards firing at Thri'sst'uhl on the descending lounge's roof—but the lounge drove straight through the bulk of them, only a few diving away in time.

The lounge vehicle crashed into the pressure doors, bending and damaging them. Delamarre and Tommy were thrown around inside. Delamarre looked up through the vid-feed walls to see Thri'sst'uhl staring down at the interior. It slapped a few of its hands onto the outer roof surface. The vid-feed of the outside cut off and went black, and Delamarre could only see

Tommy trying to haul himself up by the glow of his bar. They heard screams outside from the last of the estate door guards, then nothing.

The interior feeds of the vehicle glowed back to life, and what they displayed was impossible—pumping, undulating biomachine creatures with too many glowing eyes slithering through an ocean of filth and diseased organs.

Tommy said, "B-Boss...?"

"It's not real, Tommy! Don't look at that shit!"

Thri'sst'uhl's glowing white arms swung down from the ceiling—through the solid surface—and hooked toward Tommy—but he rolled over his bar, knocking everything down with a metal and glass crashing and shattering. Tommy lit the ceiling up with his flak gun until the spot where their otherworldly attacker's arms had swiped down was pocked and glowing, and the maddening horrors had cut off of the interior feeds.

Delamarre stood back up, chuckled, and said, "Hey, maybe you got it—"

The glowing arm swiped down again, slapping onto Tommy's head. Thri'sst'uhl made Tommy aim at Delamarre and fire his flak-gun, mulching everything in the gun's path. Delamarre exo-dove to the farthest spot in the lounge floor he could and fired quick plasma bursts across Tommy's torso and head area, popping them open and forcing Thri'sst'uhl to pull his arm back up out of the lounge.

Delamarre said, "Oh you don't like plasma?!"

Knowing he was dead if he stayed in this big, dark coffin trying to avoid Thri'sst'uhl's swipes, and emboldened by the creature's recoiling from the plasma bursts, Delamarre crawled to the lounge doors. He took a deep breath, opened the doors, and dove out. As he rolled out of his dive—

Thri'sst'uhl slammed down onto him, snapping his pistol arm and pinning him to the ground.

Delamarre tried to claw at Thri'sst'uhl's helmet with his power-assisted free arm, only to have the creature grab that arm and snap it against one of its too many knees. Delamarre fought off sobs and just moaned through his agony.

Thri'sst'uhl got close to Delamarre's face.

"What now, Delamarre?"

Delamarre closed his eyes tight, tears spilling out.

"Estate—bubble pop!"

The highest part of his estate dome released its explosive bolts, detaching its apex. The dome interior violently purged its pressure.

"Helmet!"

Several pieces formed out of his suit's neck support and encased Delamarre's head in a clear ovoid.

Delamarre and Thri'sst'uhl were pulled upwards, tumbling through the escaping air as they approached the open maw out into high orbit.

Thri'sst'uhl laughed and taunted, "Was that supposed to save you?"

Delamarre said, "What c-can I give you so you stop?!"

Thri'sst'uhl just watched the dome's opening get closer.

They were pulled out into space and Delamarre watched his family's legacy and his beloved playground get further away, Thri'sst'uhl's iron grip guaranteeing he was never coming back.

Thri'sst'uhl forced a big hand down into Delamarre's space helmet and clasped it over Delamarre's face. Its horrible voice vibrated into the Delamarre's skull.

"To expect mercy was... foolish."

They tumbled farther and the heat became unbearable. Delamarre realized Thri'sst'uhl was forcing them into an atmosphere entry burn... but its words burned at Delamarre as much as his body did.

Thri'sst'uhl watched the last of its sworn enemy's body burn away in its many hands. It considered allowing itself to burn up with Delamarre and return to its home, then realized how long it had been since it had frolicked on 'Earth'—and decided to drop to the surface and entertain itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patrick Loveland is a screenwriter and author from San Diego, California. He studied Experimental Filmmaking in San Francisco and worked as a projectionist and student small format film equipment instructor before moving back to his hometown in the early 2000s. Patrick lives with his wife and young daughter.

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Suffering | *Mark Steinwachs*

The chittering awakens me and I open my eyes. My body is prone on the comfortable bed, one of the few luxuries I am afforded. I wince when the first set of tiny hands touch me, sharp claws testing the flesh on my legs. Laying there, waiting for it to begin.

Each of us live this, session after session. It's not the physical anguish that will break us, it's the emotional torment. Feeling the tingling in our bodies as the connection builds. The unseen part of us that stretches through the chasm to them as our gift begins to merge with theirs—knowing we will soon be back for another round. There is nothing we can do to stop it. It is our life. Our life to complete theirs.

We are the Muse.

A sharp burst of pain shoots through me, my body arching as synapses explode inside. Then I slam back on the bed, the room disappears and a glowing white screen surrounds me. A cursor blinks, then it begins. Letters becoming words becoming sentences. Tiny nails dig into my flesh. More words flow as blood trickles down my legs. My face twitches with each pin prick from the small claws. The letters in black, forming on the screen in front of me. Every muscle fights the slow grinding ache as viscous red seeps from me. I give myself to him, so he may become great.

The creatures move up my legs, nipping my torso and arms. I don't need to see the sightless ones, the Deliverers, as dark as the night itself with pointed teeth that click and tick as they speak to each other in a language only they and Oizys know. She controls them and they feed her from our sessions. We are pawns, Muse and Deliverers, in the games the gods play.

A flash of golden light blinds me, pulling me from my thoughts. I wince but never close my eyes. If I look away, or even blink, the connection will break. I can't read the words but I know they are perfect. Only perfection can be this intense and with it brings ... I bite my bottom lip as a talon slashes my calf, reopening my barely healed wound from last night. A moan escapes me, tears stream down my face. I want it to be over. With each word he types my eyes are assaulted. That, mixed with the physical attacks, overwhelms me. I begin to blink but I can't let myself, I won't. He is on fire and I am his victim.

The words flow from him. I don't know how long it lasts, my time and his never mix. I am becoming weaker as blood continues to seep from the cuts all over me. My body is begging me to end the session, to close my eyes and rest before there is no coming back. I groan through clenched teeth, spasms wrack my body. I feel a Deliverer on my chest. Suddenly all the others stop but the words continue. My body involuntarily tenses, unknowing, the pause in their attack confusing me. Agonizing seconds tick by until another sentence crosses my vision.

Vivid colors erupt in front of my eyes, unlike anything I have ever seen before. A sharp claw pierces my flesh and bores into me. Its talon extends deep inside me and punctures my heart, filling itself straight from me. I scream in anguish and close my eyes. The colors vanish and my world is an abyss.

My breath is shallow and ragged. The claw in my heart retracts and the Deliverers start to slip away. My body struggles to repair itself, starting with the most serious injuries. After those, the hundreds of little nicks mark my flesh, scars of another round of torment. The room is quiet and I am at peace. I made it through once more. I begin to drift off to sleep, my last thoughts always the same.

I am a Muse. I must suffer for my artist.

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

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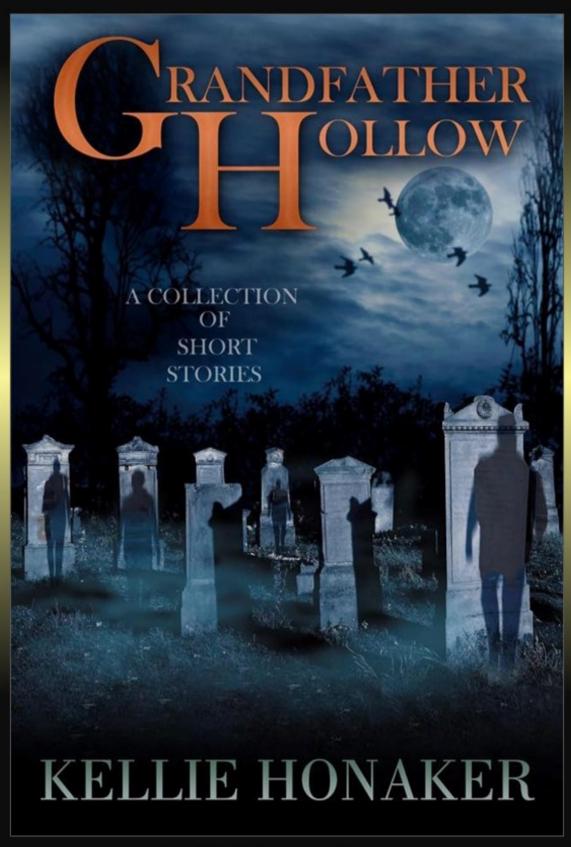
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And He Threw His Hands Up In The Sky | Lou Antonelli

Modern civilization started in ancient Mesopotamia about 10,000 BC—you read that in a history book, didn't you? That was about the time agriculture was invented, too, wasn't it?

Allow me to set the record straight for you—although no one would believe what I'm about to tell you if you repeated it. Oh, about 10,000 BC, maybe we could say civilization was restarted, and agriculture was reintroduced. I should know—I was there when it stopped in the first place.

In fact I was an eyewitness.

Talk about agriculture—our office park sat in a beautiful green valley; from my observation post I could see corn flowers across the highway, and cattle grazing in a nearby field.

The mutated descendants of those cattle were among the few animals that survived the devastation caused by the war. They grew gnarled and wooly to survive the nuclear winter; it still pains me to see an American bison, even if only on a nickel.

Modern man evolved tens if not hundreds of thousands of years ago—and civilization has only been around a few thousand years?

I don't think so.

But our civilization was much like yours; people will do the same stupid things over and over again. We are creatures of habit. In some ways I'd like to think our civilization was better than yours.

In some ways, I know it was worse.

For example, you think a military industrial complex is bad? Try a religiously-controlled military industrial complex. My boss was not only the head of the corporation, she was the head priestess of the corporate temple.

Vya's, office was on the ground floor of the skyscraper. My office was between hers and the main entrance. I was the head of security and operations. My observation post was in the lobby. That's why I had the view I did when it all came down.

Because of my job I was privy to a special piece of information—Vya's office was a drop room. It sat at the top of an elevator shaft. In case of an emergency, it could be loosed and descend straight down 500 feet into a fortified bomb shelter.

Tensions had been steadily rising between our empire and the enemy across the sea. Our military had excellent antiballistic defenses, and our office complex was well inland, nestled in a valley between two mountain ranges. But we knew that if a war started, we would be a strategic target.

Vya came out to the lobby to speak to me that morning.

"We are on defense condition amethyst this morning," she said.

That startled me. That was the highest level of alert—meaning war was expected. Of course, there had been no public announcement.

She saw my expression. "The Ramans are ready to attack. The only question left is whether we launch a pre-emptive strike."

I nodded. "As soon as Gratagar arrives, I will tell him to unlock the shelter."

We had a shelter in the basement for the employees, who didn't know about the deep bunker. That was only for temple officers.

Gratagar was a battle-scarred veteran of the last war; he was my second-in-command. I knew I could trust him to herd the staff underground, efficiently and forcefully.

Employees were already streaming across the plaza into the building when the gongs sounded and the amethyst lights began to flash. Gratagar had just walked in and he rushed up to me.

"What in the Nine Hells is happening?"

I pulled the sheet off the teletype.

"There's been a sneak attack at our naval base at Atlantis," I said.

"That's impossible," said Gratagar. "Its defenses are impregnable."

"From what came through before the transmission ceased, apparently—rather than a headon attack—they dropped a bomb in the ocean, and a tidal wave took out the base."

I read the end of the transmission. "It looks like they took out the whole island."

There was an air base on the far side our valley. Gratagar was headstrong and impulsive. He said "I'm going out to see if our fighters are scrambling," before I had a chance to stop him.

The employees were running into the building in a mad rush. Gratagar went in the opposite direction and stood in the plaza, looking across the valley.

"Everyone into the basement," I shouted. "We're opening the shelter."

Gratagar was alone now, and he glowered at the sky, his legs apart and his fists on his hips.

The lobby was bustling as people fled down the staircase to the basement. Suddenly there was a bright flash.

The strike was obviously nearby, and while the lobby was shielded by a wing of the building, Gratagar was fully exposed.

He burst into flames.

We all saw it, right in front of our eyes. Everyone started to scream and a stampede to the basement was on.

"That was close," I said to Vya. "They must have taken out the fighter base. Our defenses have been penetrated!"

I turned and realized she was gone. I knew she went to her office. I had to make a split decision, since I had to get out of the lobby before the concussion hit—to go to the shelter, or follow her.

I could hear the screams and shattering glass behind me as I entered her office suite. Her door was about to close, but I grabbed it and slid in. She was there, along with the temple officials.

"Let the door close, Barmesh," she said coldly.

I did, and she pulled a lever on the wall behind her. There was a sudden jerk as the room plummeted.

A moment later there was a roar and an incredible rumbling as the building took a direct hit. We were in a freefall as the roar continued, and the room began to heat up.

"There are lead doors in the shaft that will drop as we pass them," Vya said, and in a moment we heard a loud bang as one set of doors dropped into place.

The room continued to heat up.

One of the executives cried out. "The building is melting on top of us."

Another bang.

The heat still grew. Then a third bang, and a sudden stop as everyone lost their footing. The door snapped open.

"Everyone, out!" Vya shouted.

We dashed into the bunker, and Vya punched a red button on the wall. A blast door dropped down.

The lights automatically came on, and we all stood there, shaking as the rumbling above slowly subsided.

It was soon apparent that the severity of the attack insured we would be underground a long time. It would take the excavation robots—we embodied our artificial intelligence in humanoid machines rather than computer networks—years to dig us out.

"This may take decades," I said to Vya.

"You are the head of security and operations," Vya said. "You will supervise the machines while we enter suspended animation."

"I won't live long enough," I said.

"I have a solution," she said.

Vya disclosed that priestly scientists, in an effort to make soldiers with superior healing abilities, had developed an experimental pharmaceutical. But since they also learned the same formula stopped aging, they had never released it.

No one wanted the possibility of immortal and indestructible soldiers, she said.

But she had a small secret supply in the bunker. She gave me a dose, and I supervised the long and arduous excavation process for 300 years.

When we emerged, we saw the valley was now a barren desert. It was also obvious the ozone layer had been massively reduced from before. There was a lot more ultraviolet light than before.

In fact, Vya began to visibly smolder the moment she stepped into the sunlight. Apparently her body stopped producing Vitamin D. Her bone marrow had also died, and while now immortal she had to take messy and massive blood transfusions to sustain any kind of energy level.

She wasn't the only one among us who sustained mutations because of the radiation that permeated the environment. Many people's DNA helixes took strange twists while they were in suspended animation.

One man now would spontaneously mutate into a lupine. Another grew a jackals head. A young lady grew a snake's body. Another grew a hawk's wings and claws.

Since we had no idea what lay beyond the devastated valley, we decided to scatter and make our own way. As you probably now realize, we were the progenitors of all the gods and monsters of antiquity.

But since I looked normal, it's always been easy for me to blend in.

A few days ago I saw pictures online of the Burning Man festival, and for the first time in thousands of years I thought of Gratagar. I realized with a shock of recognition that we must have left some kind of psychic imprint in that valley when the war started.

That beautiful valley I once knew is now the Black Rock desert in Nevada. And I remember the last thing Gratagar did when the bomb went off—the way he threw his hands up in the sky when that bomb went off and he burst into flames.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lou Antonelli started writing fiction in middle age; his first story was published in 2003 when he was 46. His collections include *Fantastic Texas* published in 2009; *Texas & Other Planets* published in 2010; and *The Clock Struck None* and *Letters from Gardner*, both published in 2014. His debut novel, the retro-futurist alternate history *Another Girl, Another Planet*, is slated for release later in 2016 by WordFire Press.

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Bent Metal

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE, KOBO, AND ITUNES

Baxter's Refrigerator | Maynard Blackoak

Sitting on his sofa, Baxter wondered what was taking his new girlfriend, Deena, such a long time returning from the bathroom. As he had done with his previous girlfriend, Bonnie, he issued a warning about opening his refrigerator. Though he had avoided offering anything more than a vague explanation for his strange desire to keep it closed, the memory of what had happened the last time it was opened preyed heavily on his mind.

Thinking back to that dreadful day a few months ago, he remembered the horrified shriek. That was soon followed by a bloodcurdling scream and the gruesome sound of Bonnie's body being ripped apart. It had all occurred quickly, before he had even had a chance to go to her aid. By the time he had arrived at the scene of the massacre, she had been dismembered and her bloody pieces lay strewn on the kitchen floor. Blood splattered the walls and thick crimson streams dripped from the counters.

He recalled the sight of the hideous creature that lived in his refrigerator standing in the grisly aftermath viewing the carnage with bloodlust burning in its eyes. It cast a satisfied glance around the kitchen, and returned to its living quarters inside the refrigerator, leaving Baxter to deal with the gory scene.

With a cold shudder, he shook the bloody memory from his head. His thoughts, however, traveled further back in time to the first time he realized a monster had come to live inside his refrigerator. It was the first night he had spent in his own place. His friend, Gary, had gone to the refrigerator for a beer. Soon afterwards, Baxter heard him screaming in terror. Upon entering the kitchen, he discovered his friend's decapitated body. His head lay on the counter with its eyes agape in horror and its mouth wide open in a silent scream. Out of the corner of his eye, Baxter saw the vile creature creep inside the refrigerator, closing the door behind it.

Over the years, Baxter had disposed of several refrigerators but the creature always returned to make its home inside its replacement. He even tried moving to different locations. Still, the monstrous fiend found its way back into his fridge. Deciding to try seclusion to stop the beast from killing, he had denied himself any semblance of a social life for over a year. Nevertheless, it proved to be to no avail, as he continued to discover mutilated corpses of mail carriers, neighbors, and strangers lying in bloody heaps on his kitchen floor.

The only thing that seemed to prevent the murderous creature from killing, at least until Bonnie, was to insist everyone avoid his refrigerator. A wide range of excuses had kept visitors from going against his peculiar instruction. The reason Bonnie had ignored his wishes yet remained a mystery to him. To his knowledge, there had been no reason for her to disobey his directive.

Noting the lengthy time she had been gone, he became nervous and agitated. He had heard no screams. Nevertheless, fear raised goose bumps that raced along the surface of his body.

"Are you alright, Deena?" He inquired as he stood from the sofa.

After several moments without a response, he began walking toward the kitchen. Slowly, with tentative steps he made his way to the swinging door. Pausing before entering, he called out to her again. "Deena? Are you in there?"

A trembling hand reached to push the door open but fear of what he might find inside kept him from finishing the task. Raising his eyes to the ceiling, he released a sigh and grimaced. Pushing the door somewhat, it cracked open slightly though not enough for him to see more than a tiny sliver of the kitchen. Just as he was summoning the courage to open the door completely, he heard Deena responding from the bathroom.

"I'm fine, Baxter. Jesus! You'd think I've been in here for hours. Sometimes a girl doesn't want to be bothered, especially when she's having female issues when that time of the month sneaks up on her," she spoke in an irritated tone.

Relieved, calm quickly replaced the tension that had gripped his body. "I... Uh... Was just concerned that you might be sick or something. It seemed like you were in there for a really long time."

"Yeah. Well I ain't doing all that well. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, cramping like hell, and I feel like shit," she snapped in an abrasive voice.

"Um... Well... If you would rather go home to deal with your female problem..." he began in a sheepish manner.

Before he could complete his sentence, she interrupted nastily. "Oh, I see. My time of the month means no sex for you and now you just want me to leave. You're a real piece of shit... A real fucking dick, Baxter."

"Uh. No. You didn't let me finish. I don't mind if you stay."

"Well ain't that just so fucking nice of you. You don't mind if I stay. Go to Hell, Baxter. Just go to Hell."

His face reddened with frustration. "God damn it, Deena. I didn't mean it that way. I meant I want you to stay but only if you feel up to it."

"So if I'm not feeling well, you want me to leave?"

Frustration began turning to anger. Baxter felt something washing over him he had not felt in months, not since his last conversation with Bonnie. It was as if reality began to fade in and out. His thoughts came in garbled pieces and along with fragmented memories, added confusion to his unstable condition. A short time later, he blacked out.

"Damn it, Deena. You're twisting everything I say. Just shut the hell up and come into the kitchen when you get out. I have something I want to show you."

Deena stood in the kitchen with her hands on her hips, wearing an irate scowl. Undeterred by her angry stance, a devious grin snaked across Baxter's face. After all, he knew her demeanor would soon change just as the faces of many others who had awakened the rage inside him had. All she had to do was pull the handle of the refrigerator door and release the terror inside.

Several times, he instructed her to open it. Each went disregarded. She simply stood in place, her icy stare becoming more intense. Finally, after several minutes of imploring her to look inside his refrigerator, she groaned and complied.

"I don't see what the big deal is. There ain't nothing in there I ain't seen before," she observed with her level of annoyance on the rise.

Baxter cast a smug glance at her. He had not expected her to see the creature. None of the others had seen it either. Nonetheless, each had felt the pain of it tearing them apart. "Oh, you'll see what the big deal is soon enough. Just keep looking in there and you'll see it."

Shaking her head, she scanned the refrigerator for several moments while he waited for the monster to exact its gruesome toll. Disappointment overtook his arrogance when the creature failed to spring into murderous action.

He moved next to her to look for himself. The creature stood inside the refrigerator, giving no indication it intended to step out of its cold confines. Puzzled, he gazed at the inactive creature in confused contemplation. He could not understand its disinterest in ripping her apart.

"I ain't gonna keep staring in your damn fridge forever," she barked, turning an irritated glare his way.

Baxter bounced his eyes between Deena and the creature, and mumbled incoherently. He poked the monster in the belly, thinking it might be asleep with its eyes open. It flashed him a menacing grimace, which made him take a quick step backwards.

"That ain't gonna get it to come out. All that's gonna do is piss it off," she told him as a twisted smile crept along her lips.

Stunned, he set a startled gaze into her face. "You see it?"

Deena laughed. Her face brightened as she realized his intention. "Oh I get it. You wanted it to tear me apart. Boy, did you really fuck up. Not only can I see it, I can make it do things too. I've dealt with this ugly monster since I was twelve and got my first period."

A shroud of terror fell over him. His stomach knotted. The terror he had introduced to many others was about to be set against him. "Um...I don't suppose there's any chance we can just forget all about this?"

"The door's been opened, it needs to kill, and you are really fucked."

With a snap of her fingers, the creature leapt from the refrigerator. It pounced on his chest, ripping its long and sharp claws through flesh and bone. He screamed in agony and writhed in pain, as his blood splattered the ceiling, walls and countertops. In a whirlwind of bloody activity, the monster finished the grisly job of shredding his body into crimson covered chunks of gore. The last image Baxter saw before dying was a severed, bloody hand slapping his cheek.

Its gruesome task finished, the creature crept back into the refrigerator and returned to a dormant state.

Deena closed the door, sealing it inside its cold cage. "See you in about 28 days."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Maynard Blackoak is an author living in Oklahoma. The greatest influences in his writing are the works of Poe and Dickens. He draws inspiration from the sounds and shadows of the night and processes them through the splintered windmill of his mind to create his tales.

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Venom | Patrick Winters

The anger isn't so much a feeling as it is a presence within him, a tangible thing that now comes coursing through his tense frame. The black emotion has transcended simple thought and has become something... else. It mounts; it grows; it finds a life beneath the skin and across the bone, reshaping and becoming as much a part of him as every other molecule and atom that makes him what he is. And what he is is angry; pure, reptilian-brain and near-to-seething angry. God's rage and devil's revenge kind of angry.

It twists and turns and burns in his gut, up and down through his veins, and creates a pressing pressure against his skull. The burn isn't hot, though, but cool; a creeping chill that takes him and fills his blood with a white-blue fire.

This is what snakes must feel like—the thought leaps through his mind like a lethal rattler, rears up like a waiting cobra. It pleases him. This is what it must feel like to have venom.

He walks—no, does a two-footed slither—through the throngs of people about him, winding and weaving through their moving, loud, bothersome mass. It's a warm summer day and the heat permeating the air and coming from off their frames and their despicable breath cannot warm that ice that has taken his insides. Whenever they draw too near, rushing and pressing against him, touching his skin—no, his scales masquerading as skin—he recoils a little and halts, if only briefly, to stare at them with cold eyes. He flicks his tongue out at a particularly irksome lady, the disgust and tinge of fear that immediately overtakes her face worth the momentary obstruction of his movement. Others see him do this and take note. Their noise doesn't stop, but it takes a notable dip in volume and frequency as they continue to move about him with whispers of worry. The warning serves its purpose; they begin to avoid him and stay a cautious distance from him.

He wonders what it would be like to strike out at any one of them, to open his mouth and sink his teeth—no, his blunted fangs—right into the supple skin of a random neck that entered

into his sight. To taste a coppery warmth coating the inside of his throat; to cause pain as he latched on and bit down tighter; to put his venom to use.

Without even realizing he is saying it, the word slinks quietly off of his tongue, lost in the hustle and bustle of the crowd: "Sssssssoon..."

A predator knows when to wait. When to strike at the opportune moment. When it is least expected.

When the venom is guaranteed to kill.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patrick Winters is a resident of Jacksonville, Illinois, and a recent graduate of Illinois College, with a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He's had several works published in various magazines, have self-published a collection of short stories, *Gravedigger: Six Feet Deep*, and will soon be releasing his first book, *I Was a Teenage Gila Monster*, with Frith Books.

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Pandora | Helen Mihajlovic

The ethereal song of the blackbird infuses an azure sky as Hephaestus plunges his hand into a tepid lake. He digs his fingers deeply into the wet soil removing handfuls of clay, pondering his undertaking: to create the first woman.

He warms the clay in his hands, making it easy to mould. He shapes her curvaceous breasts, sculpts her hips and lengthy red tousled hair to hang on her slender shoulders. With the carving of her two delicate hands she is complete. He looks at her fair skin and her brows arched over almond shaped eyes. "Pandora," he exclaims, in awe of his creation. Hephaestus rummages through his filthy bag and removes a box. "You are to take this box with you. It is a gift," he says, handing it to her.

She holds onto the brownish-red box.

"But you must not open it," he warns.

Her brows rise. "Why?" she asks.

"You are only to open it when I give you permission," he says sternly.

"What is inside?" Her voice rises with curiosity.

He hesitates. "Something very precious and with great power."

Pandora's grip on the box tightens.

The box weighs on Pandora's hands as she climbs the steep steps of a palace built on a hill. She looks at its wooden columns and walks under its tympanum adorned with a sculpture of a titan bearing fire. It is as Hephaestus had described it to her; she marvels at the grand pebbled mosaic floors and the fresco of the twelve Olympians that embellishes the walls.

"This will be my new home." She smiles at the splendor that awaits her.

As a gust of wind batters her bare flesh, a door opens from the far end of the palace. A man with a peculiar round head and bulging eyes strides towards her. His nose is akin to a pig's snout and the skin on his neck is shriveled like a turkey's wattle.

"Pandora." Epimetheus salivates as his sordid stare explores her naked body. "I am to be your husband."

Pandora gasps.

The vivid light of noon gradually diminishes to the deep red glow of a setting sun as Pandora spends the day gazing at the box. Her fingers quiver as she touches its rim. She slightly lifts the lid and lowers her head to peer into the box.

"Madam Pandora," a slave boy calls from the hall.

Pandora's limbs start, the lid slips from her fingertips and the box shuts with a thud before she can peer inside. She lifts her head as the slave boy enters.

"Your betrothed would like you to join him at the market," he says, glancing at the box.

She places the box in the center of the table. She leaves, blushing at the slave boy's lecherous gaze.

Pandora finds herself immersed in pleasure at the sights of colorful tunics, golden necklaces, sparkling gems and pendants inlaid with pearls in the open-air market. Sweet scents of rich oils, rose, myrtle and cinnamon perfume the air.

A fair-haired young man with curls framing his long neck approaches Pandora and Epimetheus. He holds a basket filled with fruit.

"Madam, would you like a piece of fruit?" he stares at her elegant frame.

Pandora looks into the basket full of figs, grapes and olives. "I will have a fig," she says.

Smiling warmly, he gives her a fig, then turns to Epimetheus and offers him the fruit. Epimetheus shakes his head, giving him a drachma for the fig. Pandora feasts on the young man's bright eyes as he gives a slight bow before leaving.

While the sweetness of the fig fills Pandora's mouth, a tall man with taut cheeks, a broad chin and swarthy skin approaches.

"Chitons!" the man yells, carrying various linen clothing over his brawny shoulder.

As Pandora catches sight of his glance, she smiles.

"Chitons and cloaks!" He weaves his way through the crowd.

She looks at her betrothed with his strangely protruding forehead and dribbling mouth; an odd inflammation deforms his ears.

Is this to be my husband? He is old enough to be my father! Pandora thinks to herself in disgust. He will be in the way of my happiness. He will interfere with me finding a man I love.

She falls into a reverie, imagining herself watching her betrothed peacefully sleeping in his bedchamber; his sagging eyelids closed, the rise of his plump cheeks with each horrid puff from his mouth. As she walks closer her brows knit with a scowl; she would go mad living another day near him! She sees his unusually large fingers laid on the bed sheets. Her stomach churns at the thought of his heavily veined hands caressing her body on their wedding night. Her blood pulses with an unruly anger as she draws closer to him. Oleander flowers sit in a rich red vase on the bedside table; she impetuously seizes the vase and strikes him on the head. He shrieks. With a tempestuous upward surge of her arm she strikes him again with full force. His body convulses. She clouts him once more. Pandora breathes in deeply and steps back. She looks at the walls, floor and bed; a crimson liquid stains all in front of her. Madness. A blend of blood and perspiration drips from a lock of her hair. She shuts her eyes, holds her aching head. The air reeks with the sour scent of the Oleander plant and her senses are besieged by this orgy of blood. As Epimetheus gasps for a final breath, his lungs heave. He is still and his eyes hold a cloudy, empty cataleptic stare.

Pandora rouses from her reverie at the sound of a goat's bleat. Her breath deepens, impious thoughts stir in her mind and the reverie of the death of her betrothed awakens a delight within her.

She turns to the noise of people hastily rushing on the dirt road and she stands fixated looking at them; it is odd that no one is like her. She wonders why all the men stare at her.

"Where are the women in this town?" she asks.

"You are the first woman created by the God Hephaestus," Epimetheus replies.

"Other than you Pandora, he has only created men."

Pandora's mouth gapes with disbelief. "Are there any women elsewhere?"

"No."

Pandora feels light headed. All darkens. She collapses.

Pandora wakes with a start to a loud pounding sound; she discovers herself lying in her bed, on her side, near the window aglow with the sun's light. One grim thought spawns another as Pandora lowers her thick lashes. She is floating through a life she does not like. Her limbs hold little desire to move. She yearns to sleep and shut the world out. When she wakes may she be happy, may she be in a different life, a perfect life.

Her grim thoughts cease as a finger crawls from behind her to find her naked nipple. She jolts. It must be my vile betrothed, she thinks. Perhaps he does not have the chivalry to restrain his desires until our wedding night.

She hastily removes his hand from her breast. Feeling soft boyish skin, she quickly looks over her shoulder into the handsome black eyes of the slave boy, naked and lying next to her.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, her eyes widening.

"I was instructed to wait here until you were awake," he says. "I crept into your bed when your betrothed left the palace."

She twists her body to his while hearing a rhythmic pounding.

"Do you hear that noise?"

He shakes his head. "No, I hear nothing." He strokes her neck.

"It grows louder." She turns her head towards the door, imagining the pounding sound to be the opening and closing of the box's lid.

"Pandora, only silence fills this chamber," says the slave boy.

Her heart races; thoughts of the box plague her. She envisages herself opening the box; two glaring eyes look onto her from within and a slithering sound pervades the air.

She awakens from her fancy when the slave boy removes the bed sheet that cloaks their naked bodies. A crimson blush flares on Pandora's cheeks. The slave boy's hand creeps again to her breast.

All she can think of is the box. She imagines a woman with thick dark hair and glaring blue eyes emerging from the box, waxen skin and large naked breasts. She holds the decapitated head of a strange man on her arm, his mouth wide open showing pointy edged teeth, his eyes holding a mad stare.

The slave boy rouses Pandora from her daydream. He stands naked near the bed and he parts her legs, pulling them towards him. He lifts her and her legs entwine around his torso.

Depraved thoughts of the box flood Pandora's mind and heighten her arousal:

She imagines a fair skinned woman with a large blue serpent wrapped around her body rising from the box. The serpent's yellow eyes stare at her, revealing its sharp fangs with an angry hiss.

Filled with perverse desire, Pandora's kiss roughens, her grip on the slave boy's back grows forceful. Pandora imagines two men with grey complexions creeping out of the box, they bow their heads in shame for all the immorality the box holds.

Pandora's blood quickens as the slave boy's loins move inside her. She thinks of a destructive fire blazing from the box. She is certain there is some dark, unholy power locked away in that clay box that will fill the world with evil. Her body violently thrusts against the slave boy's loins. He satiates her desires and she heaves a sigh of pleasure.

An odd sense of fear comes over Pandora as she watches the angelic sleeping face of the slave boy. She sits upright, turning her head in the direction of the constant pounding sound. Heart racing, she stands and follows the sound.

The soles of Pandora's bare feet grow cold as she walks across the burnished marble floor. Her eyes narrow as she sees the box is no longer on the table where she had placed it; instead it waits for her in the center of the hall, its pounding causing her head to throb, her forehead to crease. She draws closer as she becomes aware of the box's changed appearance; on one side the clay has disintegrated. The box begins to violently shake. Her breath quickens as she steps back. She grasps the torch from the wall and her hand trembles as she approaches the box. Her brow becomes drenched with perspiration as the warmth of the torch's flame embraces her naked skin. Her entire body shakes as she holds the flame near the box's rim, pondering its destruction. She becomes light headed, she screams, howls, confused, frenzied. Staring imploringly at the box, she falls to her knees and sobs.

Pandora's gaze numb, she slumps in the chair, her chin clasped in her hand. I am trapped in my own life; I do not know how to escape, she thinks to herself. A betrothed whom I do not love and nothing of value to keep me to this world. She thinks of Epimetheus, his expressionless face and vacant stare, as if there were not a thought that stirs in his head.

Pandora's eyes turn to the bookshelf. At the edge sits a garnet book. Thinking it unusual in size, she grabs it from the bookshelf. Her eyes explore its cover, searching for its title; there is none, only an embossed plant with fringed petals in the center of the cover. Leafing through the pages, she glimpses several highlighted entries: Hemlock, Rosary, Pea and Oleander. She reads out loud: "Each part of the Oleander plant is poisonous." She purses her lips.

Pandora frowns at Epimetheus as he slurps his soup. She looks at the slave boy standing at the corner behind him; the slave boy reciprocates with a covetous stare.

"Where is your exquisite box?" her betrothed asks, looking at the table where she had previously placed it.

"I have placed it somewhere safe," she says. "It is far too precious to leave here where anyone could take it."

Epimetheus nods. "Hephaestus gave all of us a box similar to yours." He fills his spoon and returns to his slurping.

Pandora looks puzzled. "I am not sure what you mean."

"When Hephaestus creates a person, he gives them a box."

"Did you get a box?" She leans her head forward.

"Yes."

"What is in the box?" her heart quickens.

He coughs. "This soup has upset my stomach," he says wiping his brow.

"Did you open the box?" Her voice grows louder.

He screws up his nose at the soup. "I do not feel well."

Pandora examines his sickly green complexion.

"Yes I opened the box," he sighs. His eyelids half closed, his neck bends forward and he vomits on the table.

Pandora turns her head in disgust; her hand covers her nose. The slave boy rushes to him.

"I need to rest. Take me to my bedchamber." Epimetheus' voice falters as he rests his arm on the slave boy's shoulders.

"Pandora, the garden has many medicinal plants. Please find one to help with this sickness."

Pandora nods. The slave boy leads Epimetheus to the chamber.

The sweet aroma of lilac enchants Pandora as she wanders through the blooming garden. The chirrup of the birds weaves through the air between a medley of crimson, violet and gold flowers. She catches sight of the notorious plant and halts to stare at its roseate petals.

How pretty and innocent the flower looks and no different to the others, she thinks. Her slight hand reaches to pick it. Placing her aquiline nose near the petals she breathes deep into her lungs the heavy scent of the Oleander. She twirls the flower by its stem between her fingers and thoughts of the Oleander's poison crawl back to her mind.

Pandora carries a tray into the chamber where her betrothed lies on a mahogany bed. The cup clinks as she places the tray at his bedside table and darts him a look of disdain.

"Pandora, my dearest, you have brought me a warm drink to soothe my stomach."

A wicked smile crosses her lips. She watches as he shuts his weary eyes. "Do not forget to drink it before you sleep, I picked the medicinal flower myself."

His eyes strain to open. "Of course."

"Pandora," a voice calls from the hallway.

She raises her head to the direction of the voice, then quickly looks back to Epimetheus, already snoring loudly. She rushes out of the chamber.

Pandora follows the voice down a long hallway. Her breath deepens as she reaches the room from which the voice calls.

"Pandora," the voice now whispers from within the box.

She looks down with a wild glint in her eye. Her heart pounds as she nears the box; it sits in a corner. She reaches out to touch it; her fingertips feel it's cold exterior. Her forehead sweats as she lifts the box; it feels heavy in her slender hands. What could there be inside? She thinks, looking at the box. If Hephaestus told me I could eventually open the box, then surely there would be no harm in opening it now.

A chill runs down her spine as she holds the edge of the box. She opens the lid. All is still. Where is the chaos she had expected? Pandora looks up as Hephaestus rushes into the room with a winded rage.

Her eyes scan the entire box. "There is nothing here." Her mouth hangs wide open.

"I cautioned you not to open the box," he yells.

"You made me believe there was more!" Pandora's tone grows angry. "There was meant to be something precious and powerful inside."

"There was something precious and powerful," he says.

"You are lying," she stares at the box. "It is empty."

"You were not to look into the box until you developed your character," he says.

"Then the box would be opened and you would have the one thing that was missing when I created you."

Her heart quickens. "What is it?"

He hesitates. "I have watched you from afar. Your behavior has been a harmful influence to it," he says. "Your actions have shown little thought for others."

"The box called my name. It whispered telling me what I should do."

"You do not take the blame for your doing, you blame the box or any other thing for what you willingly do."

"No!" she shakes her head. "I loathe my life. I did it in the pursuit of happiness."

He interrupts. "Your putrid nature grew so much in force that it could distort the very box in which it lay."

"What was the precious thing inside the box?" her lips tremble.

He huffs. "Your soul was in the box."

She gasps. She shakes her head.

"What shall happen to me now?" she asks, helpless.

Her heart violently pounds; descending into a dark void, she frantically bangs on a clay wall. She has become imprisoned inside the box.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Helen Mihajlovic is a published author, 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'. All stories are dedicated to her mother and brother. She is grateful for a good editor Alison Strumberger and feedback from Roger Smith.

Damien | Stuart Conover

Damien Cross hated his name.

He knew that for it no one but God his parents were to blame.

A stupid movie from the seventies would forever have other kids call him the Devil's son.

Yet the chances of finding him without his head in a book are slim to none.

But one day soon be would put his newfound knowledge to good use.

Everything he was learning about from poison to politics would help him end the abuse.

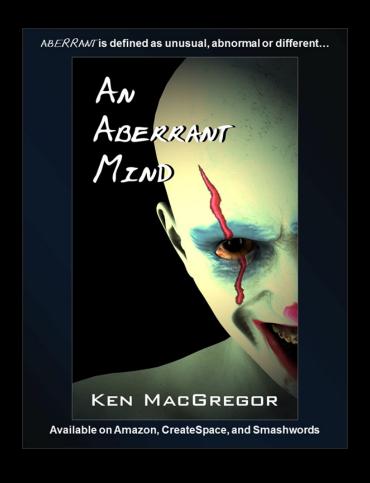
He might not be the devil but he was no one's fool.

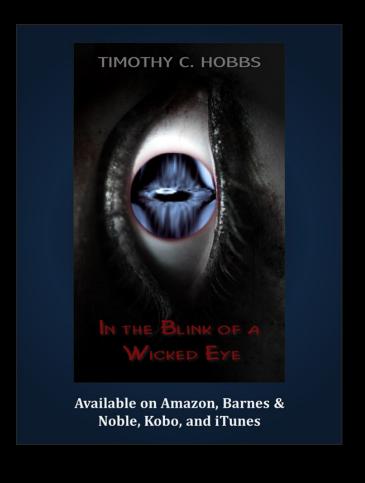
Damien had always known he was born to rule.

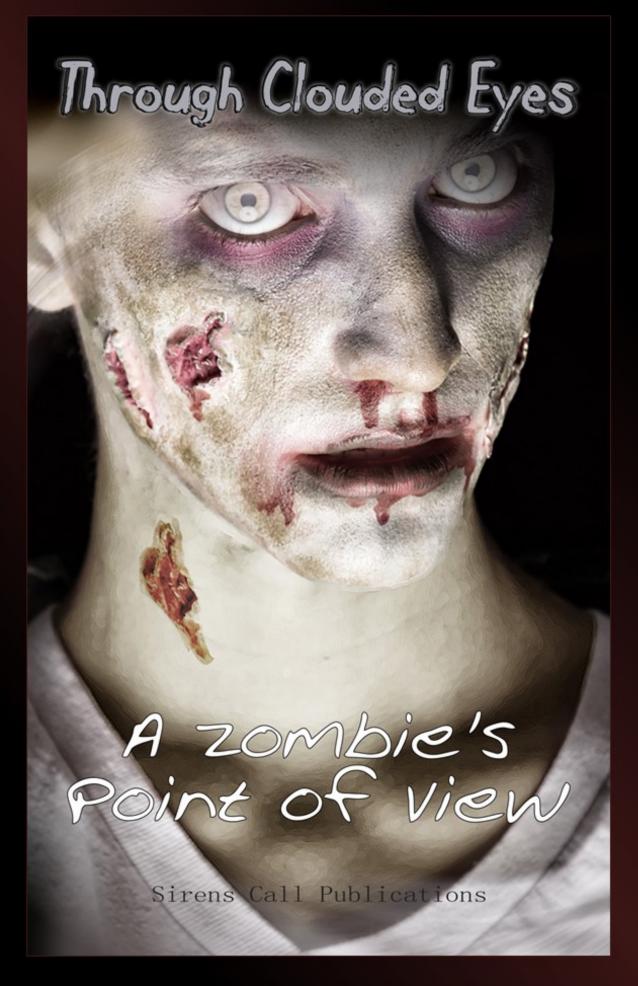
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Stuart Conover is a father, husband, rescue dog owner, horror author, blogger, journalist, horror enthusiast, comic book geek, science fiction junkie, and IT professional. With all of that to cram in on a daily basis, we have no idea if or when he sleeps!"

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Your Best Friend | R. J. Meldrum

Harrison climbed out of the car and lit another cigarette. He took one long drag from it then moved towards the building. His partner, Smith, moved in beside him.

"He should still be asleep."

"Just like me then," grumbled Smith. He was still new to the job.

"You'll soon realize the best time to call on a suspect is while he's still asleep. That way you can arrest them before they know what's happening."

"I suppose so."

They reached the door of the building and Harrison tried the handle. Locked.

"Too early. We'll have to get the manager to open it. Press his call-button," said Harrison.

Smith leant forward to press the gold colored knob, while Harrison turned to look at the street behind them. The morning sun, just reaching over the rooftops of the city, cast a yellow glow across the road. The street's shops and businesses weren't open yet and there was a sense of calm. Harrison started to turn back when he caught sight of a solitary figure. It caught his attention because there was no one else around. A tall man, standing about three or four blocks down from them. It struck Harrison as odd; the man was just standing and staring. Harrison shivered, despite the warmth of the rising sun and turned to Smith.

"Smith, do you see the man down the road from us? Doesn't it seem odd he's just standing there and staring at us?"

Smith turned to look.

"What man? There isn't anybody there. It's too early."

"Open your eyes. He's standing just down there."

Harrison's voice trailed off as he looked back down the road. There was no longer any figure in sight.

"That's weird. He was there a minute ago."

Smith shrugged.

"Probably some guy on his way to work."

"Yeah," replied Harrison unconvinced. There had been something about that figure. Something, but he didn't know what. It was definitely strange. His thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the building manager, grumbling and cursing.

Harrison quickly forgot about the man. The daily hassle and grind drove the memory from his mind. The arrest had gone well; they had caught the suspect in possession of two kilos of cocaine, but there was other work to do. More of the usual rapes, murders and assaults that lay scattered throughout the day. By the time their shift was over at 7 p.m. the events of the morning were gone from his mind. Harrison buttoned up his coat against the cold night and lit his thirtieth cigarette of the day. By the time he went to bed he would have smoked nearly forty. He knew it

was a rotten, stinking habit but he couldn't shake it. The new dynamic millennium wasn't suited to smokers and he felt like an unhealthy pariah, trying to ignore dirty looks and barbed comments from those more health conscious than himself. Saying goodnight to Smith and the desk-sergeant, he headed towards the subway.

The night was sharp and clear. The subway was about two blocks from the police station. Thirty years on the force, with eight of them spent as a detective. Two more years then he could retire. He shut that thought out. Since Maisy had died he didn't want to think about it. When she was still alive they had planned what they would do together once he left the force. But now there was nothing. Nothing. She had left him too young, a victim of a drunk driver. Harrison lit up again, knowing he wouldn't have enough time to smoke it before he got to the subway. He coughed, the damp of the night getting to his chest. What a life.

He paused briefly to take a last drag before entering the subway. He moved to toss the butt away. Suddenly he froze. There. Directly in front of him. The man. The one from that morning. Harrison was absolutely sure. It was the same man. Standing and staring directly at him. He was closer this time, about two hundred yards away. Harrison moved forward towards the figure, but a crowd of tourists interrupted his stride. It took him a moment or two to clear the gaggle, pushing his way through brusquely. He was too late, the figure was gone.

He rushed to the spot where the man had stood. His nerves were jangling. There was no sign of him. He grabbed a young woman, standing at the edge of the pavement.

"Did you see that man?"

The girl squealed in protest.

"Are you crazy? There was no one here."

An older woman, attracted by the noise, ran across.

"What are you doing to my friend? Leave her alone!"

"Get lost. I just want to talk to her."

Harrison pulled the young woman closer.

"The man. The one that was here about a minute ago. Did you see where he went?"

She looked at him, bewildered.

"I was alone. There was nobody else here."

"Tell me! He was just beside you."

"I'm telling the truth. There was no one else."

Her eyes were scared. Scared of him. Harrison dropped her arm in disgust. He headed into the subway.

The train was crowded but Harrison barely noticed. He was lost in thought. The same man twice in one day. Coincidence? After thirty years on the force Harrison didn't believe in coincidences. Something was happening. He lit up, ignoring the no smoking rule and the disgusted glances from his fellow passengers. It was to calm his nerves more than anything. He

was more shaken than he cared to admit. It bothered him. He wasn't scared of much. He had faced down robbers and murderers without too many sleepless nights. But this had shaken him. And it was nothing. Just a man. Staring. Just a man.

He coughed, deeply and painfully. Taking a drag cleared it. He stubbed his butt out on the floor of the train, knowing that he wouldn't be able to finish it; his chest was too tight.

His apartment was dark and cold. Hanging his coat up, he put the lights and heating on. He double-locked the front door and, unusually, checked all the window locks. He was still shaken. He had a stiff shot of whisky and another cigarette then went straight to bed without eating. Sleep immediately came to him.

Dark sad eyes, burning red. Staring at him. Only a dream, but enough to wake him. The flat was in darkness. The bedside clock read 2 a.m. Something was wrong. Wide-eyed and alert, with no trace of sleepiness, he looked round his bedroom. Nothing. He rose.

The apartment was empty. He went over it twice, but it was definitely empty. He scratched his head. His instincts couldn't have been wrong. He had been a police officer long enough to trust them. An unknown urge made him go to the window. The street below was empty, except for one thing. A tall figure, standing and staring. Him. Again. Harrison was immediately furious. He rushed from his flat. He would get him this time.

The front door to the apartment block was locked. It took Harrison a moment or two to unlock it. The street outside was empty by the time he got there.

"Damn, damn!"

He was still furious. Not scared or shaken anymore; just down-right pissed off. A passing police car eye-balled him, but didn't stop. He headed back inside. Half-way there his chest constricted suddenly, doubling him up with another coughing fit. It soon passed, but his chest ached with a dull throb. He needed a cigarette badly, but he chose not to have one, and instead went back to bed.

When the alarm woke him at 6 a.m. his eyes were glued together and his head was heavy. He rubbed his eyes open. Eventually they responded. He felt really rough and he had to cough to clear his lungs before he could breathe properly.

"I'm too old to be running around at 2 a.m."

The shower finished the job of waking him, and by the time he'd had breakfast and another cigarette he felt alive again. He was going to have to do something. Whoever was tailing him had to have a reason. He would ask around. Find out who was after him. Somebody was bound to know. He headed for work.

The street outside his flat was bustling. He checked the street carefully, scanning it for signs of the figure. There was no sign of him. Harrison bent his head to light a cigarette. A voice spoke right beside him. A whisper.

"One more towards the grave, Mr. Harrison."

Harrison whirled round. It was him; the one who had been following him. Harrison stared at him, incredulous. The figure standing calmly in front of him was dark. Not dark-skinned or dark-clothed, but dark. Real blackness. All Harrison could see was burning red eyes set in a fathomless face. Harrison's fury dissipated and his curses froze on his lips.

"What the hell?"

A female passer-by shot him a look. The woman's eyes betrayed her thoughts; another nut in a city full of them.

"I wouldn't shout if I were you, Mr. Harrison. You look crazy. You see, nobody can see me except you."

"You're the crazy one. I'm taking you in, you bastard. Give me your hands."

Acting like a policeman helped Harrison ignore the truth of what was in front of him. He knew it wasn't human, but he couldn't admit it. He automatically pulled the 'cuffs from his pocket, but his hand was suddenly twisted into a rigid claw by a painful spasm in his arm. Unable to keep his grip on the 'cuffs, they dropped to the ground. A larger bolt of pain shot through his entire left side, forcing him to drop to his knees. The man beside him looked on calmly.

"That's the first seizure. It'll be over soon."

Harrison looked up, his face in a rictus of pain.

"What are you doing to me?"

"Nothing. That's what's doing it, or rather that's what's done it."

The figure beside him pointed to the cigarette still dangling in Harrison's hand.

"What do you mean?"

"You've looked forward to death since your wife died. Now it's here; I'm here. I've come for you. You can finally relax and enjoy it. You see, after all this time, you've finally managed to kill yourself."

Harrison staggered forward, another blast of pain ripping through his body. Coughing violently, he tasted blood in his mouth. His eyes started to darken. People passing noticed his dilemma and came forward to help. Harrison didn't see them. He reached out to touch the figure in front of him.

"Help me. Please."

The man took his hand.

"Let's go," the dark man said and he smiled a red-rimmed smile.

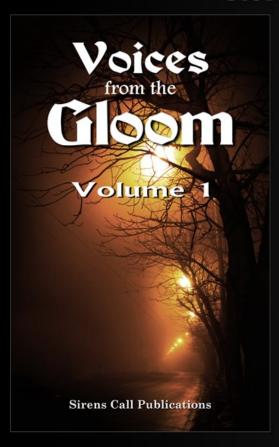
Harrison went.

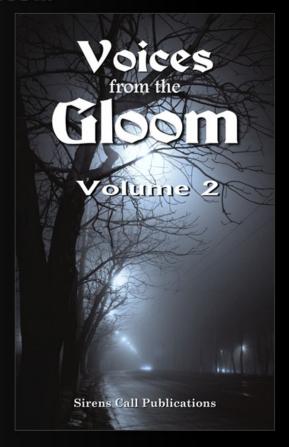
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Canada in 2010 where he now lives in splendid isolation in rural Ontario with his wife, Sally. His interest in the supernatural and ghostly is a lifetime obsession and when he isn't

writing or teaching, he is busy working to increase his collection of rare and vintage supernatural books.

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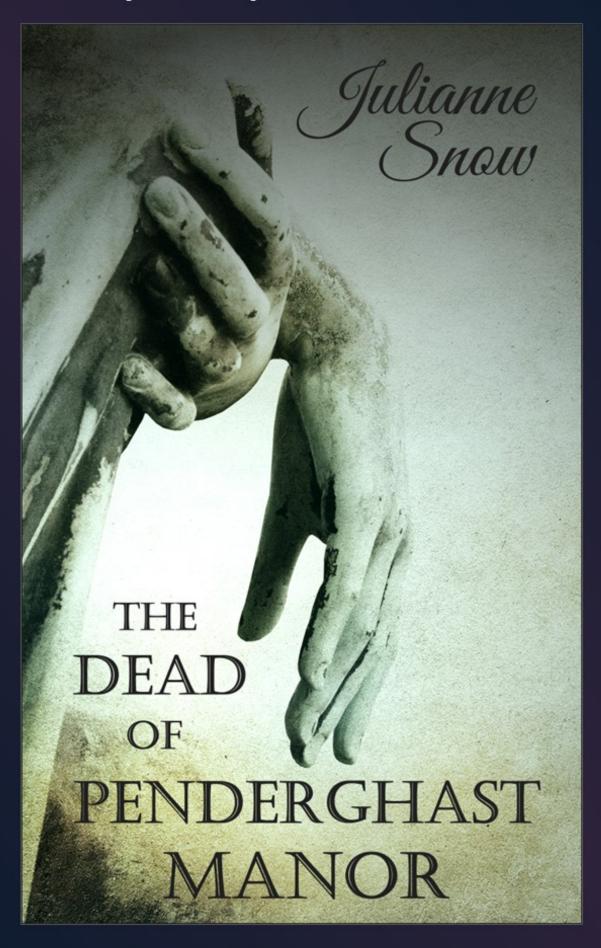
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Are You Okay? | Jon Olson

The knocking on the front door was heavy and relentless, like the pounding in Jim Argyle's head. His mouth was dry with lips on the verge of cracking as he pushed himself off the floor. Jim rubbed his forehead trying to remember how he ended up on the kitchen floor in the first place.

"Come on, Jim, open up!" a voice yelled from the front door.

His tongue itched.

He noticed the small kitchen table and two chairs were overturned. Dishes were strewn, some broken, throughout the room and the fridge was wide open with its contents spilled out across the floor. The back door was slightly ajar.

What the fuck happened?

The front doorknob rattled as the pounding continued.

"Are you in there, Jim? Open the door!"

Jim stood up and staggered towards the front entrance smacking his lips, trying to moisten them. He fumbled with the latch until it unlocked and the door pulled open.

Tom Chesterfield was standing on the front porch, and his jaw dropped slightly when he saw Jim.

"Jesus," Tom said. "What happened to you? Are you okay?"

The last thing Jim wanted to do was to try and give his brother-in-law an explanation.

"Yeah... just a little hung over."

"A little hung over? I've been trying to get a hold of you for three days. Every time I called, you didn't answer."

Jim glanced over to where his phone sat, wondering why he wouldn't have answered, then turned back to Tom. "I'm alright."

"What happened?"

"I told you." His tongue still itched.

"No, that's bullshit. The last time we talked you claimed that something happened in your backyard."

Jim frowned, trying to recollect the events of the last three days.

Tom placed a hand on his shoulder. "Don't you remember?"

Jim shrugged but offered no further explanation, wishing his sister's husband would leave him alone. Tom looked over Jim's shoulder into the house, saw the overturned furniture then walked past him.

Reluctantly, Jim followed.

Squatting down, Tom picked up a milk carton and placed it back in the fridge. He glanced at the furniture, the broken dishes, then looked at Jim who lowered his head and let his shoulders sag.

"I don't remember a thing about the last three days. The last thing I vaguely recall doing was talking to you on the phone."

The itch on his tongue grew worse.

"So why'd you try to pass it off as being hung over?"

"It feels like a hangover. My head is aching like a son of a bitch and I'm parched. Toss in the memory loss and it sounds like one." Jim bent down and flipped the table back onto its feet. "I do appreciate you looking in on me, though."

Tom offered a slight smile but when he looked out the small kitchen window into the backyard, it disappeared from his face.

"What happened to your lawn?" Tom asked leaning forward for a better look.

Jim's tongue began to twitch, making speaking difficult. "I do appreciate this, Tom, but as you can see I'm fine. You can leave now."

"There's a large patch of lawn torn up or something."

Wishing Tom would go away, Jim began rocking on his feet as his tongue flapped uncontrollably inside his mouth.

"What happened out there?"

Tom slipped through the open backdoor.

As Jim stood alone in the kitchen, a ripple of calm washed through his body and his tongue stopped moving. He rubbed the back of his head, near the base of his skull then followed his brother-in-law outside, no longer feeling in control of his own body.

Tom was standing a few feet away from the house looking down at a large hole that had opened up in the ground.

"Do you think it could be an old mine shaft that they failed to fill in properly?"

Jim replied with words and a voice that were not his own. "No, Tom, that's not what it is." His recollection of the previous three days was now clear in his mind. "The ground caved in with a slight shudder the other day while we were speaking on the phone."

Tom pulled his eyes from the sinkhole and gave Jim a wary look. "I thought you didn't remember?"

Jim continued almost mechanically, "There's a colony of small, parasitic creatures living down there that have been around for a long time. For decades they remain below until it's time to reproduce. That's when they venture up to the surface to find hosts. One of them made its way up through the sinkhole, entering the house as I was getting ready to go out." He could see vivid images of the worm-like shape wriggling quickly across the kitchen floor and up the front of his body, going for his mouth. "I struggled with it to no avail."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

With a quick swipe of his hand, Jim gripped the back of Tom's head and brought it to his, locking lips. Within seconds, Jim's tongue secreted a toxin that relaxed Tom's jaw, keeping his mouth open. Jim began to heave, his mouth pressed against Tom's until he regurgitated a thin eyeless worm with small hooks on the end of its tail. Using his own tongue, he guided it until it was in Tom's mouth where it quickly found its way into the back of the other man's throat.

When the deed was done, Jim pulled his tongue out and released his grip. Tom slumped to the ground gagging.

"What... did... you...?" Tom gasped.

"It's how they breed," Jim said. "It'll grow quickly and take control of your body. Within three days it will have reached adult size and will then lay its eggs. Once they hatch, the young will feed on you, gaining what nourishment they need. At maturation, they will exit your body and travel to their underground home while I serve as the carrier to find more hosts."

Tom struggled to speak but quickly fell unconscious.

"It's not so bad," Jim said. "They allow us to carry on with our lives as long as we don't put them at risk. If we do something they don't want us to do, they simply take control and don't allow it."

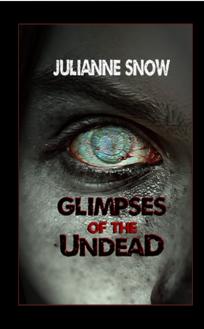
As if to reinforce his words, a tear formed, but before it could trickle down his cheek, it was absorbed back into his eye.

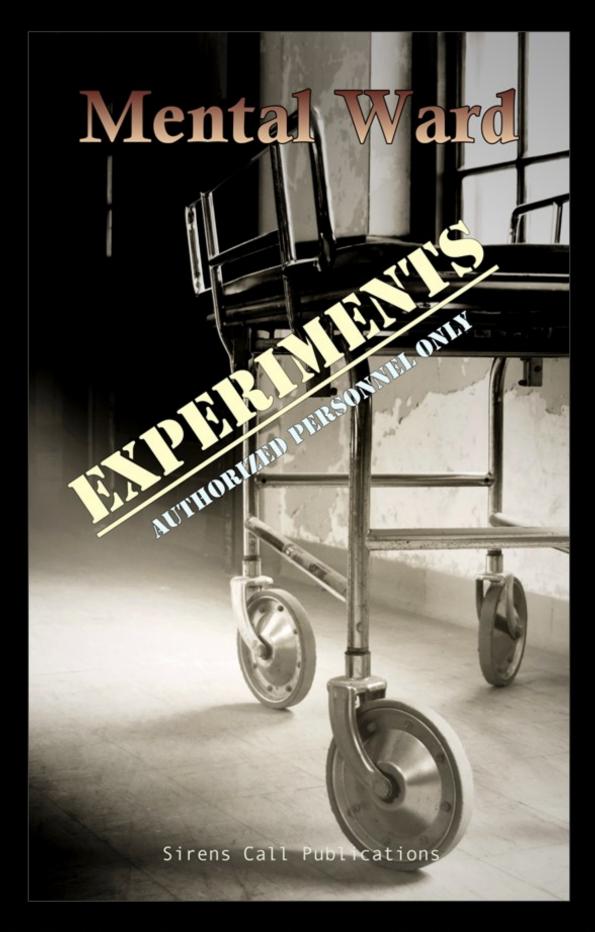
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jon Olson is a Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L. Stanfield International Airport. As an author of horror and dark fiction, Jon also has a passion for science fiction and comic books. A proud member of Pen of the Damned and the Horror Writers Association, he resides in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his wife, their daughter and three cats.

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Glimpses of the Undead Julianne Snow

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





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

A Darkness In The Cellar | DJ Tyrer

Beyond the cellar door

There is darkness

A darkness more solid

Than darkness has any right to be

Coiling and flowing

More like oil than shadow

Taking brief form

Only to melt away

Before your beam of light

Succubus | DJ Tyrer

In the void between sleep and waking

In the ocean-like depths of darkness

And unyielding pressure

A hammering heart

And surge of despair

Makes its arrival

Night mistress

An unseen face

And sensuous limbs

Harvests the night-seed

Until oblivion overtakes your mind

And you slip down

Deeper and deeper into the depths

Only to awaken

With no clear memories

Just a lingering sense of shame

Velvet Shadow | DJ Tyrer

In the velvet shadow

Where obscene things are want to crawl

In the outer darkness

Where no light does fall.

I sense an intellect

Beyond mortal comprehension

A mind so far away

It has no concept of good or sin.

In The Cellar | DJ Tyrer

Hell House | DJ Tyrer

Something moves below In the cellar, secret, dark A muffled growling Evil slips inside Not one nor two victims no Whole house becomes Hell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Genre Poetry Award, and has been widely published around the world, including in *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), and issues of *Cyaegha*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Tigershark*, and has a novella available on Amazon, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

Twitter: <u>@djtyrer</u>
Blog: <u>http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/</u>

The Beast | Austin Muratori

The beast has awoke to the valiant thunder
Watching me as he lay.
His eyes sparkle in instant wonder
Knowing today is his day.

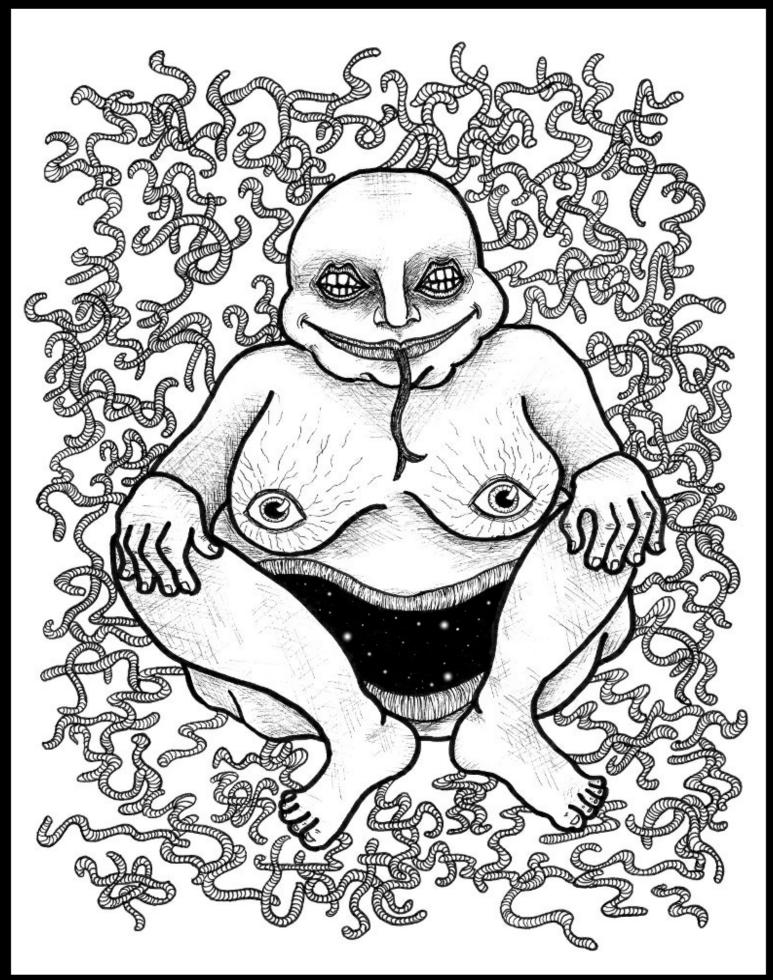
The beast moves closer now
While I struggle to get away.
My body trembles as sweat falls from my brow
Time is up, much to my dismay.

The beast is feasting
Tearing me to shreds.
Blood escapes me leaving my soul undead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Austin Muratori is a Writer, Filmmaker, Photographer, Musician and cancer survivor from a small town in Michigan. He is an avid reader who also happens to have an addiction to movies, Coca-Cola, the macabre, stories, art and all things dark. Austin has had works featured in Sanitarium Magazine, Blood Moon Rising Magazine and various other publications.

Twitter: @AustinMuratori

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Darkness Is My Name... | Einsam Vuk

Look into my eyes.

Inside of my mind.

Drain your essence.

Lost ghost of the past.

Bite strong and bleed to the death.

Lonely walker of the night.

Flying in the black sky.

Darkness is my name.

The kingdom of immortal.

Domination and damnation.

Smell the pale corpse.

Back to the life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Einsam Vuk is a Spanish artist with different talents. He's a Musician, Model, Photographer, and Writer. He's currently working on several art projects to show to the world his passion and vigor for his creations.

Twitter: <u>@EinsamVukPromo</u> Facebook: Einsam Vuk



Gothic Revival Carson Buckingham

Available on Amazon, and Smashwords

The Stripper From Hell | Sheldon Woodbury

She danced at night for shadowy men peeling off her clothes as they cackled and grinned like leering monsters lurking in the dark but when death comes it's never the end so she clawed her way back to writhe again exposing flesh that was smoky and burnt she tore that away too to the gore underneath bumping and grinding a ghostly release they howled in horror at the stripper from hell her bloody hot body spewing a brimstone smell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sheldon Woodbury is an award winning writer (screenplays, plays, books, and short stories) who also teaches screenwriting at New York University. His short stories and poems have appeared in many horror and dark fiction anthologies and magazines. His horror novel *The World on Fire* was published in 2014 by JWK Fiction.

Blog: http://sheldonwoodbury.blogspot.com/

Amazon: Sheldon Woodbury







An Interview with Artist Betty Rocksteady

This month, we're featuring artwork from artist Betty Rocksteady and we took a few moments to ask her about her art and what makes her so creative. Take a break from the fiction featured and learn a little more about this talented woman.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Betty! Why don't you take a few moments to introduce yourself?

Betty Rocksteady: I'm Betty Rocksteady, and I'm an artist and writer. I've spent most of my life weaving back and forth between those two forms of expression, and expect to spend the rest of my life doing the same! I took some art courses at a local community college, but most of my learning has been self-taught. You can visit my webpage, www.bettyrocksteady.com, to find out about my horror fiction as well as see more of my artwork, lots of which is available on my Redbubble store as well, www.redbubble.com/people/bettyrocksteady. You can get my work as prints and t-shirts and lots more. I also do monthly illustrations of stories at www.themeofabsence.com.

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?

Betty: I mostly work in pen and ink. I love the look of black and white illustrative artwork. I've done a little painting with acrylics as well. Right now I'm starting to explore brush and ink—you get a lot of the same cool qualities as with pen and ink, but with a bit more motion and life to the piece. I'm hoping to come out with some new cool pieces soon.

SCP: Who or what are some of your main influences?

Betty: Edward Gorey is my favorite artist/author, and I'd love to put out an illustrated book like one of his someday. Virgil Finlay and Clive Barker are two more favorites.

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

Betty: I'd love to work with more writers, actually, by illustrating their work. I recently illustrated my friend Jon James' story Kid Medusa on Theme of Absence, and I'm collaborating on a few future projects with Joseph Bouthiette Jr.

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

Betty: I do a ton of brainstorming and pre-sketching. I don't mind scrapping something and starting fresh when it's not coming along right, because I tend to work by building things up, so

even if I'm dumping the ink drawing, well, I still have all my pencils to work from. Or sometimes I just pile more texture and contrast in and hope for the best!

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?

Betty: My blocks are usually more me feeling resistant than actually blocked, both with writing and drawing. There are always ideas, it's just putting in the work and commitment to finish them. If there are no ideas at all, I just focus on doing little things. I love those books that have drawing or writing prompts in them—short exercises can make you feel like you've done something without the pressure of doing it perfect. Train of consciousness writing and drawing are also good, you can get some surreal imagery that you can use in more formal pieces.

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

Betty: I like things that make me uncomfortable or gross me out, bugs and weird textures and strange alignments. I read and watch a lot of horror, and a lot of things that maybe aren't considered horror but make me feel strange anyway. I guess inspiration comes from everywhere in life, and I think all writers and artists kinda know that. Follow all the things that catch your interest, and eventually they are gonna turn into an idea.

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

Betty: Well, everything starts as a seed of an idea, or one element I want in a piece. From there I do a lot of doodling and sketching to figure out what other things can be included to create an interesting composition, and I will rearrange it a few different ways until I find something I like. Where a lot of my designs go on t-shirts for my Redbubble shop, I try to create interesting outlines and negative space as well.

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

Betty: I'm really fond of Codependency, which features a man covered in giant slugs. Something about slugs just really resonates with me.

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

Betty: I love the book *The West Wing* by Edward Gorey. It's a haunted house story with no text, just pages of vague and unsettling images that have an extremely uncomfortable overall effect.

Thank you Betty! Don't forget to check out her artwork featured in this month's eZine!

Larry Saves the World | Josie Dorans

I saved the world last Tuesday at 8:56 in the morning. Kids were just settling into their first class. Parents were thinking up the day's excuse for being late to work. Cops were writing warning tickets for traffic violations while the big criminals slept in. Dogs were romping in the park. Birds were chirping and hunting worms. Everything was business as usual until the minute hand ticked over and little old me sneezed.

"But Larry, a sneeze can't save the world!"

Well, this one sure did. I mean, look around. You won't find a single war in progress. Go ahead and try to show me one example of that nasty flu that kept putting people in the hospital last week. Nobody's hungry. The water's crystal clear. The sky is too. Heck, there isn't even so much as a duck tangled up in one of those plastic six pack holders to be worried about.

I saved the world. Me. Larry Hangbinder, General Maintenance Tech.

Well, maybe it was a collaborative effort. Evelyn knows I'm allergic to her damned perfume. I swear she layers it on extra heavy when she sees me coming. Sadist. Still, if she hadn't, I probably wouldn't have sneezed and then where would this old planet be? I'll tell you where it would be. It would be swimming in the same sour pickle juice it has been, heading down the tubes, and getting ready to take a big nasty shit on itself. That's where. So, yeah, maybe Evelyn needs to share the award. So long as she collects it far away from me. I think I'd like to hold off on another sneeze like that last one, if you want the truth of it.

You know, a few minutes ago, I was looking out the window to see if Evelyn was coming back in and there is a herd of deer in the parking lot. Can you believe that? Nature is a quick old gal!

"But Larry, did you notice—"

Don't worry about that. Not a big problem. They're just napping. Heck, without all that traffic noise they've probably been doing happy deer things for hours or days and just sort of fell over from celebratory exhaustion.

"But Larry, the birds—"

Now, honestly. They're tired too... and basking! They are basking under that beautiful sky. You know, I've never seen it without those jet things... 'trails' aren't they called? Like anyone could follow one. They'd disappear just about the time you start getting anywhere. Mighty pretty without those buggers. Mighty pretty indeed.

"But Larry, that sky is awfully pale and where are the clouds?"

Clouds are over-rated. No rain on our parade now! Not one single drop!

"Nobody to have a parade, either."

Just think how quiet it is without them. See, the deer appreciate the quiet. Why the hell don't you?

"But Larry..."

Shut up. You're just ungrateful. It should be enough that I saved the world.

"But Larry..."

I said 'Shut Up!' If you can't enjoy the fact that there is finally world peace, an end to sickness and poverty, no more mountains of pollution being created every day, and Hell be damned, no more need to work, well, you can just go join Evelyn in her little snit. That's what you can do. You just go cuddle up with Evelyn and her stupid perfume and you just sneeze yourself into oblivion just like you did the rest of creation.

"But Larry..."

Did you hear me? You just go on out there and lay down with Evelyn, and the deer, and those damned birds. You just go stare at that bright white sky. Go on. Get!

"But Larry..."

You heard me. Take your screwdriver with you. Maybe you can sneeze it right into the guts of The Universe and let the magic smoke out of it, too! Do you hear me? Go on! Go breathe that poison air until it burns your stupid lungs into little black cinders. Drink the water that won't even let a damned flu bug live.

Go on!

"But Larry..."

Go on! Can't you hear me? Go save the world from whatever else you might have up your sleeve. You're the last thing, Larry. You're the last thing to save it from.

Go save the world, Larry.

Go save the freakin' world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Josie Dorans is the pen name for the feistier side of a rather nice indie author who grew up in the heartland, currently lives surrounded by mountains, but still sometimes wishes her toes were in the ocean of her twenties. You can find her work in *The Sirens Call* eZine June 2016 issue and an upcoming Sirens Call Publications anthology.

Twitter: <u>@JosieDorans</u>
Website: Josie Dorans

Lullaby | Joseph A. Pinto

It became my ghost, that lullaby—its virulent strain infecting not only the cloaked woods that surrounded us, but also the ears upon which it fell. It haunted us all, wormed its way into our brains and cored our frightened eyes to hollowed orbs. Unlike the other girls, who mewled in dread as those tinny chords crackled out from the absolute darkness, I sought to discover its origin.

I was as terrified as the rest; perhaps more so, for I managed to keep my mind threaded to reality while preventing the lullaby from wholly poisoning my thoughts. I needed to if any of us were to survive.

The other girls shoved into a uniform mass of shuddering limbs against the bars of our cage whenever the lullaby serenaded us, yet I remained apart, prone and flattened atop the floor, face pressed against the cold, slickened bars, focusing on its source. At first, tracking it eluded me, my emaciated stomach becoming its own troublesome din. Eventually I learned to ignore my hunger growls, as well the sobs from our band of captives. Soon, I gained a morsel of information; useful as it was. Somewhere—from an old phonograph, perhaps—the lullaby popped and hissed its chords away into the night. This had to mean the old woman lived in a dwelling close by.

As for the creature, that remained another mystery altogether.

By my measure, captivity had defined me for nearly five months. Abducted in spring as I took my morning stroll through the park—a chemical soaked rag ripped me from my normal life. I had since stopped wondering if my husband and children believed I was still alive. Even if by some miracle I managed to escape, I knew I would return home a husk of the woman they once knew. During this past week, a chill threaded our nights of imprisonment under the stars; autumn made herself known, and my gut instinct whispered that I would not come to feel winter's grasp.

Within the cage, I remained the only grown woman; the others ranged in ages from seven to sixteen, their body development my only means of guessing. Fear had worn our faces down to indistinguishable masks. I used to glow whenever my husband told me that I looked much younger than my years. I always smiled when mistaken for my oldest daughter's sister. Such cruel irony that my youthful appearance served to bring this misfortune upon me.

Tonight, a breeze rose again from the sentient woods and while our sunburnt, naked bodies trembled under its touch, a scent of something fetid clogged my throat. Though dirt and feces caked us, this horrible stench was not that. It had soured my stomach on many occasions before; ultimately, the precession to the lullaby. And so I steeled myself.

I stretched flat atop the cage floor, and peered between the bars out into the nothingness and waited.

"What are you doing?" A whisper from behind.

Katie—perhaps only sixteen. She reminded me so much of my oldest daughter that my soul ached. "Listening."

"For what?"

The woods then crackled, releasing a static charge into the air. Behind me, the girls scuttled like manic bugs.

Baby mine, don't you cry

Unreasonable terror descended upon us all. The girls' high-pitched shrieks pierced the night, but my gaze remained unwavering through the bars.

Baby mine, dry your eyes

Katie threw herself down beside me; she was shivering like a leaf. I gripped her hand. "Let me concentrate," I said. She nodded, teeth chattering inside her skull.

Rest your head close to my heart

The girls screamed as one.

Never to part, baby of mine

Soon thereafter, the footfall of the creature pounded through my chest. Katie must have felt it too, for her breath drew ragged in my ear. "What do we do?"

"Pray that neither of us is taken."

Little one when you play

Indifferent to the hysteria within our cage, the lullaby wafted in its heavenly timbre. It betrayed us every time.

Don't you mind what they say

A lantern's glow floated to us from the darkness, its purpose one we knew all too well.

Let those eyes sparkle and shine

The creature's footfalls resonated stronger through the floor. Desperation suddenly gripped me—the lullaby, the constant and promised threat of death. I turned toward the girls, the churning mass of desperate bodies, those agonized faces cast under pale moonlight, and sobbed against the bars. But Katie squeezed hard upon my hand and snapped me back into focus.

Never a tear, baby of mine

An apricot radiance fell upon us. The girls' shadows swayed all about, and I did my best to hide within their shallow pools; I hoped it would be enough to detract attention from Katie and myself. The old woman emerged from the thicket, face shimmering at the door of the cage. Much like us, she wore no clothing; her skin affected, however, not by the elements, but by age. A ragged sack hung from her hip. Her puckered mouth moved to the tune of the lullaby.

If they knew sweet little you,

They'd end up loving you too

She placed the lantern at her feet. The keys to our prison jangled within her fingers. "Who's my lucky one tonight?"

The hysteria resumed. The old woman stared through the bars, oblivious of it all. Oblivious of us. Now unlocked, the cage door squeaked open and she shuffled in, the lantern behind her silhouetting her hunched form. From her sack, she withdrew a tattered, old nightgown as well as a six-inch bladed knife. I pressed myself down hard onto the floor of the cage. Beneath us, the ground tremored, and I could hear the snap of tree boughs as something advanced.

"You," the old lady spat, her gnarled finger jabbing toward a girl whose knees were drawn to her chest as she rocked back and forth upon the floor. "Put it on."

She was no more than seven. I am confident those crippled eyes of hers once carried the warmth of the sun, but not anymore. The little one wet herself in distress. With a deftness that always astounded me, the old woman lunged and seized her by the wrist. In wide arcs, she swung the knife with her free hand, keeping any would-be rescuers at bay. In one motion, the old

woman draped the nightgown over the girl's soiled head and then dragged her from the cage. Aside from the desperate gouges her fingers dug through the loose dirt upon the floor, the girl offered no resistance.

They never did.

All of those people who scold you what they'd give just for the right to hold you

The creature's roar shattered the night. Girls bayed; cries for their momma went unanswered. Worse still, the cackle from the old woman's lips, and the glint of lantern light captured within her beady glare. She slammed and locked the cage door behind her once more. Off she lurched, the point of her blade at the young girl's back, the lantern's glow bobbing along. Together, they disappeared into the woods. They left us alone with the chill gnawing our bare shoulders, the metallic resonance of the lullaby failing to soothe our ears. From somewhere out in the coagulated canopy of darkness came a deep-bellied roar.

Then awful, earsplitting silence.

The following morning, Katie pulled me to the far side of the cage. Sometime during the night, after we had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, the old woman had returned and thrown ladles of porridge through the bars. At least, I assumed it had been the old woman. The girls ate, scooping breakfast from the churned dirt with their hands. "You said you were listening. For what? Maybe we could have saved Monica and the others before her. Maybe we could still save ourselves. We can't let the old woman take us away like she does."

"Please, keep your voice down." I surveyed the cage. While some of the girls shoveled dirt and porridge into their mouths, most sat with empty gazes. "Something is out in those woods, we know that. The old woman must summon it with that lullaby. And whatever is out there obviously hasn't harmed her."

"There must be more people helping her."

"One would tend to believe, but there is no certainty. All the times I've listened, I've yet to hear anyone else."

"The girls who've been taken. Do you think they might still be...?"

"No," I said, far more curtly than I wished. "It's time to stop dwelling on the maybe's and the why's. We need to focus on finally getting out. And I may have an answer."

A glimmer of hope flashed within Katie's eyes. She must have been a beautiful girl once; I wondered if she ever had the opportunity to kiss a boy. "The old woman's peripheral vision is nonexistent," I continued. "She's never noticed me lying on the floor. It unfortunately took me some time to realize. But as the oldest one here, I've still some wits left about me."

"Oldest? You're no older than I am."

For the first time since my abduction, I smiled. "Katie, I'm old enough to be your mother. It's what got me into this. It's what might get us out."

Six days had passed since my conversation with Katie. On the third day, the skies opened and so we drank from putrid shallows of mud. My strength had ebbed considerably. I paced the corners of the cage, keeping my limbs as agile as possible. No one spoke; we huddled in cold discomfort. Six days...and on the sixth night, the lullaby crooned anew.

From your head down to your toes, you're not much, goodness knows

A cacophony of turmoil gripped the cage. The girls were beyond reason. I grabbed Katie by the shoulders, and pulled her face to mine. "It's time," I said. With that, my desperate plan was set into motion.

I crawled along the floor, Katie beside me, and then pressed my face against the bars. Like a clone of my panicked heartbeat, the creature's heavy footfall assaulted the ground.

But you're so precious to me,

sweet as can be,

baby of mine

The lantern approached, the knotted woods sputtering in its glow. Beneath the melodic beckoning of the lullaby, I thought I heard the creature snort. "It'll be alright," I soothed Katie, wondering if I lied only to appease myself.

A rattle of keys—the crinkled face appeared at the door of the cage, once more wearing a crooked smile. "Who's my lucky one tonight?"

Katie waited until the old woman entered, and then rose from her position beside me. Cautiously, she entered the fringes of our jailer's vision exactly as I had instructed.

The old woman's misshaped head snapped toward her. She scrutinized Katie for a moment, and then drew the nightgown and knife from her sack. Katie glanced at me nervously as I held my breath, praying she would not reveal my position. The old woman tossed the nightgown at Katie's blackened feet, and I exhaled. "You. Put it on."

Side to side the blade swung as Katie placed the nightgown over her head. I sprang from the ground then, pushing my withered body to its limit; the sheer action of launching from my bare feet ignited agony in my joints. Whether or not the old woman saw me attack from the side, her blade still managed to slice my brow; now my own vision was compromised by blood.

I tackled her, clumsily wrapping my thin arms around her leathery body. Far stronger than I deemed natural, the old woman stood her ground, and I screamed my throat raw as her knife pierced my shoulder.

I collapsed—the whinnies of the girls surrounded me, and a growl sounded from the creature in the woods. Above it all, my ghost, that lullaby, sang to me.

If they knew sweet little you, they'd end up loving you too I staggered to my feet. The old woman suddenly yelped—Katie had done as told. Through the scarlet mask covering my eyes, I glimpsed Katie yanking the nightgown over the old woman's head, which caused her to drop her knife and keys in surprise. I scooped both from the floor, spun her around and jabbed the tip of the blade into her back. "Walk," I demanded and shoved her from the cage. By the lantern's glow, I quickly shut the cage door, locking the girls in behind me. I tossed the keys between the bars. "Keep yourselves locked inside until daybreak," I ordered Katie. "If I don't return by then, free yourselves."

I grabbed the lantern, then pushed the old woman forward. She howled, understanding her predicament—if she removed the nightgown from her body, I would kill her in cold blood. Like an obedient calf, I prodded her along; she babbled uncontrollably, but the lullaby and the snorts of the creature smothered her pitiful sounds from my ears.

We trudged deeper into the woods. The brush tore at my feet but still I pressed on; to where, I did not know. The lullaby seduced me as the lantern flame flickered and gradually went cold. The dark suffocated my senses; only then did I question whether my surmises held merit.

Then it emerged, a blackjack oak snapping at its feet, something so huge it threw the very pitch of night aside. Its foul stench rolled from its mass as it stooped over us both. "There, there," the old woman whispered.

The creature sniffed my body. I gagged upon its putrid breath. Its moist snout moved slowly along my neck as a sharp talon grazed the top of my shoulder. Feeling. Touching. Pinpricks of white twinkled in one eye—the starlight reflected within its inky, remorseless orb. It peered upward, measuring my response. Urine trickled along my legs and I dropped the knife to the ground.

All those same people who scold you, what they'd give just for the right to hold you

"That's right," the old woman cooed.

The shadowy outline of a thick, knobby arm touched my bare skin. It hesitated, and then reached for the old woman, tugging at the nightgown. "There, there, baby," her voice suddenly becoming strained.

A horrendous growl burst from the creature's jaws, then it knocked me aside. In an instant, all faded—the old woman's cries for mercy, the thump of the creature's footfalls as it dragged her deep into the woods. I lay there shivering atop the moss and lichen. Eventually I rose, praying I could find my way back to the girls, the chords of my ghost, that lullaby, keeping company at my side.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Joseph A. Pinto is the author of two published books - the poignant novella *Dusk and Summer* and the horror novel *Flowers for Evelene*. His unique voice has been showcased in numerous anthologies and magazines as well as individually published short stories. Joseph resides in New Jersey with his wife and daughter. He is a member of the HWA and the co-founder of Pen of the Damned.

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Skeleton Coast | Dave Dormer

I worry my old bones may betray me as I trudge the dunes in darkness toward my former dormitory. I've felt my share of pain before, but it's impossible to ignore the whipping winds as they sandblast my skin. I cherish my flashlight's beam because without it, I'm simply footsteps away from becoming horribly lost in the desert sand like so many before me, fueled by greed. In the early days of the mine, it was easy on the workers. The shiny treasures we worked for simply laid atop the sand—easy pickings. When I arrived though, the workers had no choice but to dig. Dig deep. With a jam jar, a brush, and a shovel, we dug.

A sudden rattle of metal sheeting, rusted and rotting by ocean spray lowers me to a crouch and I click off my light and wait.

It was just the wind.

I know I am getting close. I turn on my light and continue searching through wind rippled, knee-high sand.

It's been a long time since working here and there have been many changes since. More homes dot the inhospitable, coastal landscape than I remember and my light probes the walls blasted by sand. The elements have reduced structures to honeycombed mortar frames. I run my knotted hands along the wall's pockmarked surface and think of the hours I'd spent repairing masonry, plaster, and woodwork for the Germans within these homes. It's strange; the wood has fared better than any cement or steel. The column supports jut from the sand like twisted and jagged undead claws.

Although this place was essentially my prison for two years, it breaks my heart to see nature ravage the long, abandoned mining village. Remnants of tracks from the mine's rail system peek through the sand and I place trust in them to navigate my way toward the dormitory—our simple refuge from the howling wind.

Our employers wanted for nothing. No expense spared recreating German architecture here in the coastal dunes, we'd hear and often gossip over, and my flashlight discloses amenities that I never knew existed. Paint still clings to plaster walls despite corrosive winds like a scorned lover. I stand staring through the building's roof, long since torn free, at the starry sky. The building's wooden truss work still holds their form like a skeleton. Sand invades every crevice here and I think I arrived just in time. I'm sure it won't be long before nature swallows this place and finds no use for me either.

Tears roll down my cheek when I finally reach the dormitory—my home for two years. I think of my work boots, two pair of clothes, and single blanket provided as I count the stalls. I walk slowly to the fifth stall from the right, and its three-foot dividing wall that provided any form of privacy from my co-workers. Stories still linger in Luderitz about my deceased friends who weren't lucky enough to escape.

I'm sure I can feel their ghosts following me—maybe they even cheer for me now that I can roam unchecked.

Warily I lay down on the gritty bed of pebbles atop concrete in my stall and look up at the ceiling. I look up just as I did every night twenty years ago after a long day of digging on hands and knees in blistering heat and buffeting wind. This is where I'd eat my lone meal; remove my stifling boots, and lay wrapped in my only luxury provided, a blanket.

With flashlight propped up to shine into my cubicle, I remove tools from my pack and begin to dig. It took months to prepare this cubbyhole all those years ago in the cubicle before paranoia eventually took hold of the Germans. They set up security measures. All the workers eventually endured monthly X-rays—they told us they worried about our health, but we knew the truth, it was to expose diamond smuggling.

Tears stream down my wrinkled cheeks again—I finally hear clinking glass against the blade of my trowel. Carefully unearthed, I examine my old jam jar caked in decades of grime and under my flashlight's faltering beam, I brush it clean. My pulse quickens and sweat rolls off the tip of my nose. I can feel my body tremble like a whipped boy as I remember the penalty for smuggling when I was a resident: a year in prison or pay a five-hundred pound fine. Today, I'm sure it would mean my death for taking this jar of twinkling diamonds.

If only my aching bones could help me escape this place just one more time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dave Dormer lives and writes in North-Western Ontario alongside his wonderful wife and four children. His love of horror began at an early age and he spent many classes devoting his divided attention from the regular curriculum to write gruesome tales. He distinctly remembers and is thankful for his seventh-grade teacher who displayed an uncommon tolerance for his interest in writing by reading Dave's stories aloud to his class.

Website: http://dormerdave.wix.com/writing

From the Witness Account Series:

All the Things You Never Wanted to Know About Drowning | Jaap Boekestein

Have you ever thought about drowning?

Drowning. Let it roll off your tongue: drrrrrrrowning. Paint the picture in your mind: water, help, help, aaargh, grubl, dead.

My personal favorite, on the tune of Rawhide:

"Drowning, drowning, drowning.

Drowning, drowning, drowning.

Drowning, drowning, drowning.

Rawhide!"

Hm, I guess that is a bit of an acquired taste.

Anyway, drowning. You wanted to know about drowning.

Drowning is the conclusion of a long battle. No! A series of battles.

It is not the same like a bullet through the brain, or a 100 mph train that breaks all the bones in your body.

Oh no, drowning is nothing that merciful. It is a long, long process. A violent seduction by Death, you might say. Drowning takes time, and that is part of the horror. You fight, you fight. All the way you fight for your life because at the end Deaths waits with open arms. And its/his/her embrace will be awful. They say drowning is like being strangled, probably because suffocating is involved.

Be assured, being strangled is nothing like drowning. Strangulation is a short, sweet embrace. Oh yes, of course, there will be distress and adrenaline and struggling, but it won't take long and life supplies you with a nice goodbye gift: your brain shuts down because of lack of oxygen, you get high and you will die stoned out. It is not the best way to go but certainly it isn't the worst.

No drowning, that is a pretty bad way to go. Still it isn't the worst - it is better than burning alive, for example - but it is not nice.

It all starts with the moment you realize you might drown. Usually you are in the water, or on it. Yes, yes, you can stand near water and you are being threatened by some sadistic torturer: "I will drown you in this bath filled with dog piss. Wahaah!" Let's go with the more plausible scenario. You are in the water, or you are on the water and there is certainty you will be in the water pretty soon.

That is the first moment you might be afraid of drowning.

Actually you will be afraid of dying at that moment, because you haven't got a clue how drowning feels.

You will learn. The first of your battles begins.

Splash! You are *in* the water now.

You don't want to die, certainly not. So you start to struggle. Let's call it swimming.

The first few months of its life a baby stays afloat. After those months it sinks like a rock. So if you are not a tiny bundle of joy, your natural state will be to sink. Actually, bodies tend to float, you have to weigh a corpse down to sink it, but when you are alive, you will sink if you do nothing to prevent it. It has something to do with gasses or muscle tension or whatever. You can look it up. Not important.

Anyway, you are sinking. Water closes above your head, the dark deep is waiting for you. You will be lunch for a bunch of sea creatures. The cycle of life and death and all that.

You don't want that -I want to live! Live! - So you swim. You just realized you could die by drowning and you try to save yourself. That is the first battle: trying to get somewhere, and get out of that water. Okay, the shore is near, or a ship, or whatever. You reach it, you are saved, you will live another day. Swimming saved you. You won the battle and the war. Good for you.

Nice, but what if there is nobody and nothing near, or it is just plain out of reach? Drowning is the game here, and being saved is not in the books. You will go all the way. To the bitter, shitty end.

You lose your first battle when you realize you can't reach safety. That can take a while, and it is a whole process starting with desperate optimism to the final realization: no, you can't save yourself. You are doomed. Doomed!

Ouch. Are you going to give up now?

Most people don't. We want to live, it is in our genes. Bless the little buggers.

So swimming changes in staying afloat. Maybe someone will see you. A ship, a plane, an UFO, an angel, Ariel the Mermaid. Whatever! Stay afloat. Do Not Go Down. Do Not Give Up. Live!

Now, this can be a long, long battle. It depends on so many things, like the temperature of the water, your physical condition, your mental state. Let's cut sharks and other predators out of the equation. That is a different kind of game, here we only do drowning.

And drown you will. It can take minutes, or hours, or days before you give up, but at one point you will. You are just too exhausted, too delirious, to drown (Oh, that is a funny one, I have to remember that) to keep on going.

You will give up.

You will die.

Worse: You will drown.

You just lost your second battle, the decisive one. From here on there is no turning back. Except for miracles. They do happen, but not to you. You can count on that.

Don't worry, it will be over pretty soon.

Do worry, it will be nasty.

Very nasty.

By now you have an inkling what drowning means. You are surrounded by water, you are soaked to the bone, you are tired, beat. You can't go on. Granted, your ever inventive brain may have supplied your body with some comfortable natural drugs to combat all the stress. It is really, really sweet, but it completely useless. Drowning, THE drowning will completely blow that soft cushion away. No softly going into the night, no tunnel with a light at the end of it, no inner peace.

So far everything has been in your mind. Sure, your body has given all it got, but it was just taking orders, it was working as usual. It wasn't shutting down yet, it wasn't being violated.

So all those fears, all your feelings, everything, is because of you. Only you have been responsible so far. You. Or well, your mind. Let's say your mind is you. I know, I know, there are many different schools of thought about that, but fuck those. If you had studied twenty years to become a Zen-master you would have been in the water without much stress. But you didn't, so you felt all the things you did because your monkey brain has this wonderful ability to imagine things. It is a great survival tool, imagination. It certainly is an advantage if you can think up possible scenarios. Hooray for imagination!

It is a bitch when you are faced with certain death and the only thing you can do is thinking about your pending demise. It certainly rakes up the stress levels, so your brain can stay focused on finding an escape.

Now, we have established there is no escape in this game. You will drown.

The real phase of drowning just begun.

You sink.

The water closes above your head, the dark deep... Oh wait, I have already said this, didn't I? Well, you get the picture.

You hold your breath. Yes, you will hold your breath as long as you can.

It is not a conscious decision, it is just instinct. Even now you don't want to drown.

If you were calm, you could fool yourself by making this feel like an eternity, but no, you are not calm. Your body is fighting, it wants to live, but to live it needs air.

There is no air around. Only water.

Heigh Ho, Heigh Ho, it is off to work we go. The cells in your lungs are little busy bastards. They take the oxygen out of the air so they can transport all that energy to the rest of your body.

They don't stop, they don't listen, they keep on doing what they have always done.

Only... The oxygen runs out.

Pretty soon.

You know how that feels?

Your lungs are burning now. You must breath!

Not yet, not yet.

But!

No...

You feel your heart beating, the drumming of blood in your ears. Bomb-bomb-bomb.

Pain on your chest. You feel like you will explode.

You have no choice.

You open your mouth. Just a little.

To let go something of the terrible air that is burning in your body.

Some air escapes. Maybe you see it rise to the surface, maybe you have your eyes closed.

The relief is so short it is almost non-existent. Your lungs are still burning, you still feel like you can explode any second.

So you release some more air. Just a little.

It is like hitting the replay button.

Nothing changes. Oh, maybe it getting a bit darker now. You are sinking, aren't you?

Let's fast forward. Of course it is all terrible, but it is pretty repetitive. The worst has still to come.

At one point you will open your mouth completely.

One glorious instant of relief, of liberation.

Freedom! No more pressure on your chest, no more fire in your lungs.

Take notice of this moment. It will be the very last time you will feel anything good. Yeah, yeah, it is sad and cruel, but the universe doesn't give one titties' ass about that.

Water fills your mouth, your throat, your lungs.

If it is at sea, you will feel the sting of salt. Don't worry, it won't last. You will be feeling a lot of other things very quickly.

Okay, water in your lungs. Water contains oxygen, doesn't it? One would think those needy cells in your lungs would be able to extract that oxygen.

Sadly they don't. So suddenly the machines stop and they are flooding the brain with signals. Urgent! Urgent!

Like your brain doesn't have enough shit to handle. It already is receiving signals of liquids in your throat and wind pipe. You start to cough, to get the stuff out.

Well, that doesn't work.

Cough out the liquid, get in the air. That is the procedure.

Only... there is no air.

You are coughing your lungs out, and inhaling only more water.

Welcome to the wonderful world of drowning.

I told you, it is not a very good way to go.

You are coughing and convulsing, your body is demanding air, everything is on red alert, your body is in total panic mode. To bring the message home, the signals come in the form of pain signals. Pain means urgent, and EVERYTHING is urgent now.

Pain, panic, discomfort.

You cough, you fight, you desperately try to breath.

I mentioned pain? Didn't I? Anyway, lots and lots of pain.

The brain shuts down, but not in a soft, cushy way, because the rest of your body keeps flooding it with every signal they have. Urgent, super urgent and fucking end of the world urgent.

Ouch, ouch, ouch. Gurgle.

And now you die.

Your last thoughts won't be coherent, they certainly won't be pleasant. No inner peace, no embracing of the void. You die screaming. And in pain.

So.

That is it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jaap Boekestein (1968) is an award winning Dutch writer of science fiction, fantasy, horror, thrillers and whatever else takes his fancy. Five novels and almost three hundred of his stories have been published. His has made his living as a bouncer, working for a detective agency, and as an editor. He currently works for the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice.

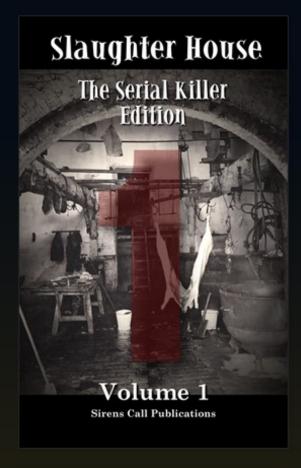
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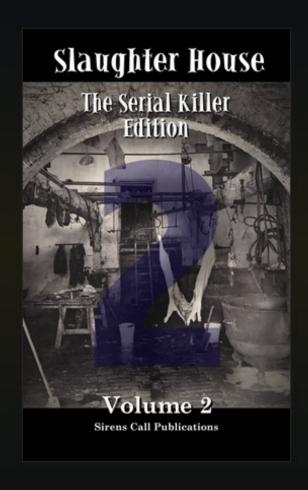
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Stain on the Memory | Kevin Holton

You'll never be rid of me, Micah had said. Not entirely.

Jacinta nudged the front door open with her hip and carried in the groceries. In days past, she would've returned to the smell of whatever that lazy dope had decided to concoct. Weird food 'inventions' were his only skill, and it was a dubious one at that. This was the man who'd bragged about putting horseradish on Cheetos, but couldn't bring himself to apply for a job.

"Good riddance," she sighed. Their breakup had been a long time coming. After a grueling shift at the hospital, she came home to a destroyed microwave and a note saying she should go buy a new one so he could make breakfast tomorrow. He wasn't even busy, he was just busy playing *Halo 5*.

Her refrigerator was emptying a lot slower now that he wasn't wasting ingredients on random crap. The lack of shelf space was a godsend, and a smile crept over her face as she struggled to find a place to put her purchases. There was so much food now! Besides, those experiments had left their unfair share of stains around the house, and she was glad she wouldn't have to clean.

You can't just wipe me away! He'd begged. I'm not trash for you to get rid of. I'm a human being! How can you treat me like this?

Two years of dealing with his unemployment had been more than fair though, right? It wasn't an easy voyage either. Her eidetic memory was soiled by countless hours spent dealing with his ineptitude. Despite showing him how to do laundry seventeen times (she counted), he still couldn't run a single load through, and expecting him to fold was like expecting a horse to eat with a fork. His bumbling hands appeared to stop working, to lose all sense of dexterity and succumb to a heretofore undiagnosed muscular dystrophy, which disappeared when he was trying to speed run some new video game.

Jacinta ran her hands through her hair and listened to her stomach growl. She relished this feeling of genuine hunger. Before, she was often nauseated by his culinary misadventures, souring her appetite, but now she could genuinely experience the pangs of emptiness.

Maybe this was a bit harsh, though. They'd had good times. He was funny, after all, and had a nice body. She dragged Micah to the local pool on more than a few occasions, sometimes to stare at him, other times to show him off. The guy had all lean muscle, so he seemed to double in size when he flexed, and his abs were subtle enough to not be showing off. His curly hair was light and shiny, and made it seem like you were looking at the sun. Every time she thought of him, she saw that brightness and smiled.

If she'd known going in that he was mostly just thin from not knowing how to cook, she would've approached things differently, but that's hindsight for you.

Her phone had no new messages, from him or otherwise. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad for her to call him and try to reconcile. They could be friends, at least.

You won't ever forget me. I'll make sure of that. Those were his last words before she sent him packing. They were dumb parting words, considering that he was well aware of how great her memory was. All of their dates were ingrained in her memory, making it all the more frustrating when he forgot their anniversary. All of his goofiest moments were there too, making it harder to stay mad at him, since this was also the guy who once spent three hours with a kitten sitting on his head, perfectly at home in the make-shift nest of his curls.

This total recall made it hard to forget what she'd said to him too, though. The more she thought, the guiltier she felt. It was one thing to refer to him as lazy and selfish for not doing the laundry or replacing appliances, but perhaps saying that he was wasting the six years he'd spent getting a Masters in engineering crossed a line. It might've been equally harsh to suggest he only loved playing video games because he wasn't good at anything else.

Actually, it wasn't a suggestion. She'd said that, verbatim, and unplugged his Xbox without letting him save and shut down, hoping like hell he'd lose a couple hours of progress. "Maybe then you'll understand how I feel about the time I've wasted teaching you how to do basic chores!" she'd said, pushing the system into his arms. His parents only lived half an hour away, and he had his own car, thankfully. "If you want someone to take care of you, go back home, because I'm done."

She didn't need to tell him the other catalyst, but maybe she should've. She was still on rotation in medical school, and that day, she'd been sent to the delivery ward, assisting with a few different cases. In one day, she'd watched a mother hold her newborn infant to her breast, while down the hall, another woman was doing the same, weeping over her stillborn child. Two were done via c-section and rushed down to incubators, having been removed prematurely due to complications. A fifth had fetal alcohol syndrome. The mother was drunk during delivery.

Jacinta wanted a child of her own, and seeing how easily it could go wrong only made her want one more. She wanted to prove that she could do it, wanted to raise a healthy, happy child despite the odds, and she couldn't exactly do that if her boyfriend was basically a child too.

Still, maybe he could've learned. Could've changed, if she'd given him the chance.

"Damn it," she scowled, talking to herself. "Can't believe you're going to do this." She pulled her iPhone from her pocket and had it call Micah, pressing the receiver to her ear.

The dial tone came through, and a ring replied. The ring was coming from upstairs.

Her eyes moved skyward as she tracked the sound. The bedroom. She grabbed a knife, noticing one missing, just in case he was armed—she'd seen too many Lifetime movies to go up unarmed—and waited for the call to end. She didn't leave a message, just punched in 9-1-1, ready just in case. The stairs creaked louder than ever, as they always do when you need them to be quiet, but the carpeting muffled her footsteps. The bedroom door was ajar.

When she nudged it open, every date, every anniversary, every cute antic was wiped away. Even her memory couldn't hold onto those in light of this one new entry: Micah, naked, spread eagle on the bed, the missing kitchen knife gripped tight in his hand, with cuts all over his body.

Blood ran across the sheets and down onto the floor. Incisions arced along his other arm, his legs, torso, even face.

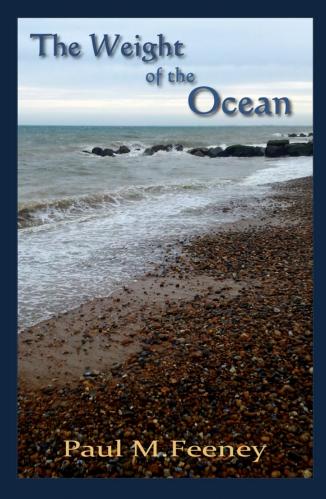
On the wall, written in blood, were the words, I WILL BE THE STAIN ON YOUR PERFECT MEMORY, AND YOU'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO WASH YOURSELF CLEAN.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Over the past few years, Kevin's fiction and poetry have been in numerous anthologies, and he's had the privilege of working with companies like Dark Moon Digest, Crystal Lake Publishing, and James Ward Kirk Fiction. When not writing, he is a student, actor, gamer, and amateur Batman.

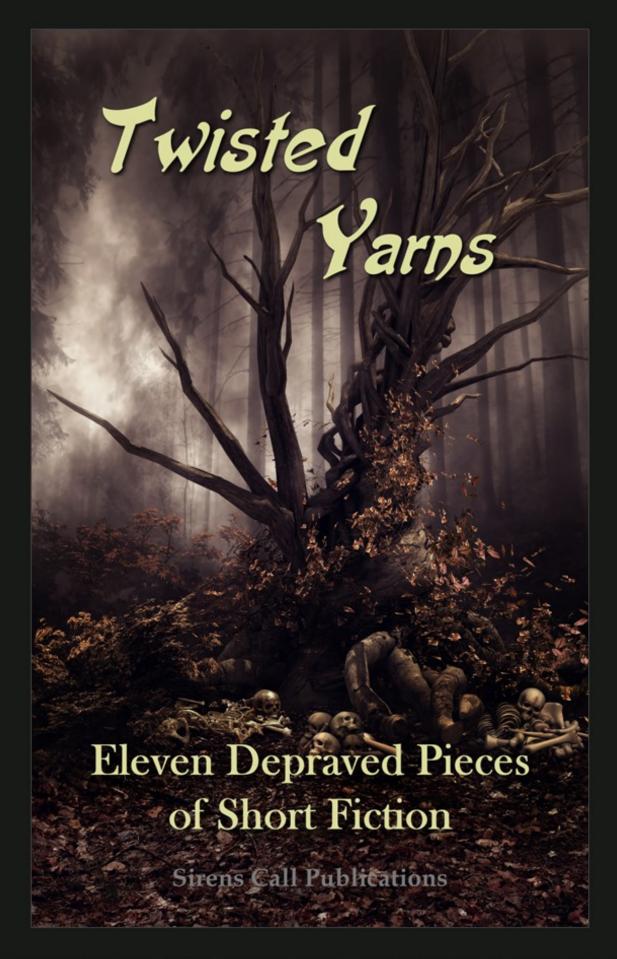
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Heretic | Patrick Winters

He's lashed to the pole. Ropes bind him to the unyielding stake, biting and cutting into the skin. The shouts and curses deafen his ears. He begs, he pleads; he'll burn, he'll pay. Doctrine has damned him, and he's told he deserves this torment. Kindling is set with care at his feet; greater care than he has been shown in his short imprisonment. Torches light the night; he can already feel the heat. He knows he'll soon be blazing as brilliantly as the fires reflected in their eyes. And why? A simple thing, really: because they say God's favorite color is red; he believes it's blue.

Perhaps they're right, he thinks as the red of the fire blazes around him and takes him, body and soul.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patrick Winters is a resident of Jacksonville, Illinois, and a recent graduate of Illinois College, with a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He's had several works published in various magazines, have self-published a collection of short stories, *Gravedigger: Six Feet Deep*, and will soon be releasing his first book, *I Was a Teenage Gila Monster*, with Frith Books.

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They Come in the Night | Winnona Vincent

Salina opened her eyes to the darkness. The room was so still and silent. She sat up and listened. Nothing! Then a tapping sound above her on the window pane. She moved back against the wall. Drawing her knees up to her chin she closed her eyes and concentrated on the sound. The tapping came again, this time, louder.

Opening her eyes, Salina realized she was not in bed anymore. She was in a damp cold room somewhere. The darkness was still there. But her back was resting on the cold, damp stone now. She dug her feet into the dirt and wrapped her arms around her knees. The room was so cold, and she wished she had worn something besides the thin nightshirt.

There was a sound of rustling of wings. Salina pulled her legs and arms into herself tighter. The shaking inside of her took over. Her body felt strangely numb. She shivered as sweat ran down the back of her neck and onto the stones behind her.

Salina closed her eyes again and concentrated on the sound of rustling wings. Opening her eyes, she was back in her bed with the blanket wrapped around her. She sprang out of bed and ran across the dark room. Feeling around in the dark she found her robe and slipped it on.

Shivering, Salina wrapped the robe around her body and tied the belt tight. She headed back to bed.

Salina thought about turning on the light but pushed the thought out of her head. Turning on the light would only attract their attention. That was the last thing she needed. She had not wanted to go to bed. But she had to sleep, and that is when they came looking for her. This time, Salina could feel them searching for her. There at the edge of her mind. They sent out feelers and searched.

Salina had protection spells and the amulet. These could only do so much. As the things became stronger searching for her; Salina's magic became weaker. Partly because Salina was new at this and partly because she was not strong enough to keep the spells growing.

The tapping started again. Salina dove back on the bed and pushed herself against the wall. She had managed a glimpse upwards at the window. A dark shape was in the window. It looked like a bird.

Selina crept over to the edge of the bed and looked up at the window again. The storm made the sky dark, and since she could not even see a shadow against the window pane now, she turned and crawled back to the wall. She leaned back against the wall and shut her eyes.

Fear had slowly crept inside of her. Salina could feel it growing in the pit of her stomach making her arms and legs weak and shaky. Then the tapping came again. Salina started to look up at the window when a bolt of lightning shot across the night sky. She could see the small raven plainly now tapping against the window.

Selina began to stand up on the bed. She reached towards the window to open it and let the poor little thing in when the bird exploded. The window was covered in the remains of the raven. Blood ran under the window sill and splattered over Salina. She could not believe her eyes. Terror struck into her like a knife. She opened her mouth to scream and darkness engulfed her.

Salina screamed, but no sound came from her throat. She buried her head into her knees and hugged herself tightly. Salina began rocking back and forth. She was silently repeating to herself. 'Go away! Oh please go away and leave me alone.' The darkness remained silent.

Opening her eyes, Salina was back in the stone room again. As her eyes became accustomed to the dim light, she saw a row of iron bars in front of her. The bars blocked off the open end of the room. Beyond the bars, Salina saw a row of lit torches hanging from the wall.

Salina became aware of how cold the room felt. Her robes were wet with blood and sweat, and her body was freezing. Her body began to shake violently. Fear swelled through her veins and wrapped its roots into her brain. She collapsed sobbing on the dirt floor. "Help me, please! Someone help me!" Salina sobbed into the darkness.

A moment later the sound of bird wings rustled around her. As Salina raised her head and looked around the room, she saw a man standing in front of her looking down at her. The man appeared to have feathers growing out of his arms and shoulders. He had appeared out of nowhere, and as Salina looked at him, she could have sworn his mouth was a beak then slowly turned into a nose and mouth.

The man's back, buttocks, and legs were covered in black feathers. As he turned to face her, she noticed while his skin was dark the front part of his body was human looking. Salina looked into his large dark birdlike eyes.

The man slowly started to speak to Salina. She stared at him blankly. Then his words seemed to get through.

"Salina, answer me!" The man stood looking at her waiting.

"Who are you? Why have you done this to me?" Salina finally managed to ask.

"Salina! I have done nothing to you. You asked for help. So I came. I have not done this to you. You are inside of your protection spell."

Salina looked at the man. She had no idea what he was talking about. But the words started her mind working. The fear was still there, but it was not as powerful as it had been. She thought for a moment then said, "If I am inside my protective spell, how can you be here?"

"I am not sure exactly what you are asking me. Human language is very hard for my people. I am here because you called out for help. I am not affected by your spells. The Raven people are not evil. We are not good either. We answer to an ancient magic, much older than the one you have been playing with."

"Who are you?" Salina's mind was starting to work again.

"I just told you! Okay, Salina, I am Leem of the Raven people. My sister Lena tried to help you earlier tonight and the darkness that hunts you destroyed her. It is her blood that covers you now. She is the reason I came when you called for help."

Salina looked into Leem's eyes. She wanted to tell him he was lying, but something inside her stopped her. Leem continued.

"Salina do you remember when you were a little girl. You were playing in your grandmother's garden when two fledgling Ravens fell out of their nest. The neighbor's cat tried to catch them, and you stopped it. You put the small Ravens in a cage and cared for them until their parents returned."

"Yes, I remember. But how could you know about that?"

"Salina, that was my sister and me. From that day on the Raven people have watched over you."

"How can you expect me to believe that?"

"Very well, believe what you like. My sister died tonight trying to warn you and protect you. I came because I felt obligated to try and help you. My sister thought you deserved it. But I can see now we were both wrong for trying to help you. Good-bye, Salina."

"Wait!" Salina cried out." How can you help me? I do not even know what is after me."

"Yes, you do. All you have to do is think about it. The answer will come to you." With that, Leem disappeared. Salina sat with her back against the cold stones. She stared at nothing

thinking. A dark shadow appeared on the other side of the iron bars. It moved slowly up and down watching Salina.

"Salina?" The shadow whispered. "Sweetheart, what are you doing in there?"

"Troy? Is that you? What are you doing on the other side of the bars? Come here, please. I have been having the most terrible night." Salina sat looking at the dark shape and wondered why she could not see him.

"Salina, get rid of these bars, and that ridicules amulet you are wearing, and I will meet you back in your room."

"No!" Salina shrieked. "I am safe here. Why won't you come to me? Just walk through the bars and come to me, Troy. I need you!"

"Troy!" Salina watched him disappear. She broke down and sobbed. She sat looking at the iron bars. She could not stop the protection spell. She would not give up the amulet either. She was not strong like Troy. He may have thought they were nothing but superstition but Salina believed in them. They were the only things protecting her from the darkness and the evil that wanted her.

She finally fell asleep. When she woke up, she was in her bed. Sunlight filled her room. Her robe was still wet and sticky. She found clean clothes and went to take a shower. She had just finished drying her hair when the phone rang. It was Troy.

"What happened to you last night?" He asked. "I waited for you downstairs, but you never came down."

"Fell asleep I guess," Salina said. "Was that you last night?"

What are you talking about? Of course, it was me! I was supposed to pick you up late and take you to that party remember?"

"Sorry, I forgot. Where are you, Troy?"

"Outside, waiting for you?"

"Come on up. I will be a few minutes. I have to do a couple of things before I can go."

"I will wait for you in the car. Salina, will you do me a favor?"

"Of course Troy, what is it?"

"Do not wear that hideous amulet. Please. It is embarrassing to me. I have to admit to somebody that my girlfriend believes in the superstitious mumbo jumbo."

"Superstitious mumbo-jumbo? Troy, you are the one who told me you were a warlock on our first date! You are the one who introduced me to your little group of witches. It was you who gave me the book of spells to read! It was also you that told me you wanted me to become one of you!"

"Yes, I know, but you were not supposed to take this whole thing so serious. We were only kidding around. I sure did not tell you to do all this protective shit! Did I?"

"Troy, something is after me to kill me! What am I supposed to do? I have to protect myself. I don't get why you won't help me. Why won't you help me Why won't you and your witches protect me from whatever is after me? I know you can."

"Fine Salina I will be back to pick you up tonight at six. I will call the girls and have them meet us at my place. We will put an end to all this stupidity. But when I pick you up tonight you cannot have that amulet on or any other form of protection. Do you understand."

"Okay, Troy. Thank you."

"Yeah well it will be over after tonight Salina."

"I hope so."

Troy started the car. Looking up at Salina's bedroom window he laughed. "Yeah it will be over tonight, but not the way you think it will be."

Salina had been a lot smarter than any of the others had ever been. She had proven that when she started looking up protective spells on her own and doing them. He did not need a witch that could counter him. He was master of the group. No witch would be his equal. Salina could easily become that.

Troy was back in front of Salinas place at six o'clock. He dialed her number and listened to its ring. He jumped when she tapped on the car window. He unlocked the door. She climbed into the car. Troy handed her a cup full of herbal tea which he poured from a thermos. "To calm your nerves." He said as he drove off.

"Thank you," Salina said as she sipped the strong bitter tea. She realized too late it was going to do more than calm her nerves.

Troy had been watching her. He had made sure that she had drunk the whole cup of tea. When he was sure she was totally under the tea's influence he spoke to her.

"You cannot fight off the tea's effects. I wanted you to be fully awake for tonight's little ritual. You see, of all the women I have chosen for this, you are the only one who ever was smart enough to read those books I gave you and tried to use them. You amazed me."

Salina's mind was racing. She understood now why Troy had wanted her to remove the protective spell and the amulet. They had been protecting her from him! The shadow with his voice on the other side of the iron bars! How could she have been so stupid?

They pulled up in front of Troy's house. He carried her in and laid her on a table in a room full of candles. Linda, Becky, and Kathy were already there. They removed her clothes and took their places around the table. They began the ritual.

Suddenly Salina screamed out Leem's name with her mind. He heard her and knew what was happening. Leem, and a few others answered Salinas call. They knew they would be too late to help Salina, but they would destroy Troy and the others.

Troy had reached into Salina's chest and pulled her heart out. He had eaten it before her heart had stopped beating. The three witches, were in the process of removing Salina's skin and

cutting up her body when Leem and the others appeared. Troy looked up at them. His face and hands were covered in Salinas blood.

"You are too late," Troy said as he looked at the group. "What are you supposed to be? Some kind of angel or something."

"I am Leem of the Raven people. You killed my sister Lena last night."

Troy looked at him. Then he laughed. "Oh yeah, that ugly little black bird that was tapping on Salina's window. Now, what was that supposed to be a message? You need to leave, or I will do the same thing to you!"

Leem looked at Troy. The others with him stepped up next to Leem. They raised their hand's palm up towards the witches and Troy. Closing their eyes, they concentrated, calling on old magic. Magic from the beginning of time. Troy and the witches exploded. The pieces caught on fire and burned as they hit the ground. Leem and the other Raven people vanished.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Winnona grew up in the Los Angeles area and moved to Northern California in the 70's. She became interested in writing before she graduated from High School. Winnona recently completed the NaNoWriMo, write a book in a month challenge. She currently enjoys writing short stories for publication. Horror and Fantasy stories are two of her favorite types of writing.

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Below the Triangle | *Alex Woolf*

There are places all over this world where no one ever goes. Dark, unvisited corners of buildings, rooms behind locked doors, their keys lost long ago. There are places in our local park, near where children play—places so thickly covered by plant life they're hidden from human view. We live our lives very close to these places, sometimes just inches away, but we never visit them. Why is that? It may be that we have no reason. We might not even know they exist. Or it may be that we don't *want* to visit them. Perhaps we went there once, then chose quite deliberately never to do so again.

My story is about one such place. It's very close to our high street, just yards away from the coffee shops and the banks and bus-stops. I went there once. Perhaps I was the last human being ever to do so. What happened to me there scared me so much that I still have nightmares about it, years later. It's hard for me to talk about it, yet I know I must. Because if I don't—if I don't tell you what happened to me in that place—then the knowledge will be lost, and some day, someone might be tempted to go back there.

There's a road running alongside our local park. At the bottom of the road, where it meets the high street, is a traffic island known to people around here as the Triangle, because it's shaped like... you've guessed it: like a triangle. On the Triangle, for many years, there were some public toilets. A Gents and a Ladies. They were built underneath the Triangle, and you got to them by two sets of steeply descending staircases.

Now I don't know about the Ladies toilet. Not being a lady, I never had any cause to make use of it. But I do know about the Gents. And it's the Gents toilet, below the Triangle, that is the place I am referring to—the place where I had my experience.

It was a cold night in late November. I was on my way home after a few drinks at the pub, and it might have been the cold or it might have been the drink, but I suddenly had a powerful urge to relieve my bladder. If I could have avoided paying a visit to this particular Gents I would have—if I could have made it home, that's what I'd have done—for I'd heard scary rumors about this toilet. People had complained of odd rumblings, strange groanings that didn't sound like the plumbing, nor the trains rolling into the nearby railway station.

But I couldn't help myself. When you have to go, you have to go. So down those steps I went. When I opened the door, the first thing that struck me was the smell. You all know that public lavatory smell. This one was more pungent than usual. And it was pitch dark. I felt around for a light switch, and found one on the crusty surface of the wall next to the door. The bulb flickered to life, casting a dim, cavern-like glow on grimy yellow brickwork, old Edwardian urinals and a row of three toilet cubicles. Two of the cubicle doors were ajar. I glanced at the one with the closed door and I remember wondering nervously if there was anyone in there.

I didn't wonder for long though. I was there for one purpose only, and after that I wanted to be gone. So I went over to one of the urinals and got on with my business. I was just finishing when I heard something behind me, and it was a sound that sent a trickle of warm liquid fear through my insides. What I heard was a tapping sound, slow and hollow, like bony knuckles against a door. Tap, tap, tap, it went. Tap, tap, tap.

I can't tell you how scary that sound was, down there in that dim underground room. I knew where it was coming from. No question, it was coming from behind the closed cubicle door, which was right behind me. I had no doubts now there was someone in that cubicle, and that someone knew I was here, and had probably been waiting in there for who knows how long, waiting for someone to visit.

Tap, tap, tap, went those knuckles against the door. Tap, tap, tap.

I didn't want to imagine what sort of person would choose to be down here at this time of night, and what plans he might have in mind for me, and I didn't wait to find out. My fingers stiff and clumsy, I somehow managed to pull up my zipper before stumbling towards the exit. Before I got there, the tapping ceased and the cubicle door squeaked open behind me. There was a slow dragging of feet across the tiles. I was screaming inside as I heaved open the exit door. Fresh air stung my face, terror climbed up my spine. Behind me came a deep groan. And then

something made me look back. To this day I don't know what possessed me. It was only the briefest glance, just before the door swung closed. But it scarred me with a memory I will never be able to erase.

What I saw was a demon. I don't know what else to call it. It wasn't human—at least it may have been once, but not anymore. It was old, extremely old, its skin like dead, shriveled leaves. The face was long, the eyes black with a leathery gleam like the wing-cases of beetles. Sharp teeth glittered in the dark hollow of its mouth. Its thin arms were raised, with hands like twisted spiders spread wide as if to embrace me.

I screamed—really screamed this time—and stumbled up the stairs.

I reported my experience to the police the next day. The duty officer, an old fellow by the name of Groveland, went pale when he heard my story. "So it's back then," he muttered. I don't know what he meant by that. But soon afterwards, the council closed the Gents. Coincidence? Perhaps. Though I doubt it. Some men arrived on the Triangle the next day and locked up the toilet and placed a steel bar across its door. Not long after that, they covered the toilet staircases—both of them—with reinforced concrete slabs. And on top of that they laid a thick layer of asphalt. Everyone agreed it was a good idea. The toilets were in a neglected state and had become a health hazard. But the real reason, in my view, wasn't to stop people going down there. It was to stop something very old and very evil breaking out.

So next time you're walking across the Triangle, think about what I said. There are places all over this world where no one ever goes. Dark, unvisited places where terrible things may lurk. And there's one such place right there beneath your feet. Let's just hope the steel bar across that underground door is strong, and the concrete and the asphalt covering that stairwell are nice and thick.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Alex Woolf is the author of some 20 commercially published novels and novellas aimed at young and adult readers. They include Soul Shadows, a horror novel about cannabilistic shadows, shortlisted for the 2014 Red Book Award. When he's not writing, he's often worrying about the world, especially it's dark, unexplored places where weird things may lurk.

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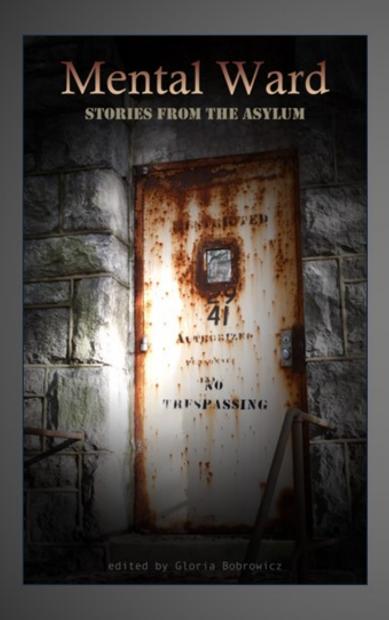


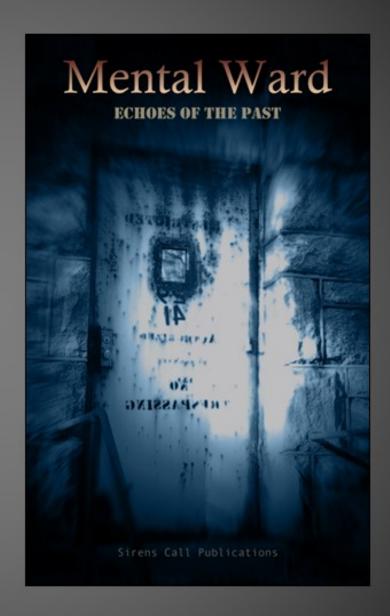
Childhood Nightmares:
Under the Bed

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

Sanatorium, mental ward, psychiatric hospital - they're all the same.

Places where the infirm, the crazy, and the certifiable go for treatment... Or what passes for 'treatment'.





Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, Smashwords, and the iStore It was one of the older art deco apartment buildings in the Bronx, located on Walton near Featherbed Lane. It rose ten stories from a ziggurat base and was constructed of russet bricks ornamented at regular intervals by colorful plaster geometric designs. The roof was crowned with techno turrets and cubic battlements. Symmetrical fire-escapes cascaded, zigzagging like dark lightning bolts from the uppermost windows.

Charlie Malachi had lived on the ninth floor of this building for over fifty years. He presently pulled his apartment door to lock behind him, and ambled down the hallway until he came to the elevator—a vintage Otis carried on four cables in a compact shaft, accessed through a conventional oak door framed by marble panels. He pushed the mother-of-pearl 'down' button that extruded from a tarnished brass plate. He placidly gazed around him at the small piles of paint chips and dirt in the corners, at the frayed and faded flowers in the rug under his feet. He listened, and frowned. The lift's peculiar timing and noises had become ingrained, a part of his life he took for granted. He used his thumb to punch the white button a second time.

In a few minutes the familiar smooth, gliding rumble could be heard faintly from below. But there was something else. Something not normal, not right. Charlie Malachi raised his chin and tilted his head. He sniffed. "What the blazes is that?"

There was a distinct odor, different from the usual mustiness, similar to the fumes of sewer gases and rot that sometimes filtered up from the bowels of the building, but so much stronger. Pungent, overwhelming, the stench seeped past the sill and jambs of the elevator door. Charlie tried to dampen his anxiety. There was no reason to get upset. All he had to do was call the super.

The metallic rolling became louder; a gentle thud indicated the lift had stopped at his floor. Charlie absently peeked through the door's rectangular window as he twisted the knob; he jumped backward immediately, startled. Someone was already in there, pressed into an angle of white space. He inhaled deeply and pursed his lips, annoyed with himself. "Jumpy today, Charlie," he said loudly. He yanked open the heavy oak slab and grasped the shiny handle of the elevator's burnished, folding scissors-gate. He stared at his fellow passenger through the diamond-shaped openings as he slid them aside. He stepped over the level, steel threshold that read 'Otis Elevator Company,' and turned. He pulled the gate shut, depressed the pearlescent round next to the number '1.'

The typical groan and glissando of the hydraulics, the slight shake and then fluid descent, gave Charlie confidence. He maneuvered so that he could see the stranger hovering in the opposite corner. The small space was bright and there was an electric light overhead, yet the figure, dressed in trousers, coat, and fedora hat, looked dark and shadowed. Charlie realized that the foul odor he'd noted before wasn't only oozing through the ventilation grilles—it was

emanating from this man. Charlie winced in spite of himself. It was like being caged with a backed-up toilet.

The other raised his head in Charlie's direction. A grayish lower face appeared below the hat brim; thin, blue-gray lips stretched and curled. "I go down," he said. The voice was scratchy, like a radio with static, and a rank, reeking puff of air floated from the mouth.

Charlie couldn't help himself—he gagged and his face wrinkled up in disgust. He pressed back against the wall without thinking. "Do you live here?" Charlie demanded, his anger growing. "This is a private building!" He resisted the urge to clap a hand over his nose.

The other snorted. "I go down," he said again. "To basement. You ride with me."

Something seemed to move in the air; the light flickered. It looked like the stranger was standing in a fog wrapped in a grainy mist. Charlie was more angry than frightened. He didn't feel seventy, but thirty again, his fists and muscles bunching, his jaw bulging, ready for a fight. "I'm calling security," he said, his voice steely, his eye on the red emergency buzzer beside him.

The other's clothing began to dissolve and swirl upward, coalescing in the air above him, disappearing in a wisp of crackling smoke. What remained was an ashen, spindly, naked, bipedal thing with a skull-like bald head and sunken ink-holes for eyes. "I come up. I go down. Much work to do. We prepare," the thing croaked.

Charlie's face became a gaping mask; he tried to get himself back under control—his posture, his expression, his breathing—as panic abruptly flooded him. The need to escape was overwhelming. He tried to think. He slid his gaze down and watched through the slats as they approached the first floor. They were almost there. He grabbed the handle of the scissors-gate and waited ... waited ... then shoved it hard to his right, which immediately tripped the safety brake. The elevator shuddered mildly, stopped. Charlie rushed for the door knob and seized it with both hands. He pushed at it and shook it until somehow he got it to move; he shoved it open and dove out, falling with a flat smacking sound on the cold surface of the first-floor lobby.

He lay sprawled on the brightly colored terrazzo tiles, listening to the sighing sound and click of the entrance closing behind him.

"Hey are you okay?" someone asked, reaching out a hand.

Charlie started, looked up; it was the mailman, who had been filling the banks of blue-painted mailboxes to their left. "I ... I think so," he answered. He didn't know if he'd injured himself; he couldn't feel a thing. He reached up and grasped the offered fingers, hauled himself to his feet.

"Wow, man," he said, and took Charlie by an arm, patted him on the back. "Are you all right? Your hand is ice cold!"

Charlie shivered now, and glanced back at the elevator door. From behind it came the melody of pumping pistons and flowing cables, reverberating clanks and bell-like pings. He rubbed his upper arms and turned back to the mailman. "What's beneath this part of the Bronx?" he asked.

"What?" he laughed. "How far down do you mean? From what I've read, there are a lot of old tunnels and track-beds under here. Deeper, might be some small underground streams or springs that are part of the Hudson River estuary system. In general you're standing on the some of the oldest rocks in the world. The gneiss ridges under Grand Concourse and Riverdale were created over a billion years ago. It's part of, like, the Canadian Shield, which is, you know, the oldest rock anywhere."

Charlie Malachi narrowed his eyes. "So, this might be the oldest place in the world?"

"Okay man, you know I shouldn't get into this. I need to stop talking to folks on my route, my supervisor told me..." He paused for a moment and furrowed his brows. He peered at the elevator entrance and the glossy green Verde-Antique marble that surrounded it. "Is that elevator still going down? How many basements does this building have?"

Charlie grasped the mailman by one shoulder. "Could you say this is the oldest place on the surface of the earth?"

"Maybe, who knows," he said, laughing. "Gotta get back to work, dude. Sorry!" He gently moved out from under Charlie's grip, and reached into his bag as he approached the boxes. "Oh, and you know," he said without turning around, twisting his master key and opening one of the flip-up covers, "... one of the spots where the world's last super-continent began to break apart, was right here. The Palisades, between Jersey and New York. Volcanoes like no one can imagine exploded; sent out miles and miles of lava. Began the last drift of the continents, kind of began the current era."

Charlie remained rooted, focused on the mailman.

"Well, I'll be seeing you, dude," the other said after a few minutes. "Take care of yourself. You might want to see a doctor. And tell your super about that elevator."

Charlie watched the mail carrier saunter out through the wrought-iron and stained-glass double doors. A flash of sunlight from the street filled the lobby, then arrowed into a strip, then was gone. Charlie slowly pivoted; he listened. It sounded like the elevator was rising again. A chill skittered up his spine. What should he say? Who should he tell? "My son already thinks I'm a crazy old man," he nearly shouted, his voice echoing off the polished surfaces so that the words "...crazy old man..." seemed to linger, hover in the air.

He listened; he froze. The elevator had stopped at the first floor.

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 Give Anthology, The Literary Hatchet, Riding Light Review, and The Sirens Call, including the 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 Women in Horror issues. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

Buddy, Karma Really is a Bitch | R. J. Meldrum

Buddy stared over the garden wall at the kid and his puppy playing together on the lawn of the big house. Buddy decided he wanted the puppy. He'd been walking the streets all day, unsuccessfully looking for somewhere to rob. He was tired, hot and in a bad mood. Seeing the little kid on the immaculate lawn of the expensive house with the cute puppy made him mad. If he couldn't rob somewhere, he might as well take the puppy. He could have some fun with it, then sell it or dump it. He vaulted over the wall and stood for a brief second in the bushes, scouting out the scene. The kid was by himself, playing with the puppy. No adults. He walked over to the kid, a boy of about five years old.

"Hey. Nice puppy."

The little boy looked up and smiled.

"He's mine. He's called Spot."

If the boy had been just a little bit older he would have known that Buddy, dressed in saggy jeans and cheap sneakers, was probably up to no good. The outfit marked Buddy out as someone who would never be able to afford a big house in a nice neighbourhood. Buddy stared down at the boy, feeling his mood get darker. A voice spoke, the source right next to Buddy's left ear.

"Don't Buddy. Don't do what you're planning to do."

He whirled round, his heightened fight or flight instinct causing the instant reaction. There was no one there. He flexed his arms, the gold rings on his fingers winking in the sun. The tattoos on his knuckles, once a novelty but now so familiar he no longer noticed them, moved as his fingers stretched. The boy just sat and stared at him. Sweat broke out on Buddy's forehead. He was not the most imaginative person and the voice had freaked him out. He felt an overwhelming urge to punch the boy. Hard. The voice spoke again.

"You really don't want to do that, Buddy. Not a nice idea."

"What the hell?"

He whirled around again, but there was still nothing there. The boy, still sitting on the grass, giggled.

"It ain't funny, you little asshole," shouted Buddy, finally grateful for an excuse to vent his anger. He pulled back his fist to punch the kid.

"I wouldn't...," said the voice in a sing-song manner.

Buddy's hand fell to his side. Screw this, he thought to himself. Just grab the puppy and go. Bending, he pushed the little kid out of the way. The kid started to snuffle. Buddy reached down to pick up the puppy.

"You don't want to do that, Buddy. I really wouldn't."

"Who's talking? Who keeps talking to me?"

The little boy, lying prone, spoke up.

"It's nanny. She looks after us when we are playing. She stops any bad people. Bad people like you who try to steal things."

"Nanny?"

"Nanny," said the boy with just a trace of smugness in his voice.

"Just give me the dog."

Buddy roughly grabbed the puppy. It squealed in pain and distress. There was a sudden growl from behind him. Buddy's eyes locked with the boy's.

"Nanny is here."

The child cocked his head to one side, a curiously adult gesture.

"And do you want to know a secret."

"What?" asked Buddy, frozen in place by the staring, smiling child and by the growl behind him. He wasn't sure he wanted to see what had made the noise. There was no one there. "She's my nanny, but she is also Spot's mommy. And she doesn't like it when Spot squeals. When people are nasty to us."

Buddy turned round. The dog, the one he had failed to see when he entered the garden, stood two feet away from him, its teeth bared. It was a much bigger version of the puppy he was holding and its teeth were *huge*. The dog, this bitch, looked at the puppy and nodded imperceptibly. Buddy dropped the puppy; it bumped onto the ground and, unhurt, ran back to the little boy. Then the nanny took a step forward.

Buddy had the briefest moment to regret his actions, regret his life, and realize that sometimes, just sometimes, karma really does bite you in the ass.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Canada in 2010 where he now lives in splendid isolation in rural Ontario with his wife, Sally. His interest in the supernatural and ghostly is a lifetime obsession and when he isn't writing or teaching, he is busy working to increase his collection of rare and vintage supernatural books.

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The Last Stop | *S. Alessandro Martinez*

The lamppost and its dull light were my only companions on these dark, lonely nights as I waited for the bus to take me home. The rain poured from the black, cloudy sky, the raindrops making their never-ending beat upon my umbrella as I stood there chilled to the bone. It was the rainy season and on nights like this the rain was so heavy and fierce that you could barely see across the street.

A gust of wind nearly took the umbrella out of my hands and in my brief panic of the moment I thought I saw a hooded figure standing in the middle of the street. But after securing my umbrella in a firm grip and looking back, I saw no one. On dark nights, all alone, with thunder rumbling in the distance and rain threatening to drown you, it's easy for your mind to play tricks on you and imagine things that are not really there. That was probably it.

I looked down the empty street. No headlights. No sign of my bus yet. I checked my watch and decided the bus must be running late. As I looked up from my watch, I saw the figure again out in the middle of the street. The lack of any other light sources beside my lamppost mixed with the heavy rain obscured the figure's features, but I thought I could make out some of the face under its hood. I shuddered as a sense of dread came over me from seeing the vague outline of the person's face. It reminded me of something I thought I had seen in a nightmare once, although I couldn't quite place my finger on it.

Just then a car sped past. I was so startled I fell backwards onto the hard, slick pavement. When I sat up and gazed back at the street, the dark figure had disappeared again. I checked all around, but found no trace whatsoever of the thing. I climbed back to my feet and set the umbrella back over my head. I cursed at myself for jumping at shadows and wished that the bus would hurry up.

As I stood there, the rain started coming down harder. I felt every drop as it hit my umbrella, sounding like a barrage of gunfire. I shivered from the cold as my clothes had become soaked from my recent trip to the pavement. I grumbled under my breath. I had had enough of waiting and was about to call a cab when I saw headlights in the distance. Finally the bus was coming. A smile spread across my face.

The bus was still several blocks away. As I watched the headlights moving through the downpour, the lamppost suddenly went out and I was plunged into darkness. I heard the faint sounds of movement behind me. I hesitated for only a second and spun around quickly. My heart was pounding against my ribs. I could not see anything in the complete dark, but a rotten, fetid smell hit me causing my stomach to churn. I felt a chill right down to my very bones as I heard a faint, raspy voice coming from right in front of me.

"Your time has come to depart."

The approaching headlights illuminated the area and there was the hooded figure I had seen standing right before me; its features too horrible and terrifying for me to describe. I stumbled backwards in fear, my foot slipping off the wet curb and falling into a heap in the

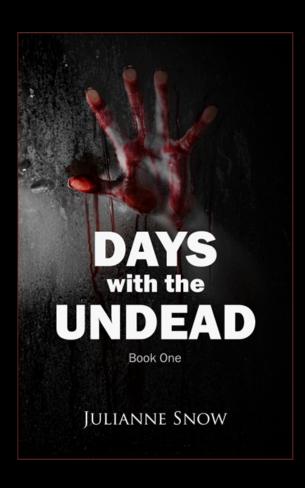
street. The last thing I heard was the screeching of the bus's brakes as it failed to avoid hitting me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: S. Alessandro Martinez is a horror and fantasy writer with several published stories in both magazines and anthologies. He will be self-publishing a book of twisted poems this year and is working on two novels. Some of his inspirations include H.P. Lovecraft, Clive Barker, Joseph Delaney, and Brian Lumley. He lives in Southern California with his fiancé.

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Days with the Undead: Book One Julianne Snow

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



The Winnowing | Stacy Fileccia

Steam rose off the Chattahoochee, braising everything in the surrounding pine woods, including Mandy, who pressed a cool cloth against her scarred cheek and neck with trembling arthritic hands. A slight breeze slipped in through the window over the sink, so she subconsciously turned to cool the right side of her face—the side that still had full feeling, untouched by cigarette burns and bite marks. Her neglected flowerbeds caught her eye. Flicking away the single tear that sneaked out, she abruptly turned to read the book she found in this week's grocery box.

A couple of miles away along the banks of that mighty river, Lucky and Jimbo awakened after a three-day binge. Jimbo looked around for his sandals and shirt, but all he could find were a few vague memories, empty pockets, and a rotten headache. He gingerly touched his bald head where it had sunburned. Shrugging, he belly flopped into the 'Hooch, trying to rid his jowls of the vomit smell.

Raising his eyelids to half mast, Lucky watched Jimbo a while before squelching his toes through the muddy red clay and joining him. They splashed at each other for a while. Then they tramped barefooted along a trail Lucky said he thought he remembered would take them back to his truck. "Man, I hope the keys are in it."

Jimbo laughed almost louder than his stomach growled.

As shadows squeezed the life out of the remaining sunlight, Lucky threw his arm against Jimbo's hairy chest. Stopping, they stared at the kudzu-enveloped cottage, the weed-choked flowerbeds, and the cock-eyed sign that read: "Winnows. No Trespassing." Flickering light danced with shadows throughout the house. Mesmerized, Lucky and Jimbo watched for a while. An owl screeched nearby, sharp and sudden. Almost at the same time, bats spewed through the sky, dipping and soaring like a satin flag in the wind.

Jimbo ducked, though they came nowhere near him. "Isn't that just creepy?"

Lucky grunted. "Think I remember that name from somewheres."

"Oh, man, I remember! Three or four years back, maybe? Someone broke in and like to killed Mrs. Winnows. Her husband was out choppin' wood or somethin'. Died tryin' to save her."

"Yeah." Lucky shivered. "I remember now."

Jimbo's bald head gleamed as the moon popped up over the treeline. "Too bad Mr. Winnows didn't know about the other guy!" He chuckled. "Shoo, doggy! He was stealin' crap from the bedroom. Shot the old man and left the woman for dead. I don't think they ever found 'im."

Lucky ran his bony fingers through his blonde tangles. "Only she wasn't dead, was she? Made it out. Drove herself to the hospital." He stared at the kudzu growing over the rusty car.

"They say she don't leave the house no more. Wonder if she's dead."

"Nah, stupid. The lights are on."

"Right. Hey. Maybe we're close to the road." Jimbo made to bypass the house, but Lucky grabbed his arm.

"I bet she got a lot of insurance money."

"Reckon she's got it squirreled away in the house?"

"Don't know. Worth a look-see."

They both startled as something very large tramped nearby. "Deer, likely," Lucky whispered as the sound of hooves vanished into the woods.

They crept up to the window.

Sitting in a chair across the way, a woman with a silver braid lying over her shoulder squinted at a paperback. Her frayed night clothes rose and fell with her slight breaths, and her fingers trembled as she licked one to turn a page. She looked, for all the world, like the light of her soul had been snuffed out.

The cuckoo zipped out of the clock above the mantle nine times.

She stood up suddenly, tossing the book onto the coffee table.

Jimbo and Lucky ducked out of sight.

After her footsteps died away, Jimbo elbowed Lucky. "Did you see her face? All them scars?"

Mandy lay in bed, willing sleep to come. It wouldn't.

She visualized Graham's face, which always comforted her. He'd retired only a week before his murder. She allowed the memory to linger. He'd... They'd been so happy. Even with those thoughts, though, sleep wouldn't come. Something didn't feel right. Odd noises, perhaps.

Looking out her window where blue moonlight streamed in, she strained, listening for the deer that had slept under her window every night since Graham's death. Its presence made her feel safer somehow. Tonight, though, no heavy tramping or deep breathing sounds reached her ears. She sighed.

Then she shifted her focus to Graham's final words: "I love you." Every day, those words kept her heart beating. Her eyes grew heavy as she focused only on the cadence of his now-gone voice. She pressed her scarred cheek into the pillow and shut her eyes.

A floorboard creaked.

Her eyes flew back open, and a deep foreboding washed over her. *Was the house settling?* She turned toward the door.

Ever so slowly, it squeaked open.

Fear tangibly pressed her into the bed. An oddly familiar stench of fish and muck taunted

her senses. She knew that smell. It overwhelmed her, making her feel like Gulliver who'd been tied to the ground by tiny people.

Out of the gloom of the hallway, through ratty blonde tangles, the eyes of her husband's killer materialized.

Her scream—long, loud, pleading for help—pierced the air, sounding like someone falling from a cliff.

The skinny, nasty murderer leaped across the room.

Landing on her stomach, he strangled the scream back down her throat and clamped his hand over her mouth.

Her vision tunneled.

His scrawny frame loomed over her. His fingertips gouged her cheeks. "Go ahead, Jimbo," he called out to the house. "Find whatever you can."

She couldn't draw in breath. Paintballs of darkness exploded across her vision, blocking out the moonlight. She could still see those piercing, bloodshot eyes, though.

He grinned in a jagged way as he slid his knees onto her arms, pinning her painfully.

She squirmed, but he only laughed, allowing the merest bit of air to slip into her nose.

Drawers opened and closed and furniture knocked heavily to the floor from the other room while Mandy exhausted herself fighting for her life.

He let go of her throat and pulled out her very own fillet knife from the kitchen. Moonlight glinted off the blade as he brought it inches from her face.

She stilled. The floodgate that had held back the memories of that awful day of Graham's death burst open. The steel of her own carving knife had scraped her rib and collapsed her lung while a man—probably this fish-and-muck-smelling man's brother—loomed over her. Her head had spun from blood loss while he pressed his lit cigarette onto her face. The scream escaping her mouth when he bit her cheek felt like it came from a disembodied spirit. She had wanted to die.

Then Graham had come, driving his ax into the man's back.

The man had fallen across her, but Graham kicked him off. He knelt by her and said, "I love you." Then the other man—the man tormenting her now—shot him in the back. She had seen the killer's eyes, but her brain wouldn't focus on anything else. Then he was gone.

Graham's body had fallen across hers.

Now the killer was back.

What did she have to live for now? She hadn't really felt alive since that afternoon. With no fight left in her, she wanted to die. Quickly.

The man stabbed the pillow next to her ear. "Higgly piggly, you old wench. Think I might just stab you right in the eye." His lips twisted into a half smile. "But when am I going to do it?"

Knowing full well he couldn't hear her any more, she screamed through the hand over her

mouth for Graham. She couldn't feel or move her arms any more as the killer's knees pressed into them. Feathers drifted through the air as he kept thrusting the knife in and out of the pillow.

Then he paused.

He pressed her face so hard, her head tipped forward, which made her neck hurt. Her tears spilled over his fingers.

A warm breeze blew through the open window and circled room. Then it settled.

He bent closer and whispered in her ear, "Your time has come. I'm taking vengeance for my brother."

The door slammed open, and a balding man stood in the doorway.

The man holding her startled, nicking Mandy's unscarred cheek.

"I ain't findin' nothin', Lucky," grumbled the man, who ignored her plight. He set to tearing apart her dresser drawers.

"Just hurry up, Jimbo." Lucky's death grip loosened for no apparent reason. He looked around drunkenly. "Did you hear that?"

Jimbo turned from the drawers. "No. What?"

This time, Mandy heard it, too. It came like a faraway train where you couldn't see the tracks. It grew louder with each passing moment. Then everything went quiet except for Jimbo scrounging under the bed.

Mandy suddenly recognized what it was when the sound of someone chopping wood exploded in the room.

Lucky jumped to the floor, backing up with eyes darting crazily. He tripped over Jimbo, who cracked his head on the bed boards and let out a string of profanity. Scrambling up and looking around wildly, Lucky jabbed the knife in the air, yelling, "Come on!"

Mandy rolled off the other side of the bed, her arms useless, numb, and pin-pricky. She scuttled to the corner and froze as Lucky flew backward and slammed into the wall. A warm breeze caressed her face. She closed her eyes, smiling.

The caressing breeze lingered for a moment longer, then zipped away—tornado like—across the room.

Lacerations appeared on Lucky and Jimbo's skin as if they were at a car wash and the buffing rags had been replaced with whips. They screamed.

The room became still again.

Mandy watched in fascination.

Jimbo said, "Come on, honey. We don't want to hurt you. We just want the money. Just tell us where it is, and we'll leave you alone."

In disbelief, Mandy watched dozens of streams of blood flowing from Lucky and Jimbo's wounds and dripping on the floor. She stood up, moving her arms to get her circulation flowing again. "Just give you the money," she repeated. "Like I'm supposed to pay you for breaking into

my house and disturbing my peace." She glared directly at Lucky whose face shone in the moonlight. "You killed my husband. You tried to kill me. And that's just not enough for you."

Jimbo's jowls flapped as he shook his head. "No, Lucky survived being killed by an ax murderer. He done told me! His brother was killed. He didn't have nothin' to do with your husband. Come on, Lady. We just need some cash for food. We're hungry."

"Ye-ah. Then we'll head right on outta here. Zippidy Doo Dah."

She ignored Lucky. "Look at my face! His brother almost killed me. My husband saved my life, and this man—this evil man—killed him in cold blood."

Suddenly, Lucky's face distorted. He yelled and stomped his feet as if he were on fire.

The tornadic breeze zoomed around the room and settled near Lucky, whipping him across his face and chest while plastering his body to the wall. Stronger. Harder. Faster. Knocking him off balance. Spilling his blood.

Icy winds drew together from all four corners of the room, and a man-creature took form. His eyes burned with blue fire. An ax stuck out of his back, and his periwinkle skin exuded a pulsating, icy cold.

A chain clanked and pulled taut around his neck as wind swirled around him. "Lucas!" the creature boomed. "Lucas! You aren't lucky. Why couldn't you turn from our evil ways?"

Mandy suddenly felt warm all over. It filled her with peace. Then the warmth pulled away. A man clothed in glowing white formed beside her, holding the chain of the creature in one hand while gently rubbing her shoulders in the other.

She leaned back against the wall. Her voice quavered, "Graham."

Graham smiled on her. "Mandy."

The word vibrated through her.

"Well now. Mandy. That's... that's a right pretty name." Lucky lunged at Mandy.

Graham, with calm determination exuding from his eyes, flicked the creature's chain. "No. It's time for a winnowing."

With lightning speed, the creature pulled the ax—dripping with glowing blood—from his own back. He slammed it into Lucky's chest, knocking him back into the wall. Lucky slid down then arose shakily, knife in hand.

Graham boomed: "Your brother is already mine. Now I claim you!"

Lucky leaped at Mandy, but the creature slammed into him, taking him down.

The knife flew out of Lucky's grasp toward Jimbo. The moment elongated, playing out in a supernatural time.

"Kill the woman!" Lucky screamed as fire from the creature's eyes leaped into his hair and encircled his head like writhing snakes.

Jimbo stared at the bloodied knife. Before Graham could leap across the room, before the creature could respond to Graham's frantic chain pulls, Jimbo acted. Instead of following Lucky,

though, Jimbo flung the knife out the window. Jimbo looked down on his now-still friend who lay burning and bleeding on the floor, and vomited all over Lucky's mangled body.

The creature—Lucky's long-lost brother—slammed the ax into Lucky again with finality.

Graham stopped just before reaching Jimbo, and they all stared as Lucky's charred soul scurried out of his body like a spider. A new chain flew from Graham's hands and wrapped itself around Lucky's neck. Lucky jerked back but could say or do nothing.

Jimbo ran for his life when Graham gave him a slight nod.

Graham kissed Mandy tenderly while flicking the chains. Lucky and his brother picked up the furniture and straightened all the craziness.

Tears misted her eyes.

Then Lucky picked up his own dead body while his brother lapped up the blood and burnt flesh from the floor. Graham flicked the chains again. The trio distorted, became wind, and blew out of the window into the night.

Mandy stared out after them and watched the majestic deer make his way over to his favorite spot along the house right beneath her. His breaths made her think of Graham somehow.

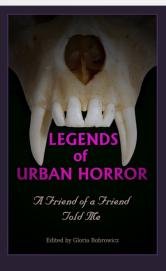
In the morning, Mandy awoke with renewed hope. No evidence remained of the battle that had raged within the cottage. But she felt better than she ever had since Graham's death. She turned on the radio just in time to hear the story of a horribly disfigured body found that morning in the Chattahoochee.

"That would be from the winnowing," she whispered. She smiled and went outside to do a little gardening.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Stacy Fileccia, winner of the 2016 Wicked Women Writers contest, is an Atlanta transplant living in Dayton. A technical writer/editor by day, she word smiths fantasy and horror stories while listening to profound pop-punk rock music by night. Her stories have appeared in *Through Clouded Eyes*, *The Sirens Call*, and *Buzzle*. She holds a BA and Professional Writing Certificate from WSU.

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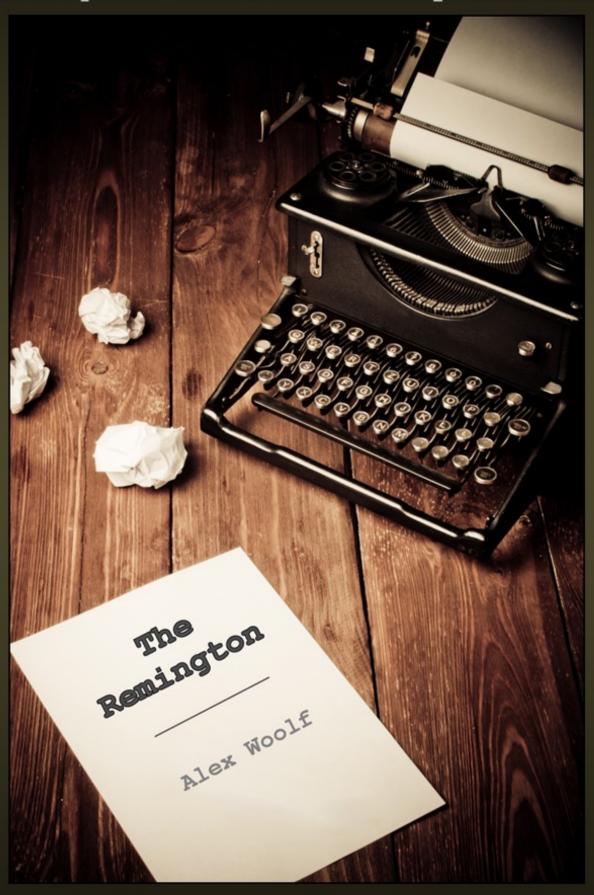
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The Bree | DJ Tyrer

The trees upon the Bree formed an almost impenetrable shield against the light of the sun and the bustle of the outside world. Beneath their verdant canopy, all was still and quiet. It brought a comparison to the grave to mind and a shiver ran down his spine as he walked beneath the spreading branches.

He'd come to the area attracted by the tales of the Tandbury Lights. He'd been an eager viewer years back when they'd caught the media's attention; Essex UFOs with a dash of folklore. Of course, he'd still been at school back then and not been able to join the others who'd flocked thence. Now, although media interest had long faded and the New Age encampment there had dwindled, he had come to make his pilgrimage.

Borrowing a friend's campervan, he'd driven along the back roads of Essex to the village that held his obsession. Years before, someone had daubed the silhouette of a classic flying saucer on the sign welcoming new arrivals. Sadly, the mysterious lights were no longer frequent visitors and the only illumination that rose into the sky whilst he kept a vigil there had been the globe of the full moon.

Not that his time in Tandbury had been entirely wasted—there were many New Age bookshops and gift shops that had yet to succumb to the inevitable decline, and he found a number of interesting books and pamphlets to interest him. But, after a few days it had become clear that his dream visit was to be an anticlimax. That was when he first noticed the Bree.

Although not perhaps much when compared to truly imposing hills and mounts, here in the relatively flat Essex countryside it dominated the horizon, a mighty green mass running from north to south. For some reason, it played upon his mind, fascinating him in the same way that the lights had: he found himself staring at it instead of the sky. With the Tandbury Lights a noshow, he decided to pay the Bree a visit instead.

It was not too far from Tandbury, so he decided to walk, enjoying the summer sun shining down on him. Eventually, he'd begun ascending the tree-clad slope following a dirt rut carved into the hillside. He wasn't sure if it was a footpath or had been ground out by the repetitive passage of some animal. Whichever it was, he was alone. The green-tinged darkness was silent as the grave and smelt of damp earth.

Beneath the trees there was relatively little plant life, just bare earth, leaf mould and toadstools. Sometimes, where there was a gap in the canopy, where a tree had died and fallen, there would be a riot of plant growth, lush and sweet smelling.

He had been walking for some time when he saw the ruins, the tumbled remains, little more than a pile of rocks, of what must have once been a cramped cottage. A variety of plants—foxgloves and lupins were the only ones he thought he recognized—and fungi grew amongst the collapsed stones of what had been someone's dwelling. He stopped and stared at it: his first feeling, oddly, was one of sadness, as if it represented the loss of something. But, the longer he stared at it, the more that feeling ebbed away to be replaced by one of nervousness bordering

upon fear. After a while, he really didn't want to be there any more, although he couldn't quite will himself to move. The shade and silence no longer seemed pleasant or restful, but oppressive and terror-laden.

Suddenly, there was a breeze. He didn't quite feel it, just a sudden chill that seemed to creep up his spine, but he did see the plants growing from the mound of stones waver as it passed. Then, the very stones themselves seemed to quiver, as if the chill affected them too. He stood enrapt, all the heat of the day driven from him, as dust trickled down from the pile and small stones began to tumble out onto the ground. The silence had been replaced by a low murmuring sound that might have been the passage of the breeze but sounded more like a whisper. Something was stirring beneath the mound.

Larger stones began to tumble from where they had lain for an age. He could see dark gaps between them and thought he saw movement within, the movement of something bony. The murmuring had grown louder and, disquietingly, he thought he could almost make words out. Around him, the darkness had grown deeper and more chill.

Finally, he was able to pull his eyes away from the ruins and it was as if a spell had been broken: a wave of terror and nausea swept over him, galvanizing his legs and he was running pell-mell back down the hillside, tripping over roots and sliding on the slimy mulch. Heedless of the direction, he just ran, desperate to flee whatever it was that he'd encountered there beneath the trees.

At last, he found himself beside a road, not the one he had walked east along earlier, but he knew he would eventually find his way back to where he'd left the campervan. Back beneath the rays of the sun, everything seemed normal again, as if nothing had happened. He wondered if it had been a dream, or, rather, a nightmare. But, deep within himself, he knew that it hadn't been. There was something evil upon the Bree and he would never come near it again. Ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing*, placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Genre Poetry Award, and has been widely published around the world, including in *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), and issues of *Cyaegha*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Tigershark*, and has a novella available on Amazon, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

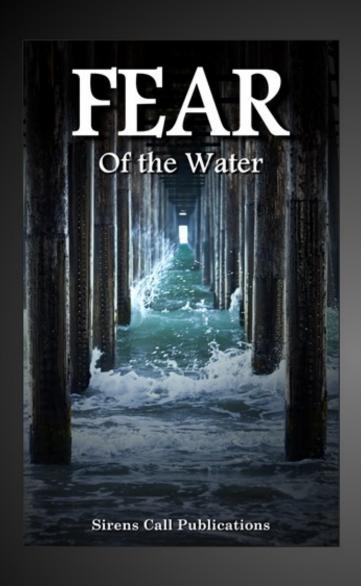
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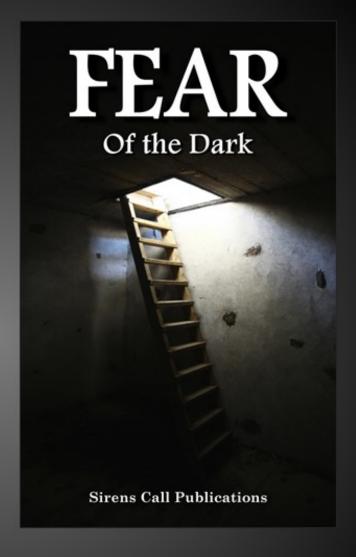
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What do you FEAR?





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Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes Rush stood, paralyzed.

All the muscles in his body had gone slack. His gun was drawn, but it was so much useless metal in his hand.

The flashlight had fallen when the old man touched him; it rolled along the floor at his feet in a lazy arcing motion that mocked the fear he was now feeling. The light reflected jaunty shadows in front of his eyes and he wanted to scream, but could not.

"I've been waiting for you Detective. I thought you would come back, that you would come to see the exhibit," the old man said. His accent was heavier now than it had been. "Why are you really here? I have a guess but then again, you don't get to be my age without learning a thing or two about the predictability of humans."

Rush tried to remember his training, to remember the things they taught at the academy. All his cop bravado left him. He was at the mercy of the old man lurking in the shadows.

"I could let you talk, but I don't know how much it would change things. You have questions young man. I can see them on your lips, but the answers don't matter, not really," he said.

Rush could hear the gloating satisfaction in his voice. It was the same sardonic sound he heard in court months ago. Rush had wanted to hit him then, too. He tried to tighten the finger that lay on the trigger of his gun, but nothing happened.

"Let me guess a few, shall I? After all, we're in no great hurry here. Your department doesn't even know you've returned, do they?" he asked. "You want the truth, am I right? You want to know the how and the why." The old man was moving around behind him; Rush could hear him but still couldn't see anything more than a shadow.

"Possibly you wanted to come return all the property you took during the trial? You came here to give back my things, my tools, and you happened to wander in to the workshop because you couldn't find me upstairs with the rest of the old relics.

"I don't see any of my things here, Detective so you must be here for answers."

The old man shuffled into the light. He walked the distance between them with the same hunched-over waddle he had before. He stepped in front of Rush and straightened with an effort.

"I am going to let you speak, for now," the old man said and touched Rush's throat.

"What the hell did you do to me, old man?" Rush belched out in a roar; every other muscle in his body useless.

The old man tottered a bit, then crumpled back into his hunched posture and stepped back from the detective. He looked frail, battered and too old to be a murderer.

"My family has been doing this for a very long time, Detective, and we've gotten exceedingly good at it. In fact, you are the first person to come so close to guessing the truth about what we do in over a century."

This man was a direct descendant of the exhibits creator, Marie, but to Rush, he looked like any other murderer.

The old man looked up at Rush and smiled.

"What have you done to me, scumbag?" Rush bellowed again. He could think of nothing else to say. All the questions about the victims and the wax statues were gone.

"Come now, Detective! Let's not resort to the vulgar just yet. I have so much to show you." He smiled again and Rush tried to cringe back. The old man seemed to have too many teeth.

"What did you do to me?" Rush demanded. He was scared now on some deep and childish level that he didn't understand.

The man stepped a bit closer and took the gun from his hand. He placed it on a table near the two of them and turned back.

"You can have it back when I am finished. I'm afraid the bullets wouldn't agree with me," he said.

"Don't touch me!" Rush spat out.

"I'd like to say that everything will work out for you when I am done, but that isn't likely. I doubt anyone will fuss over a police officer gone missing after such an embarrassing moment in the spotlight." The old man took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves.

Rush watched as the man reached up again. He paused, his finger looming an inch from Rush's face. He looked like a man contemplating some monumental decision.

He touched Rush on the cheek under his left eye and the color began to drain from his vision. His left eye dimmed and then was gone. He didn't feel anything but picked up the slow movement on his cheek where the man had touched him. Something dribbled down his face. The old man reached up and plucked it off his cheek.

Rush began to scream when he realized it was his eyeball.

The old man touched his right cheek and laughed as the screaming doubled then morphed into the choking sound of hyperventilation.

"You see, Detective..." he started and then shook his head. "Actually, you can't see so I'll describe it to you. I've gotten rid of your eyes because we won't need them. I shall give you new ones when I am done." The old man stepped up to Rush and plucked the right eye off as it rolled down his stubble covered face, then tossed both orbs onto the floor.

"It's customary to remove the eyes from the exhibits as the trauma of watching your own death can cause... unexpected changes in skin tone and hair. You still have your ears so you can listen. I think it's a fair trade for the tools and time you took from me during the investigation and trial," the old man said, still polite, still smiling.

He reached up to Rush's mouth and stuck his finger in.

Rush wanted to gag, but couldn't move more than his throat. His tongue flopped out of his mouth mid scream. Blood and saliva spilled down the front of him.

"Detective Rush, I will be doing something that you may consider rather gruesome, but I assure you it's necessary. When it begins, you are going to feel nothing, but I promise it won't end that way. Sometimes I can still hear *them* screaming a day or two after but not every time," the man said.

Rush fought his paralysis as hard as he could, forcing his will against every nerve and muscle but his body would not respond. He could smell his own fear now.

"The last thing we need to do before we can continue, Detective, is to remove your clothing and have everything cleaned and pressed. Undoubtedly you will spoil yourself and that won't do. I assure you though, you will look as professional and well dressed as any officer of the law in this fine city," the man said with an air of perfectionist pride.

The fear finally shattered his resolve. Rush felt his bladder let go. Bile crept in to his mouth and he vomited. He was going to die at the hands of this monster.

"We've come so far since you kicked in the door of my home and the museum. Your meddling almost cost me everything, Detective, and I think it's only fair to tell you the entire truth as we proceed," he said.

Rush could hear the sound of something on wheels being moved across the room. It mocked the same waddling gait the old man had when he walked.

"You were so much closer to the truth than you ever realized." The sound of metal on metal filtered in through Rush's panic. He could hear things that sounded sharp and painful.

"I used to embalm my exhibits after ending their lives, but I've found a way to do it while the subject is still breathing. It's a bit more painful but in the end, it gives each of you a more life-like feel. Now, I am going to place a needle in your arm. You won't feel the pinch but the rest, well, you'll see."

Rush felt something in his arm where the old man had touched him. It was pressure at first, but the pain that followed was immediate. Rush began to scream again as the old man touched his throat, the scream cut off; Rush passed out.

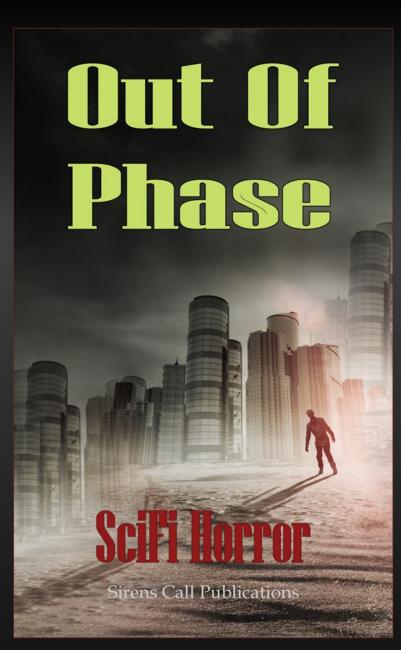
"...and this is our newest and most popular exhibit. The curator calls this 'New York's Finest' and will feature the men and women in uniform from all over The Big Apple."

Rush heard the pleasant female voice pass and the sound of feet on a wooden floor. The realization of what happened hit him and he tried to scream and thrash about. Nothing came out of his mouth; he couldn't move.

The voices faded, as did the footsteps.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Christopher is a creator of worlds, destroyer of lives and yes, he sleeps well at night... mostly. He is a fiction writer, poet, and scribe to a beautifully vengeful muse with a taste for horror, fantasy and the erotic. His insatiable imagination has no limit. If you come across Christopher's path and he seems distracted, be careful—you never know what he may be plotting.

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And Drown Melancholy | Scarlett R. Algee

The headache has lasted nineteen days.

Nineteen days. Charlotte can count every one of them. It had started the day after she'd spiked her Coke a little too vigorously and stumbled into the pond at the company picnic: an insidious little pressure behind her eyes and above her upper teeth. Sinuses, she'd thought, the consequence of snorting out a noseful of stinking, muddy water. It had taken two days to get the gritty feeling out of her mouth and the eye-watering bouquet of algae and catfish out of her nasal cavities.

By then, she'd realized it wasn't her sinuses.

Migraine. That's been the consensus, over the last seventeen days, of two general practitioners and a neurologist. Charlotte's inclined to agree with them; she doesn't have the throat-quivering nausea, not yet, but the auras are there, little flecks and zags of color that flit in and out of the edges of her vision like UFOs, eluding her most concentrated efforts to focus on them, jiggling and dancing with every throb between her temples. The pain's there too, rasping at the backs of her eyeballs, thrumming between her teeth, jackhammering the inside of her skull so hard she expects to blow out bone dust with every breath. The doctors' solutions had been bed rest, Tylenol, and time; Charlotte's boss had watched her zombie-shuffle into work, glazed and tight-jawed, right up until yesterday and had suggested a week off instead. That suits Charlotte fine: it lets her sit home in constant dark and slug down the pain with booze and the oxycodone left over from last year's dental surgery. Not the wisest combination, she knows, but it's the only thing yet that's even taken the edge off.

Charlotte lolls in her overstuffed recliner, her third extra-tall double-strength rum and Coke close at hand, waiting for the pill she'd sucked down to kick in. The late-night news program is the only thing she's found that isn't too bright or too loud; she's got the volume low, just enough to pick up, to occupy the one sliver of her brain that isn't threatening to explode from her ears. Even now, at midnight, with all the blinds closed and all the lights off, she can only squint in agony at the screen for a second before giving up and closing her eyes.

"Now for an update. Medical researchers believe they may have found a parasite responsible for the nation's recent outbreak of drowning deaths. Some of the footage you're about to see may be disturbing to some viewers."

Charlotte slits one puffy eye open, then the other. The news anchor is a bottle blonde with a weary gaze, and her voice has pitched up with urgency. Nearly two hundred people have drowned across the country in a month, all of them seemingly accidents, all baffling. There'd been talk about it at the office three weeks ago, when the number had been a few dozen, rumors and jokes about some secret cult urging its members to suicide in pools and bathtubs; she'd even had a few barbs thrown her own way after the pond incident, suggesting she circle her backyard pool with a padlocked fence just in case God or aliens gave her the urge. The scene switches to a

bearded bald man, Dr. Something-or-other, wearing a lab coat over his suit in a book-crammed office, and Charlotte tries to focus.

"Surgeons have extracted worms from the brains of some recent victims." His voice is flat with practice, and the scene cuts away, to the shore of a lake. Somewhere in Tennessee, if Charlotte's cramping brain reads the caption right. The voiceover continues: "The specimens haven't yet been positively identified, but there are early signs that they may be a species closely related to *Spinochordodes tellinii*, a hairworm known to cause similar behavior in ..."

Charlotte tunes him out. Her gaze is on the scene, eyes open wide now: a man in a green T-shirt and purple shorts lies leaking on the ground, recently dredged up, circled by emergency personnel. His face is a smeared slate blur, the concealing effect growing into a pixelated muddle of bruise tints as the camera zooms in; but the blur doesn't cover the sand, caked like packed brown sugar in his sodden blond hair, or the blackish trail of lumpy blood that has drooled from his left ear. Charlotte stares, momentarily fascinated, as the blood continues to ooze.

"...not yet sure how this animal has evolved to infect humans, or how infestation begins. However, reports from victims' family members suggest symptoms..."

On the screen, someone is shaking out a white sheet over the drowned man's body. The camera shifts away, but not before Charlotte catches sight of a military-style boot, so shiny it reflects the red crawl of the ambulance lights.

"...dizziness, stiffness, lack of coordination... behavioral changes in the presence of water..."

Between the boot and the body, partially obscured, is a long, thin creature that lies coiled in a heap: the unnamed parasitic worm, Charlotte supposes, though it's like nothing she's ever seen. No worm could be this slender, an overcooked strand of brown spaghettini sauced with blood and black flecks. It squirms visibly, and the sight makes her sore brain twinge in sympathy. A blue-gloved hand swoops into the scene, bundling the worm into a clear plastic bag. Charlotte's eyes ache, her vision joggling momentarily. She blinks hard, seeing spots, and drinks off her rum and Coke.

She needs more Coke. Grimacing, Charlotte eases out of the recliner, leftover ice rattling in her glass as she sways. She starts jerkily toward the TV, then remembers she'll need its light to grope her way round the kitchen--thank God for open floor plans when you're too drunk to navigate properly.

At the refrigerator, dull warmth begins at the top of Charlotte's head and paints its way down the inside of her skull. Her stomach does a little flip and her jaw relaxes; finally, *finally*, the oxycodone has made its appearance and she can forego the rum. She pours her soda with shaking hands, trying not to weep from sheer relief.

Back in her recliner, fresh drink at the ready and television still droning low, Charlotte falls asleep.

Charlotte awakens to three realizations.

The first is that there's light seeping through the blinds, cool and grey as though the sun's gone into hiding, and that the television screen is frozen in a garish striped test pattern. Both are still far too bright for her liking, and she scowls as her eyelids snap immediately into the squint she's worn for nearly three weeks. The second is that opening her eyes has roused the pain again, a more frenetic throb than last night, one that vibrates her eardrums and crackles along her jawbone under her teeth; reflexively, she grinds her molars.

The third is that she's madly thirsty.

Charlotte fumbles for the glass of Coke she'd poured up earlier. The tumbler slips through her fingers and she snatches at it, but it thuds on the floor. She sits up, groaning at the stiffness in her neck, and looks over the side of the recliner; the heavy glass is intact, but there's nothing on the carpet beneath it, not a spill, not a droplet, not a fragment of melting ice. She hadn't even sipped at it before she'd fallen asleep, she's mostly positive of that. Now it's empty and she doesn't remember drinking it.

"God." The word comes out thick, and Charlotte gingerly rubs her hands over her face, wincing when she gently prods her eyelids. Her tongue feels glued to the roof of her mouth, prying loose only with effort, slipping over the foul sour-sweetness coating her teeth. Suddenly her thirst is a knot in her gut, twisting and raw. Water. She needs water.

Charlotte gets to her feet clumsily, nearly pitching to the floor as she gropes to pick up her glass. Getting the tumbler in one hand, and holding the back of her head with the other, she totters into the kitchen, away from the rainbow stare of the TV. In the dimness she scrabbles for the tap and swallows saliva. The aura's not elusive now; it streaks her vision, bloody red and dazzling.

Water. Cold. It slops over her hand as she wrestles the glass under the faucet. Her brain squirms in her skull, a live thing all its own, a pulsating mess of knife-edge pain. She drinks with her eyes closed, and the red streaks elongate and snap, turning white, becoming stars that cast off sparks with every swallow. She fills and empties the glass six times, only stopping when her stomach threatens to rebel, but it's not enough.

It's not enough. Her brain is on fire; she can feel the fever slithering through its shell of protective membranes. Her tongue is a swollen sponge, her throat a desert, her skin a withered root aching for moisture. She drops the glass into the sink. More. She needs more.

The pool.

Charlotte lurches toward the sliding doors that open into her backyard. There's a fence-isn't there a fence? No, that was a joke, a joke. She works the lock with graceless hands, frustration welling from her arid throat in a croaking wail, until the door bursts open and she collapses onto the lawn.

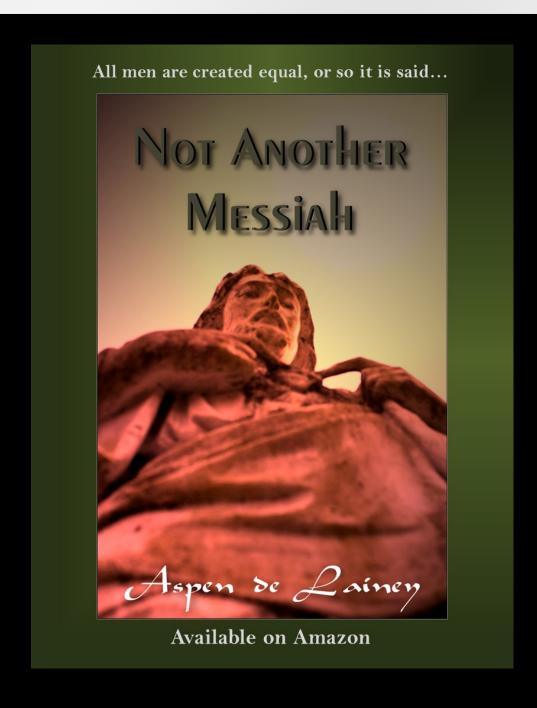
Dazed, she lies there a second; it's barely daylight and the grey is comfortable. But the grass is wet and her tormented nerves shriek, *waterwaterwater*. Charlotte drags herself upright, takes three steps toward the pool and falls again, her vision swarming with whirling sparks,

pressure building in her skull as though her brain's begging to be let out. A swim. That's all she needs. Just a swim, and she'll feel better.

Weeping, blinded, she begins to crawl.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Scarlett R. Algee's work has appeared in several places, including Sanitarium Magazine, Mantid Magazine, and the recent anthologies Zen of the Dead and The Haunting of Lake Manor Hotel. When not reading, writing, or making steampunk jewelry, she lives in the wilds of Tennessee.

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The Reaper's Harvest | Lucretia Richmond

The scars from the past hadn't healed properly and they were there to remind her of what could happen in the dark. She wanted to believe he had moved on; away from her, but as Halloween rolled around the corner she saw the signs of his return. She had never feared the night as much as she did now. She had been too young to understand then what had been happening to her even when they tried explaining it to her, the words didn't come out right.

She knew deep down it would happen, but she didn't know it would come so soon.

She had ran out so fast into the cornfield, away from the house where the bodies were. She had gotten so deep into the maze before she realized she was lost and couldn't find her way out. It was a starless, moonless night and the wind nearly knocked her to her knees. She kept checking all around her, she had thought she could see him through the shadows unless that was just her fear. He was still inside of the house, he had distracted himself from the scent of the blood.

It was then she felt a touch against her arm. Madison turned toward him and saw her brother Chris. It couldn't have been him he had died with the others.

It must have been an illusion, the reaper taking the form of her brother to lead her to her own death. It was all a trick, she couldn't follow him, but she was so confused.

"Come with me. It'll be fine. Don't worry."

"I know what you are, you're not my brother."

Madison ran back toward the house, toward the road. Not many cars came down the deserted highway, but she had hope and that was saying a lot for her right now.

She stopped before she reached the entrance of the cornfield, they were there. All around her. The bodies of everyone she knew. They had all come for her. They weren't going to let her leave. She tripped and fell landing on the ground, she felt her hands being held and her feet, they wouldn't let her go. She didn't want to look at their faces, but her eyes reached their mouths where they had long, sharp teeth. She could hear the reaper laughing as she struggled to breathe just one last time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lucretia Richmond is a resident of New Mexico and a writer of romance and horror. She enjoys writing different worlds and creating the characters that live in them. Lucretia is an Indie author on Amazon.com where her other works can be found.

Facebook: Author Lucretia Richmond



Copyright Betty Rocksteady

The Cast | *Livingston Edwards*

"I think we've done it this time. If the rest of the tissue is gone by next week, we won't amputate. You understand? He's safe."

Amanda stared at her son laying in the hospital bed, his right arm wrapped in bandages, connected to beeping monitors by red and blue wires, and shook her head. She laid her hand on his cheek for a moment, then stood and turned to the pediatrician.

"You *think*?" she asked, her voice hoarse. Dr. Geoff clenched his jaw, but remained quiet. "That's what all the other doctors said. Look, when are you people going to get it right? How long will Tim have to keep facing this? Why does it keep eating away at him, why can't it just leave us alone—?"

She took a deep breath and turned away, her shoulders trembling. The pediatrician paused, placed his hand on her shoulder, and squeezed softly.

"It's not as bad as it looks. His tissue *is* accepting the treatment. He's going to be just fine—*I promise*—"

"Okay! Just, can you give us time alone...?"

"Of course."

Dr. Geoff watched Amanda return to her child's side, brushing his brown hair, kissing his forehead, before he turned and left.

Amanda woke up sobbing, sweat plastering the nightgown to her body, the covers bunched on the floor. Breathless, she peeled strands of brown hair off her forehead and tucked them behind her ears. A flash of brown caught her eye and she looked at her hand. She imagined the skin stretched taut, the bluish veins stretching across bulges and protrusions, a hole widening and opening as she looked closer at the hideous—

"Mommy!"

She shrieked. Her eyes lifted to the bedroom door, to the little boy with wide brown eyes running into the room.

"Tim, what's wrong?" she asked and threw herself out of bed, arms widening. "Tell me what's—"

The words faded in her throat as she saw the cast on his right arm, an inky green color, dotted with tiny stickers and a single autograph in black permanent marker reaching for her. She backed away as his cast grew larger and closer, and Tim looked up at her teary-eyed.

"Mom-my?"

He waved the cast at her. Amanda took a deep breath and closed her fingers around his; she tensed as she squeezed the plaster.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"It itches real bad!"

Tim running after her, Amanda hurried into the bathroom and opened the vanity mirror; her reflection stared back at her and she paused, startled by her puffy red eyes, the wild tangle of brown hair on her head. Scowling, the woman reached for a brush, swept it through one side of her hair, and watched dandruff sprinkle the counter.

"Mom-my?"

"Yes?" Amanda set down the brush and forced a thin smile on her face.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course. Mommy's okay. I'm okay." She reached for a measuring cup and unscrewed the cap to his medicine. Green goop jiggled inside; a bitter scent filled the bathroom, tinged with the smell of cherries.

"Are you mad at me?"

She looked at her son.

"Mad? No, no, why would I be mad at you, honey?"

"Because of what's on my hand. Because it's all my fault. I'm sorry, Mom-my!"

Her heart skipped a beat. The tears spilled out of her eyes, uncaught. Amanda knelt and wrapped her trembling son in a tight hug. She heard him sniffle and her heart ached.

"It's never your fault, honey. It's no one's fault. And I never, ever want you to say or think that again. I will always love you."

"O-Okay."

She squeezed his nose between her knuckles, and he giggled and hopped out of her arms. Amanda wiped away the tears, returned to the counter, and poured the syrup into the measuring cup.

"Are you mad at Dad?"

She slammed the medicine bottle onto the countertop, squeezing until her knuckles whitened. Amanda took a deep breath and faced her son, holding out the cup with a shaking hand.

"Let's not talk about Dad. Not now. How about you take your medicine and see if we stop that itching?"

"Will it make the voice go away, too?" asked Timothy.

She paused.

"Yes."

With Tim watching cartoons in the living room, Amanda shut her bedroom door and reached into her purse for her cell phone. She tapped her fingers on the dresser while she waited.

"Dean? God, where have you been? Forget it, just listen. He's getting worse. What do you mean, who? Our son! These doctors don't know what's going on and that Dr. Geoff's the worst of them. He's a liar, Dean! No, I won't stop shouting...you're what? With Emily—Goddammit Dean! Our son's going to have his arm cut off and you're at brunch! Well then, fuck you!"

Dr. Geoff closed the door behind him, his smile fading when he noticed Amanda standing beside her son, glaring with an arm wrapped around his tiny shoulders.

"Our appointment was at three," said Amanda. The pediatrician's lips thinned as he glanced at his wristwatch.

"Of course, I apologize," he said quickly, meeting her eyes briefly before he moved to Timothy sitting on the edge of the examination table. "How are you feeling today, Timothy?"

As the boy looked up with a toothy grin, Dr. Geoff pulled a cherry lollipop out of his pocket.

"Can I?"

"Go ahead," said Amanda with a quick smile and Timothy giggled as he took the lollipop in his free hand. "Now just stay here, Tim. I need to speak with Dr. Geoff outside."

"What's wrong, Amanda?" asked Dr. Geoff, shutting his door, and Amanda clenched her jaw; she grabbed her purse strap, twisting and stretching the leather.

"I hope to God you're not lying about this," she whispered and Dr. Geoff fought hard to meet her stern gaze; he focused on the worry lines creasing her pale forehead. "Any of it. You promised that this would be the last time he'd be in a hospital and that *thing* would be gone from his arm."

"Your son's waiting," he said after a moment, his voice cracking with every word.

"All right Timothy, we're ready to take off your cast. Are you ready? Good, now I want you to hold your hand right here and keep it as still as possible. I'll be using a special saw so I want you to wear these big earphones and these glasses. Perfect. Now Amanda, if you could hold your son still—"

"We've done this before."

Dr. Geoff nodded, raised the diamond-tipped saw, and flicked the red switch. A harsh screech filled the room. He pressed the whirling saw against the cast and powder sprayed the air; wincing, Amanda clutched her son's hand. Timothy looked at the saw with wide eyes.

Then the pediatrician set down the saw, used scissors to cut away the rest, and held up the final length of green plaster. Amanda held her breath as Dr. Geoff raised Timothy's hand.

"Everything's looking great, Amanda. See? Like I said, the tissue is—"

Amanda screamed; Dr. Geoff gasped. The pediatrician flung Timothy's hand away and turned to the woman, leaping to his feet.

"Oh God! Look, look, I did everything I could! There's nothing else I could have done—I swear to you..."

"What is it, Mommy?" His lollipop fell to the floor and shattered inside its wrapper. Timothy lifted his palm to look, but Amanda blocked his eyes. She felt warm tears run down her palms.

"Don't look, honey."

But she looked at the bulge in the center of her son's palm. She looked at the crooked mouth underneath his thumb, stretching from end to end with skin peeling off black, saliva-encrusted lips. She looked at the nostrils caked in snot. The face groaned and breathed in and out, and the nostrils flared and the lips opened. A set of brown eyes glared at her, blinking and flickering curly eyelashes.

She grabbed Timothy and held him close, hearing him wail in her arms; his legs kicked wildly. Amanda squeezed him as she fought the nausea building in her stomach. A glint of silver caught her eye.

"I need to contact the hospital," said Dr. Geoff and stumbled to the door, his face pale. "We can amputate—"

"It's too late."

Her hand drifted to the bone saw's plastic handle.

"What?"

Her thumb flicked the red switch.

"It's too late."

The screech of the bone saw cut off Dr. Geoff's shouts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A lifelong Los Angeles native, Livingston Edwards was born with an insatiable desire to tell stories. If there's a rare moment he's actually not writing, then he's certainly thinking about it. Taking his inspiration from the horror of human emotions, he delights in frightening his readers—but just enough so that they keep turning the page. *The Cast* is his first publication.

Twitter: <u>@LEDwards000</u>
Facebook: <u>Livingston Edwards</u>

The Little Fat Man's Curiosity | Stuart Conover

The little fat man always seemed to know a little about everything.

He knew where to find answers that no one was able to. In a chaotic world he was often able to tell you what was going to happen before it occurred. He was the king of information. Some say it was technology and some say he had sold his very soul.

He would say it was but a small price to pay for his money, his knowledge, his power. So when a man knows a little about everything you need to wonder.

Why is he asking about you?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Stuart Conover is a father, husband, rescue dog owner, horror author, blogger, journalist, horror enthusiast, comic book geek, science fiction junkie, and IT professional. With all of that to cram in on a daily basis, we have no idea if or when he sleeps!"

Twitter: <u>@StuartConover</u>

Website: http://www.stuartconover.com

Damaged | Miracle Austin

One concussion with a black eye last Halloween because I didn't wear the right costume...

Two broken ribs for hugging a friend on my 26th birthday

Three visits to the ER within six months and a web of lies rotating in my mind ready to be unleashed

Four new jobs in the last two years while,

Nightmares chased my fractured shadows...

Every time I run, J.C. Bleu—a basketball-star athlete/celebrity I used to be engaged to for almost three years—found me.

My name is Riley Silvers, and I once dated a *monster*.

No one saw what I saw; they only saw perfection and power. J.C. always knew how to influence anyone. I knew J.C. would never set me free.

So, I traveled to a special place I read about online—my last hope.

I met the Roadrunner, a middle-aged, bald cowboy with a double, six-inch golden braided beard.

Roadrunner gave me a possible solution and explained to me what I had to do. I paid him up front. I met him at an outside shooting range every Sunday evening for almost three weeks.

On our final night, the Roadrunner placed a worn, leather pouch in my hand. Before I made it to my car, I dropped my keys from my rickety hands. I picked them up and caught my reflection in the side mirror.

I looked ten years older with a few fighting gray hairs.

Roadrunner shouted out in a gruff tone, "Remember, what I told ya. Drink the juice in the vile, load her up like I showed ya, aim, and shoot."

I shook my head.

He walked over to me and bent down to my height with his large hands resting on his full hips. "You sure ya up for this?" he asked.

"I gotta be. This is the only thing that will solve my J.C. problem."

I opened my car door, started it up, and backed out.

"Call me when it's done, and I'll take care of the rest for ya." He watched until I drove off.

One of my headlight's beams shined a dull light. It didn't matter because the moonlight substituted for the extra light that I needed.

I traveled to J.C.'s favorite place, the basketball court, at his old high school.

J.C. always loved to practice there before a game.

I turned my car off about less than a mile out and allowed it to coast into the parking lot. I opened my door slowly, scooped up the pouch, and left the door open a few inches without closing it.

I pulled the vial out and pulled the cap off. A twirl of smoke climbed up my nostrils—the scent reminded me of tequila mixed with burnt hair.

I closed my eyes, placed the vial on my lips, and tilted my head back to drink the orange liquid. It was super bitter and felt like a fire flame scorching down my throat.

I loaded up my Springfield XDM handgun with silencer, as Roadrunner instructed.

My vision transformed into an extreme 3D multi-layer format. I could see the tiniest spider buried deep in a bush. Roadrunner told me that it could come in handy, if J.C. turned the lights off. Plus, it ignited a sudden boost of confidence and calmness inside of me.

I walked in the back towards the gym and heard a basketball bouncing up and down the floor. I placed the gun in the small of my back.

I opened the door. I found J.C. sitting on top of the basketball rim with ball in hand.

"I knew that you couldn't stay away from me," J. C. barked with a half-grin.

I shook my head.

"You're not going to hurt me anymore!"

J.C. jumped off the basketball rim, and I noticed the gym floor shake. J.C. bounced the ball up and down, which made large holes in the floor.

"You can't stop me. I'm going to make each day of your life hell until I get tired of you! I could've killed you when I killed your parents that night."

"What? What are you talking about? I thought they died at camp from the bear attack."

J.C. roared out a sickening laugh.

"You were naive when I first met you and remain the same, so pathetic. You really shouldn't have interrupted my practice. You know how much I hate that. Remember when I slammed your face into the glass dining room table for interrupting my best friend's visit?"

J.C. walked closer to Riley and threw the basketball at Riley's face.

Riley fell backwards. J.C. leaped on top of Riley. Streams of thick saliva flowed from J.C's protruding, long and curved fangs, as fur started to emerge all over J.C.'s face, chest, and arms. In a growling voice, J.C. asked, "Who's going to save Riley now?"

"Me!" Riley's hips thrust upwards. Riley threw her left hand back in order to pull the handgun from its location and pointed it at J.C.'s face.

J.C. roared in a deep laughter, which vibrated the entire gym causing the backboards's glass to shatter and rims to fall to the floor.

"Your gun is no match for me."

"What about a gun loaded with silver bullets, a-hole?"

J.C.'s piercing red eyes widened, as Riley pulled the trigger and shot J.C. in the mouth.

Blood, thick saliva, and broken fangs decorated Riley's t-shirt.

Riley pushed J.C. off and ran towards the car to call Roadrunner, so he could clean up the scene.

Roadrunner shared that he would be there in thirty minutes or less.

Riley used some paper towels in the backseat to wipe off as much gunk as possible.

Roadrunner pulled up in his truck, turned the truck off, and jumped out with a large suitcase. He walked up towards Riley.

"Are ya ok?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Show me the body so I can get rid of the evidence."

Riley walked Roadrunner towards the gym and opened up the doors.

They walked in and Roadrunner circled the body twice and stared for several seconds without a word.

"Ready?" Riley asked, as he wiped the sweat off his thick red eyebrows with the back of his hand.

"I haven't seen a *she-werewolf* in a long time. I really thought you were crazy when we first met and you told me your story. I just went with it. Why did you leave the *her* part out?"

"Would it have mattered?"

"No, I reckon. It's just..."

"Just what, Roadrunner?"

"Nothing, let me get started, so we can get out of here."

"Say it."

"I never would have thought your monster was a she-werewolf."

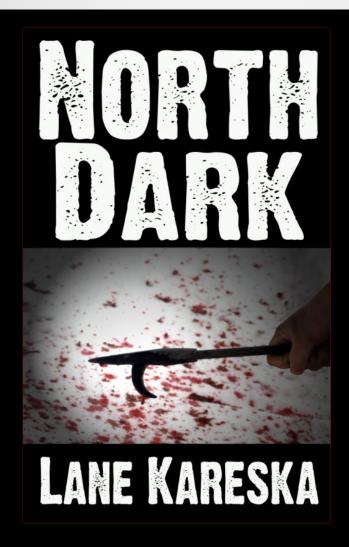
"That just goes to show you—a *monster* can be what we least expect and anyone... Jacquelynne Constance (J.C.) Bleu turned out to be mine..."

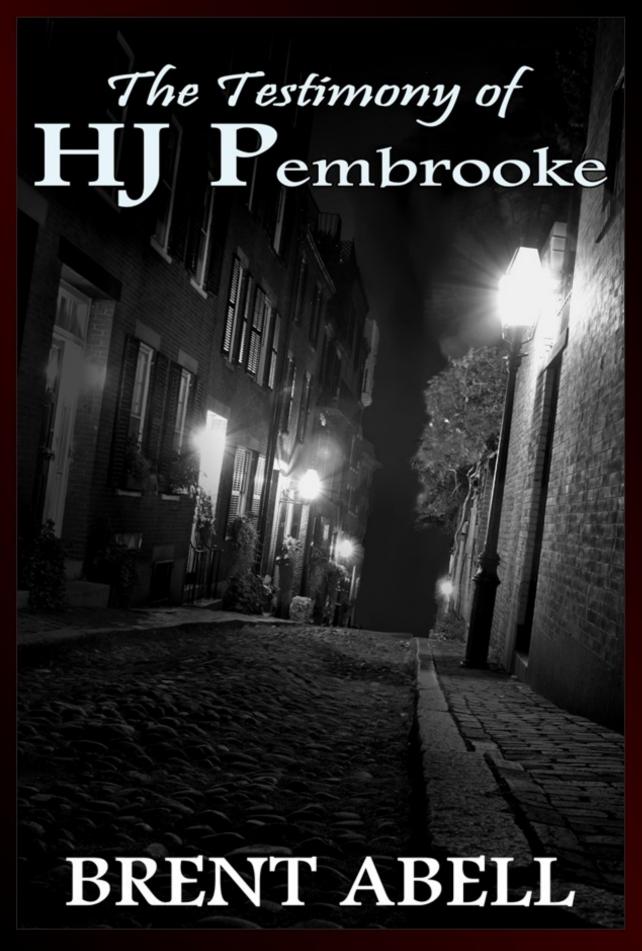
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Miracle Austin is a YA/NA cross-genre author who works in the social work world by day and the writer's world by night. *Doll*, her debut, paranormal novel, was recently released on 2-14-16. She enjoys attending diverse book festivals and comic conventions. Miracle resides in Texas with her family.

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AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

Nuts | Patrick Winters

Circus Peanuts are not to be trusted. They're shaped like peanut shells, large and exaggerated. But, they're squishy and puffy, like a marshmallow. They're a bright orange hue, seemingly hinting at a similar citrus taste. But this isn't true; they're of an artificial banana flavor. In essence, Circus Peanuts are deceivers. Edible little tricksters, these strange candies are, and I'm leery of them. I don't want their ilk near me, much less in my mouth. If I must, I will stay far away from any and all circuses where these dastardly treats may lurk in wait, plotting in their confounding and secretive ways. These Circus Peanuts may yet be the death of us, the very harbingers of an apocalypse that will end us all.

And don't even get me started on Sour Patch Kids...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Patrick Winters is a resident of Jacksonville, Illinois, and a recent graduate of Illinois College, with a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. He's had several works published in various magazines, have self-published a collection of short stories, *Gravedigger: Six Feet Deep*, and will soon be releasing his first book, *I Was a Teenage Gila Monster*, with Frith Books.

Website: http://wintersauthor.azurewebsites.net/Pages/Welcome

GAPE Aiden Truss

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Barnes & Noble,
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and iTunes



An Interview with Ela Lourenco, Author of Child of Fire

Sirens Call Publications recently released Child of Fire, the second book in Ela Lourenco's Dragon Born series. We sat down with her to ask a few questions and this is what Ela had to say about writing and Child of Fire.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Ela! Why don't you take a few moment to introduce yourself to any readers who aren't familiar with you.



Ela Lourenco: Hi, I'm Ela and one of my earliest memories is of my mother reading to me and my father making up the most amazing and wacky bedtime stories. Books have always been a huge part of my life and storytelling one of my greatest passions. Having lived a very nomadic existence until my late twenties I always viewed books as 'forever' friends whom I could take with me wherever I went.

As a mum of two myself now I have taken great pleasure in creating my own stories to pass on to my children.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

Ela: I always wrote—whether it was short stories, poems, news articles... it was never an active decision, more of a calling.

SCP: What is *Child of Fire* about?

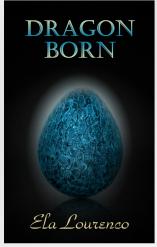
Ela: Child of Fire is the second in the Dragon Born series. It is the continuation of the trials and tribulations of Lara and her friends and the beginning of the dangerous yet exciting Karnac—the age-old challenge which will determine the next heir to the Azmantian throne.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Child* of *Fire* before they read it? Should potential readers read the first book in the *Dragon Born* series before *Child of Fire*?

Ela: I would definitely recommend any reader to start with *Dragon Born* as it introduces Azmantium (the world the story is set on) as well as the characters involved. There are many plot twists in *Child of Fire* which continue on from the first book.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge of writing a series?

Ela: Hmm, I love creating epic stories, creating new worlds and races and setting an entire history and back scene for it all... the hardest



challenge is to know when to stop creating the world and get on with writing the actual stories!!

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Child of Fire* apart from other books of the same genre?

Ela: Well, *Child of Fire* is a true blend of genres—there is sword and sorcery, paranormal, magic and yet a slight science fiction flavor too. Also I have been told by my beta readers that as a series it is pretty ageless as my adult readers have enjoyed it as much as their children (in fact, not to get anyone in trouble, but some of them have sneakily finished the book while their children slept because they couldn't wait!)

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

Ela: Lol. I am always reading!! I have just finished the latest of Nalini Singh's *Psy Changeling* novels—which is a fantastic series and am about to immerse myself in Richelle Mead's *Glittering Court*. Oh, and I will read and reread anything by Jennifer Ehstep—I love everything she has ever written!!

SCP: When you're writing, what are some of your must-haves to help you through the process?

Ela: Lots of good coffee, good quality dark chocolate, a pen and paper!! Caffeine helps, chocolate is always necessary and I love to jot ideas on actual paper—it helps my thought process!!

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

Ela: For me success is reaching children who don't enjoy reading and converting them. It's inspiring them to read more and to create their own stories—from the feedback I have had, I know that I have succeeded in this.

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?

Ela: Don't worry about what is 'du jour' or marketable. Write what you want to read yourself, enjoy your own story, let it be a labour of love and the words will flow.

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

Ela: They should walk away excited and curious, desperate to know what happens in book three!! As some questions are answered, more arise and the plot thickens—I want them to savour the anticipation!!

SCP: Many of our readers don't know that you teach writing workshops to school age children in your spare time—what is the funniest thing any of them have ever asked you and what was your answer?

Ela: Running these workshops and seeing children of all ages and abilities gain confidence in themselves (whilst having a great time!!) is about as good as it gets for me.

Their take on things differ so vastly from ours—it is wonderful to see the world through their eyes. And yes, it can be hilarious too at times!! One of my young authors (having read *Dragon Born* herself) asked me why it took me so long to write the next in the series—she thought it was not fair to expect her to wait so long for *Child of Fire* to be out! I explained that the book was written but it had to go through the editing process to which she promptly replied, "Well, why can't you just type it up on your computer and email it to the world?" Lol.

SCP: If you could take one piece of advice from the budding writers in your class, what would that advice be?

Ela: I always get the kids to fill in feedback forms at the end of the term so that I know how I could improve, or other subjects they would like to explore. Pretty much the only thing they have ever suggested is that I increase the quantity of the workshops, write my books faster so they don't have to wait, and make sure I am 'still around' until they are eighteen so they 'at least get one subject they enjoy'!

Sometimes R	dus say the be	st things. That	iiks Lia.	

Samotimes kids say the best things! Thanks Flat

An Excerpt from Child of Fire

Thunder crashed and lighting whipped across the dark purple skies as the hooded figure hurried down the long tree-lined avenue. She seemed oblivious to the light blue droplets of rain clinging to her cloak as she performed a series of glyphs to deactivate the wards of the dark and derelict mansion. Once inside, she pushed the heavy Roxan wood doors open as she made her way down the familiar tunnels into the bowels of the old house.

"Yelena, I am glad you could make it," Melia said in surprise as Yelena opened the door and pushed her damp cloak off. "We didn't think you would make it tonight."

Yelena smiled weakly. "I was going to stay at home with Lara... but I thought that we should meet and discuss what we are to do now."

"Does Lara know about these meetings?" Kieran, Leyla's father asked.

Yelena shook her head, "No. I think she has enough to be worrying about right now, it didn't seem like the moment to tell her of the Priests of the First."

"How is she doing?" Sarra, Sofia's mum, asked kindly.

Yelena shrugged. "It's hard to tell. She has spent the last few weeks walking around the house like a zombie. She has been so quiet that even little Talia is worried and keeps asking me what is wrong with Lara."

Aelwen came over to where Yelena was standing and patted her shoulder reassuringly. "Lara is a strong girl Yelena, she will be fine once the shock fades—give her time. It isn't every day you discover that you are not only a dragon, thought extinct for years, but you happen to be the last one. I think she is doing amazingly considering what she has just found out. In fact, all four of them are... it has been a big shock for all of them."

"Are you sure the girls will be able to keep this to themselves?" Yelena wondered. "If they don't, well..."

Aelwen nodded. "I have spoken to them all many times since the beginning of the holidays. They are a credit to you all," she continued as she nodded at Leyla, Sofia and Anna's parents, "I sincerely believe Lara's secret is safe with them."

"I wish you would let us tell them that we know Lara's true nature," Melia said. "Then Anna could know she could talk to me if she had any questions."

Daniel, Sofia's father, shook his head. "We have talked about this Melia. You know the more openly we discuss our group and the more information we give them the bigger the burden of secrets on their shoulders."

Melia nodded grimly. "I know... it's just that Anna has been so secretive lately, she seems so worried. I just wish I could reassure her that it's ok, that we all know Lara is a dragon. We have been preparing to protect Lara and help her since the day she was born."

"I agree it would be easier in a way," Sarra said. She looked at her husband, "But Daniel and I have some information that will convince you secrecy is key at this moment."

All heads turned to look at Daniel expectantly.

"Has something happened?" Yelena asked worriedly.

Daniel cleared his throat. "You know I am the second-in-command information officer for the King... well, yesterday I overheard some startling news... It seems the King is taking particular attention in the team members the three young princes have chosen to help them in the Karnac."

"That's not surprising," Lily, Leyla's mother, mused. "He probably wants to assess the wisdom in his sons' choices."

Daniel nodded. "Yes, but yesterday Leader Korhan gave me a list of names... he wants me to investigate the background of all of the members in Prince Xan's team."

"What do you mean 'investigate'," Yelena asked, arching a brow.

"He wants full background checks on all of the members- he wants to know everything about them, including checks on their families and information about their ancestry. He is particularly interested to find out whether the team members belong to good families who support his rule."

No one spoke for a moment as his words sank in.

"Gods above!" Yelena exclaimed. "What are we going to do? If he looks into Lara's past he will see that she was orphaned... you can't tell him who her parents were, but if you don't isn't he just going to get more curious?"

"Yelena is right," Aelwen said. "We have to avoid him taking interest in Lara. The more inconspicuous she is the better."

"I agree," Daniel nodded, "Sarra and I have discussed this already. We need to invent a back story for Lara and weave it together by magic so the King cannot penetrate through to the truth even if he were to use truthspeak."

Yelena barely heard the rest of the conversation as she slumped in the sofa staring into the crackling flames. How had everything gotten so out of control so quickly? Her beloved Lara, daughter of her heart, entrusted to her by the First herself—in so much danger.

"Yelena," Aelwen sat next to her, "Yelena?"

Yelena snapped out of her reverie and looked up. She was startled to find everyone else had left. "Sorry, I was just thinking."

Aelwen smiled, "We all know how dangerous that is."

Yelena tried to muster a smile and failed.

"Are things that bad?" Aelwen asked gently.

"Lara is like a shadow of herself," Yelena said sadly, "she eats, she talks, she plays with the girls—but there is something missing, as if she were merely going through the motions." Yelena looked at Aelwen. "I wish she would be angry, sad, cry, scream... ugh, I don't know. She just isn't reacting at all. I wish I knew what she were thinking!"

"Yelena, Lara isn't one to shout or have a tantrum. She is probably just taking some time to figure things out. All she needs is a little time and space."

"I've given her space!" Yelena exclaimed, "I have not talked to her about dragons at all, I thought it would be better to let her come to me with questions—in fact I told her I was there for her night or day if she wanted to talk. But she hasn't mentioned it once!"

Aelwen looked pensive as they sat in silence for a few moments. "I think I may have just the thing to help Lara," she mused.

"I'll try anything at this point!" Yelena said hopefully.

"Elina is still hidden deep inside the school's tunnels," Aelwen began, "with everything that happened with Lara there wasn't an opportunity to sneak her out and get her to her people. I think Elina may be able to help Lara in a way we cannot."

"But she barely knows Elina," Yelena said sceptically.

"Oh, I think you will find they have bonded quickly through their shared experiences. And I believe Lara may find it easier to talk to someone who has not always known her, someone new in her life." Aelwen's smile slipped. "Yelena, school starts in a few weeks. Do you really want Lara to go back while still like this? It could be dangerous for her—we need her at full strength."

Yelena looked at her closest friend and sighed. "Ok, it is worth a try."

"Lara! Lara! Wake up!"

Lara opened one eye and looked at little Talia who was merrily bouncing on the edge of her bed.

"What time is it?" she asked groggily.

"Time to get up!" Talia squealed as Lara reached forward and started tickling her suddenly.

"Talia what is taking you so long?" Yelena called out as she walked up the stairs, "I thought you were going to bring Lara downstairs?" She smiled when she walked into Lara's room to find the sisters intertwined on the bed giggling.

"Good morning," Lara smiled at her mother.

"Good morning honey," Yelena sat on the edge of Lara's bed. "I have a surprise for you."

"Really?" Lara sat up, fully awake now, "What is it?"

"Get dressed and come downstairs and you'll see," her mother said mysteriously. She looked at Talia, "And you, no telling her what it is!"

Lara jumped out of bed and pulled on some clothes. She quickly ran a brush through her chestnut hair, and Talia in tow, ran down the stairs.

"What is this surprise...?" she stopped midsentence when she spotted Elina sitting at the kitchen table, coffee in hand. "Elina?" she said with wonder. "How did you get here? Is it safe for you? What if someone saw you?"

Elina stood up and came to hug Lara. "Always thinking of others first Lara, don't worry I am perfectly safe. Your aunt Aelwen took every possible precaution and more when getting me out of the tunnels." She held Lara at arm's length and looked at her. "You look well Lara, although I could swear you have grown in the mere few weeks since I saw you last!"

Lara beamed at her, "It's great to see you too! How long can you stay?"

Elina looked at Yelena before she spoke. "Your mother has invited me to stay until you return to school in two weeks' time if that is alright with you?"

"That's great news!" Lara said happily as she sat down and grabbed a warm apple muffin off the stacked plate on the kitchen table.

Yelena nodded to herself as she watched them. She had not seen Lara this happy for a while. Aelwen had been right about this young woman, Elina—she would be good for Lara.

"Come Talia, why don't we go to the shops with Emmy and Sadie. You all need new shoes, and I need to pick up some herbs from McFane's."

"Aww! I wanted to stay with Lara and Elina!" Talia pouted.

"But you love going to McFane's and looking through his herbs drawers... besides, I was thinking of taking you all to Sally's Sweets on the way home. But if you don't want to go..."

She laughed when Talia rushed past her and shouted up the stairs. "Emmy, Sadie, hurry up and get ready, we're going to Sally's!!" She turned to Yelena, "What about Lara and Elina?"

Yelena smiled, "We can get them something too. Now come on, let's go."

"I'm so happy you're here," Lara said as she polished off her muffin and sat back in her chair.

Elina smiled at her. "As am I. Elder Aelwen has been keeping me informed about all that is going on, but frankly I was getting a little bored hidden away in the tunnels by myself." She looked at Lara seriously. "But what about you? How are you doing?"

Lara looked out of the kitchen window. "I don't know Elina. I just can't believe what happened—I know it's real, but it just doesn't seem real or possible." She turned to look at Elina, worry in her eyes. "How can I be the last dragon? There haven't been dragons in so long! I have so many questions!"

"Have you tried talking to your mother about any of this?" Elina asked kindly.

Lara shook her head. "No. I want to, but she seems so worried all the time. She thinks she's hiding it, but ever since I transformed there is a constant look of fear in her eyes."

Elina patted her hand. "That is what mothers do Lara, they worry. I still remember my own—it is part of being a parent."

Lara shook her head. "I don't think that's what she's worried about."

"What do you mean?"

Lara sighed dejectedly. "I think she's worried that I might hurt one of my sisters. She's always watching me when I am playing with them—and I swear there's fear in her eyes." Her blue eyes shone with unshed tears. "I think she's worried that I am a monster—and she's not wrong. If I am a dragon then I am going to turn evil, aren't I?"

Elina stared at Lara speechlessly for a moment.

"Is that what you think?" she asked. "That you are a monster?"

Lara nodded.

"Why on Azmantium would you think such a thing?" Elina exclaimed.

"I have read so many books on Magical histories—they all say that dragons were an evil race, that dragons were power hungry and cruel, that they wanted to enslave all who weren't dragons."

Elina shook her head. "Oh, Lara. Is that what has had you so worried all summer? I wish you would have talked to someone before." She brushed Lara's cheek gently, wiping away the

lone tear glistening there. "Lara, dragons were not evil beings—far from it. Dragons were a peaceful race who sought only to better the world for us all. Dragons were gentle creatures—not monsters."

Lara looked at Elina, confusion and hope warring in her eyes. "But all that I have read... how can all the historians be wrong?"

Elina sighed with frustration. "I don't think it is so much that they were wrong. I think they wrote their lies on purpose. They wanted people to be scared of dragons—they wanted to turn people against dragons. Lara, you are not evil and you are not a monster."

"But if dragons were not dangerous or evil, why would they want to do that?"

"They weren't evil, but I never said that dragons weren't dangerous," Elina explained. "Dragons were dangerous in that they were the most powerful beings on this planet with a link to magicks unrivalled by any of the other races. If they had wanted to they could have enslaved us all." She took a sip of her coffee before continuing, "That is why the historians wrote such terrible things about them—from fear of what they could do."

"But that is wrong!" Lara exclaimed angrily. "How can someone be blamed for something they could do but didn't?"

Elina nodded. "I agree, it is unfair and wrong. But do not place all the blame on the historians for their misdeeds. They were merely doing what they were surely coerced to do."

"What do you mean by that?" Lara asked.

Elina sighed. "Historians are men and women of research, of science—do you truly think that they would wish to leave a false legacy of their own accord? Their whole goal would surely be to leave an accurate account of past events. So why do you think they would go against everything they believe in to lie about history?"

Lara thought for a moment. "Because they were made to?"

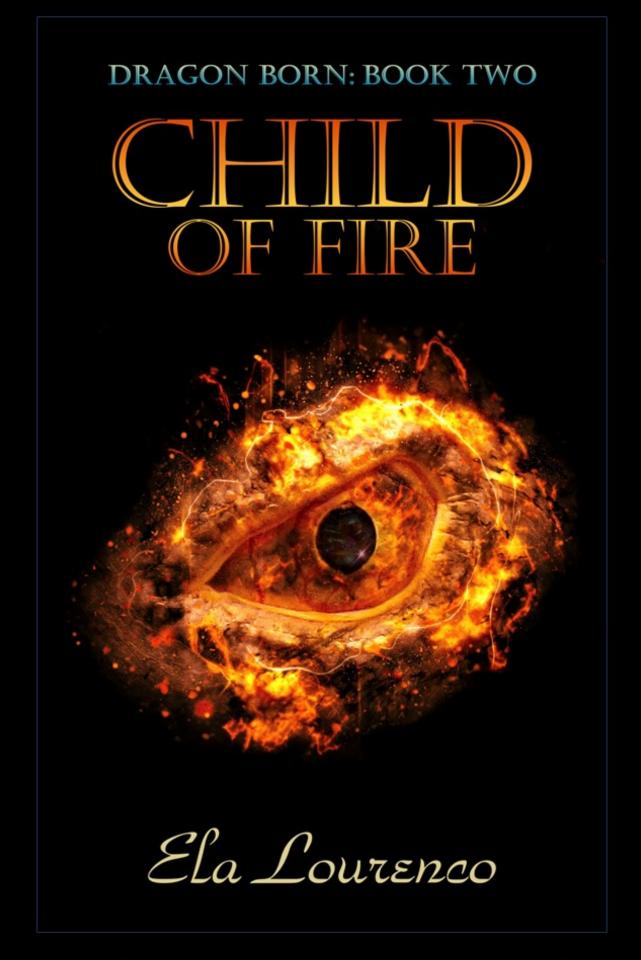
Elina's eyes sparkled. "Exactly! I know better than most how easy it is to 'break' someone's principles when you have hold of something they hold dear. Fear is a strong motivator Lara, never doubt it."

"But who could have forced them?" Lara asked. "Is it the same people that took you from your mother?"

"I don't know Lara," Elina said gravely, "I never saw the people in charge of kidnapping me, only their minions."

Lara watched with awe as an invisible wind coursed through the kitchen and Elina's eyes turned to mercury.

"Beware, Child of Fire for the shadows loom ever closer. Search within yourself the power of light and banish them to whence they came... otherwise the world will devour itself and the light shall be no more." Elina was no longer sitting down, she was hovering a few feet off the floor as the foresight took hold of her. "Heed my warning, Child of Fire. Only you can bring back the light into the world—you must journey to the core of yourself and bring it to the fore..."



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