



The Sirens Call

August 2017

issue #34



A Dark Fiction

Horror eZine

*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, Poetry,
and Artwork for
Horror Fans!*

*Dark Atmospheric
Artwork by
Multiple Artists*

*An Interview with
Lee Andrew Forman,
author of 'The Bones
of Hillside'*

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Rapture of the Seas | A.J. Huskey

I take my father's hand, and we step into a darkened chamber lit only by a row of feeble blue orbs evenly set like deadlights into the walls. Tall concrete pillars reach upward into shadow, surrounding a giant glass column that stretches high to an unseen summit. The murky water that fills the tank shimmers sickly aquamarine upon the walls.

"Go on," my father says, giving me a gentle push. "Before they close." I look to him and I look at the tank and I take a tentative step. Then another. I press my hands to the glass. I lean forward, look up, and see what we came to see.

The gleam of pale white underbelly cuts through the gloom of the water. Three or four hovering so high above me, gliding like ghosts. Their mouths are incisions beneath pointed gray faces. Their jagged triangular tails swing back and forth, like pendulums, like metronomes, like the dismissive gestures of debutantes. And like debutantes, they ooze grace and effortlessness and can devour a man whole.

"These are sharks," my dad says. "The killers of the sea."

"They're so pretty."

"Millions of years of evolution have made them the most efficient predators in the world. They are beautiful creatures, aren't they?"

I tear my gaze from the hypnotic dance of the aquatic assassins and look up at my dad. "You're weird."

"It comes with intelligence."

A voice crackles over the intercom. Sea-Arama is closing in thirty minutes. My dad reaches for my hand. "You ready to go?"

I put my hand in his and say, "Almost," and I turn back to the tank—

Soulless black eyes upon dappled gray flesh. They coalesce in the abyss, peering large, unseeing, through the murk of the water. Leviathan. It circles the deep, the bottom of the tank, far far below the killers of the sea. It opens its maw, gigantic, fathomless, and it churns through the water before it, searching, for me, for us—

I scream and I fall and I try to get away. "Honey?" I scuttle back toward my father, just as the behemoth floats by impotently against the glass wall of its tiny aquatic prison. They don't know what they have here! Does no one else see? A demon, a monster, that hides in the deep, needing to devour.

My father swoops me up, and I scream and I cry into his shoulder. "Baby, that's just a grouper," he says. "It's just a bottom-feeder. It's harmless."

He's wrong.

Even the killers do not kill it.

Awake, I inhale deeply, to catch my breath from a long-forgotten fear made manifest in nightmare. I see only darkness in the unfamiliar room, an ichor of shadow, and I feel the cloying moistness of the air. The bathroom light should be on, and Dave should be beside me, and I

realize the jarring silence of stilled machinery. I should have never agreed to join him on this charter boat, *The Rapture of the Seas*. I've never much cared for the water.

"Dave," I whisper into the shadows, but I get no response. I step out of the bed and feel my way toward the door like a sentient mannequin with useless painted eyes. Before I reach it, I hear the door pop open with a metallic click. "Dave? Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Why don't we have power?"

"We need to get topside." He blindly grabs at me, finds my arm and runs his hand down into my own.

"What's going on?" We ascend the carpeted stairwell, and a chill runs through me despite the clammy ocean air. The tenebrous touch of fear. Something is very wrong.

Dave opens the upper door, and we go on deck. The moon shimmers upon the expansive, undulating ocean that looms limitless around us.

A crewman appears from a door somewhere nearby. He has the expression of a man trying to hide his panic. "Sir. Ma'am. You need to put these on now." He hands us two crinkled yellow suits, bootied and zippered. They look like discarded paper dolls.

"Why?"

"The engine room is flooding," Dave says. "We have to abandon ship."

I nod my understanding. My breath quickens in my chest. We step into the suits, and the crewman takes us to the bow, where other crewmembers bustle about in their own wrinkled yellow suits. One of them has a pack on a tether, and he throws it into the water. I look over, I watch it splash upon the ripples below, and float upon the water. A lifeboat, empty and inflated.

I glimpse a shape within the water, in the silver cascade of moonlight. It lurks near the hull of the ship.

"Dave, I saw something."

But he dismisses me with silence.

"No. Dave, no!"

"Honey," he says. "I know you're scared—"

"We can't go in there!"

"We're going to be fine. We've already radioed out."

"I saw something!"

"Baby, please calm down." I try to back away, but Dave has me still by the hand. He pulls me to him and hoists me over his shoulder. I cry and I scream as he carries me to the railing, as he steps toward the ladder descending to the water below.

There, again, I see the creature in the water, deep below the surface of the tarry black ocean. I scream and I kick and my elbow makes contact just right with the side of Dave's head.

He loses his grip. On me. On composure. And the ocean rushes closer and closer. It slams into my gut and I plunge below the surface. Up is down is left is right and I have no sense of direction in this lightless domain. Murk and bubbles and a glimmer of something above, below, around.

The eyes of the leviathan.
They coalesce in the abyss.
The demon-beast opens its fathomless maw, oblivion in mottled gray flesh.
It draws me into the void.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — A.J. Huskey is a speculative fiction writer currently residing in the Texas Panhandle with her husband and their two cats. She has a bachelor of science degree in biology.



Alone in the Darkness | *R. J. Meldrum*

Mother has shut the bedroom door. Before she left me alone, she closed the curtains. I have told her many times I prefer to have them open, but she thinks the light from outside will keep me awake. She is wrong. I could sleep with the light; it's the darkness that keeps me awake. In the darkness, *they* speak to me. I've tried to make her understand, but she dismisses me. Mother knows best, she says. She is wrong; this time *I* know better.

I consider opening the curtains, but I cannot disobey her. She'd be upset if she found them open. I would rather lie in the darkness, listening to *them* pour their poison into my mind, than risk upsetting her.

Mother says I am a special boy and she enjoys looking after me. I have no job, no friends and no life other than with her. I am a man now, but I prefer to act as a child. I am comfortable with this. Life with Mother is so much easier and simpler.

But the voices interrupt my perfect world. Every night I lie in the darkness, hearing *their* voices. I hate what they are suggesting, what they want me to do. It is hard for me to resist because I am alone with them, alone with the fear.

I wake to find the day is bright and sunny. The voices have stopped, but I know they'll return at dusk. My defenses cannot last much longer. Soon I will do what they ask. I know this to be true, no one could resist their terrible siren song, the call that leads me to destruction. I feel a fear like never before. Not a fear of them, but a fear of what I will be forced to do.

Mother arrives with my breakfast on a wooden tray. I cannot eat, fear has closed my throat. I go downstairs, leaving my tray untouched. Mother is concerned, but I brush her off. I am rude to her and I see tears in her eyes. I'm an ungrateful child, that's what she's thinking.

The day passes and Mother comes to me to tell me it's my bedtime. She has red eyes, evidence of my ingratitude. I climb the stairs with a heavy heart, not because she's upset, but because of the night to come. I know my defenses will finally collapse, once the darkness comes. Mother closes my curtains, then leaves my room without wishing me sweet dreams. This is fitting, since I do not expect them. I have finally given up the fight and I am no longer afraid.

When I am alone in the darkness, I open my mind and welcome the voices. I listen to what they have to say, no longer questioning their logic. I will obey.

The next morning, I rise in the darkness before dawn and stand in position behind the door. I hold the knife in my hand. I don't know where it came from. The voices must have prepared it for me. When Mother opens the door, she will not be able to see me. She will enter and I, as the voices have instructed, will strike. I smile as the voices, my new friends, chatter amongst themselves. I feel part of them now, part of the darkness and of the fear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010 with his wife Sally. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Digital Fiction, and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

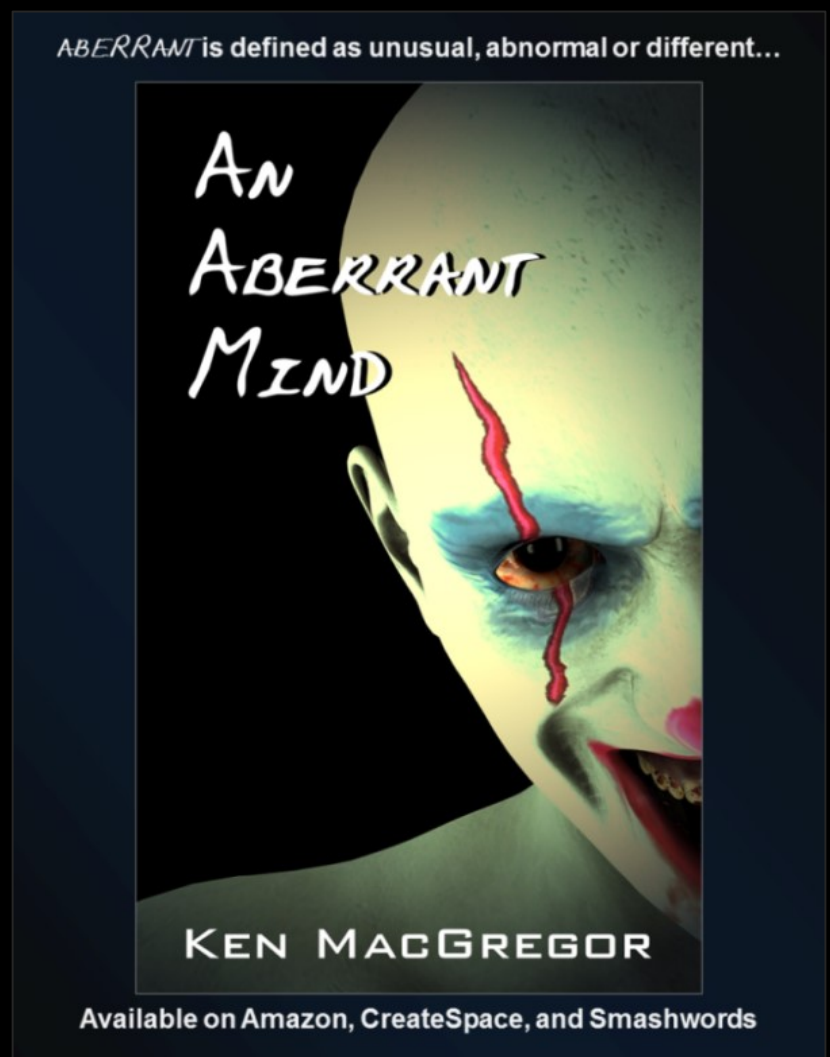
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An Aberrant Mind

Ken MacGregor

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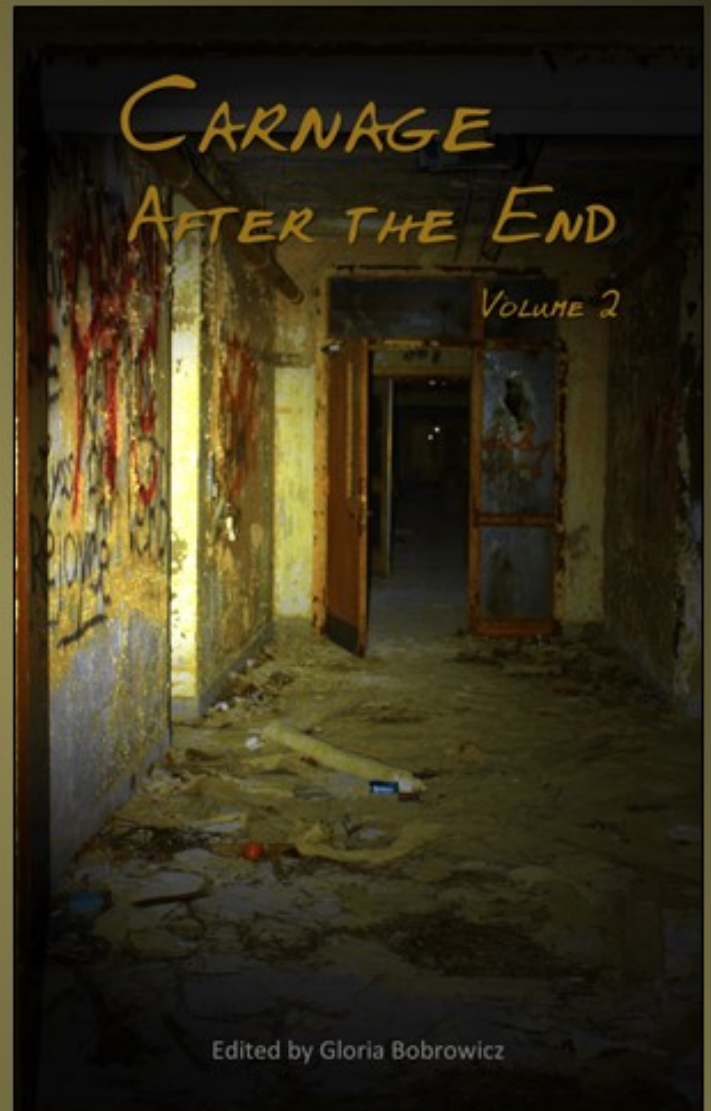
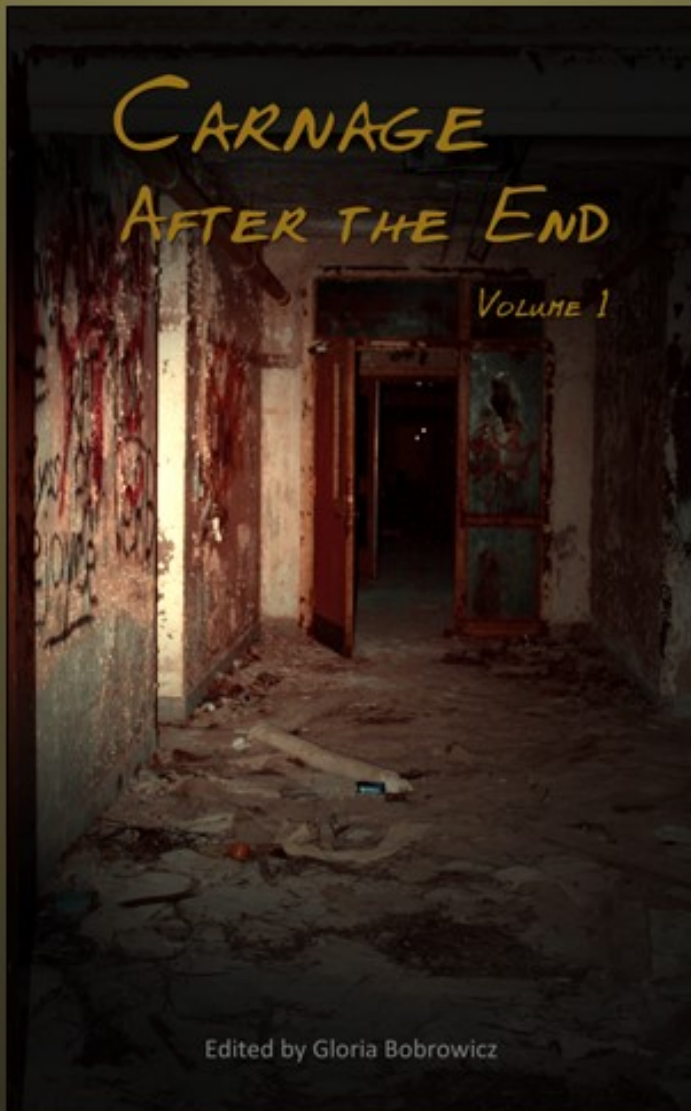
SCREAMS

The Machine

Sam Mortimer

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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...



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I came to upon dark and wild lands with no recollection of how I had gotten here. My hands and feet were covered with rich black oozing earth that dripped back to the muddy ground beneath my tired aching feet. The wind which blew around me brought a disturbed silence that dried my eyes, which now stung with the cold that seeped into my creaking bones.

Tentatively I stepped forwards as I shielded myself from the onslaught of rain and hard winds which rattled through my brain. I had to get out of this cold, nothing else mattered as my feet struggled to keep me up and moving. It felt as if I had not walked in a long time.

In the distance silhouetted against the violet twilight sky was a dark house with familiar turrets and long towers. I thought of ham and cheese sandwiches, fresh strawberries and cream, and my metallic tasting tongue screamed out with tortuous longing. My mouth felt dry and lacking and my lips felt stuck on my dry teeth, eager for substance and form.

I had no idea of where I was, but that house I knew. Previously I had stepped over the threshold and slept within its warmth. I'd once known its long dark corridors and its endless rooms and I knew it to be a grim place.

She stood waiting on the ancient stone doorstep, yellow light seeped out from within and upon her face was a triumphant smile. Wordlessly I followed her in. The dark corners of the hallway crept in as I passed.

The warmth caressed my tired aching bones but still I was terribly hungry and thirsty. My head felt weak as I struggled to navigate my way into the room on the left which I somehow knew was the front room.

"Catherine," my throat burned as I struggled with words. My eyes strained to see against the harsh light hanging in the center and the darkness that crept in from outside.

She was exactly as I remembered her, long blonde luxurious hair that never looked anything other than perfect. Her dark knowing eyes that I could now see right through watched as I stood before her not knowing what to do. It all seemed so long ago when I had known her.

"You came back," she observed as she took out a cigarette and lit it, "you just can't help yourself." Catherine sat with a smile that was not of happiness but of triumph.

Slowly the memories were unearthed. I'd met her at a party years ago when my wife had not been present in order to stay at home and mind our young children. She exuded sex. I'd never met anyone so alive and being near her made me wake up to the fact I was getting older with each day. She made me want to halt time and I moved everything to be with her. My wife and children were traded away for a life more wild and free.

The years turned and with her also. She wouldn't come near me and we became strangers marooned in this large rambling home lost in the wilds. Catherine didn't want me but she wouldn't let me go. I was a toy to her, a possession she had won from another. I missed my wife and children and they missed me too. I decided to go back to the life I should have had.

"What have you done?" I took a step back away from her as she grinned at me. Something about me was highly amusing to her but I could see no cause for mirth.

“You look hungry,” she gestured to the large dining table by the large bay windows, “eat,” she commanded.

My stomach had never felt so empty; upon the table was enough food to feed a whole party of people but it was only the two of us there. My eyes scoured the dishes. She knew exactly what I liked and it was all there. Roast lamb sat steaming in the center accompanied by roast potatoes and mint sauce, I spotted king prawn and avocado salad next to strawberries swathed in thick rich Cornish cream. I’d never seen food so wonderful but it was bad. I couldn’t see what was wrong with it but I knew that I hunger I felt could not overcome the repulsion as I looked down upon the spread.

“Eat,” Catherine ordered. Her voice grew quick and harsh, “I’ve gone through an awful lot of effort to get you here tonight.”

Effort was something she had never lacked. She had worked hard to get me, to take me from my family and bring me here to her empty home and when I had finally decided to leave she went through a lot of effort to stop me.

As I left in the night after our final argument I steered my car through the dark lanes that I knew so well, yet as I came to the crossroads a mile or so from here she appeared in the road. There was no other action to take than to avoid her but it resulted in me losing control and skidding off the road and into oblivion.

Now I was here somehow. She had brought me back but I was determined to go. I was so tired of this, of her and her cruel ways. I wanted to begin again, a fresh start with the people that I loved who were prepared to grant me that second chance.

“I’m not hungry; I will not eat your food.”

“Very well,” she said hiding something in her voice, “until next time.”

I didn’t question why she had so easily let me go. I staggered to the front door, my bones creaked and crunched as I took those crucial steps. My cold white hands fought with the latch. Soon I would be free but I would have to return into that black terrible night that taunted me.

“We could be happy again,” she pleaded. I could hear the desperation in her voice, maybe she had changed but it was too late.

“I must leave,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Have you ever wondered why there are no mirrors in the house?”

“I’m not here to play games Catherine.” But something was up, there was something that she knew but I didn’t.

I had not wanted to look but as I saw my reflection in the small glass window in the door I let out a knowing gasp. Now I knew why I felt so hungry yet could not eat. Why my eyes stung and my bones felt weary.

“You do realize that you’re dead darling.” She stood in the hallway mocking me with her sweet voice, “But you can stay here with me if you want.”

“I’m leaving.”

“You promised you’d be mine forever and a day.”

“We’re not right for each other. I loved you once but now I don’t.” The smile had dropped from her face; there was true sadness underneath, “You must let me go.”

“Never,” she promised.

Out into the night I went as lonely and as cold as before. I had nowhere to go but I just needed to get away from her. She didn’t follow and for that I was glad, for I knew I would not make it very far. My bones began to crumble and to the black earth once more I fell. It was joyous to finally lay down to rest. Being taken back into the soil I felt reborn, I was regenerating.

Catherine stood by the door and watched him leave. She sighed as she watched his once earthly body return to the unhallowed ground in which he had risen. Once more she went back inside and laid a white linen blanket over the rotten food she had placed on the table many years ago. There was no need to clear it as next year she would call him again as she had done every year since his death. She’d rouse him again and again until he would finally give in and stay. Try as hard as he might, he would never get away from her. He would never be free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - S.J. Budd is an author living in London. Her biggest influences include H.P.Lovecraft, Patrick Rothfuss, and anything concerning the strange and paranormal. Previously she has been published in Sanitarium Magazine and when not writing short stories, she is working on her first novel.

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One Bad Fur Day

K. Trap Jones

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The Giant's Heart

The young newlyweds trek up a cobbled path winding through a tidal island. They carefully examine the stones beneath their feet until they find the legendary giant's rocky heart embedded in the path. Holding hands, they close their eyes and each make a wish. The ground rumbles and they both tremble. A large, pebble-covered hand pushes its way through the earth and a booming voice says, "Are you happy?"

The woman nods without thinking and the stony hand grabs her and pulls her, screaming, down into the narrow hole.

Her wish was to die happy... she'd failed to specify when.

The Performance of a Lifetime

The teenage actress raced down the hillside, shrieking, sliding on the loose stones, and waving her arms wildly. The film crew at the base exchanged confused looks.

"What is she doing?" the director said. "Improvisation? We'll need to re-shoot this scene."

None of them realized she wasn't performing for the camera; she was running for her life.

A huge, scarlet demon appeared on the brow of the hill. It aimed a fireball at the actress and she burst into a crackling blaze. The film crew scattered before the demon so it could have fun picking them off one by one.

B is for Blood

Bloody Bernard was the baddest vampire, bar none. He bit everybody his bewitched thralls brought before him.

Nobody could best him. They beat him black and blue but his body healed when he drank blood and he binged on buckets of the bitter beverage.

A big bastard named Basil was bid to bring an end to Bernard's blight. After a brilliant battle, he beheaded him.

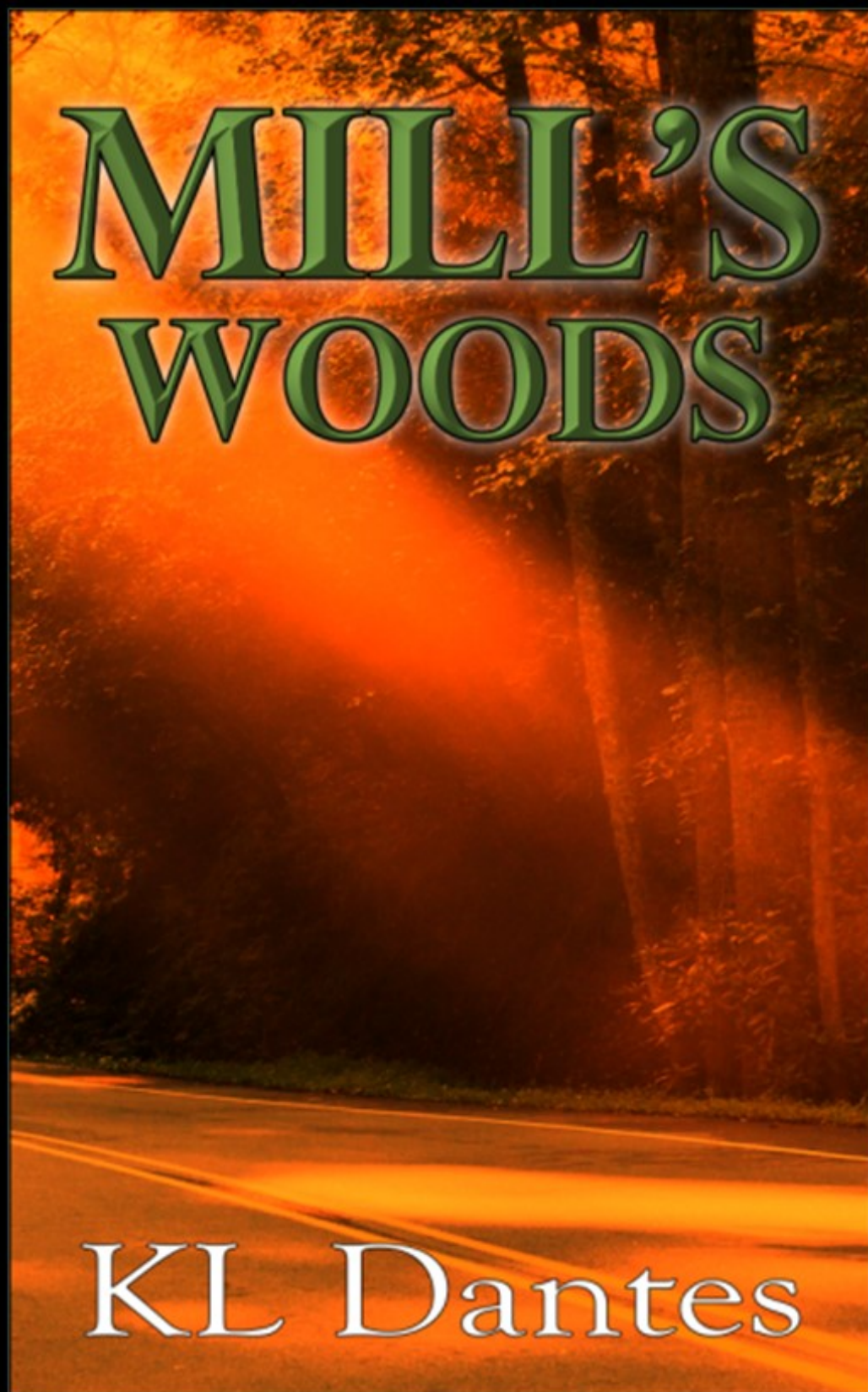
But Basil had been bitten and swallowed a drop of Bernard's blood. He became a vampire even badder than Bernard. He had banquets of bodies, blissful bloodbaths, and built a brood of sisters and brothers.

Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

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No one could have guessed the blood-thirsty
horror hidden in Mill's Woods!



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Missing the Boat

Finn missed the last boat leaving the village. On a steep hill that led down to the small harbor, he leaned against a stone wall gasping for breath while forlornly watching his salvation sail away.

Inaccessible by road, tourists visited Umbrard by sea during the day but always left before sundown. They didn't bother the locals, who occasionally were even willing to sell them souvenirs and pose for photographs.

When darkness fell, the villagers' monstrous true forms were revealed. And according to the agreement, humans found in Umbrard at night were fair game... which was rather unfortunate for poor Finn.

Weird is the New Normal

Sometimes I think the only difference between things that are considered 'weird' or 'normal' is the amount of time a person spends experiencing them. Things you initially thought were strange can quickly become ordinary.

Case in point: the first few times I transformed it felt like the most bizarre experience in the world and I thought I'd never get used to it, but after a dozen full moons I'm becoming accustomed. Now it's just another regular thing. Once a month, I hunt people down to rip them apart, eat their hearts, and frolic in the mess of guts and gore.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Emma Grave is a speculative fiction writer who lives near the forest of Cannock Chase in the UK with her husband and house rabbit. Her stories have appeared in *Speculative 66*, *Fantasia Divinity Magazine*, and *Fifty Word Stories*.

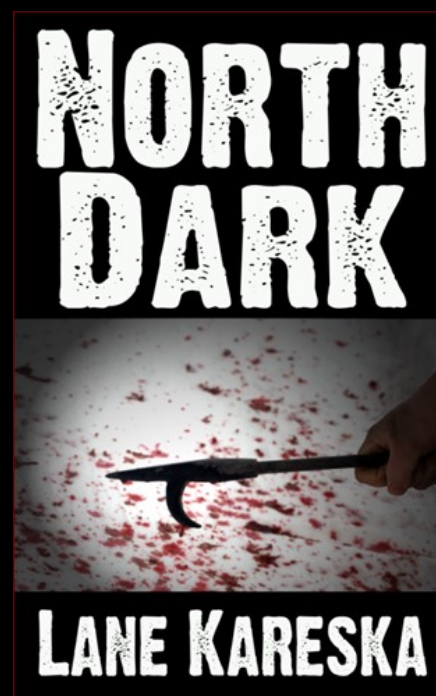
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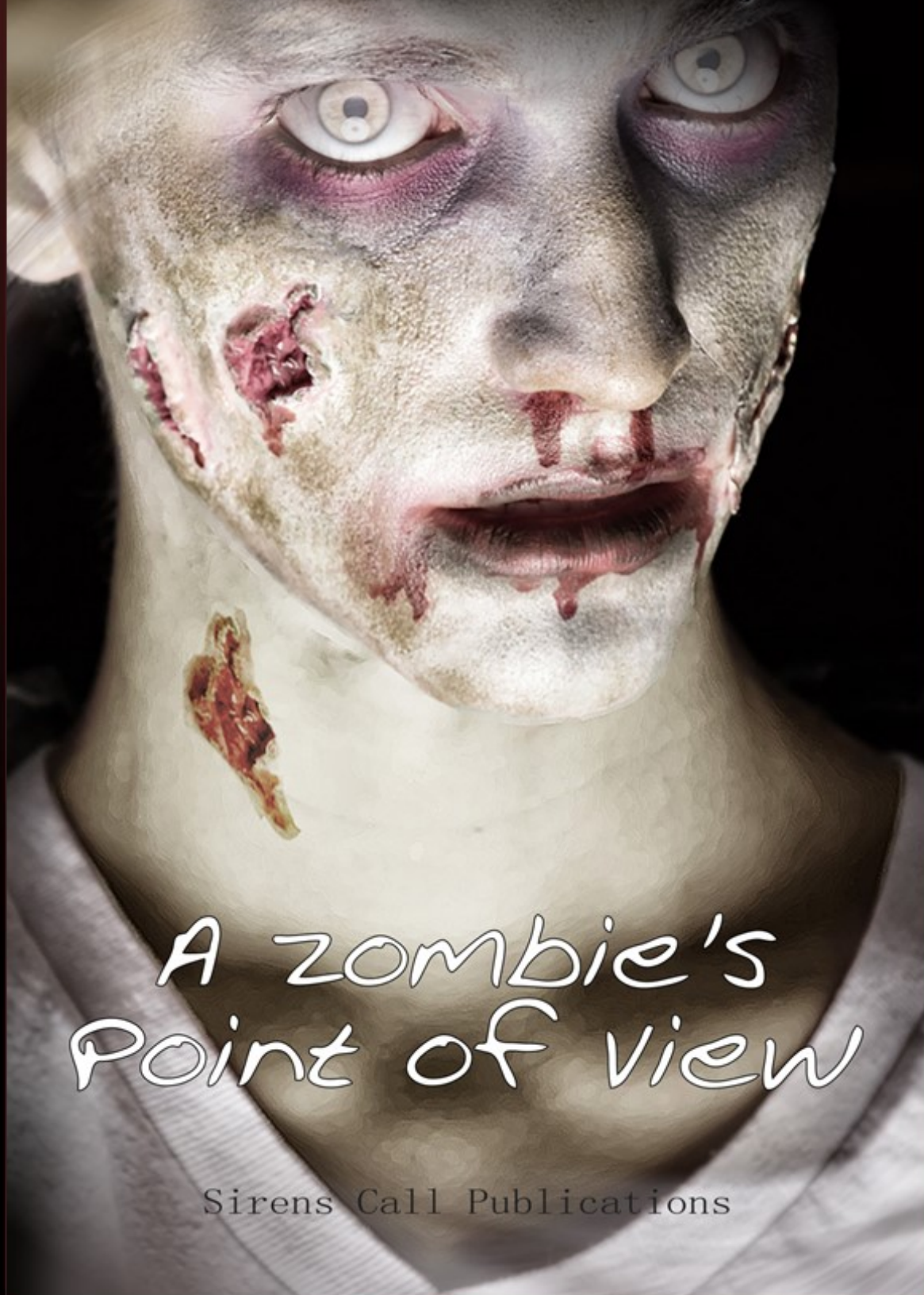
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A zombie's
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DRAGON BORN: BOOK TWO

CHILD OF FIRE



Ela Lourenco

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Darkness | *Mark Steinwachs*

Light from outside the hotel pushes through around the edges of the closed curtains. Just enough of a glow to have the blackness tease him into thinking there's something within the shadows.

"Hello, Darkness, my old friend," he says from the bed.

"I'm not your friend. I never was," a quiet, confident voice replies from within the space of the room.

"That hurts a little bit. I never did anything to you. My life wasn't by choice. I was put here to do a job and that's what I did," says the gaunt, weathered man as he brushes his long, scraggly, brown hair from his eyes.

Darkness shifts, not taking an actual shape. His form is the air itself moving in the room.

"And what a fine job you did." Sarcasm curls around the edges of his words. "You botched it and I had to take care of the situation."

The man cringes as Darkness continues. "That was quite a sight, all those years ago. It was the perfect setup. I've never seen anyone suffer like you did that day. I thought it would go back to the way it was. I thought I was rid of you. But, no, he sent you back."

The man closes his eyes. "Are the old ways really the best ways? What did they do? Where did they get us?"

Darkness creeps up the bed, floating inches over the man, enveloping him without touching. "They did more than you ever did, otherwise you wouldn't be like this and I wouldn't have had to come back," Darkness says, then whispers, "now I will take my rightful place at his side."

The man grits his teeth, pushes himself up, passing through Darkness, and gets out of bed. "Do you think he will take you back?"

Darkness morphs into the shape of a human. His color never changes, but he subtly alters various shades of black that make him stand out from the rest of the room. Dressed in an exquisitely tailored suit, standing straight and tall, he's the polar opposite of the man in front of him. "I know he will. He made his mistake. He isn't perfect and he knows it, no matter what they think." His words were saturated with disdain as he dismissively waves his hand toward the window and the city outside

"You were a mistake," Darkness says, continuing his offensive, "one that went on way too long. Look at you now, in a seedy motel wasting away. And did you ever really do anything? Did you try? No, you got sent back and you hid. Oh, sure you tried for a bit, but quickly gave up."

The man walks past Darkness. He turns the floor lamp on and winces as he lowers himself into the chair next to it. In the lit room, the difference in their bearing and appearance is even greater. Darkness is seemingly taller, his taut muscles showing through his suit. Muted oil slick colors swirl at his edges as he moves. The man's face is drawn and pale, his skin stretched

against his body. Each bone protrudes from his ribcage and his thin legs look like they could snap at any moment.

“What did ruling with fear ever get anyone? It didn’t work then and it won’t work now. That’s why he sent me,” the man says, his words hollow.

“And what a great job you did. What did you fix? Nothing. It’s my turn again, and this time he won’t hold me back. For ages I’ve worked my ass off to get to this point, all while you hid. It’s too late for you to try and save things now. You waited too long to try. Maybe if you had grown your beard back, you would have at least gotten the hipster crowd on your side.”

The man bows his head and slowly starts to get up from his chair. There is a rumble from the earth below them and the room begins to shake. The man falls back into the seat and looks up at Darkness, who is motionless, unfazed by the situation.

An unimaginable splintering sound echoes around them, the world rocking violently as it kilters off its axis. Furniture topples across the room and the lamp hits the man in the head before falling to the floor, shattering the lightbulb.

A moment later the power goes out and for the first time the room is truly dark.

“What did you do?” the man asks, his voice barely heard over the last rumbles from the ground.

“I started the end of days. I’m going to do what you couldn’t. I’m going to join your father and make the world right.” Darkness snaps his fingers and an eerie, pale green light fills the room. “I want to see your face, *old friend*.”

The man shifts in his seat as the world continues to tremble. Blood seeps from his forehead, but he ignores it. “What. Did. You. Do?”

“We are sinking. I ripped it free. The land of greed and sin is about to disappear, and you with it. These pathetic creatures need a reminder of who is in charge. Your father gave them free will and they abused it. He sent you to teach them, and they didn’t listen. You were too weak to make them see what is right. Your time is finished. There is no coming back now. I’ve spoken with your dear father and he is done with you.”

The world stops shaking and a moment later flickering light seeps through the curtains. Darkness snaps his fingers, the hotel room going dark once more. He steps across the room, opening the curtains with a grand gesture. Fires dot the landscape across the city, the only illumination as far as the eye can see.

Darkness takes in the sight, then turns to the man. He slowly walks the few paces to him, as if stalking his prey. Darkness grabs the man by his hair and jerks him out of the chair, half dragging him to the window.

Darkness positions himself behind the man, forcing him to look outside. “There, that is the world you are leaving behind,” he hisses. “Look at it.”

People run wildly in the streets. Gunshots ring out. First one, then another, then a steady stream of them. Anarchy erupts in the city’s final moments.

Sobs wrack the man’s body, his words barely audible. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Father. I failed. I allowed this to happen. I’m sorry.”

“Your father doesn’t care about your pitiful whining anymore. Too bad you can’t pray for your own soul on your deathbed like they all did. To forgive all. To go in peace. You will suffer and your father won’t stop it this time.”

Darkness puts his free hand on the man’s neck. He twists violently and a loud crack fills the room. For one second the world goes silent, then the chaos outside resumes. Darkness drops the man to the floor. He takes one last look outside, then is gone.

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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The Real Bill Anderson | *Jacob Mielke*

Bill Anderson is the nicest guy you could ever hope to meet. He'll always wave hello to you when retrieving the morning paper and he always has a friendly smile and a handshake ready to go if he passes you in the supermarket. He is the kind of guy who will mail a Christmas card to every one of his neighbors. He remembers every birthday and never forgets your name. He'll give you the shirt off his back if you ask. I hate Bill Anderson.

The last time we played together, we were eight years old. A chained up dog was barking at us while we walked home from the library. It was a German Shepard, a mean son of a bitch. We picked up a rock and threw it at the bastard. I still remember how satisfying the dog's yelp was.

The mutt lost an eye, but I lost so much more. That was the first time in our life that Bill really felt guilty about something. From that day forward he threw no stones and hurled no insults. He even started holding doors open for people.

He repressed me. He cut me out of our personality and buried me deep into his subconsciousness, helpless to intervene as he became the polite, limp-wristed pansy he is today. I've spent the last thirty-four years as just a whisper in the back of Bill's mind.

He doesn't think about me. He doesn't hear me scream.

Today is different. Today Bill went to the supermarket and did not smile. He did not shake hands. He scarcely even noticed the concerned looks of the people around him. They all know him and they all know that something is seriously wrong when Bill Anderson doesn't smile.

Right now he is standing in the pharmacy aisle, staring down at the pack of diapers he's been holding for the last ten minutes. He doesn't see the diapers. In his mind's eye (and mine) he sees the child he always wanted and now will never have.

I rage in his head. Let me out, Bill! Tear that package to pieces! Tear it! Throw things! Burn this whole fucking place down! Let me out let me out LET ME OUT!

Bill stares at the diapers silently.

A hand closes on our arm. The light touch is comforting to Bill, disgusting to me. He looks at the hand's owner.

It's Payton Braun, the woman who lives across town. We see her sometimes at barbecues and church functions. She's just like him: always smiling, always willing to help out a lost soul in need. She disgusts me.

Her face is a mask of concern. "Is everything okay, Bill? You look kind of down."

Stupid bitch, why won't she mind her own business? Shut her up, Bill. Wipe that concerned look off her righteous face. Hit her. Keep hitting her. Crush her fucking skull!

"Hey, Payton. I'm not going to lie, it's been a really trying day. I don't really want to talk about it though."

She pulls him into a hug. "I'm here if you need anything. Don't hesitate to ask." Bill hugs her back and feels comforted. The agony in his belly subsides some.

"Thank you, Payton. I really appreciate it."

You're so weak, Bill. You make me sick.

Payton pulls out of the hug and looks at our face. She stares into our eyes and through them I see her features tense with surprise. I see her eyes widen ever so slightly.

"You take care, Bill."

“Yeah, you too.” We watch her walk away, admiring how she looks when leaving. Then it hits me; Bill Anderson never looks at any woman that way except our wife. Is it him staring, or me?

When that bitch looked at us, was she staring into his eyes...or mine?

I try to smile. The corner of our mouth lifts slightly upward. That was all me. For the first time in three decades, I did something. Me!

The real Bill Anderson.

It is not quite dark yet when Bill finally finds himself standing in front of our house. I try to go inside but we stay rooted in place. He remains in control of our body, which frustrates me. I do think I made a muscle in our leg twitch though, so there's a small victory there.

Come on, Bill. Let's do this. You and me. It'll be easy, nothing to it. If you have trouble, I'm more than willing to help.

Bill is not expected here right now. In fact, he's not supposed to be here for another two hours, when his shift at the office ends. But he never showed for work today. He's been wandering the town all day, contemplating what is to happen.

I imagine the face of Mr. Roscoe, the twat who runs the office, contorting with rage when he realized his most dependable employee didn't bother to show or even to call off. I see it reddening and puffing up with anger and it gives me glee. I can also see it shrinking in horror when he learns what transpired tonight and that's even better.

Finally Bill takes a step forward. For once, I'm glad that he's in control of our body because I would be bouncing all over the place like a kid in a candy store.

The door creaks when it opens, but no matter. It's quiet enough that the upstairs occupants won't hear anything.

Bill takes great care with his movements. He's lived in this house for years and knows exactly where to place his steps so the floor won't creak. He manages to open the closet in the kitchen without noise as well.

There is a high-pitched squeal from upstairs followed by a bout of laughter. Bill freezes in place. Our eyes turn hot and tears spill out. Sorrowful tears at first, but with a little bit of coaxing from me, they quickly become angry. Our fingers close around the closet's hidden treasure. The crowbar is cold in our hand and heavy, but damn if it doesn't feel good. Even to Bill.

Oh yes, Billy-boy. You can't hide it from me. I know that you know the truth: we're one and the same. You can't deny me forever. I am you.

Crowbar in hand, we make our way up the stairs. Bill no longer cares enough to try and be quiet but the sound our footsteps apparently goes unnoticed because the giggles and moans from the bedroom don't stop.

There is no more fire in Bill's belly. No more rage. He feels nothing. It's like he's dead inside.

Or at least he would be, if I weren't inside him too. I can barely contain my excitement. Our hand grips the crowbar so tightly it hurts and I can't tell if it's my doing or his.

The door to the bedroom is cracked open slightly. The sounds are more prominent here. We stop moving in the hallway and this time both of us want the same thing. I don't want to rush. I want to enjoy this without sully the moment with haste.

We push the door open slowly. The lovers in bed don't acknowledge us. They are too wrapped up in each other. Our mouth pulls into a smile at the thought of my joke. Wrapped up in each other! We should have been a comedian.

The man is on top. That makes sense. Bill's lovely wife Laura always preferred missionary to everything else. Boring bitch.

Laura has been cheating on Bill since they first started dating but of course, sweet and naive Bill turned a blind eye to that. Oh, he noticed the signs, same as I did. His weak mind couldn't handle it. He's been lying to himself his entire marriage. That's why I should be in control of this body. For all of my flaws, I'm honest.

It's obvious that the lovers are close to finishing their ageless ritual. I can feel the emptiness inside Bill changing. He's not despairing nor is he exactly angry...he's excited. Gleeful, even. A lifetime of denying himself, denying me, is crumbling down.

Laura's eyes are closed while she gasps and moans and it's only when we're right at the foot of the bed that they snap open and she sees us. Or rather, that she sees me. Her eyes stare into mine and I can tell that she knows exactly what is about to happen.

The man never realized we were there. One second he was thrusting and grunting and the next his skull was split open. I doubt he even felt the blow before dying.

Laura shrieks and hugs the corpse tightly to her, as if using it for a shield. We smash the crowbar into his back repeatedly and lazily, not really trying to hit her yet. For now it's enough simply to hear her screams and pleas of mercy with every swing.

Eventually she pushes her dead lover to the side and tries to bolt past us to the door. If we had been out of our mind with rage, she might have made it. But we're not raging. This is no longer an act of vengeance. It is simply fun.

We seize Laura around the waist and hurl her back onto the bed. Then we are on top of her with our hands wrapped around her throat. I do not remember making any of these motions but it's just as well. Our wife deserves a more personal touch than her lover.

And then, just like that, it's over. The woman, the thing, in my hands isn't alive or human anymore. It's just a large cut of meat. We let go of its crushed throat and look at our hands—

Click. The truth comes roaring back like a gale force wind. These are my hands. This corpse used to be my wife. Not ours.

There is no we, no us, no our. It's just me. I am. My God, what have I been doing all of these years? I work a job I hate and married a woman I knew all along didn't love me. I've been pretending like some boring asshole was in charge of me but that's a lie. It's been me all along, denying myself. For what? Social acceptance? Some greater moral responsibility?

No more. My name is Bill Anderson and I am done punishing myself. I am free.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jacob Mielke is a writer of horror and speculative fiction. His work has previously been featured in The Sirens Call eZine Issues 33, 30, and 29, as well as magazines and anthologies from Hellbound Books, Bards and Sages Quarterly, and Jitter Press.

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Light, Nighttime Reading | *Nate Ealy*

The best day of the week to clean the attic is always Sunday. At least that's what David thought. Spring cleaning was a necessary evil that annually plagued his home, but while moving boxes and making room for more stuff this May, David happened to notice that a board was loose under his foot. Perplexed, he investigated further and noticed that it was loose with reason. The board pulled all the way up to reveal a small cubby space big enough for an old, hardcover book.

David picked up the book. There wasn't a title on its black covers, and the cold spine had a musty stick to it. David opened the book.

Inside was faint handwriting in big looping font. David had a hard time reading what the book was saying, but what he could make out was nonsense. For the most part, it was the same description over and over again of a mysterious beast.

David lost his fascination and returned the loose board back to the floor. He took the book with him downstairs when his attic was finished.

He set the book on the kitchen table while he prepared lunch. For a single man living alone, this was a turkey sandwich. Before he ate his sandwich, David opened the book again and flipped through the pages. It was either the ceiling light or the sunshine coming in from the window, but the book was now easier to read. The letters were darker and less faded. He could make out more words this time around.

And what he could make out tickled his fancy. David read about a beast with large leathery wings and red-black eyes like coal. Once he finished this section he'd actually get on with his day.

When David looked up from the book it was quarter to six. He'd spent the last five hours reading.

"Holy shit," he said. He slammed the book shut and slid it across the table.

David ate his sandwich and salvaged the rest of his day. That night though, he couldn't sleep. He could only think about the book on his kitchen counter.

With bloodshot eyes, David sat down in the breakroom. The steel mill was starting up for the week, and Mondays sucked as always. Only, this Monday would be worse because he didn't sleep for more than an hour the previous night.

"You look like you let the weekend go on for too long." Steve slapped David on the back. Steve had his work blues on like David did. "Whatcha into?"

"I must've had some insomnia. You know, I used to get that from time to time. I ended up reading a book all night," David said.

Steve cocked his eyebrow. "You? Read? I'll believe when I see it."

Steve was a believer by lunch time. David had brought the old, black book with him to work to read on breaks. He didn't talk much to anyone, just kept turning the pages.

At quitting time, David went home with his book under his arm. He knew he needed to continue his cleaning, but all he wanted to do was read that book.

Tuesday morning David went back to the breakroom with the book in his hand.

"You really should quit that. You might get to thinking," Steve chuckled.

David sat down and opened the book. Without looking back at Steve he said, "I'll let you know what I think when I'm finished."

"Hey, where's your lunch? I don't see your bucket anywhere," Steve asked.

David looked around him, furrowed his brow, and then cursed.

"Fuck! I forgot to bring one," he said.

"Just order in a pizza," Steve said. "I'll help you finish it. You sleep any better last night?"

"Naw," David shook his head. "Maybe two hours. Reading's a good way to pass a sleepless night though."

On Wednesday David would have read the book at work first thing in the morning, but he wasn't there first thing in the morning. He'd overslept. He threw the book in his car and sped away to the mill, again forgetting what he'd eat for the second meal of the day, but that wasn't too bad actually. He'd forgotten about the first one too.

Thursday morning David remembered about work. He picked up his phone and called off. That way he wouldn't be disturbed and could read his book in peace.

By the time the weekend rolled around, Steve was worried. David had been acting strange, really strange, and he knew he wasn't eating anything. The last couple times he saw David at work the man didn't have a lunch.

So, by Sunday afternoon, Steve drove across town to where David lived. David's mailbox was stuffed with envelopes and his grass needed cutting. Steve knocked on the door and rang the bell, but no answer. David's truck was in the drive which meant David was there somewhere. Although, he could be too consumed by his newfound muse to get up from the book and answer the door.

Steve tried the door anyway. It was unlocked.

The lights were on in the house. Steve walked from the living room to the kitchen, and didn't find David. He checked the bedroom last.

David was in bed, sitting on top of the covers with his back against the headboard, and that damn book was open on his lap. His head tilted back too far to look comfortable, and his mouth was hanging open as well as his eyes. Steve could smell the foul stench of feces in the room. Steve saw the book's pages were blank like new fallen snow, a contrast to the crusty brown stain underneath David.

Steve ran outside and threw up on the lawn.

Then he called an ambulance.

When the paramedics arrived, they said that David had been dead for hours. They said that by the looks of it, his heart gave out. Probably from lack of sleep.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Nate Ealy is a writer who lives in rural Western Pennsylvania, and when he is not watching Pittsburgh sports he can be found writing short stories. His stories have appeared in Grove City College's literary magazine The Echo, Gathering Storm Magazine, and Massacre Magazine.

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Drabbles | *James Kowalczyk*

Behind the Wall

"I dare you to stick your arm in there," my friend Alicia whispered. She smiled as she adjusted her prosthetic arm. We'd been playing in her basement since third grade when we became friends after I'd stepped between her and a bully. She had never revealed to me how she lost her arm and I never asked.

"You afraid?" Her expression was the same one she'd had after she'd gotten caught for letting loose a jar of white spiders in Sister Cecilia's desk drawer.

I stuck my arm in, holding my breath.

Now I know how she lost her arm.

Ritual

Father Mariani smiled as he wiped the blood from his hands. His sharpened teeth shone in the moonlight. "Pass me the shovel," he whispered to his accomplice, "and wrap the limbs." The altar boy nodded only. He could not speak, for his tongue had been cut out when he was 12 years old. Using waxed paper, the boy dutifully bundled each arm and leg separately as the priest started the car.

"Hurry," he called to the boy, "before the jugs of vital fluid begin to clot. We still need to get briquettes for the barbeque."

They ate well that night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — James Kowalczyk was born and raised in Brooklyn and now lives in Northern California with his wife, two daughters, and four cats. He teaches English at both the high school and college level. His work has appeared in numerous online and print publications.

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The view into the valley was spectacular. Above them, the mountain peaks were white with snow and ice. Susan gushed.

“It’s so wonderful. So spiritual, so enlightening!”

“We should head up to the lodge. It’s getting late and we’ve still got five miles to go,” replied Carl.

They were on a trekking holiday in Nepal. Ten days of unescorted hiking, with nightly accommodation provided. They traveled light, most of their gear was transported by vehicle and was waiting for them at their next overnight stop.

They were scheduled to stay the night in one of the villages that sat among the foothills. Tomorrow they were heading higher, towards one of the base camps at Everest. That was going to be the climax of their trip. Susan was looking forward to the opportunity to meditate near the world’s tallest peak. Carl was looking forward to stopping walking. It was only a ten-day trip, but he was chafed in places he hadn’t realized could get chafed.

After a couple of hours of hard walking they entered the village. Carl was puffing, he wasn’t as fit as Susan and the increase in altitude was affecting him. He was ready for a rest.

The village was typical of the region, a scruffy, run-down collection of buildings scattered near the road-side. Prayer flags and bunting brought color to the dull brown of the buildings. Dogs and chickens wandered freely, somehow managing to avoid the traffic. It had the feel of a frontier town, one that might simply disappear overnight if fortunes changed. Susan checked her phone.

“The lodge is on the other side of the village, just outside.”

“Okay, I’m dying to get my boots off and grab a shower.”

The lodge had been built to cater for the western tourists who saturated the region. The smiling owner showed them to their room. Carl slumped gratefully onto the bed, thankful for the meager comfort it provided. Their luggage had already arrived and Susan was fussing with it, making sure everything was just still there.

After showering, Susan suggested they take a walk before the evening meal. As they strolled, they walked past homes, shops and the small temples and shrines so commonly seen in the region. As they passed one of these temples, they heard the distinct whimpering of a young child from within. Susan slowed, then stopped.

“Carl, I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s nothing to do with us, so just keep walking.”

“No, I want to see what’s going on.”

Carl followed her, mindful of her forceful, sometimes abrasive personality, and aware that if any trouble developed he’d be the one getting punched.

The inside of the temple was small, no more than five feet wide, ten feet long and about six feet high. It was dim inside, the only light coming from sputtering candles. Incense burned in various parts of the room, the smoke obscuring the view. There was a shrine at the far end. A

statue of an elephant, draped in colorful flower garlands. Plates with offerings had been placed on the floor. Susan was already standing by the shrine when Carl entered.

“Look at this, Carl. Look at this outrage!”

Carl joined her and looked. On the floor lay a small child, no more than five or six years old. He lay in a fetal position under the indifferent eyes of the elephant statue. Dressed in rags, his skin was covered in sores and filth.

“He must have been abandoned here. How terrible,” said Susan.

The child was whining, his thin arms rubbing his face as tears tracked clean marks through the dirt. Carl was shocked by the sight; he’d seen a lot of poverty and deprivation during this trip, but this was by far the worst.

“What should we do?” he asked.

“Well, we need to contact the authorities. Carl, pick him up.”

Carl, sympathetic as he was, blanched at the thought of touching the filthy child. Susan sensed his hesitation and frowned.

“Don’t be so silly! Just pick the child up! For goodness sake, do I have to do everything?”

There was a gentle cough from behind them and a voice spoke.

“My master says please do not touch the child.”

There were two figures standing on the threshold. One was a young man, around twenty, wearing jeans and a t-shirt. His companion was an elderly man, dressed in a long flowing robe. The old man bowed and said something in the local dialect. The younger man nodded.

“My master says you are not the first outsiders to see this boy, but you must leave him alone and you must leave the temple.”

Carl could feel Susan tense.

“This child is in a very bad way, you understand?”

Her voice grew shriller, a sure sign that she was furious. The old man nodded, as if he understood what she said, but then he spoke again in the same dialect.

“My master asks if you want some tea. Please.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Carl interjected before Susan could answer. He didn’t want to cause any problems with the locals and he was suddenly aware they were in a potentially vulnerable situation. He didn’t think there would be any violence, but he didn’t want any unpleasantness to spoil his trip. He placed his hand on hers to mollify her. She stiffened then relaxed. The young man gestured with a smile. Carl and Susan stepped out of the temple into the early evening sun.

The tea was served to them as they sat at a rough wooden table in the only café in town. A few disinterested villagers sat nearby smoking and drinking tea or coffee. The four sat sipping their tea. No one spoke for a few moments, then the old man began to talk. The young man translated.

“My master says you must be wondering why we allow this.”

Carl and Susan nodded.

“My master says you must not interfere or move the child. The child is a...fixed point. That is the closest English term to the word in our language.”

“A fixed point?” asked Susan. The old man nodded and spoke in fractured English.

“Yes. Fixed point. Good.”

He nodded, smiling. The young man said something to the old man in the quick-fire language of the region. The old man nodded. The young man spoke.

“My master has given me permission to speak freely, so you understand. In our religion we believe that there are certain children selected by our gods to bear the burden of sin for all humanity. This child, the one in the temple, is such a creature. He is a sacrifice to our gods. He looks young, but he is more ancient than anyone living in the village. He was born to absorb our sin, to be punished instead of us. The people go to the temple to pray, confess and bring offerings. He lies in that temple, absorbing the darkness of the world. Soon, his time will be over and he will ascend to heaven. Without him, and those like him, the Earth would descend into darkness, as the burden of our sin destroys us.”

Susan stared in shock.

“You mean to tell me this child is allowed to lie in that temple in his own filth? It’s barbaric!”

The young man spread his hands.

“It is not barbaric. It is the truth. He was born for this role. You must leave him alone. He must stay in the temple.”

“Well, we will see about that.”

The two locals spoke briefly in their own language, then the younger man spoke again.

“Please, do not do anything to interfere.”

Susan stood up.

“I will do what I think is best.”

Later in the room, Carl sat next to Susan on the bed.

“I think the best thing to do is wait until we get back to Kathmandu and then contact the authorities,” said Carl.

“They won’t do anything. And it might be too late by then. That child is at death’s door. I can’t stand to think that here we are, well fed and sleeping in comfortable beds, when just a few feet away that poor little boy is starving and suffering.”

“Look, this is a poor country. There are children suffering everywhere. Why worry about just one? I think we should just let someone know when we get back to Kathmandu. One of the aid agencies, perhaps.”

Susan looked at him, her jaw firm and set. Carl spoke, in a pleading tone.

“Now, can we just go to bed? I’m tired and we have a long day tomorrow.”

Carl woke the next morning to silence. Normally Susan rose before him and the noise of her getting dressed woke him. He looked over to her bed. It was empty and her gear was gone.

“Oh no, Susan. What have you done?”

He rose and dressed quickly, worried what he was going to find outside. He knew where to go. The small temple was in turmoil, with a large group of villagers milling around outside. Carl spotted the young man from the day before. Their eyes locked and the young man came running over.

“What have you done with him?”

“Who?”

“The child. He is gone.”

“I haven’t done anything with him. I’ve just woken up.”

“Then your friend must have taken him.”

Carl knew it to be true. That’s exactly what she had done. He could even imagine the scenario. Dressing and packing quietly in the dead of the night, while Carl lay snoring. Sneaking out of the lodge and into the temple. Quelling her revulsion for long enough to pick the emaciated child up, then heading down the mountain to the next village to pick up a taxi. She’d be well on her way to Kathmandu by now. Thanks Susan, he thought to himself; thanks for leaving me to pick up the pieces. He spoke to the young man.

“I didn’t know what she was going to do. She must have left in the middle of the night.”

The young man nodded, clearly believing him.

“What are you going to do now?” asked Carl. The young man gave a grim smile.

“Nothing, it is already too late. So many of you foreigners come here and see the child, but only your friend was arrogant enough to think we were lying. What are we going to do? What can we do, Englishman, when we were telling you the truth? Without that child, that fixed point to absorb our sins, the darkness is coming.”

He pointed at the sky. Carl looked up. The young man had been right all along; the sun, without any fuss or drama, was going out.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010 with his wife Sally. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Digital Fiction and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

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The Darkness and Me | *Melissa R. Mendelson*

I could feel its heat rise through my skin. My bones echoed its quake. My blood boiled. It wanted out, and I used to release it from time to time, only to step over the mangled bodies left in its wake. It nearly claimed me as I pushed it back into its cage, but not before it drew blood. And that blood now stains the broken floor.

Its red eyes were like burning coals in the darkness. An invisible grin lingered along the black as it stared at my cuts and black and blues. It knew that it was stronger, despite the key gripped tightly in one scarred hand. It knew that it would win, but I shook my head and smiled, wincing at my split lip. The staring contest continued, divided between decaying metal bars, and fear flickered in my mind for a moment. What if it did get out? Could I fight it again, or would that be the end of me?

It paced back and forth in its cage. It had all the time in the world. It refused to surrender. It refused to die, knowing each and every weakness that I had, and again, I felt those red eyes on me, burning holes through my pale skin. It would wait, count down the days until I turned a blind eye, and then it would escape. And nobody would be safe. Nobody would believe me when I apologized, and all those scars that I carry from years ago would grow, mangled and bloody. All because I lacked the strength to kill it, and we both knew where my strength really came from. But I would not surrender, and the game would continue. And so did the pacing.

My fingers scratched at the dried blood on the floor. It mirrored my movements. Flesh briefly touched claw, and for a moment, I felt a chill of excitement. Oh, to be free again sang from both our lips, but who would pay the price for that? So many harsh memories then bombarded my mind, silencing that chill, and I pulled my hand back. They have suffered enough, and so have I. And yet, when I met its red-eyed gaze, I wanted to slip that key in and open the door and let the darkness out, but then I would awake and see all that devastation left behind. And I either would break, or my darkness would fall.

Somewhere deeper, I could hear a droplet of water, rain from last night's storm. My days have grown darker, and my strength has been lacking. And it lapped up every drop, growing eager by the moment. It was always in this time, where it knew it would get out, and I wanted to feel again. I wanted to let go, but the cries were as deafening as the raging storms that have filled the cracks of these walls. And I pulled the cage door tighter, and its claw missed my flesh by an inch. This time, I would not break. This time, it would stay behind these bars, but then it grinned that ice cold grin as if it knew some kind of private joke. But the joke was not lost on me.

The lights dimmed overhead. The floor was always cold. Voices echoed of the lives lived above, lives that I could no longer feel a part of, which was why I visited the darkness more. It was not a sign of weakness as it might think. It was not a sign of surrender. You win. I lose. It was acceptance. We have fought our battles, our wars, and at the end of each bloody chapter, the cage waited to take us both. And it was here that I would remember all those mistakes, all those lives left shattered, broken, mistakes that I could never heal. But the past no longer holds me.

The past is dead, and I have all the time in the world as it paces back and forth, thinking it will get out. But the sad truth is that neither one of us will ever escape from here.

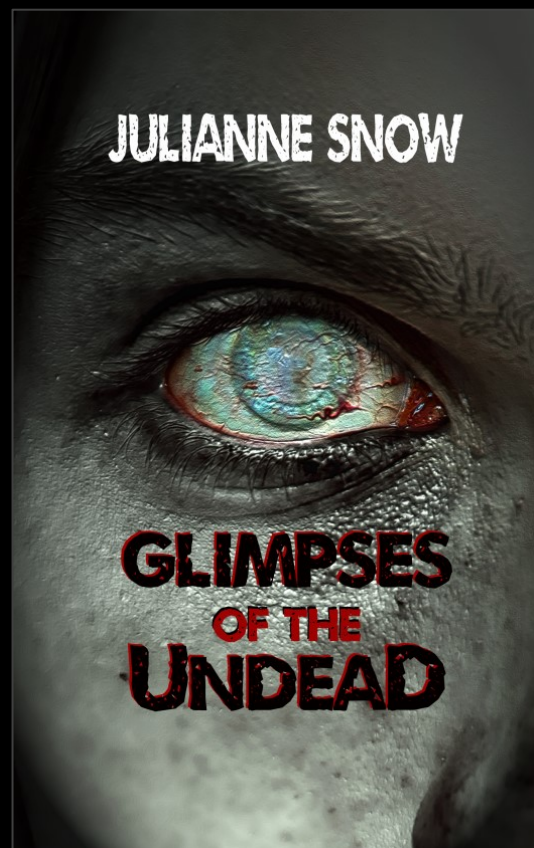
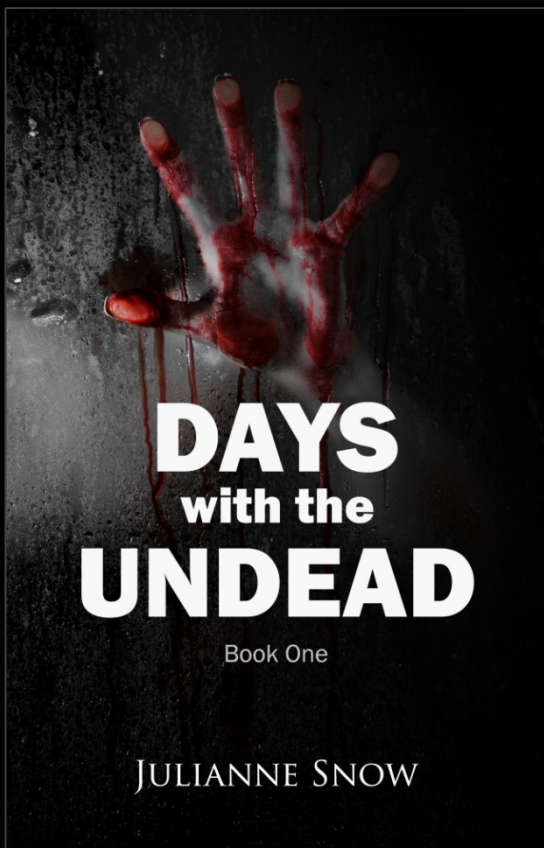
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Melissa R. Mendelson graduated college with both an AA in Liberal Arts and BA in Mass Communication: Critical Analysis. She was a Long Island news reporter from 2002 to 2004 and later went to work for the State of New York. She has now been published three times by Sirens Call Publications, and she is continuously published by Antarctica Journal.

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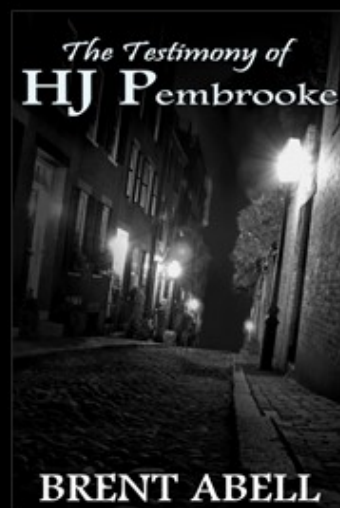
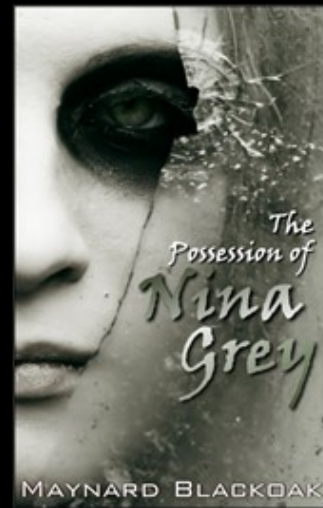
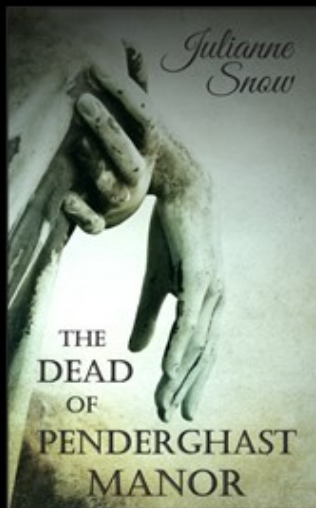
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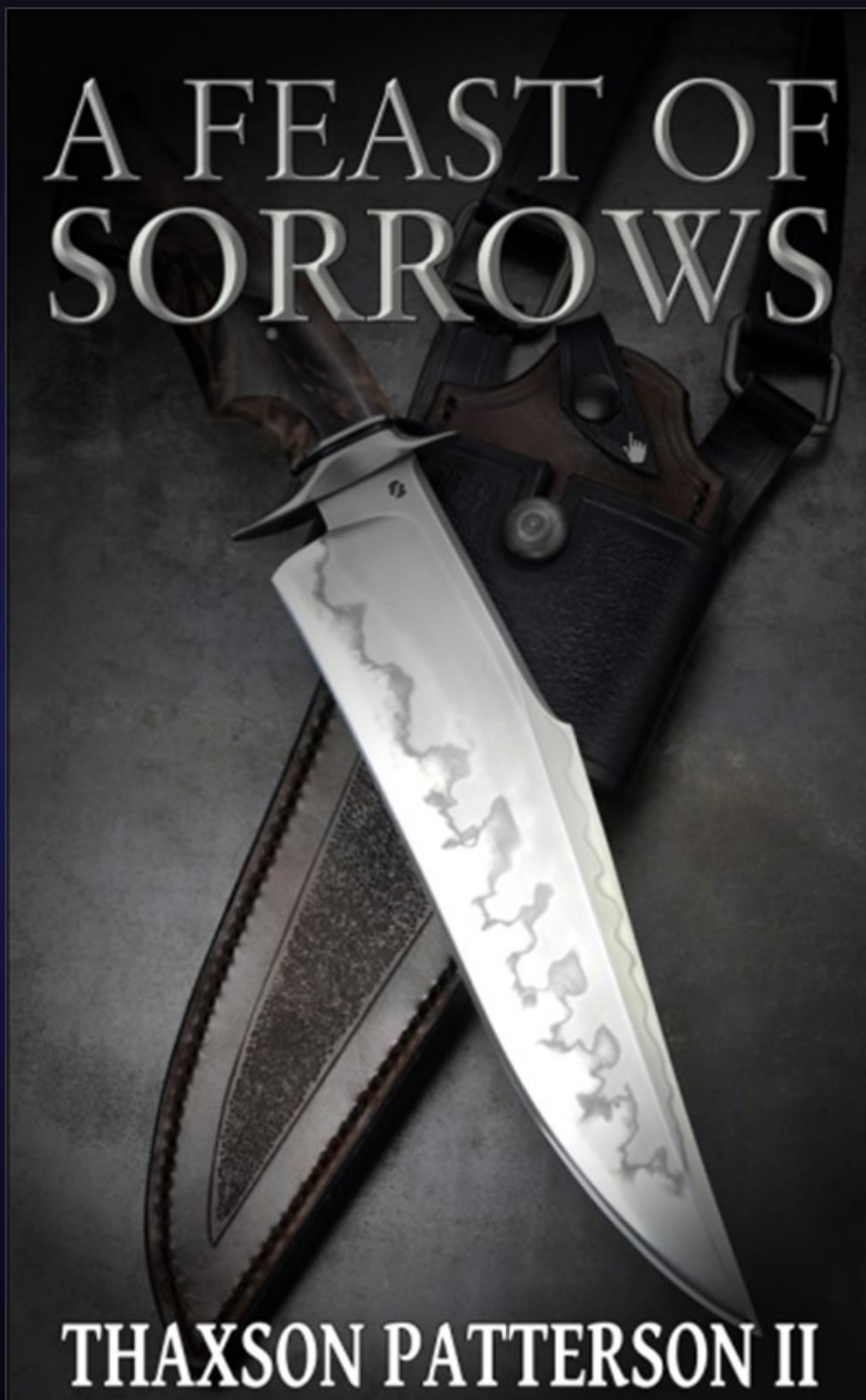
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There are even worse things in the world
than serial killers...



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Jonathan Hathorne forced himself to remain calm as he searched for his project log. His studio was long and spacious and he usually kept his tools and research materials meticulously organized and clean. But his world was presently chaotic and his desk and the shelves behind it were obscured by piles of paper, books, notebooks, and magazines that no longer fit on any shelves.

He strained to avoid eye-contact with the colossal block of marble that sat at the far end of the vast rectangular space of the loft. He began hurling aside whatever came into his hands, trying to find this particular loose leaf binder—reddish-brown leather, two-inch rings—and finally, there it was, under a stack of pictures that he'd printed a few days before.

He yanked it up, scattering the photocopies, knocking over a mug that served as a pencil caddy. He noted the ceramic container was the one Susannah had given him, the one that had HE WASN'T SORRY HE KILLED THOSE WITCHES printed on one side with a picture of his ancestor Judge Hathorne on the other.

"Oh, shit...." Jonathan Hathorne said as he cleared off his swiveling office chair and sat down heavily, forcing the seat to groan. He threw open the cover and pushed through the handwritten pages until he found what he was looking for. He sighed and rotated in the chair to face the far corners of the loft, allowing himself one glance, from under his brows, at the nearly completed statue. He estimated the thing stood nearly twenty feet tall—the height from the floor to the peak of the studio ceiling. He held his breath and forced his eyes back down, reading the words scrawled in his backward-leaning longhand.

February 2, 2017: Received block of Thassos marble, Greek crystal white imported from Macedonia. Arrived in great shape by truck from Boston. Two delivery men plus four students helped carry up to studio, set in place.

February 4, 2017: Wood crate, all packing material, removed. Inspected block. Measures in at 10-ft. tall, 5-ft. wide, almost 5-ft. deep. In excellent condition, amazing pure white, very fine.

Jonathan ran a finger along the words '...10-ft. tall...' His stomach tightened and he felt light-headed. Perspiration rolled down his forehead, the shirt under his arms dampened. He slowly stood, twisting his head down and to the side to avoid any glimpse of the marble. He needed a drink.

A few hours or days later—he couldn't remember—the high-pitched sound of a telephone woke him. Jonathan moaned as he rose to a sitting position; he was sprawled on one of his couches downstairs, an empty bottle of scotch lying on the floor at his side, a medium-sized drinking glass overturned on the cushion next to him. He stumbled to stand and hunt for the phone but didn't find it in time; the answering machine clicked on. "Jon, it's Susannah," a garbled, crackly version of his fiancé's voice jolted him where he tottered in the middle of his living room. "I know you're there. Pick up the phone. You haven't talked to me for ten days. That architect—what's his name, Lopez or something—has been calling *me*, asking *me* where

the statue is, and what's going on." There was a pause, then, "Jon, I'm coming over. You need to answer the door and let me in. I'll call the police if you don't let me in."

Jonathan found the hand-set. The living quarters of his home lay directly beneath the studio and had once been cozy and clean with shiny, polished Colonial-American furniture; now he was surrounded by garbage, clutter, and dust. He pushed the 'talk' button and hoarsely shouted, "No, no, Susannah, don't... no one is allowed here."

"Jon?" her voice sounded startled.

"I'm not sure what's going on, but the thing is almost done," he said. He kicked at some of the dirty laundry on the floor and realized he hadn't changed clothes in days. He picked at his growth of beard and realized he hadn't shaved in weeks.

"Yeah, whatever. I care about you, okay? I'm worried about you. But I don't need this schizo behavior in my life, and I'm not your goddamn middle-man. I'm your girlfriend. Call the architect and talk to him yourself."

A sound came from over his head; it was a bumping, scraping noise. Then came a loud *BOOM* and the entire room shuddered. He ended the call and dropped the phone. He stared upward, afraid to go upstairs and witness once again something impossible, but also feeling overwhelmed with a burning need to know.

He crept slowly to the stairs and stiffly climbed, trying to be as quiet as he could in stocking feet. He remembered how excited and confident he was weeks ago, how he planned to sculpt an angel with a sword, Bernini by way of North Andover, a commission for Boston architect Guillermo Lopez and his wealthy clients building a house in Amesbury. This was going to be his breakout moment, the turning point of his career—using marble of incredible clarity and depth. Marble mined in blocks from Balkan hills, shipped at great expense.

He moved one foot after the other, his eyes focused on the landing and hallway above. Old arguments, angry confrontations with his wealthy and powerful Massachusetts family suddenly seized his thoughts—he'd shocked them by dropping out of Harvard so he could study art. All those years spent building a reputation, trying to achieve some measure of success—this angel meant everything to him, and everything was falling apart.

He reached the top floor and continued, his steps slowing as he drew closer and closer. He was terrified by what he might discover, and impatient to see. He came to his desk and office area, paused, raised his chin, focused on and studied the sculpture. The top of the marble had pushed into the apex of the ceiling, and—he bent his head to the side in order to confirm this—it was breaking through the roof. Jonathan's body straightened upright, stiffened reflexively. He clenched his jaw, rolled his hands into fists that hung at his sides. His untrimmed fingernails dug into his palms as he willed himself to advance toward the marble mass.

He halted at the base of the thing, his legs wobbling. He was closer to it than he'd been in many days. He lifted his head, painfully, fighting the compulsion to look away, and moved his eyes back and forth as he inspected the stone. *I didn't carve any of this detail, I didn't do any of this polishing, this refinement.* "Did I somehow complete this work in a dissociative state? Did I do this? No, just no. It doesn't make sense..."

He circled the massive figure—it seemed almost fully formed. “How could I have done this?” It soared more than twice the height of his original block, twisting and writhing with an exquisite serene face, its polished hair streaming and massive wings unfurling. The legs were wound in lustrous marble fabric but the sandaled feet were attached to the rock. One arm was emerging from the side; Jonathan had watched it rise higher and higher each day. The other arm rested on top of a sword-hilt but this was still half-formed, as if waiting for the claw chisel to gouge the surface, the rasp and riffler to finalize reality.

Jonathan backed away, his upper body bowed like the thing was some kind of deity or royalty and no mere human could turn around in its presence. He groped for his desk, found his chair, lowered himself. His stomach rumbled and he felt nauseous; he hadn’t eaten ... for how long, he couldn’t remember. He bent over from a sitting position and picked up his log. He skipped entries, reading briefly, moving from one to the next until he found what he wanted.

March 11, 2017: The nose and eyes appeared this morning. The last thing I know I did was rough out the basic form. It was a featureless mass, mostly still raw stone. Now it has a head, wings, some hair, and a nose and eyes. It looks embryonic. I don’t remember how or why.

Jonathan pulled several more pages over the metal rings, paused.

March 27, 2017: I’m losing it. Something has to be really wrong with me. I don’t remember doing any of this...

March 30, 2017: The eyes have pupils. There are toes. The hands have fingernails. It seems a lot bigger than I thought it was...

April 15, 2017: It’s definitely growing. There has to be an explanation; I’ve got a split personality, something’s wrong. The details are beautiful, the folds of the robe are exquisite, almost real. Did I create that? Do I have that kind of skill? Susannah tried to see me today. I told her to go away...

April 22, 2017: I think the thing is watching me. I can hardly stand to look at it anymore. The left arm is free of the marble, it’s got muscles and a sleeve and I don’t know how...

Jonathan Hathorne set the notebook on his lap, closed his eyes. It was chilling how he’d accepted these changes day to day, making excuses, rationalizing. He’d lived with the sight of smooth and rounded surfaces punching through the natural stone, creating shiny marble mounds of flesh and wing and bone, the recognizable landmarks of an individual, an entity being born. The thrill of creating as if he were giving birth, watching something plastic and real coalesce from marble or granite by the skill of his hands had been perverted—an accomplished sculptor, in control of the entire process that brought something out of nothing was now a helpless spectator, a slave. His life wasn’t his any longer.

Jonathan slumped in the chair. Around him, discarded at his feet, were the crumpled or scattered pages of pictures, sketches and research. This wasn’t going to be just any angel, but one of the fallen, the Watchers, punished by God for seventy generations, bound by chains of darkness deep in the very metamorphic folds of the earth until such time as the Almighty should release them for judgement. *Or until such time as a great block of marble should be hewn from an ancient mountain.*

A sound like the cracking of ribs shot at him from the high far end of the loft. He started, and jerked his eyes up to the head of the angel. Pieces of lumber, of sheeting and shingles crashed to the floor. He rose to standing in front of his chair, toddled a few feet in the angel's direction, then fell to his knees.

It was almost free. The shimmering sword, the angry and vengeful hand that held it, rose in the air. Its eyes were gleaming and flashing arrogant gold, its nacre wings vibrating and ticking like those of a newly hatched bird. The top of its head was moving, lifting, destroying more and more of the roof around it. Its hair flared like a storm burst from the sun.

The floor swayed, the walls shook, hanging lights swung wildly. There was a grinding and crunching, and banks of mullioned glass windows shattered.

Jonathan began to weep. He wet himself, and the smell of urine, the warmth of it, utterly defeated him. "Whatever you want of me," he sobbed. "I am yours," he cried.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rivka Jacobs currently lives with four Siamese cats in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology. More recently she's placed stories with The Sirens Call eZine, The Literary Hatchet, Fantastic Floridas, and Riding Light Review. Rivka has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and mental health counseling, and a BSN. She most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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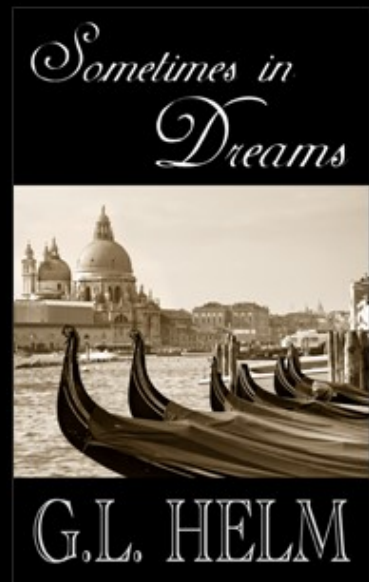
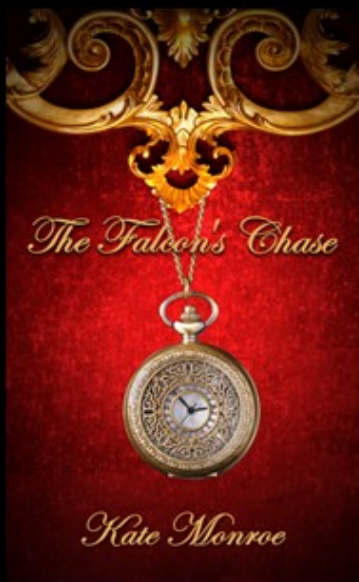
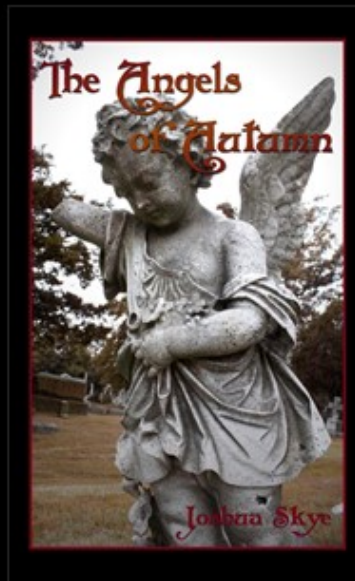
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From Conches... | *DJ Tyrer*

Humphrey Sneyd was an ardent supporter of Doctor Darwin's theories about the origins of human life, as unpopular as they might be. If anything, his outspoken and outrageous views were an embarrassment to the Doctor and he had been effectively ostracised from the Lunar Society as a result. Not that that disappointed him greatly, as he preferred the company of his many tomes to that of erstwhile scientists who, in his opinion, were blinkered, whatever their self-aggrandizing claims.

He had been enjoying some of Darwin's poetry, but dropped the volume onto the table beside his chair and picked up a far older and weightier book. This he was reading for enlightenment, not entertainment. Had the clergy known that someone in the shadow of Lichfield cathedral possessed the dreaded Necronomicon, he was certain they would have had a fit.

It was Erasmus Darwin who had opened his eyes to the unthinkable truths that underlay reality. Darwin's motto was 'We all came from conches,' a concept that could have come straight from the pages of the Necronomicon in which it was claimed the blasphemous tampering with early life by the inhuman Elder Ones had birthed the conch-like V'Nula from which all terrestrial life, including man, proceeded through curious acts of fission. Echoes of that eldest of earthly beings could be found in the barbarous beliefs of the Hindoos whose great preserver god, Vishnoo, grasped a conch shell filled with life-giving water, and in the shells placed on the graves of slaves in the Caribbean.

Although his fellow 'Lunatics' had found his oration upon the topic too curious to stomach, Sneyd was determined to prove his contention and the broader theorising of Darwin through the empirical method of actually examining dread V'Nula itself. Having dared to brave the mold-tainted pages of the Neconomicon, he had discovered the means by which to test his ideas and, checking over the points one last time, he was prepared to test it tonight.

Exiting the house, he entered his private garden pornotopia, pausing briefly to admire the erotic floral imagery and breathe deeply of the heady evening scents. Sometimes, he wished the Necronomicon could tell him how to summon a beauteous nymph to satisfy his urges.

His servants had cleared an area in the center of the garden for the ritual, which involved a wide pentagrammatical symbol to accommodate the huge quasi-deity progenitor. It was to this space that he headed; first drawing the necessary symbol and then, engaging in the ritual and chant.

The air above the soot-described symbol began to shimmer and a vast conch-like shell of eldritch form faded into view to sit there like a vast gastropod with coiled shell atop a mucus-shod foot. Here oozed the ultimate great-grandfather of humanity, the mighty, rugose, conch-shelled V'Nula. Sneyd gazed upon it in awe.

Suddenly, from beneath the shell's lip, a ropy gray tentacle shot out and wrapped about Sneyd, viscously entrapping him despite his belated struggle. With an unpleasant sucking sound, the tentacle retracted, pulling the helpless occult-scientist beneath the shell and into some hidden, oozing maw amidst the pulpy proto-flesh.

Sated, the ancient being slowly faded away, leaving but a smudged soot symbol and smear of mucus amidst the erotically-shaped vegetation.

Having been devoured before he could attempt any scientific assessment of the being, it had to be admitted that Sneyd had failed to prove his contention that humanity had all come from conches, as Darwin said, but he had, at least, the brief consolation of knowing that it was to a conch he went...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), Snowpocalypse (Black Mirror Press), Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Night in New Orleans (FunDead Publications), Miskatonic Dreams (Alban Lake), and Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen (Hieroglyphics Press), and has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

Twitter: [@djtyrer](https://twitter.com/djtyrer)

Blog: <http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>



Drabbles | *B.B. Blazkowitz*

Evidence in the Furnace

I will never forget those terrible screams. That night I put my boss in the furnace. He had to go. Those prying eyes knew too much. I was surprised it took so long. Luckily, I had an alibi when the authorities arrived. Even though I'm safe, what's left still remains, refusing to burn away. On what would be his birthday I lit the furnace. Immediately I heard his screams. The pilot refused to go out. Then the hatch opened. Before I could scream the charred flaming arm of the evidence in the furnace pulled me in.

The King's Feast

First you need to carefully remove all the skin, tendons and layers of fat. Be careful not to break the bone, you will need it later. Season the meal with roasted garlic, salt, pepper and lemon zest. Tenderize with a leg bone before marinating it in a light brandy for one cycle of the sun. Afterwards, grill over an open flame until the center is a succulent pink. Make sure you pair the meat with Brussels sprouts and Pinot Noir. Be careful not to overcook the King's fallen foe, or next time it will be you on the serving plate.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — B.B. Blazkowitz is a horror fiction writer from a cultural dead-zone in the middle of nowhere Ohio. He is a fan of movies that spook, and video games that shoot. His writing has been previously published on Horror Tree, Bloody Disgusting, and Horror Writers.

Twitter: [@BBBlazkowitz](https://twitter.com/BBBlazkowitz)

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Against the Wall | Ronnie Smart

Ravi had it all under control. He had a beautiful wife, Shanzah, and a baby daughter: Sitarah, his star. He enjoyed playing cricket on Saturday mornings. He was also owner-operator of Patel's Corner Store. The shop made a good trade, and it was open late.

But just before closing, three youths rushed in, their faces covered with white bandannas. Ravi didn't get time to see them on the security cameras. A big one stood with black tribal tattoos over huge shoulders, holding a machete. The other two had hockey sticks.

"Give us your money!" the large one demanded, pointing at the till.

Ravi was alone at the counter. The ding of the register drawer opening drowned out the Bangladeshi dance music.

Another made him get on the floor, on his belly. Two of them crossed the counter. They kicked him over and over, bruising his ribs, smashing his glasses. "No, take the money. Take the money," Ravi said.

Ravi pushed everything back inside. He would suffer this. He had to.

They stopped and got the money out of the till. There wasn't much. He heard them yelling, shouting, knew they'd found the iron bar under the counter. They hit him with it. Then they started stomping. He couldn't fight back.

Pushing the feelings back, he gripped the flesh of his thigh. He could take it. He had before.

His teeth cut against his lip after a blow. A metallic tang. He remembered something.

He'd had it all under control. No one knew. His wife had met him after he had pushed back the impulses. Shanzah slept in the back now. So did the baby.

If the men killed him, who would protect Shanzah? Would they rape her, kill her?

"Stop, please, stop! No more, stop." Sobbing. The beating continued.

Was he going to die here? Blessed Allah, he had to protect them.

So he let go. He stopped gripping the outside of his legs.

The moon was out. The changes happened. Faster, because it had been held back so long. He screamed, and so did they. The blood had taken over.

The camera's eye caught the movement of a huge gray wolf. It leapt, knocking the big man to the floor. Howls of pain. The wolf's teeth dug into his neck, his face. Shelves tipped over. Blood gushed over the tins of soup, the packets of instant noodles.

Panicked cries and rushing feet headed to the entrance. He pulled his teeth out of the squirting stump of the neck, the body still gurgling and shaking its limbs. One of the men got outside. The man screamed, "Soli, Soli!"

He took the legs first, dragging him down, tearing fabric and flesh away with sharp teeth, dug his face into the belly till the man's motion stopped. When his muzzle rose, caked in blood, the door was shut and nothing was visible through the window. One had escaped.

Shanzah yelled and screamed from the back.

He could smell the young one too. *So soft and tasty.*

Got to get out!

The door! The beast charged forward, trying to smash it open. Then he leapt at the bars over the windows. They didn't give. The screaming only made the frenzy increase. The wolf tried again and again to smash the door, stumbling back, dazed.

A baby's smell. Taking off his t-shirt to hold her when she was born. Holding her tight to his skin. Shanzah lying in a hospital bed. *So soft and weak. Soft meat on the bones. Delicious.*

Another smell. His princess. She was screaming. The door wouldn't open! Why won't she open the door? Kissing the back of her neck, holding her from behind in his arms.

Her arms could barely swat a fly. Oh, Shanzah! No! *The flesh*. Tearing and ripping until the screams and sobbing stopped. Silence.

The hair torn and ripped out, bloody chunks of flesh on bone.

Her hairstyle on their wedding day, her smile...the birth of his daughter...

Out! He had to get out! Through the back door. There was more food outside. He had to get out!

The wolf leapt over the counter, smashing through the hanging bead curtain, ripping it off.

Rushing past the smells. The back room. The door will give.

Wood creaked, but held. Push the smell down.

Soft, tender meat. The blood.

But the door would not open. Why would the door not open?

A thick padlock on the door.

The blood, the blood. Crunch up the bones. Swiftly the wolf padded to the room with the child's cradle.

The wolf opened its mouth. Blood and gobbets of drool from its open mouth dripped onto the face of the baby. Tiny fists rubbed against eyes, smearing red over cheeks.

Many nights, when she wouldn't sleep, he sang to her, cradling her little body in his arms.

A long whine. It started to turn its head to go to the hallway.

Another smell, under the baby's. No! The wolf knew its own.

Remembering Shanzah's arms going up, the hunger that could not be slaked, that returned again to destroy all that he knew and loved, the animal bit down quickly, crushing the soft skull of his child in large jaws, and then rushed from the room.

Returning to the clutter and piles of tins and shelving, he gorged itself on blood and flesh, filling his belly.

A noise outside, a growl from within. Sirens and flashing lights. Men with guns in the doorway.

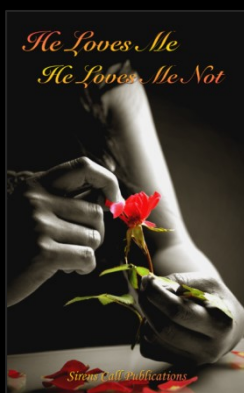
The wolf leapt at the guns, but it would not die. It fled to the dark places that men did not know.

What was left of Ravi died in the morning. Away from the city, away from the bones of the dead, of his wife and baby daughter, he cut deep, letting the blood flow from his wrists.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ronnie Smart is a Scottish-born New Zealand poet and writer of short fiction, who grew up on a steady diet of horror novels, kung fu movies and English romantic poetry. His work has been published in Flash Frontier and Alluvia, and has been accepted for the August issue of Blue Fifth Review. He is member of the AHWA (Australasian Horror Writers Association).

Website: <https://ronniesmartblog.wordpress.com/>

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He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

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

The Nightmare to End All Nightmares

John Grey

The dream was merely fooling itself.
It tried to cast old friends in its plot,
even a former girlfriend,
but demons took the roles instead,
and the devil himself, I'm certain,
wrote the fiendish screenplay.
I was dressed in my pajamas,
bare-foot and trudging through
a hot steamy jungle.
Every branch I grabbed for support
proved to be a python
when it wasn't a hissing viper.
And that cat that faced me down
was no tabby.
Not with a head as big and round
as the entrance to a subway tunnel,
and sharp teeth as long as javelins.
So I was rescued at the last minute
by a beautiful woman.
Big deal.
She was, in reality, a banshee.
No, make that a vampire.
The big feline's mandible
would have been love-bites
compared to her blood-sucking chomps.
And did I mention the poisonous spiders.

And the staggering, rotted corpse of my old
headmaster.
Not forgetting the three-eyed monster
and the serial killer with a quota to fill.
I didn't remember all of it.
Maybe that's a good thing for my poor
psyche.
But a cannibal tribe certainly looked at
my poor half-naked body with interest.
And the room in which I suddenly found
myself
was closing in on me from all sides.
I had a succubus in my bedroll
and the wendigo howling from out of the
winter woods.
And I shudder to recall the headless knight
and, oh yes, the grinning knightless head.
What finally startled me out of that horror
show
was a noise downstairs.
I figured it for a burglar.
On investigation, I discovered it was a
burglar.
What a relief.
He only broke into my house.
He left my head alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in Front Range Review, Studio One and Columbia Review with work upcoming in Naugatuck River Review, Abyss and Apex and Midwest Quarterly.

Facebook: [John Grey](#)



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Devil's Playground

Tara Teed

The weight of the world is around my thigh
Dragging my shame just to look in your eyes
Even though they are the purest of blue
The soul is gone and I'll never break through
So young I was and high on love,
Around the devils finger I'm strung
A false world and a sliver platter,
Is all it took to make me shatter
Careful not to step out of line,
But the sun sets to bring the darkness rise

You had this image in your dreams; some person I should be,
But you're not the damn saint that you try to preach.
Too young to be a man so you compensate
When all was right, you needed to complicate
So I took a step back to see there is no future to find
When young blood mixes, the young heart is blind
It's hard to get to safety on someone else's deadline
Being chased by their demons in a self-inflicted night

Poking and prodding, Snapping and stabbing,
Pushing and dragging, Laughing and tracking
Saying that I am the one who is lacking
Did it make you feel like a man,
Knowing I could never rise to where you stand
It was never about equality, partnership or honesty
Put all the blame on me, it's nothing but distracting
While you play the victim, and always keep me guessing
Through a dehydrated field, I was forced to walk to you
But how could I, when each step was a landmine
Dragging my feet, just wasting time
Romp around in the devil's playground
Where souls are lost, no bodies to be found.
Too blinded to see, I will never belong,
No love is given when possession is involved
Exploding with emotion, I lose a part of me
Getting pushed around on the devil's playground
Where love for another will never be found

ABOUT THE AUTHOR —Tara Teed is twenty-nine years young. She lives in a town within North East Ohio that thrives along the shores of Lake Erie. With a Bachelor's degree in English, she holds a job within the city Hospital. Tara wants others to find a sense of security in knowing someone has faced battles they have, and joy in stories never told.

Alice & the Old Ones

Alice fell into a wonderland
In a deep red-litten cave
And wandered alone through elder realms
For there was none who her could save
In strange troughs and channels
Flowed her newfound viscous friends
Who so desperately sought her company
For their own peculiar, alien ends
Leading her down secret paths
To forgotten, Pnakotic lore
Carved into strange green tablets
By the Winged Ones aeons before
Strange and peculiar truths
That shook Alice to the core...

Alone It Is

Alone it is, a bleak point
Jutting into limitless space
Perched upon which is a house
From which the Kingsporter averts his face
One with a terrible resolve
Chose to ascend to that height
To reach the forbidden house
Where he saw a peculiar sight
And heard tales of an elder time
Before even the Elder Ones were born
And suffered a most terrible fate
When his soul from his body was torn

Babysat

Being babysat stinks
When you're almost a teenager
Almost grown-up
No longer a stupid kid
But not so bad
When it turns out she's cute
And willing to play games
Not quite spin the bottle
But the Ouija board seems like fun
Then she draws a symbol
On the dining room floor
Mom is gonna flip!
Suggests a summoning
Not sure what that is
But you're game
Anything for the cute girl
Great, she says
You can be the sacrifice

Beast Within

Magic conceals fur beneath the skin
A masquerade to hide the beast within
By night revealed to stalk its prey
A pious man by light of day
No faith, no force can those jaws withstand
No weapon held in mortal hand
A bullet blessed or blade anointed
Perhaps might slay the one appointed
By the Devil as his hunting hound
Assuming the beast can ever be found
Ravenous, unstopped so many shall perish
That the tale none shall need embellish

Lycaon Zeus

Lycanthropy given birth in Arcadia
A curse beneath the glamour of that land:
Man-wolves and death cults a shadow
Haunting the woods that border the pastoral idyll.
When darkness enshrouds hill and valley
You peer into hidden recesses of the human soul.
But, remember! This is the land of Pan
Whose wicked pipes inspire *panic* in shady glades.
Lulled by false peace and transient beauty
You overlook the true form of that land.
Just as a sweet apple holds a hidden rot,
Arcady can be a beautiful dream,
Or a nightmare ruled by Lycaon Zeus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), Snowpocalypse (Black Mirror Press), Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Night in New Orleans (FunDead Publications), Miskatonic Dreams (Alban Lake), and Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen (Hieroglyphics Press), and has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

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GAPE

Aiden Truss

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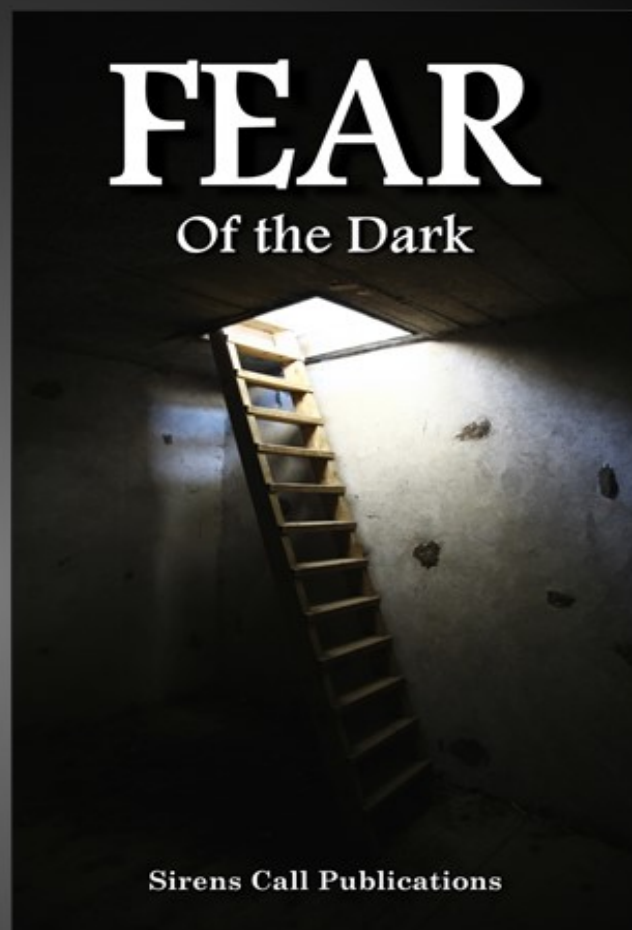
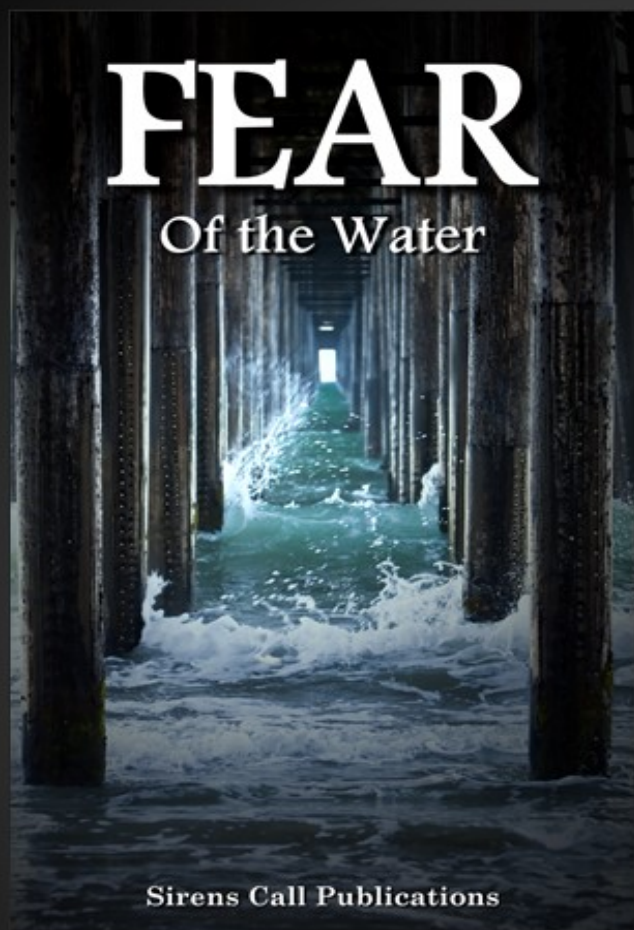
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How the Head of Vera's Husband Landed on Her Lap | *Justin Boote*

How the head of Vera Moggins' husband landed in her lap was actually quite amusing. Seen from a certain perspective. The family cat Sparky probably thought so too, because when it landed, he went straight to work lapping up the blood that dripped on the floor.

Vera didn't think it particularly funny and started screaming instead. In her shock, and during the few seconds she needed to analyse the situation, the head fell onto the floor with the interesting coincidence of it landing so that the bloodied, glassy eyes, and the almost comic O-shaped mouth stared straight back at her as though appealing for help.

Sparky didn't know anything about that, but prodded it with his paw anyway in the hope that it might be something to play with. He stopped when he realized it was too heavy, and so resumed lapping at the trail of blood. It was then that Vera found voice.

Sparky bolted.

Had modern science found a way to glue severed heads back on, and thus reanimate the unfortunate victim, she might well have done so, and then say to her husband Dennis, "I told you so." And she would probably be right in her accusation. She'd been warning him for weeks to be careful in the bathroom. He wasn't young anymore (neither were at seventy years old), and the step into the shower could be deceiving, and, yes, mortal. All it took was for one to slip on the wet shower base, and in all probability, the remaining years of said victim would be spent confined to a bed. If lucky.

Vera didn't know if this is what happened to her now very dead husband, but the cry she had heard seconds earlier, followed by the sound of the glass shower door smashing indicated that she may have been right about her premonition. This didn't provide her with any satisfaction however.

After Vera's screaming finally started to die down, due mainly to lack of oxygen rather than any attempt at clarity, she managed to rise from the armchair where she was knitting Dennis a new scarf (*won't need that now, will he?*), only to fall to the floor. She was crying, her heart was entering danger territory, and her whole body was shaking so badly that she inadvertently kicked the head with her foot. It spun around a few times, spraying a mist of blood everywhere, before coming to stop once more with those tragic eyes staring straight at her, as though not content with the first round of silent pleas and accusations.

It was as she looked into those desperate eyes that she saw her beloved Sparky come back into the living room, and renew the cleaning process of the blood. Before falling unconscious, she tried to shoo the cat away, but the words failed her. What she didn't know was that it had been Sparky's fault in the first place that had provoked this surrealistic scene...

"Damn cat! Pssst!" said Dennis. He hated the damn thing. He could understand the company it provided for Vera, and it sleeping on her pillow or armchair, keeping it nice and warm (something he certainly couldn't do anymore, he rued), but his legs weren't so sturdy these days, and the thing had the nasty habit of getting in between them, rubbing against his ankles, its

tail waving, to the point that he often tripped over it, resulting in Dennis cursing, and the cat screeching in pain or surprise. He wondered if the cat did it on purpose; try and send him falling down the stairs to break his neck, so he could claim his side of the bed as well (Dennis refused to allow it to sleep with them at night). Considering the number of times the cat had been close, he often wondered if he himself had nine lives. If so, at least half had already been swiped from him.

After one particularly epic chase around the house (after Dennis discovered it trying to have sex with his fur hat), Dennis inadvertently trapped it in the bathroom. As punishment, he decided to give it a good squirt with the shower head, sending the cat into a soaked frenzy. Dennis laughed a goodun, until the cat bit his ankle in its desperate attempt to escape.

Two things were learned from this; one was that Dennis was too old to chase felines around the house, and the other, that Sparky discovered the bathroom was not a good place to get trapped in. So, a truce seemed to have been mentally declared. When Dennis was in the bathroom, Sparky steered well clear. It appeared to be a good truce. Dennis could dedicate himself to a little peace and quiet, while he went about performing his private tasks, and Sparky could spend his time dozing on The Man's comfy armchair, maybe even a little claw sharpening on the leather front included. All good fun.

Unfortunately, truces—as promises—are sometimes broken, and this is what happened between the two sometime after the shower episode. And why Dennis' head was now dripping its last on the living room floor.

"You be careful now, Dennis Moggins, when you step into the shower," his wife said that fateful morning. "You're not getting any younger you know, and the floor gets slippery."

"Yes dear. Thank you for reminding me I'm an old biddy. But I'll be okay, you carry on knitting or stroking that damn cat of yours," he replied, sighing. He didn't need her to keep repeating the same over and over again. He had the scars and the bandage to prove it, after he had slipped in the garden fetching the newspaper one morning. Where twenty—hell, even *ten*—years ago, the only damage would have been his pride, now he had a bandage on his elbow to remind him also.

"And don't you swear at my poor Sparky. He for one, still loves me," she shouted back.

Dennis growled.

Earlier, another epic battle had ensued after Dennis discovered scratch marks on the back of his armchair. The armchair was what Sparky was to Vera; his baby. It had cost a small fortune, and all were vehemently prohibited from even touching it except himself, so when he discovered the scratches that morning, a CSI investigator wasn't needed to tell him who the culprit might be.

"VEEERRRAAA!"

Vera came running from the kitchen thinking he might have slipped again (*so damn clumsy nowadays*), only to see her husband standing there with a bright red face, hands clenched into fists, veins prominent around his neck. At first, she thought he was having a heart attack.

"Dennis, what's wrong? What's the matter?"

Dennis didn't answer. Instead, he unclenched a fist and pointed to the armchair.

Vera gasped and put a hand to her mouth. She had an idea that Sparky might be in for a tough day.

And he was.

Vera began to say something about poor Sparky, but Dennis wasn't listening. He had other ideas, the main one locating it and ripping its claws out. No, its head. He headed directly for the bedroom where it would most likely be taking a well-earned nap. It wasn't there. He checked the kitchen where it might be stuffing its face. Still nothing, but while contemplating his next move, in it strutted from the garden; confident, content. The owner of the house.

Dennis roared and leapt for it, a move that might have made Sparky proud under other circumstances. Instead, it turned and bolted back from where it had come from, but not before Dennis delivered a well-timed kick up its backside, sending the creature screeching and flying through the air.

Justice was done. For now.

Still disgusted about the state of his once-immaculate armchair, yet satisfied that at least some punishment had been admonished, he decided that a shot of brandy was required to calm his nerves. And then another, before a shower. Such exertion at his age now left him out of breath, and sweating all over.

Finishing his second shot, he told his teary-eyed beloved that he was going to take a shower. Knowing full well by now that Vera was not likely to come and take a peek at what was once a fearsome body, he made the terrible mistake of leaving the door open as he undressed.

At that precise moment, it would appear that Sparky had decided a little dose of revenge was required, and returned to the house, its bottom sore and throbbing, its anger and desire for retaliation stronger. It sneaked around the house, ready to bolt should The Man appear again, or more precisely its foot, until it heard him in the dreaded bathroom. Sparky went to investigate, ever cautious. The soaking it had received earlier had almost given it a heart attack as it shot away like a thing possessed. As though it had a flea up its backside, as its owner Vera might have said.

The Man was fully undressed and had his back to the door when Sparky entered, stealthily as only a feline knows, crept up to The Man, and raked a wonderfully deep, five-claw scratch into the back of his calf.

Now, this had been Sparky's only plan, and it would have been quite satisfied leaving it at just that, but then something fantastically unexpected happened.

The Man roared in pain and surprise, almost bursting Sparky's eardrums, before his legs gave away and he crashed into the shower door. The shower door cracked—even though it was an expensive, heavy piece of glass—and just happened to smash as Dennis fell against it. As Sparky watched in amusement, it saw with what might have been glee, as a large piece of the heavy glass broke from the door and came flying down to land directly on poor Dennis' scrawny neck. Sparky received another improvised shower—this one crimson—as Dennis' head was almost but not quite removed from his shoulders. This should of course have killed Dennis right

there and then, but perhaps a combination of fate or divine intervention contrived to see him, unbelievably, pull himself up and stagger out of the room.

With obviously no idea where he was heading, he staggered and stumbled, head wobbling from left to right as though a puppet whose strings had snapped, down the hall, still spraying blood everywhere, until inadvertently reaching the living room where Vera was sitting with half-finished scarf and knitting needles in hand, looking decidedly worried at the loud crash she had just heard. Dennis—and this is the funny part—might just have survived his accident/avenging if it had stayed at that, and Vera had managed to call an ambulance in time. But, unfortunately, as Dennis staggered in, he obviously failed to see, and would have been incapable of avoiding anyway, that Sparky was lying sprawled at the entrance to the living room, lying there licking the blood from its body, and no doubt feeling quite chuffed with itself. Thus, it was almost inevitable that Dennis should inadvertently step hard onto its tail, causing a manic screech of pain and panic from the cat, who subsequently leapt up just in time for Dennis to trip over it (again).

The coup de grace was then served, again thanks to Sparky, by falling and smashing his head against the hard tiles, and terminate the party with his head now completely severed and flying through the air to land on his soon to be also very dead wife (her heart would never recover).

This is how the head of Vera's husband came to land in her lap.

Sparky saw out the rest of his days at the home of a nice young family who thought him very cute.

Except for the rather unpleasant habit he had of bringing dead birds and mice into the house and chomping on them in the bathroom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Justin Boote is an Englishman living in Barcelona, who has been writing short horror/suspense stories for fifteen months. To date he has had fourteen stories accepted for publication in diverse magazines. He is also moderator at a private writer's forum The Write Practice.

Facebook: [Justin Boote](#)



Cradle

Joshua Skye

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Some things are better left unknown...

FOUND FOOTAGE

A vintage 8mm movie camera is the central focus of the image. It is a silver-colored metal device with a prominent lens in the center. A film strip is visible, entering from the left and looping around a spool at the top. The camera is positioned on a dark surface. The background is dark and out of focus, with a soft, circular greenish light source visible on the right side, creating a bokeh effect. The overall color palette is dark with a greenish tint.

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Population II | *Han Adcock*

The bricks of the building appeared to sweat, brown stains dripping down. The cement between them was likely in need of replacement, Steven figured; one of the walls bowed outwards in the middle. A pregnant house.

"You're meaning to tell me," he said to the woman beside him, "you can't just knock it down?"

"I'm afraid not." The woman was from the Council, some kind of planning permissions officer in reverse. Steven had forgotten her exact job title, though her badge said 'Caitlin' and she came with an easy, white smile, a sense of humor and a clipboard, which was an improvement on the last one they sent out to act as envoy. Bill Something, he'd been called, and all he was able to talk about was finances, whilst smelling of perspiring socks.

"Why not?" Steven asked. "It was my grandfather's."

"Our records do show Muckle House as being in the possession of Mr. J. F. William," Caitlin said, examining her clipboard. "However, within six months of him owning it, he sold it to an overseas property development company, somewhere in Europe."

"Then why haven't they hurried up and developed it, gotten some tenants in?"

"I honestly couldn't say. Perhaps they don't yet have the funds. It is odd, the house being left to you when a company owns it...maybe your grandfather forgot about the sale."

"Can't you contact the company?"

"We've been trying to reach them, though letters come back unopened, the phone isn't answered, there's no answer machine..."

"What kind of company has no answer machine?"

"S.M. Hole and Associates." By now Caitlin was loitering by the wire fence, desperate to be out on the pavement. Though it was hard to loiter wearing a pinstriped suit, Steven supposed.

He laid his palm flat on the rounded belly of the wall and pushed, experimenting. Nothing shifted, but the bricks were oddly warm, for mid-November.

His grandfather had been an open, inquisitive man with no wife or other family apart from Steven and his mother. Steven remembered spending a couple of Christmases with him in a tall house on the coast, both times for twelve days and thirteen nights. It was a superstition of John Fraser William's that the twelve days of Christmas were the darkest, coldest days and nights, where the most evil could be visited upon a person.

On neither occasion was there mention of Muckle House. Steven recollected doing jigsaws, and ghost stories being told around an electric heater that had to be plugged in and left uncovered in case of fire. He remembered the smell of the old carpet, the brown mole nestling on one side of his grandfather's nose, the little telescope he was shown how to use in the attic, working out the shape of Orion the Hunter and the Big Dipper.

On Tuesday morning last week, a letter flopped through Steven's letterbox. No stamp, no address on the front, only his name, Mr. William. Whoever hand-delivered it did not stay to say hello or let themselves be seen. The letter simply stated his grandfather had given him an old house, the one he used to walk past on his way to and from school without thinking about it.

The house stood alone in the middle of a circular lawn, surrounded by wire and NO TRESPASSING signs, windows blinded by sheets of old board, roof gray, slates missing, two chimneys stained with ancient soot.

The wording at the end of the letter was bizarre.

“The house at no. 16, Dennison Avenue, has chosen you.”

At the bottom, it was signed, ‘Magellan.’

“All right?” Caitlin said behind him.

She was on the pavement outside now, but he was no longer paying attention. The texture of the wall changed, moving—moving inwards—sucking, sponge-like, the skin on his palm burning as he wrenched his hand free...

It just tried to...?

He gazed down at his hand, numb. It was red with brick-dust, as red as Mars, and it felt as if someone had dumped battery acid all over it.

“Mr. William?” Caitlin again.

“Um. Fine. Yeah. Coming.” He shoved the hand deep into his trouser pocket and walked towards her, not looking back. To look back would be to admit it.

That damn house tried to eat me.

Something about the room was wrong.

He sat in a wooden chair, legs dangling above the floor, chin aching on the dark, shiny table. The jigsaw was big, but there was no picture.

It was black. There weren’t even any stars.

His mother and grandfather did not appear to see this. She sat in a winged armchair, texting on her phone. Probably writing missives to her current on-off boyfriend, Mark or Mitch or whatever his name was. His grandfather bent over the pieces at the other end of the table.

“Granddad?” Steven said. All that could be seen of him was the top of his head, so bent over was he. There was dust in his hair, from the ceiling perhaps. “Granddad, it’s black. Should we go and change it at the shop? I think it’s stopped snowing.”

For some reason, it was impossible to see out of the window. The heater glowed, peaceful.

Then his grandfather spoke. “The second population.” His voice was flat and unemotional, as if reading from a cue card.

“Sorry?”

“The second population, the people of the ruins, they have cast their vote.”

A steady knocking sound issued from the heater, increasing in volume and frequency as they spoke. Steven glanced towards it. It was glowing, redder and redder, almost bursting as whatever inside it hammered to get out.

When he looked back at his grandfather a scream withered his tongue. The face and the mole gazing at him were familiar but empty, the eyes blind bits of board. One side of J. F. William’s head bowed outwards, ready to topple, and the heater was growing demented.

“They chose me, you’re next. The flowers of the void are opening, and from the loop they come,” J. F. William said. “The others. The second population have cast their votes and counted. You are the one.”

Steven jerked, breath rasping in his ears. He was already sitting upright in bed, the memory of the exact words of the dream circling inside him, along with the horrible sensation of being seven years old again, and of being trusted with something he did not want.

The knocking was not only in his dream. Someone was rapping on the door downstairs, and his watch read 3.00a.m. in green neon. Soon time to go to the observatory. Swinging his shaky legs out of the covers, he pulled on some trousers and fumbled around for socks. His hand ached.

He shuffled through the darkened hallway, biting his lip against the cold, and peered through the spy-hole in the door.

One man, all alone in a long, brown coat. Ragged black hair, high cheekbones, probably homeless. No sign of a weapon.

He opened the door.

“Good evening, my friend,” the man said, and bowed low, a curious old-fashioned gesture. “I am Magellan.”

“Finally!” Steven huffed a laugh. *This is my grandfather’s solicitor? Bit eccentric.* “You thought to pay me a call at this hour? You’re lucky I’m on a night shift.”

“Perhaps I can accompany you to your destination?”

Magellan stuck out an elbow. Bemused, Steven took hold of it.

“They say a new star is dying,” Magellan said.

Something like unease coiled like a cold viper in his stomach. How could the man know about NGC 66696, the distant celestial body more than three times the mass of the Sun? How did he know Steven was in the process of watching it explode, every night he glued his eye to the telescope, throwing off skins of brightly-colored dust and gas in slow-motion?

“Are you an astronomer?”

Magellan laughed. “Only an escort.”

Having no reply to that, Steven tried to lead him up the hill. Instead, as they passed by Muckle House, Magellan swung the gate open with a rattle and dragged him across the grass.

“The place here was given to you for a reason.” The cold quality of his grandfather’s dream-voice now came from Magellan’s throat. “There are such gateways in every town, every village, every country, connected to larger gateways.”

“Gateways?”

“A black hole is a large gateway,” Magellan continued. “That dying star will become one, a precious gateway that folds back in on itself. The entrance is the exit. A loop.”

A cold draft kissed Steven’s back. His hair stirred. He tried to wrench his arm free but Magellan was a lot stronger than a man that thin had a right to be.

“Flowers in the void,” Magellan continued, dreamily. “They burst, scattering seeds. We are stardust, Steven William. Eventually we return to our source, and we come back all anew.”

“Who *are* you?”

The man did not appear to hear the question. “Souls are light. Gravity affects them more, however, much more. You don’t know how it feels to be pulled up and out, through the black, through the airlessness, the cruelty of the silent planets, back to the center, to enter a black hole, to be torn apart, the pain of it, to be rebuilt another way, and to be spat back down to Earth with no memory of your body.”

Magellan smiled a thin, gray smile, spread his hands. “Here I am. One of the second population. We hide in abandoned buildings, in old houses, under bridges, along rain-swept roads, in graveyards. Not all of us regain our memories, but I am of the lucky few. I was dispatched to find you, Steven.”

Steven’s hand throbbed, all the way up his arm. He couldn’t breathe. Talons of pain scrabbled at his chest. “My grandfather...”

“Oh, yes, he was the last one. He did try to warn you.” Magellan smiled as the boards began to go up behind Steven’s eyes, and the bricks in the side of the house crumbled aside. “Maybe you shouldn’t have opened the door...”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Han Adcock is a writer of short stories, short long stories and poetry ranging from the humorous to the bizarre. His work has appeared in Expanded Horizons and Poetic Diversity, and read aloud on the Tales To Terrify podcast. He lives in England and is the editor of Once Upon a Crocodile.

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Drabbles | *Jason Pere*

Deadfall

Winston clutched at his leg and winced from the shooting pain. The fall had given him many other injuries to be concerned with but his leg was by far the gravest worry.

He looked about at the pit he found himself in. Someone had taken a lot of time and effort to dig it. Winston felt it curious that there should be a manmade hole so far off the hiking trails.

Winston heard the sound of rustling leaves from above and called for help. He fell silent and cold with fear when he heard the wicked laughter answer his plea.

Embraced

"I don't want to die," gurgled Nixon as he tried to stem the flow of blood oozing from his chest and soaking his uniform.

"Painful isn't it?" said Marian as she shifted her stare from the dying soldier to the war-torn battlefield. "Would you do anything to live?"

"Yes," said the desperate man as he stared at the deathly pale woman.

"Then drink," Marian said as she pricked her finger and bled onto Nixon's lips.

Nixon eagerly tasted the sweet blood and felt life return to his failing body.

"Now you are mine forever," Marian said to the new vampire.

Identity

I woke to flickering lights and the smell of mold. My body ached from head to toe. I could barely see anything and I had no idea where I was or how I got here. I felt like I was sawn in half lengthwise. I nearly vomited from the pain. I swung my feet over the edge of the stained mattress and stood. I followed the erratic bursts of light from the fixtures in the bathroom next door. I went to the sink and stared in terror at the reflection in the mirror. I did not recognize my own face.

Keep Out

I should have paid attention to the sign. It was supposed to be legend and superstition. None of what just happened could have been real. Everyone else who came with me was dead now. I couldn't run let alone breathe. I did not know where I was. All the rooms in the asylum looked the same.

I could hear it. The screaming was getting louder as it came closer and closer. I was shaking like a leaf in a storm. I had nowhere to hide or escape. I heard the thing right next to me. It was screaming my name.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jason Pere resides in his home state of Connecticut with his darling wife, two maniacal felines, and sweet hound dog. Since 2012, he has published a multitude of work across many genres, including two novels, *Calling the Reaper* and *World After Death*, anthologies and collaborations with CWPH, and his own fiction blog. He has a propensity for dark content. Fantasy, however, is his favorite genre.

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Mommy, It Has My Eyes | Matthew Brandenburg

“Mommy, it has my eyes!” she cried.

“That’s nice dear,” the girl’s mother said, distracted by the view from the top of the hill.

She ignored her daughter as she absorbed the dream-like landscape. Rolling hills, pink and purple bushes, large oak trees, and the long driveway down to civilization. The large open expanse was in stark contrast to the claustrophobia of the house.

This was the first day of their new life. An uncle had recently passed away and left the large mansion to his nephew, the girl’s father, Bill.

When they had received the news, Bill and his wife Shirley were in the courtyard of their apartment complex. A man in a suit came up to them and handed them a letter, then it was a whirlwind of visits to the lawyer to go over the will and deeds to the house that was going to change their lives.

“I’ve never even been to the house before. And I honestly have no idea why I’m in the will, I don’t think I ever saw my uncle but twice. But, if I remember the stories, it’s a pretty large house, we could probably sell it for a ton of money,” Bill said.

Shirley tried to stretch out the crick in her back as the conversation came back to her. Bill weaved fancy tales of what they were going to do with the money. After the long ride yesterday, they had slept in the living room on a couple of air mattresses. Shirley wished she could blame her soreness on the cheap blow up beds, but she knew the cause. The noises.

During breakfast, while Bill was making plans on cleaning the house, Shirley mentioned the noises. “Did you hear any of the creaking or the moans?”

Between bites of toast, Bill waved the question away, “It was nothing, the house is just settling. It’s probably not use to people being in it. I think it’s been empty for some time. I wouldn’t worry about the noises.”

She volunteered to clean the garden and left Bill and their daughter, Jill, inside. The noises still rattled around in her head, echoing and growing worse the more she thought about them. She wanted to be outside, away from the confines of the house.

Overgrown weeds and bushes grabbed at her legs while she made her way from the house. Fog blanketed the grounds and she wondered if she had woken up or was walking into a dream. *This could be a park*, she thought. *What are we doing here? I know we need the money, but something feels wrong.* The sound of footsteps brought her out of her thoughts of the morning and back to the hill.

“Mommy, it has my EYES!” She cried even louder.

“I know, you told me that already. Did you tell Daddy?”

When they had arrived last night, their car was on empty. They had used their last couple of dollars to fill it up. The headlights on the car had revealed their ticket to a better life. Shirley’s first thought had been that the house was from a horror movie. The type of house a madman would lure pretty women to, before he stuffed them. Their daughter had counted the windows to see how many floors it had. “One, two, three. Wow, mommy, this is a big house!”

“Yes it is. But don’t go falling in love with it, we won’t be keeping it for long,” Bill said.

Shirley’s counting had proved accurate. There was also a basement and a tower. After they had dropped their one duffel bag and mattress into the living room, Bill was eager to explore. He fished around for a light switch but couldn’t find any. All they had with them was their car’s emergency flashlight. Shirley thought it would be safest if they didn’t explore the house until the morning. However, they all agreed that finding a bathroom after the long car ride would give them a chance to see some of the rooms of the house.

The darkness of the hallways ate up their small light as they huddled together on their search. Jill squeezed her husband and daughter’s hands as they walked through the hall. The light fell upon strange carvings of children’s heads along the walls. The silence of the house seemed to accentuate the sound of their breathing. Shirley found herself holding her breath and tiptoeing to not make a sound, afraid that the faces might wake. Eventually their search lead them to the kitchen.

Their cone of light swept around the kitchen, revealing piles of filth. Shirley gasped at the peepshow of dirty dishes and rotting food. Everywhere Bill pointed the light, a picture of his uncle’s life became clearer. The smell burnt Shirley’s nose, acid began to climb up her throat threatening to come out. “Mommy, I don’t feel so good.” Jill said.

“Me neither. Bill, what’s that doorway lead to?”

The group shuffled around the black remains of something questionable on the floor and toward the door. There they found the bathroom. It was just as bad as the kitchen.

“I don’t really want to go in there alone,” Shirley said.

“Uhm, I guess Jill and I can face the other way while you do your business,” Bill said.

They followed Shirley into the bathroom. Black mold grew like shadows in all the corners of the bathroom. Shirley guessed the toilet had once been white, though now it was some sort of brownish color. She squatted over the toilet, doing her best not to touch the seat.

“Honey, I’m going to hold you while you go,” Shirley said to Jill. In the daylight, on the hill, Shirley hoped that Bill’s first mission was to clean the bathroom.

A slight wind blew across the land and Shirley hugged herself, though it could have been more about the story her husband had told her about his uncle.

According to her husband, his uncle was some sort of toymaker, using the basement for most of his inventions. He was famous for inviting all of the town’s children to his house to test out the new toys. “Can you imagine? Being able to go to some giant house and play with a bunch of toys? That is like every kid’s dream. I heard about these amazing toys after the fact, of course. I don’t know if my parents just didn’t want me to bug them to take me there, or if they knew he was weird. But, man, that would have been amazing. Of course, now that I know what I know, I’m glad I didn’t go,” Bill had told Shirley.

“After some disappearances in town, there was an investigation into my uncle. I read some of the articles about it. He was accused of killing some kids due to some evidence. They didn’t have much, but it sounded crazy. He had some sort of crazy contraption in the basement. And they had found some rooms with strange dolls and toys.”

Shirley's skin prickled as her imagination ran wild.

"I guess he never really denied the stories, but he was like the richest guy in town, so he had the jury and court in his pocket. They let him go. But, he shut his gates, locked the door, and never came out. After that, no one saw him again."

Now, on the hill with her daughter, her husband was exploring the house. At the breakfast table, he wanted to see if he could find his uncle's toys. "Imagine if we found some of the haunted toys? I'm sure they would go for a ton of money on the internet. Maybe they are vintage or collector items? I'm sure someone wants them."

Shirley nodded, knowing that he was desperate to make some money. After he got fired, it had been tough to make ends meet. Receiving the letter of his uncle's death and being on the will had been an amazing bit of luck. But, she couldn't imagine finding anything of real value in the house.

The wind picked up a little, carrying with it the final words of the story Bill had told her. "They never found the bodies of the children." Her imagination crawled through the rooms of the house. She could almost hear the screams of the kids on the wind. Maybe the uncle did it, and it was in one of those rooms that Bill was exploring right now. What if he finds a bunch of skeletons? Or he finds the murder machine and somehow Jill gets in it?

But, what if he does find something worth some money?

A ray of sunshine splashed on her face and it warmed her. For an instant she allowed herself the chance to think about the life they could have. Sure, it was going to be a lot of work to fix up and clean the house. But, her husband was handy, he had fixed a lot of things for the apartment complex they lived in. And there was a lot of land, she always heard people say they want land. Maybe if Bill does find something amazing, he could patent it? This really could work; this could be the answer to their prayers. She was ready for their life to turn a corner.

Shirley was lost in her thoughts when a voice broke through.

"I love you Mommy."

This voice was clearly not her daughter's. It sounded recorded, almost like a robot.

"MY EYES!"

An ear-piercing scream came from her daughter's direction. Frustration crept up in Shirley's thoughts as she was brought back to reality. *She is always so dramatic.* The sound finally cracked the fragile threads of her patience. She was ready to yell, ready to pour out a year's worth of frustration on her daughter. She turned toward Jill, and her frustration melted into mind numbing fear.

Her daughter was covering her face. Blood seeped out between the fingers. Jill's mouth trembled as the screams became a pathetic whimpering. Shirley's heart melted at the sadness in her daughter's voice, the sadness of a little girl whose mommy wasn't helping. Shirley's instinct was to bend down and pick up her daughter, but the sight of what was standing next to Jill froze her in place.

Standing next to her daughter was a larger porcelain doll. It had brown hair, green glass eyes, and a blue dress. Shirley's mind couldn't process what was happening.

One of the doll's smooth hands was holding on to her daughter's dress, as if they were the best of friends. There was something red on the hand, Shirley prayed it wasn't what she knew it was. She tried to imagine that Jill was trying to show off the new toy she found. Yet even that thought became warped and twisted with the blood on Jill's face.

Then the doll lifted up its other hand and opened it. On the palm of the porcelain hand were Jill's beautiful brown eyes, blood dripping from the doll's hands. Shirley saw the dark blood and chunks of skin on the fingertips of the toy's hands, the fingertips that had clawed out her daughter's eyes.

Shirley opened her mouth to scream, but she couldn't hear it. The only thing in her ears was her daughter's pathetic cry.

Clouds seemed to form and eat away at her moment of happiness. She fell to her knees, eye level to both her daughter and the doll. She had hoped that the horrors of the house wouldn't have followed her outside, yet here she was staring into the glass eyes of the doll. In those eyes she saw nothing. Her mind cracked and tears rolled down her cheeks.

Through her watery eyes she reached out to one of the shapes in front of her. Her hands grasped the smooth porcelain skin of the doll. She didn't remember her daughter having such hard skin, but it was her daughter and she needed to tell her it was okay. She pulled the doll to her chest and hugged, whispering to it that it would be okay.

Jill stood next to her mother listening to her soothing something that wasn't her. All she could do was cry, her tears mixing with the blood.

"My eyes...my eyes...my eyes..."

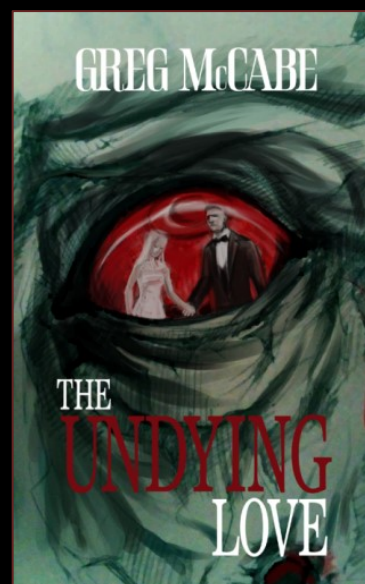
ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Matt Brandenburg is a horror writer from Kalamazoo, MI. He lives there with his supportive wife, two kids, and two dogs. He spends his time reading books, watching Gravity Falls with his daughters, listening to strange soundtracks, and digging around in his pumpkin patch. This is his first published piece, but he has a few stories floating in the ether or on his blog.

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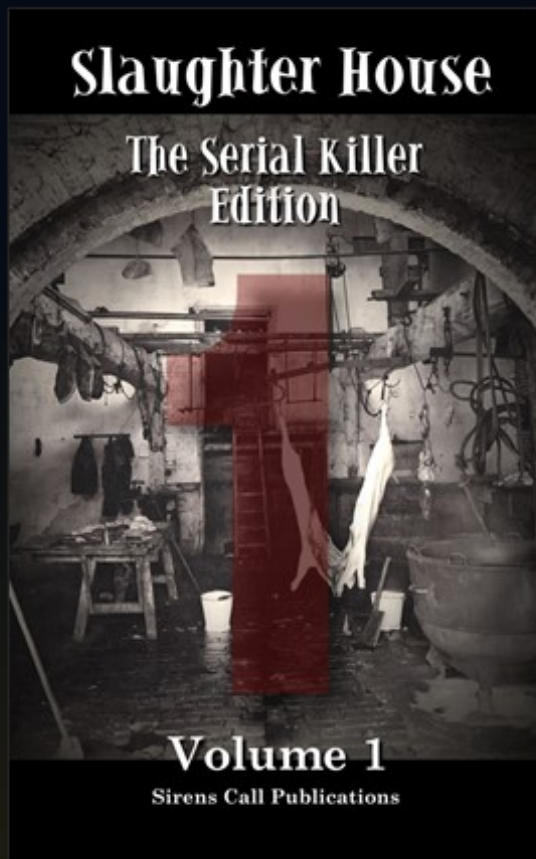
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The Undying Love *Greg McCabe*

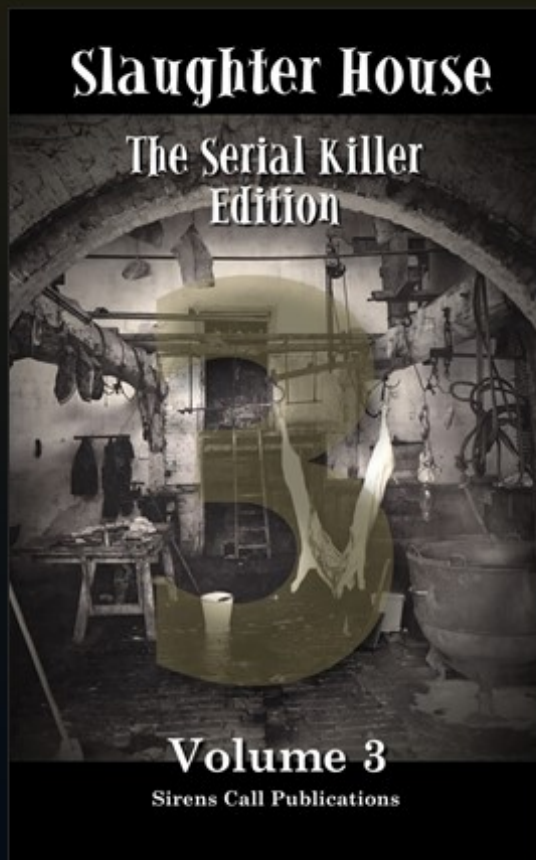
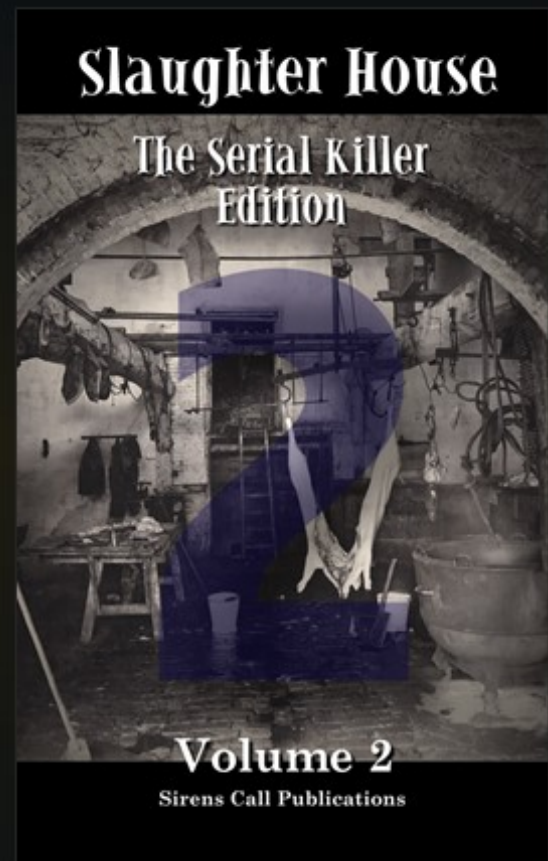
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Street Party | *R. J. Meldrum*

Ira and Myra liked London. They were on their first visit to the city, staying in a small, slightly scruffy hotel in Kensington. Ira sat on the small bed in the small bedroom tying his shoelaces, while Myra put on a coat. They were heading out for a walk after their evening meal.

It was October and already getting dark, but the sky still had a thin sliver of light down near the horizon. It was beautiful against the jumbled skyline of the city. London wasn't like any other city; it was a city of layers, of mysteries, of a deep and long history. Even Ira, not the most imaginative person, could see it was a city that had seen hate, love and war over the millennia. It was a place where you could be 'someone' or it could be a place for people to disappear. A place where all things were possible, a place of dreams and nightmares.

They had been walking for about half an hour when Ira noticed they were moving away from the busier, crowded streets into a quieter, more residential area. Ira spoke, breaking the silence they normally kept during their walks.

"Myra, don't you think we should be getting back? We don't want to get lost."

"You've got the A-Z, haven't you?"

"Well, yes...but..."

"Then we'll be fine. If we get lost, we'll just get a cab."

"Okay, honey."

He hadn't seen a cab for at least five blocks; the roads were almost empty of traffic, but he didn't bother trying to argue. It wasn't worth it. Myra sped up. He couldn't be bothered to keep up, knowing that she would eventually wait for him. He looked around, relishing the unfamiliarity of the scene. The houses around him were big, solid in their comfortable red-brick.

Suddenly from the darkness on his left-hand side there jumped a short, terrifying figure. It screamed at him, baring fangs and claws. He felt his bladder go in shock, aware of a warm wetness spreading down the front of his thankfully dark-colored slacks.

It took him a full two or three seconds to realize that the figure in front of him was not some hideously deformed demon, but simply a child dressed up. Three or four similarly dressed figures followed the first one, all running up and down the street in front of Ira. They carried bags and jumped up and down in excitement. He suddenly remembered what day it was. The 31st of October. Trick-or-treaters had caused him to wet his pants. He laughed despite the dampness spreading rapidly across his trousers.

A larger figure loomed from the alleyway. An adult no doubt, supervising the kids. Ira smiled at the unseen person, who was still hidden in shadow. The adult moved under the streetlight and Ira saw it was a perfectly pleasant looking young woman. Hell, she was young enough to still be classed as a girl, maybe only nineteen or twenty. Probably the kids' nanny, certainly she was too young to be their mother. She smiled at him and as she did so, she went from pleasant looking to downright beautiful.

"Hello. I hope that the brats didn't scare you. They've been doing that sort of thing all night. Frightful, aren't they?"

“Nope. It’s good to see kids having fun.”

He neglected to mention his pants.

“Well, it is Halloween. One night a year isn’t too bad.”

“It’s nice,” he replied, unable to think of anything else to say. His wet pants, now cold, were proving to be an unwelcome diversion. He prayed she wouldn’t notice.

“Gosh, you’re American. Visiting London?”

“Yes, first time here.”

Myra came back to see what was keeping him.

“Hi Myra.”

Myra ignored the girl and spoke directly to him. The children ran under her feet, nearly tripping her up.

“I waited for you at the top of the block. I knew you’d get into trouble.”

“I’m not in trouble. I was just passing some time with these folks. They’re trick-or-treating.”

“That’s nice. Let’s go. We can’t be out too late.”

“Okay.”

He turned to the girl who was standing silently beside him. The children chattered noisily around him. It was a beautiful sound. He touched the head of one of them and she smiled at him. He couldn’t help smiling back.

“Ira.”

That was the first grumbled warning. It wouldn’t be the last.

“Well, it was nice to meet you. Good luck with the rest of your trick-or-treating.”

“Thanks very much. Enjoy your walk.”

They continued their walk, moving further into the residential area. Gradually, the traffic noise faded and they found themselves walking in silence. Ira had never considered himself to be particularly imaginative, but he knew that he hadn’t been imagining what had happened with the girl. She had been saying something to him, something that he was sure Myra wasn’t to know.

He tried to keep note of the streets they were walking on, but he soon realized they were lost. Somewhere in the distance he could hear noise, but he couldn’t work out what it was. It wasn’t traffic. He looked at his watch and realized it was starting to get late. It was nearly eleven o’clock. They had been out for more than three hours, but it hadn’t felt like that. He would have sworn they’d only been walking for an hour. He tried to think what time he had met the girl with the children, but he couldn’t think. It hadn’t seemed like five minutes ago, but surely kids weren’t allowed to stay up that late?

Lights started to go out in the houses around them, as people settled down for the night. The memory of the warmth of the girl’s gaze faded and his basic practicality returned.

“Myra, I think we should head back now.”

She nodded.

“Where are we?”

"I don't rightly know, honey. I think we need to look at the A-Z. Let's stand beside one of those streetlights."

They huddled together under the streetlight and Ira pulled out the A-Z.

"What's the name of this street?"

"Slaughter Alley," said Myra, squinting up at the street sign on the corner.

"No Slaughter Alley in the A-Z. Sounds very Victorian, like it was taken from Dickens."

"What's the next street?"

"Let's look."

As they walked to the next street Ira became aware the noise he'd heard earlier was getting louder. He could finally identify the sounds. It was people laughing and shouting. Like a party, he thought. Ira felt jealous. He wished that he was having a good time, rather than wandering around lost in the dark. He wished he was having a good time with that girl he'd bumped into. Myra, who had walked ahead again, stopped.

"It's called Tollhouse Towne Junction."

He looked in his book again.

"Nope. Nothing."

"Can't we just find our way back again? Retrace our steps."

"Well, honey, I can't remember which way we came. Can you?"

"Oh, Ira, you're useless."

"We could call a cab," suggested Ira.

"I left the cell phone back at the hotel."

"We could ask someone."

"Who?"

The street was empty.

"Well, we could ask at one of the houses."

He looked around, searching for a lit window. There were none. He checked his watch. Midnight. There was no way! It hadn't taken them an hour to check two street names! He shook his watch, trying to force it to tell the real time. It still read midnight. Around them the merriment carried on, the sounds echoing off the walls. He heard a child's voice. There was a roar of laughter in response, which drowned out the child's sharp voice.

"We could head for that party. We wouldn't be disturbing them and I'm sure they'd help."

"What party? What the hell are you talking about, Ira?"

"The party. We can just follow the sound of the party."

"I can't hear anything."

"Myra, you must be going deaf. Come on, or we're never going to get back to the hotel tonight."

He set off. She followed him, complaining. He turned left and right, trying to keep the noise of laughter and gaiety ahead of him. He was amazed a party was still going on, in this quiet suburb of London. It seemed incongruous at this time of night. He would have thought that the residents wouldn't have stood for such a noise so late at night. Didn't the British have laws about

that sort of thing? Still, it didn't matter to him, as long as they could get some help. Maybe the nanny girl would even drive them back to the hotel. That is, if she was at the party. Ira suspected that she would be. No, he *knew* she would be.

He strode ahead, moving away from Myra, anxious to get to the party and find the girl. He wasn't that bothered about getting back to the hotel anymore. He suddenly just wanted to get to the party. Some need drove him on, mixed with the fear that the sounds would suddenly stop and he would be left in the darkness with only Myra for company.

He vaguely heard Myra call from behind, but her voice was indistinct in the noise from the party that was getting nearer and nearer. He turned one last corner and saw it. The party. It was a street party, with trestle tables laid out down the center of the road. It was a long, wide avenue, perhaps a mile long, but the party filled the whole road. The tables were covered in red and white checked cloth and bulged with party food; it reminded Ira of the summer fetes back in Kansas when he was young. There were people thronging the street and Ira hung back, suddenly shy. He didn't know these people; how could he expect them to invite him to their party? He felt dirty, ashamed for presuming too much. He started to turn away when a voice pulled him back. It was her, the girl from before; she was at the party as he had known she would be. The little girl, whose head he had patted, was wrapped around her legs. Both were smiling at him. She spoke.

"You found us. I'm so glad. I knew you would, that you'd understood. Please join us."

She took his arm and led him into the throng.

Myra turned the corner of the street only moments after Ira had disappeared round it. She fully expected to see his little fat figure shuffling down the street towards this so-called party that only he could hear. She was getting sick of him and filled her lungs, ready for yelling. When she turned the corner, her breath was expelled without sound. In front of her was a wide avenue, perhaps a mile in length. She gasped. The street was completely empty. Ira had disappeared.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010 with his wife Sally. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Digital Fiction and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

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Of Lions and Mice and the Danger of Doors | *P.L. McMillan*

It's become as hazy as the rest of my memories. I tell the doctor that I am afraid that my memory will be blank as the white walls that surround me. Or maybe, I think to myself, that's something that I've begun to hope for.

Still as it fades, the fear does not. I want the doctor to know this because that's how I know what happened is real. The fear tells me that the memory is real. The irrational dread of doors remains. What a strange thing to fear but I can explain. I promise the doctor that I can. Or at least, I think I can specify what the fear means. The danger is when a door is just about closed but not quite. Now, it is the door of my room I fear the most. But all doors have this danger. When a door is not quite closed, there is that terrifying possibility that something could come through that shouldn't.

Like the things that I'd seen that last night in my house before they took me here. Things all the doctors have vehemently assured me couldn't exist. That night was the last time I saw Joseph alive.

We'd always been so different, he and I. He was so fearless. So strong and carefree. I'd always wondered. Yes, wondered at his love for me. I, shy and perpetually paranoid of the worst-case scenario, I, the girl against the walls, the girl hidden in everyone's shadows.

Oh, how I loved his light, his power, and confidence. I would have done anything for him and him for me. I wondered, yes, I wondered at his love. The lion's love of the mouse.

The doctor always asks me to remember that night.

When was it? Oh, it is so hard, so hard to keep track of the days in the white room, walking down the white halls, and sitting in the white common room with the other people dressed in the same white slacks and shirt. How am I supposed to tell? The window, my window, is high up on the wall. I can't see out. Can't see if it is summer, winter, fall, or spring. When was the last time I was in the common room? When was the last time I'd been let out?

That night, months ago, perhaps, is faded. It is fading in my brain. I couldn't tell you what Joseph looked like, not anymore. He was handsome, sexy, no doubt about that. The women in the streets would stare, oh how they would stare and envy the meek shadow at his side. But his hair color, his eye color, the shape of his face is gone. Was he tall? He must have been. Taller than me at least. Muscular maybe. I seem to remember his daily workout regiments. I can't remember. Was it really my mind brushing those memories into obscurity? The doctor gives me no answers.

Perhaps, I sometimes tell him, maybe it is the drugs he makes me take. I don't tell him this next part, oh my no, but in my first few weeks here, I used to hide the pills under my mattress. Time after time, I hid them there.

But night after night, I had the terrors. The nightmares. The fearful replay of that night, the echoes of his screams. So I started taking the pills. It numbed everything, thank God. The fear became manageable. The memory became a movie and I, just a spectator. But the doctor still asks me to remember.

The night. The doors, doors when they are ajar and full of expectation. Full of menace and threat. That night, the door had been ajar.

Which door was it?

I often check my white room's white door. It is never ajar. They take special care with my room and with my door. They don't want my night terrors to start again either.

But that night, it had been the front door of the house that had been ajar. The house Joseph and I had shared. It wasn't a white door like the one in my room. I know that for sure. I don't remember the color though. I don't even remember what kind of house we had shared except that it was full of sunshine and pictures. Pictures of us.

He was so carefree though. I tell the doctor that, he needs to know. It's important. He was so carefree and so—careless.

That's why, I always tell the doctor, that's why he didn't recognize the danger that a slightly open door can have. During my sessions, I always look at the doctor's door. It's not white but it's not the front door either. It's wood. It's wide open. No danger there. No potential of danger there. It is what it is. Open.

That's why he died that night.

He was carefree, careless, dead.

I tell the doctor that I had always been a fearful thing. Not like Joseph. Sometimes I would come home and find the front door unlocked and Joseph asleep on the couch. Sometimes, he'd be the last one in at night and in the morning I'd find it unlocked when I went I left for work. A chill would crawl through me then.

I began to check. I loved him, don't get me wrong. I loved him but the mouse didn't trust the lion to be afraid of the jungle outside. That was the mouse's job. The lion feared nothing. Why should it? But the mouse knows that sometimes, there is something in the jungle under those dark and damp fronds that everything should fear. So I began checking the door. In the morning, at night, after lunch, and whenever Joseph left or returned. I checked and checked and checked.

I was the door mouse. Ha. I always laugh at that joke. The doctor would only stare. Dormouse. See? No, he never gets the joke. No matter how many times I tell it.

But that night, before bed, I went to check the door. I remember that. Joseph followed me and the lion tickled the mouse and teased the mouse about her paranoia, about her compulsions.

And I laughed too, that night. I remember that as well. In that moment, I wasn't thinking about the danger, the shadows, or anything dark. And of course, back then, I didn't know of the worst danger, the potential danger of doors not completely closed.

It's always at this point in the memory that I want to stop. I just watch the doctor taking some notes until he gestures. He always wants me to continue.

I am sure you know how some doors can be. Sometimes you have a door that has to be firmly pushed in order to actually close and thus kill any potential threat that might try to push in. Our front door was like that, tricky, untrustworthy. You had to be firm, push and listen for

that click to know it was actually closed. I would give it a pull to make sure it was closed before I locked it. My lion was good at closing the door, if not locking it. He always closed it tight.

But that night, I reached for the door and I think I turned back to him and said something worthy of a horror movie. Maybe I said, "One day something terrible will happen because of your carelessness." Maybe I said, "Someday something will happen because of you." I said something that I know I should regret if I could only remember what it was. The doctor always says it doesn't matter.

And I took that cold, smooth metal handle in my hand. The door wasn't shut. Not properly. With my tug, it opened. I went to close it and found resistance.

I was violently shoved against the wall, trapped behind the door as something forced its way in. The mouse became a statue. I saw Joseph's face. The fear I saw there was like nothing I'd ever seen. I can still feel the hot wet gush down my legs as my bladder lost control. I remember the lion who turned and ran.

I saw them. The dark things.

They were tall. Humanoid. But like mannequins, they had no features and were so terribly smooth. Their movements were all wrong, they weren't of this world. Even just to look upon them made my eyes hurt, like when you look at an altered picture that has all the wrong angles and perspectives that don't make sense. I can't explain it more to you than that. Five of them, I counted as they gave the lion chase. They were so silent, their skin as black as shadows and taking in all the light.

Joseph didn't make it far. I heard his body hitting a wall. I heard him fall with a grunt.

I remember thinking so desperately that I needed to do something, anything. I should call the police. I screamed inwardly at myself to move. But I didn't. I stayed behind the door, against the wall.

I heard his screams, the lion's death squeals. I couldn't even move to cover my ears against the horrible sound. I listened to him die. The screams became groans, became all I could hear, soft thuds and slushy splashes. Then silence.

I thought they'd come for me next. But they filed by, their hellish bodies glistening and wet. Their smooth heads straight and forward, never tilted once in my direction. The last one took the edge of the door in its hand. I felt its hand brush mine. I felt how its skin was, burning with intention. It left a smear of blood on the back of my hand.

It closed the door softly. I heard it click, the door that is, not the thing. It made sure to close the door completely.

I knew it was safe then. There was no potential left. They couldn't come back for the mouse. So the mouse went to see the lion.

I found him, I think, in the bedroom. Sometimes I ask the doctor why a man would flee to the bedroom. The back door was in the kitchen. But that's where I found the remains of the lion that I, the mouse, had loved.

They'd torn him to pieces.

No. That isn't right.

They'd *beaten* him to pieces.

He'd been pounded and bashed until he'd become nothing more than chunks and blood and bits of bone soaking into the bed sheets and between the boards of the hardwood floor.

I found a smear of eye on the door frame, a fresco of brains on the farthest wall.

And that's where it ends. That's the memory. That was the end of the lion. That's where they found the mouse on her knees in the pool of Joseph. After I'd called them, or so the doctor reminds me each time. I called them, so I'm told, and I waited.

Now I am here. I am in the doctor's office, having finished my story again. He has a habit of clicking his pen over and over again when I am done. He sits there and stares at his notes. I listen to the clicks. The door to the doctor's office is open still. It's okay to check, to make sure.

As it is every time, he tells me I am still confused. In shock. Those things never existed, he is convinced. He is a lion too, this doctor. Just like Joseph. He doesn't know, can't understand, that there are predators out there that even lions should fear.

But a mouse knows. A mouse knows what is right to fear and how to fear.

The doctor begins to talk. I turn my gaze to the door once more.

It's never wrong to check.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — P.L. McMillan is a Canadian writer living in the United States, having taught English in Asia for 3 years. Armed only with gallons of tea and a black pen, she is forever chasing the dark thrill of shadowy threats and eldritch shivers. Some such chilling tales have been published in Sanitarium Magazine, Fundead Publications, Neat Magazine, and Hinnom Magazine.

Goodreads: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/14159052.P_L_McMillan



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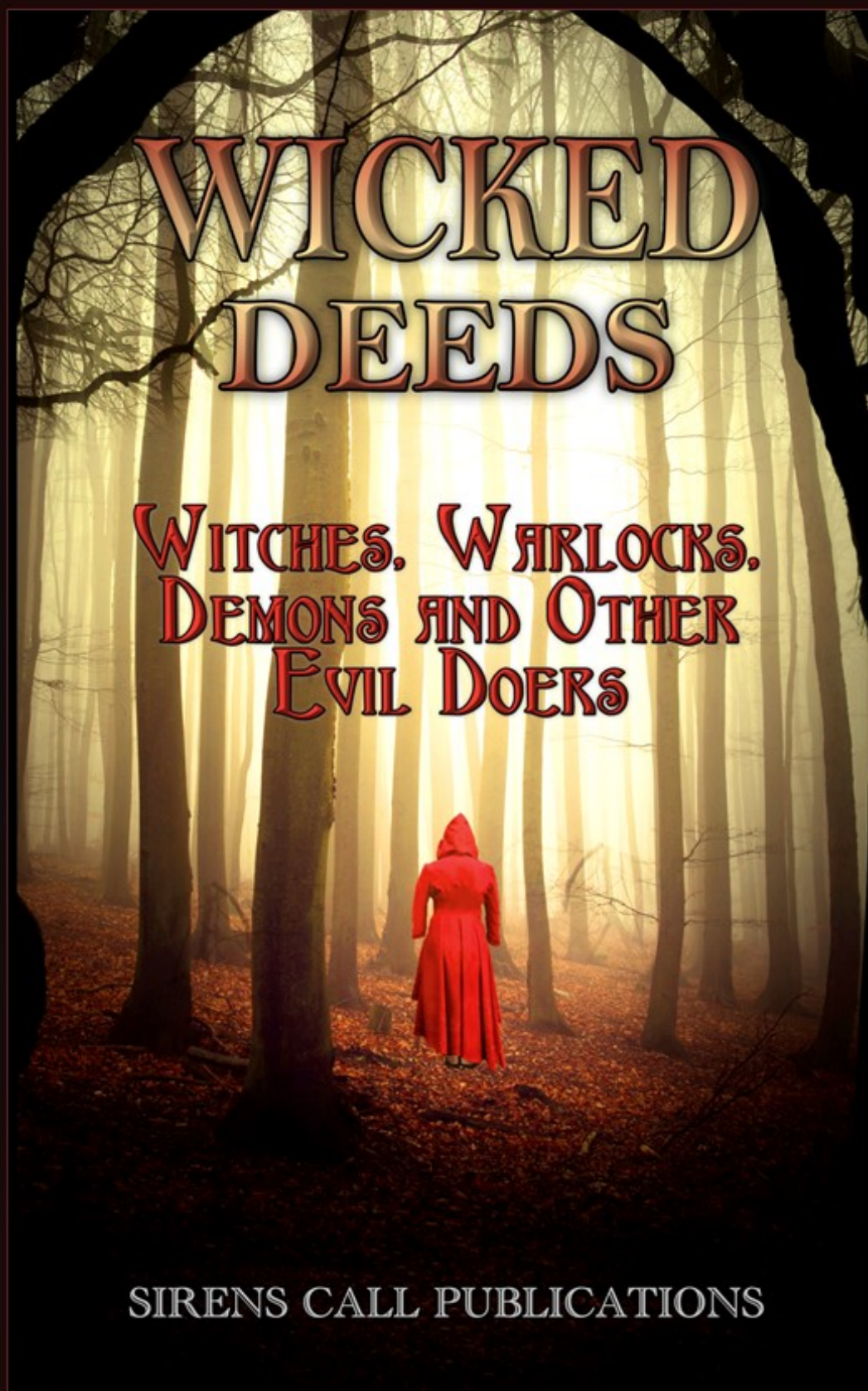
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Fluorescent Lights | *Melissa R. Mendelson*

I'm tired of being in this room. I'm tired of the sickly, pale walls, the fluorescent lights overhead, the paper beneath my skin. The blue gown hangs loose in the back with long, white tendrils, and my feet stick out, hugged in black socks. Goosebumps dance along the flesh because it's always cold in here, and the knife of silence is cutting me deep, bleeding me dry. Just tell me what's wrong this time.

I'm always here. Locked inside this room. I've tried to escape. Sometimes, I think I've made it. Then, I blink, and I'm back inside this room once again. And I've clawed the walls, screaming to be released, but nobody has ever heard me. Instead, I'm forgotten, and time is the custodian slowly mopping the floor outside. I'm about to go crazy when the doorknob starts to turn, but then a voice cuts in. And the door pauses. I'm denied, and I'm still locked in here. All I want is to go home. Just let me out. Let me go home.

I'm tired of this game. She nearly claimed my life four years ago with a simple, white pill. I didn't feel well, and she responded, "I will increase the dosage." I still didn't feel well, and she said to give it time. I gave it time, time to slowly kill me, and I ran in circles, begging for answers. What was wrong with me? Why did I feel like this, and finally someone had an answer. They took the simple, white pill away, but that did not cure me. And to this day, its toxin courses through my veins, and I don't recognize my face.

I've dodged bullets since then. Take this pill. You'll feel better. What is it? Medicine. It's all a lie. They never tell you what they are really giving you. Poison. They are weeding out the weak, the old, the foolish. We've put too much trust in them, and this room waits to swallow me whole. I am tired of this game. I just want my life back. I'll take whatever I can, and I have tried. And again, I thought I succeeded, and then I awoke in this cold, sterile room with the lights shining overhead. And the door remains shut. If only they would just come in.

I fell sick a few months back. I didn't realize how sick I was. The clinic was just down the street from me. It was the safest place, the furthest from this room, or so I thought. And they plastered smiles onto porcelain faces, and their eyes shined blue with understanding. And their gloved hands looked for answers, and the answer was another pill, one that I thought was working. And then I grew worse, forced to see her, another one that promised to take care of me, giving me a syrup that turned my insides out, but I got better. Or so I thought until that moment when I awoke and found my body unresponsive. I should have read the label more carefully, but I trusted her. I thought I was getting better, but my flesh was now cold. My heart was still. My mind clawed at the walls, and now they're walking in, covered in black and carrying a tray of shiny, sharp objects, objects to peel away the flesh and reveal bone. So much for doing no harm.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Melissa R. Mendelson has an AA in Liberal Arts and BA in Mass Communication: Critical Analysis. She was once a news reporter and now works for the State of New York. A variety of her writing has been published by Antarctica Journal, and she recently finished writing her first Horror/Sci-Fi novel, *Lizardian*. She is now writing a new story based off John Carpenter's movie, *Starman*.

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An Element of Doubt | *DJ Tyrer*

Folk always said there was something a mite peculiar about the Bennet family; an abnormal urge for learning in a clan that eked a living from harsh hillside with a soil thick with stones. It wasn't right, or so folk said, for men such as them to get ideas above their station. Why, all that reading and learning and such was liable to turn a man's head and give him all kinds of strange ideas. If folk had to read, and it wasn't considered advisable, then the Good Book was plenty. Folk said that the Bennets read books that were about as far away from good as you could go; books with funny-sounding names written in queer letters that nobody had a right to understand and in languages heathen and abominable in tone and content. It wasn't right. Folk tended to shun the Bennets.

Oh, folk were polite enough and the Bennets, in their turn, were no better nor worse than their neighbors, some surly, some fairly affable, all private as the hillfolk always were. They would go into town on occasion and do business without a blemish. Never attended church or chapel that anyone was aware, but not all the locals did. Being literate, they received more post than one would think, often big packages tied up with string that contained books and manuscripts. Those packages didn't just come from across the United States, but from abroad. Few folk knew anyone in the next state, even the next county, let alone elsewhere in the world. That was just another thing that marked the clan out as peculiar to those who were aware of them.

Of that strange lineage, none perhaps, was stranger than Mark Anthony Bennet, the last of the line and a confirmed bachelor who appeared content to allow his family to wither on the vine. Had any of his neighbors ever come to know him, they might have been surprised to discover that even his kindred considered him odd, an anomaly from the ancestral stock.

It wasn't that Mark failed to conform to the family stereotype. He was well-educated, despite his rural origins, and somehow, even found the funds to attend college (nobody ever learnt where the Bennets found the money to indulge their seeming passion for collecting old books, even as their farmstead grew more and more infertile around them). He kept to himself as the family and their neighbors had ever done, even if he was counted as one of the more affable examples of the line, and continued to receive the regular shipments of books and the other correspondence for which the family was known. As far as folk were concerned, it was business as usual at the Bennet farm, even if none were quite sure what that business might be. But, behind the gossip and speculation, none guessed that Mark had deviated far from the well-ploughed furrow of his family's ancestral pursuits.

For Mark, you see, had abandoned the path followed by his father, grandfather and sundry other ancestors since their escape from the infamous Massachusetts witch trials. Where his predecessors had pursued the occult and the dark arts with a view to harnessing its power or allying with spirits for power, he had grown alarmed at what he learnt and had vowed to combat such evil to the utmost of his abilities and defend mankind from the hidden threats that imperilled it at every turn. To which end, he had continued his occult studies in order to

understand that which he was pledged to fight, learning both its powers and weaknesses, and how each might be turned against them.

Of the spirits about which he read, which menaced humanity, the worst were those that the Mad Arab in his opus had named as the Great Old Ones. Great because of the immense power they wielded having shaped the very universe from its primal elemental substances. Old because they were the ones who had birthed the universe and would remain yet when the hoary existence crumbled away into nothingness, far, far in the future. These beings were the Archdukes that ruled over the Hordes of Hell. Dreaming in the graves that contained them until the day the stars that held them in thrall shifted their positions, these beings desired nothing more than to undo their work and unmake all things.

Of the Great Old Ones, the greatest threat to mankind was posed by the primal water elemental named in the Mad Arab's book and that of the Mad Monk as Cthulhu. A vast water dragon with tentacles like a gigantic squid, Cthulhu dwelt, sleeping, dead yet alive, in an underwater city deep below the waves ruling all manner of sea demons and lesser elementals. From its tomb within its city, Cthulhu sent forth its dreams to seek those human minds amenable to its service, inviting them to become its slaves in return for certain favors. Thus the being, as much dead as alive, had built a legion of followers to slip unseen through thronging mankind and do its bidding, leading mankind ever closer to its end.

As to why Cthulhu and its ilk held such enmity for mankind, Mark had no idea. At times, he theorised it was just a byproduct of being part of the material universe that the Great Old Ones had created but had come to loathe. At others, he wondered if there was something special about humanity to earn their ire, wondered whether there was some truth to certain obscure passages in the Sussex translations of the Mad Arab's book that Cthulhu had shaped a female being named Ilyth'la who had become the mother of the human race, or, at least, certain superior elements of mankind. In the margins of one moldy old tome, Mark's great-grandfather had scribbled, in spidery handwriting, almost unreadable, a note to the effect that the Bennet bloodline had its origin in the lost city of the sacred flame where Ilyth'la ruled. Whatever the truth, Mark was certain that Cthulhu and those who followed Him intended great evil to fall upon the entire human race—and he was committed to stopping it.

Just as he had learnt that Cthulhu was the chief of the water elementals, so Mark had discovered that there was a chief of the air elementals, the race of Great Old Ones locked in perpetual warfare with their kin of water. This being, named by some as Cthulhu's brother from the primal dawn, was called Hastur, although none named it ever due to certain superstitions concerning the vocalisation of its name. In a lesser-known volume, penned by the crazed Comte d'Erlette, it was said that a certain symbol, similar to the swastika in form, sacred to Hastur, when drawn in the prescribed manner using yellow ink, would prove efficacious against Cthulhu and its minions.

Spurred by such claims, Mark had diligently sought the translation of the lost Samaritan codex that held the ritual for creating such a sign, and, finally, he had found it. The text had been in the possession of a certain occultist whom he knew to be a follower of mad Cthulhu. The man

had been unwilling to trade it or sell it, knowing that the rituals it held had the potential to harm not only him but the god that he followed. Thus, Mark had waited for Aldebaran to rise in the sky, for that was when the power of Hastur waxed and that of Cthulhu waned, before traveling to the home of this man and murdering him so that he might take the translation and further his fight against the enemies of man.

With the secret of the symbol now in his possession, Mark had researched how to craft one to use against his foes. Finally, taking an onyx and having made the ink of sacred yellow as the volume described, he painted the sign upon the stone to the accompaniment of the requisite chants, creating what was, at once, both a potent shield against and a deadly weapon to use upon the elemental spirits of water and their servants. He was, now, equipped to wage war upon Cthulhu and his vile spawn.

From the writings gathered by his father, Mark had pinpointed several locations where there might be some of the lesser elemental offspring of Cthulhu against which he might test his weapon. From these, he selected one that seemed the likeliest and prepared for battle, mapping the area and examining all that his father had written about it. Rather than seek to use such knowledge to gain power, he would use it to strike against the forces of evil.

The lesser elemental was located in a cave deep below a promontory on the Massachusetts coast where witches and cultists were reputed to gather in worship of Cthulhu. To best ensure his success, he waited until Aldebaran was at its highest in the sky, when the water elemental's powers would be at their weakest and it was unlikely there would be any allied cultists present. In addition to the sigil, he also packed some dynamite with which to seal the chamber in which it dwelt once the deed was done.

Traveling to the promontory, Mark located the fissure with its crude stairs down, that his father had described in his notes, without much difficulty. By the weak light of an electric torch, he descended into the darkness, the sign-marked onyx held before him, ready for use. Firm of purpose, he did not allow the scary atmosphere to shake him, just kept descending.

At last, he reached the chamber of the beast which had the same general form as its unwholesome parent on a smaller scale, albeit a smaller scale that was enormous by human standards. The elemental was something like an aquatic dragon with webbed digits and strange fins upon its body and a beard of tentacles that gave its head the repulsive outline of a squid. Initially, it lay still as if dead, then, as he advanced towards it, stirred and turned the horrific gaze of its milky-white eyes upon him, seeming to regard him with what might have been a certain puzzlement, if that was not projecting human thought processes onto an alien mind.

Mark advanced, determinedly, and thrust the sigil-stone he held towards the fiend, which recoiled from the symbol of Hastur. However, the effect was only momentary and it struck out at him, sending him flying across the chamber, snapping bones. Uncertainty flowing over him as it advanced with great, loping strides towards him, and realizing he no longer held his only protection, Mark began to panic. Despite his injuries and the terrible pain, he staggered to his feet and began to run for the fissure by which he had entered the cavern.

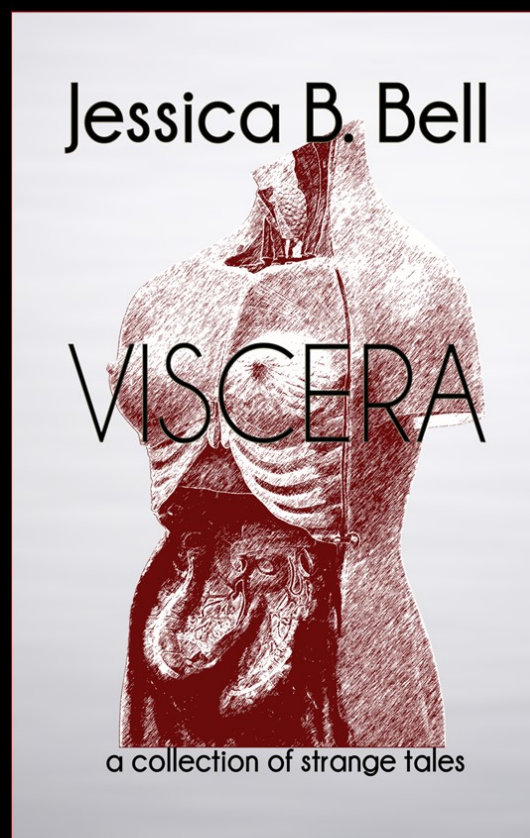
With a sudden realization, he remembered he carried dynamite. Pausing, he yanked it from his backpack and, held in trembling hand, tore the fuse to a stump with his teeth and lit it. Throwing it at the advancing monstrosity, he turned and ran as fast as he could up the crudely carved steps towards the surface. Moments later, he was bowled over by the force of the blast. As soon as he could, he continued his climb, seemingly no longer pursued.

The blast seemed to have sealed the chamber, but, beyond that, his success or failure was impossible to determine. Although the beast had seemingly recoiled and he had survived its attack without dying, Mark had begun to have his doubts about the theories that had led him into the monster's lair. He had been certain that he understood the nature of the Great Old Ones and how to destroy them; but now, he held an element of doubt and felt the need to re-evaluate his theories before pursuing his crusade further...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), Snowpocalypse (Black Mirror Press), Steampunk Cthulhu (Chaosium), Night in New Orleans (FunDead Publications), Miskatonic Dreams (Alban Lake), and Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen (Hieroglyphics Press), and has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

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The Last Request of Gladimus McCarran | *Soter Lucio*

The last request from the prisoner about to be executed for his crimes was incomprehensible to most. He asked that his head be upright and he wanted no mask covering his eyes.

Gladimus McCarran was as guilty as sin and as bad as they come. Chloe was sure there isn't a place in Hell fitting enough for him. Hell must be terrified and doubtful of having someone badder than the head honcho in there. At twenty-three years old, he'd committed more crimes than any other in the history of this small island.

His last walk was accompanied by the most upbeat music, which he got the prison chaplain to have played for him. The seven officers who attended to his execution with sombre faces all tendered their resignations with twenty-four hours notice.

The reason for the strange request became clear exactly one year later when a security guard from the halls of death row fell to the ground writhing in excruciating pain. It all happened right there on the steps of the Hall of Justice. He fell to the ground writhing and holding onto his belly, his face twisted in grotesque manner. Visitors and employees alike scampered for safety, as though whatever was going on with him would be contagious. Nobody called for help.

Chloe's position to assign seats to witnesses for the execution process was an unenviable one. For this reason she felt safe in her job of ten years, until she recognized the victim writhing on the steps. His job was to open the gates to the execution chamber.

After the initial fear of possible consequences due to her superstitious nature, she put it out of her mind and went on with her daily routine. Impossible. Memories of the past kept haunting her. She imagined seeing the chair in which the first client was electrocuted, right there in her living room. That was a botched procedure, and the smell of burning flesh and hair was prevalent within the confines of the prison walls for a while. She could now smell it in her room.

She sprayed air freshener, perfume, even sprinkled talc, but the scent stayed. Ergo, not her imagination. Could it really be that scent from so many years ago? Nah! No way. Must be her imagination. Throughout the years there've been many executions. The law was strict and showed no remorse, and no mercy for the heinous crimes committed by some. Appeals were down to a minimum, so once you're guilty of a crime punishable by death, so be it. Sentence was carried out swiftly.

Gladimus McCarran was known to be a dabbler in the black arts. It had long been assumed that was the reason evidence was always lacking and no case against him ever stood up in court. His appearance, his facial features, took on the look of a deranged and evil individual. His brown curly hair always was unkempt and unwashed, his clothes dirty and smelly, and his house, nestled between two large immortelle trees quite close to the river bank, contributed to the stories being bandied about the small fishing village. At twenty-three years of age his face was that of a much older man. Like in his forties or so. His mother died giving birth to him, and his father, who witnessed his birth is said to have never spoken a word after coming out of the delivery room right up to his death when Gladimus was five.

With all that information from the dead past going through her mind, Chloe's nerves were on edge. Deathly afraid to do the dishes in the kitchen because she'd be facing the window, and was absolutely sure that Gladimus would just materialize in the living room, she decided to leave the kitchen as is.

She slapped her forehead a few times and said aloud. "Get out of my head." But the thoughts didn't go away. With trembling fingers she clicked on the radio hoping to hear some music, but it was the top of the hour and the news was just starting. She couldn't help herself, she just had to listen when the announcer said a body was found half burnt on the steps of the Hall of Justice. That body was also one of the officers who tended to Gladimus on that fateful day. She paced the tiny living room relentlessly, deathly afraid and wondering what would happen next.

When the strong wind slammed an opened window shut, it was akin to a bomb dropping on the rooftop, reminiscent of the vivid stories she'd read about the last world war and of the stories from her parents and grandparents about all the happenings around those who practice black magic. A scream escaped her mouth and with hands flailing she made a beeline for the front door knocking over any obstacle in her path. She jumped the gate and fell face down on to the gravelled roadway, grazing her knees and bursting her lips. She also sustained a large gash on her forehead. But no matter, she rolled over and got up and ran again. Only this time she fell into the arms of Michael Romaine, the most arrogant and obnoxious person in the neighbourhood.

"Whoa! Are the hounds of hell after you?" Michael asked as he held her up by the armpits.

"There...there is some...something in my house!" She stammered a response.

"A burglar? Well let's go see. Shall we?"

"No. No. Not a burglar. It's... It's Gladimus McCarran." Michael froze in midstep and in slow motion turned to face Chloe. "What did you say?"

"I think it's Gladimus McCarran. He's back. And he is killing us one by one." Chloe blurted out this last bit. She thought she recognized something akin to empathy in Michael's face, but he burst out laughing, head thrown back. Chloe folded her arms, and knew her face was getting red by the feel of warmth slowly rising to the top of her head. She folded her arms and sobbed quietly.

"You really are hateful. You know that!"

"No. You're getting me wrong. You were hysterical. All I was trying to do, was to shock you back to reality." Michael explained.

"Well, is this reality enough for you?" She shook her fist at him. Ferociously.

"But I think maybe you're right. Gladimus was a piece of work. I don't doubt you." He turned again and gazed at the house. "There's smoke in your house. Did you leave the stove on?" He asked her.

"No. I don't think so. But maybe I did. I did smell smoke. And I ran out. I thought it was Gladimus. I thought I saw him in the mirror. Please don't laugh at me."

Michael grabbed Chloe's arm and shouted "Run!" Without a flinch she ran, and ran, heart pounding against her chest, hands trembling and seeing Michael's back going further and further away; she knew that Gladimus was close. Then she felt the darkness enveloping her and she

could no longer see Michael. She was running in one spot. Not moving. She felt her heart stop and dropped to the ground.

Chloe came to her senses, she knew not when, but looking around, she recognized the abandoned building on the outskirts of the village. She noticed the stench first, and then the menacing vines growing on the walls. They appeared to be alive, snaking around the pillars. A hoarse and gravelly laughter pierced the air and startled she rose to her feet, glanced around and praying aloud, she moved towards the exit, but Gladimus materialized at the far end of the building and said, "You placed them where they could see me and laugh at me."

"It was my job." She stopped and stammered a reply.

"A job you enjoyed." He replied, his jagged and rotten teeth glowing like hot coals. "All of you hated me. And you never bothered to say why." He stated as a matter-of-fact. "You all have to pay as per my last request." He continued.

"Your last request?"

"You remember. The names printed on my back. So I remember." He explained, growing more grotesque.

"My name wasn't there."

"No it wasn't. Because you couldn't be forgotten. Blood relatives are never forgotten."

"What?" She froze at his unbelievable remark.

"You are my elder sister. But you never acknowledged me. You too good for me?"

"Your mother was..."

"We had the same father. Your mother was my father's first wife."

"My father died when I was two."

"That's what you were told. Your mother wouldn't accept my father's beliefs, so she left him. But not before you came along. You look like him."

"That means..."

"You are like me. Black arts. Look at your palms."

Chloe raised her hands to her face while Gladimus showed her his. The markings on their hands were the same. A black mole with one strand of hair in the middle of the palm, and a star near the little finger.

"This is nothing but a coincidence." Chloe's head reeling, she felt faint and disoriented so she sat on the floor right there. She didn't see when Gladimus stretched his hand and waved it over her head. She did feel her hair stand on end and she sprung up from the floor, eyes blazing with hatred. With a surge of inhuman strength she lifted a steel beam and threw it at Gladimus. It went right through him and he laughed in that unearthly voice. Chloe was shocked and scared of herself in what she had just done. *No. That wasn't me.* She thought to herself.

"Oh yes it was." Gladimus answered, reading her mind. Chloe was shocked again. "We are the same, my dear sister."

"No!" She shouted. And running out of the building screaming and crying, she felt herself going insane. She again met Michael, all bloodied and confused sitting at the side of the road.

"Michael. He said he's my brother." She blurted out.

“Your brother? Of course he is. I thought you knew that. Everyone did.”

“What!”

“The reason your father never spoke after his birth is, unlike your mother, his mother didn’t know how to stop him from infecting the child.”

“You mean...”

“You were protected. But only for so long. Now you are just like your brother and your father.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Soter Lucio is a great grandmother, who does ironing for a living and loves all things horror. She travels the world through her writing and comes back with change in her pocket and stories from all over. Soter tells horror stories to her grandchildren because a little scare never hurt anyone. Other than that, she likes a good cup of coffee.

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John Mc Caffrey

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DRAGON BORN



Ela Lourenco

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Drabbles | Shelly Redd

Dark Garden

My feet are wet.
I'm standing in the garden. The night is broken by shafts of moonlight glinting through the sighing trees.
I can hear small animals scurrying in the gloom.
Looking down into a well of darkness at my feet, my vision lightens, sharpens and the body of next door's ginger cat resolves itself, lying in a pool of glistening blood.
I smell and taste something metallic. I'm thirsty and my mouth feels wrong somehow. I touch my mouth with taloned fingertips to find my canines are sharp and my chin sticky.
I wake up.
My feet are wet.

Bad Medicine

Waking. Groggy. Eyes blurry. Struggle to get up. Can't. Strapped to a bed.
They're watching me.
Trapped. Panic. Look for the door.
Barred window. Full moon emerges from behind clouds.
I feel the change, the power. Bones shift, muscles move. I howl.
Half transformed hands, claws slice my bonds.
Slashing, biting anyone who tries to restrain me. Hot blood flows down my throat, coats my fur.
The door is open. I leap over the bodies, the pooling blood, seeking freedom.
Wolf form follows the scent of fear, out, into the night.
Tracking, hunting. *I am hungry. They will not escape.*

Home Alone

Tap. Tap. Tap.
Something wakes me up. It's at the window. *Must be the wind, howling tonight.*
Is the window shut? Opening the curtains, I see knobbly wooden fingers tapping the glass.
Should've cut the old tree back in the summer. Annoying now. I won't sleep until I've sorted it. Maybe I can break the nearest twigs off?
I open the window, pushing the bare branch away with the frame. The wind whips at my hair and face, obscuring my vision.
I look up.
Crooked talons speed towards my throat.
I stumble back.
It squeezes my neck.
Choking.
It grins.

Living Daylights

“You scared the living daylights out of me!” she exclaimed.

“SORRY. I ONLY MEANT TO SCARE THE LIFE OUT OF YOU” boomed a deep deadpan voice from above her.

“Well, you did that. What are you dressed like the Grim Reaper for? It’s months until Halloween.”

“I AM THE GRIM REAPER. I AM DEATH...”

“Yeah, yeah. Now come down off the cupboard.”

“MY NEW APPROACH WORKED.”

“Very funny” she replied sarcastically. Then she followed his gaze, down to her still, lifeless body. Shocked, she stammered “But...”

“I SCARED YOU TO DEATH” the Reaper said, as he held out his hand.

Moonlight Sonata

The pack howls as one and we can smell the humans’ fear as they hasten their pace over the bridge, moonlight reflecting on glittering inky water.

The vampire is close, his stench cuts the chill night air like a blade. His words stop the couple in their tracks and he begins his hypnotic diatribe.

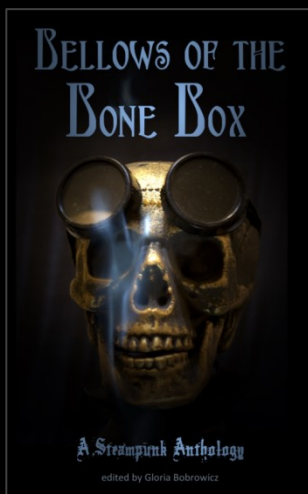
Our paws kiss the ground as we race towards the leech. He hears our approach, hisses, and flees, breaking his spell.

Hunting our quarry, we flow around his confused victims, our nocturnal song merging with the screaming and ripping sounds as we ravage our parasitic prey.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — After winning a national fantasy TV story competition when she was 9, Shelly has read and been thoroughly entertained by the supernatural ever since. She has recently been inspired by two published writer friends to let my imagination out to play after proofing several short stories and novels for them. Shelly lives in rural Oxfordshire with her other half.

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Bellows of the Bone Box

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In the town of Erdely there lived three sorcerers. The First, and oldest, was a humble pub owner. The Second, and youngest, was his boisterous brother. The Third, and most ambitious, was a wealthy noble. While they all loved their prohibited hobby, it was clear the young brother was by far the most powerful. His sibling cared little; he was content with his own abilities, parlor tricks they may be in comparison to the others. The Third, on the other hand, was envious of the youth's innate strength. As time passed, envy turned into jealousy. Jealousy turned into anger and indignation. Indignation and anger turned into a plan.

One night as darkness descended over the land, The Third sought to extinguish the light of life in the youth. Two knights of flexible morals accompanied The Third to carry out this deed. They entered into the youth's home undetected and made their way to his room. Before the youth had a chance to retaliate, his arms were severed right below the shoulder. With his ability to summon the elements nullified, they cut off his legs out of spite. While he still breathed, The Third had him wrapped in bed sheets and carted off deep into the forest. Here no one would question the tragic loss of life, for it is not uncommon for people from all walks of life to disappear under grisly circumstances deep in those cursed trees. The youth's final breath was wasted under cold wet dirt as the two thugs covered their tracks. The Third only watched in glee as his superiority had been cemented. The limbs of the poor boy were then tossed into a gulch for wolves and other dark beasts to feed on.

"I am sure you heard by now, my brother has died," the humble pub owner told The Third as he entered the secret loft above his pub. When The Third was seated, the pub owner lit the fireplace with a flick of his wrist. The pub owner's dark, scruffy, graying face looked pensive as he went about fetching frosty mugs of ale.

"I am sorry for your loss, our loss. This land is unforgiving even to the most gifted of us," The Third responded, keeping his grim satisfaction well-hidden. The older one only stared at his fair, well-groomed face emptily.

"A lesser man would believe his very surroundings are conspiring against him." After saying this the pub owner sighed then quickly finished his mug of ale. They chatted a bit more, trying to keep their minds off the elephant in the room and the empty chair it occupied. Soon they parted ways. The pub owner closing up shop, The Third returning to his splendid cottage. He was complacent in the notion that no one would ever see the blood on his hands.

The next day shocking news came to The Third: one of the knights with flexible morals was found dead in his home. They said his body was still sitting at the table with a half-eaten meal laid out in front of him. His head was missing, as were the arms, severed just below the shoulder. The Third shook this uncomfortable thought from his mind.

An eerie coincidence but a coincidence nonetheless. Nobody knew what happened that night.

Later that evening he met with the pub owner for drinks and discussions of the arcane.

"You hear about what happened to one of the Lord's knights? The unlucky sod was killed before breakfast. Probably made a few enemies in his life. Anytime I saw him at the bar, he always had a shifty look in his eyes," the pub owner said before silently, and quickly, finishing his mug of ale.

The Third shook his head while muttering: "What a grim way to go."

"The specter of death can be quite creative in its dealing old friend," the pub owner responded dryly. They soon parted ways, pub owner to his quarters, The Third to his. This night he returned home with haste, despite telling himself that he had no reason for worry. When he was deep in his home he finally calmed down and quickly went to sleep. Unfortunately, his sleep was continually interrupted by what sounded like a local stray clawing at his door.

"Probably picked up the scent of dinner..." the Third mumbled to himself as he tossed and turned.

The next day brought little comfort though. News reached his ears that the other knight with flexible morals also passed. His wife found him by the back door. His legs and head were both missing, his arms were clutched to the door, as if trying in vain to escape an unknown fate.

"No... Nobody knows. This, this can't be. Those two miscreants took all sorts of under-the-table work not dissimilar to our own. They had made enemies." He mumbled to himself remembering what the other sorcerer had said. Still trouble accompanied him as he went about his duties as a noble. Every so often he would catch himself looking over his shoulder for reasons he could not comprehend.

Despite the blood on his hands he found himself looking forward to meeting with the pub owner. His ale was always ice cold, and the hearth was always warm.

"I am sure you heard the news, but another knight was found dead today." The pub owner poured them both a drink. The Third enjoyed the secrecy of the loft above the pub. It was their secret space. Their safe space.

"You would think the dark of this land is beginning to creep into our very homes old friend," The Third said into his mug.

"Or maybe even into our hearts. No matter to us, their doings are not our problems are they? Let us enjoy our ale and enjoy our company. Dying is just a part of living so why take it for granted?" He then quickly finished his mug in silence. The Third smiled. Why was he worrying? With those two gone, there was nobody left that could expose him. His anxiety dissipated and he found himself enjoying his time here on a level he had not in years.

The time eventually came for them to part ways. The pub owner to his quarters, and The Third to his own. He casually strolled home this night. When he reached his home it started to rain. He counted himself lucky again that he got to enjoy an evening stroll before the storm rolled in. The rain continued to grow as he settled in for bed.

He awoke with a jolt deep into the night. In his slumbering stupor he swore he heard something pounding on the window. Realizing his imagination was running away from him he laid back down as the thunder rang out once more. No sooner had he closed his eyes when he heard it again. Fully awake now he knew it was no storm making that sound. The Third scrambled out of bed, eyes darting around the darkness expecting to find something, or somebody, there. Thunder rang out loud once more. Then he saw it standing on the side of the window. It was the face of the pub owner's younger brother. His face decomposing, chunks missing from his dark wooly beard. The sigils on his arms began to glow icy blue as The Third readied an attack against the wraith. Then he was gone. He heard the pounding again, but he realized it sounded more like thunder now. He resigned himself to believing it was merely tricks being played on his eyes by half formed nightmares and his own gnawing conscience.

When he woke up that morning he began combing his estate looking for signs of the wraith he thought he saw in the deepest hours of the night. If someone had trespassed on his land, the steady rain and wind would have blurred their tracks. With nothing to find, The Third shrugged off last night's nightmare and went about his day. It was uneventful, with his bored mind day dreaming of frosty ale and the camaraderie of the pub-owning sorcerer.

"Trouble sleeping old friend?" The pub owner set a drink in front of the Third, eyeing the slight bags under his eyes.

"I carry the burden of a light sleeper, storms always bring restless nights." The pub owner lit the fireplace with a flick of his wrist and began pouring perfectly chilled ale. *Parlor tricks they may be, but you can't say he is wasting his arcane knowledge.* As they sat and drank from their mugs The Third, still shaken by what he thought he saw, felt compelled to ask.

"You have not spoken much about the loss of your brother."

"Not much to say. He is my brother, and I am distraught by his loss. But, he was boisterous; possessed by the spirit of adventure. It was his brashness that got him cut down." He then smiled at The Third. "No storm tonight old friend. May you rest peacefully."

"Cheers to that!" he responded with vigor. Mugs were clinked and mugs were emptied as the plainly dressed pub owner and his eloquently-robed companion passed the time in their secret loft. This night they drank much later than normal. So when the time finally came for them to part ways, The Third was in high spirits. He jaunted home with an inebriated spring in his step. Weariness finally setting in when he was comfortably within his splendid cottage. He fell into bed where his dreams were greeted almost instantly.

He awoke to the sound of wood being ferociously splintered. He shot up, feeling a draft blow through the house. Had somebody broken his door down? The sigils on his arms glowed blue and orange, as bitter ice and red hot fire formed in the palms of his hands. When he reached the doorway on the first floor he saw that it was indeed ripped right from its hinges.

"You will not cross my threshold and live to tell the tale, fool!" He tried not to take his eyes off the doorway, but he could not deny the unmistakable sound of footsteps in the floor

above. He kept his incantations readied as he slowly returned up the stairs. A shadow moved in the distance. With cat-like reflexes he showered half the room in fire before sending a sheet of ice across it, trapping anything not burnt to a crisp inside. The fireplace on the opposite side sprang to life, revealing he had hit nothing. He quickly turned again toward the window expecting to see the young sorcerer's wraith. Nothing. The Third walked towards the window, eyes fixated on the patio outside it. As he did the face of the dead sorcerer came into view. The Third screamed. The wraith stood in the window for a moment then turned and walked out of view.

"Return to me spirit! Convince me your undeserved power followed you to the grave!"

Nothing. Only footsteps, and clawing at the walls as the wraith walked the patio circling his bedroom. He saw another shadow move, then another. His eyes darted around the darkness hopping between the flickering lights of the fireplace. Footsteps again. Without warning, the windows exploded inward all at once, causing him to shield his eyes. When the glass settled he lowered his arms to see the wraith of the young sorcerer standing before him. His rotten flesh stunk of decay and odors far worse than he could fathom. His eyes never blinked, but bore into his own. He stood on legs that were not his own. The tattered flesh was held together by means unknown to The Third. The wraith slowly opened his coat, with arms that were also not his own. Underneath was a rib cage devoid of viscera. In its place were the heads of the two knights with flexible morals. The thing that horrified him the most, was that there was just enough space between those bones for a third.

No one knew what happened to the Noble who lived in the splendid cottage in Erdely. When the sun rose his home was burnt to the ground with a quickness the townsfolk could only refer to as 'eerie.' Not long after that though another peculiar thing happened. A proprietor of the local pub found the body of his young brother deep in the thick forest. Everyone agreed the young man deserved a proper burial. While exhuming the body, the mortician found something he refused to talk about to this day: the young boy's body wore the arms and legs of two nameless knights, and his stomach housed the charred remains of three human heads.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — B.B. Blazkowitz is a horror fiction writer from a cultural dead-zone in the middle of nowhere Ohio. He is a fan of movies that spook, and video games that shoot. His writing has been previously published on Horror Tree, Bloody Disgusting, and Horror Writers.

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The Green Room | *Scott Paul Hallam*

A children's nursery should never become an infirmary, should never become a morgue.

William Trufant, hands on his hips, stood in the middle of the room where his three small children once slept and played. The room, lit by paraffin lamps and gasoliers, cast shadows on the bright green wallpaper, ornate leaves interlaced from ceiling to floor.

Two white cribs and a small child's bed empty. A few wooden toys still littered the floor. William coughed violently, the sound filling the room.

He spent too many nights alone in this place since the last funeral. His wife Margaret has never entered since, holed up in some chamber in his mausoleum of a home; a few spoonfuls of laudanum and now probably deep in slumber.

First, Agnes. Complained of a cough. Then came the bloody noses and sore throats. Soon fever flushed her pale cheeks crimson. Within days, she stopped breathing. Two days from her third birthday. Her tombstone read January 25, 1852 - January 22, 1855.

Three months later, Charlotte. One morning, her usually rosy face held the pallor of a ghost. The doctors' serums had no effect. Nor the surgical bloodletting. Modern medicine could not even slow the progression of her sickness. She passed in her sleep.

A year later, Charles. His little gentleman. At first, Charles expectorated only phlegm. After a couple of weeks, the coughs expelled mostly blood.

A team of doctors and nurses were hired for constant care. They lived in one of William's drawing rooms, taking shifts.

No use. Charles shortly fell into a coma and never awoke.

William paced around the room, the clacking of his footfalls against wood almost tangible in the stillness.

Father Bernard thought the dark lord had taken up residence in the nursery and that an exorcism was in order.

Most of the doctors were baffled. Some diagnosed the illnesses as diphtheria while others cholera.

But Doctor Leonard suspected that the green walls themselves, the copper acetate from the wallpaper that contained arsenic, was the culprit.

William thought the notion absurd. Margaret spent long hours playing with the children in the nursery, singing them lullabies and not so much as a stuffed up nose.

William peered out the window at his stable of horses. All the steel that William's plant produced, all of the wealth could not stop death in its tracks. Could not stop the destruction of his bloodline.

William rested his arms on the crib and mumbled a prayer. He clutched the railing with both hands, lifting the crib above his head and smashed it on the ground.

He took a splintered piece of wood and ripped long tears into the wallpaper, dust flying into the air. William tossed the shard of wood aside and started clawing at the green leaves as if a rabid beast was let loose upon the room.

His shouts and commotion caused his staff to race up the steps, following the sounds of chaos.

When they crowded the doorway, he shouted to them to board the room up immediately. Have the door painted black. He exclaimed that the devil slept on his son's bed, and lest they too wanted to become Satan's pet, they should never cross the threshold or risk being dragged to the recesses of Hell.

William stormed past the crowd, knocking one of his butlers to the ground. He raced down the steps and pushed open his large mahogany doors, bursting into the chilled night, cold for May. His manicured hedges stretched out before him; his gardens pregnant with red zinnias and asters visible in the dull glow from the outside lamps.

He turned and looked up at his manor made from imported limestone, once a testament to industry, to his empire of steel, an edifice built for his family and his future heirs. Now just a hulking tomb of stone and glass.

And if his home had indeed become a tomb, then it'd be his as well. He possessed plenty of soothing syrups and tinctures that would help him sleep for as long as he wanted.

William smoothed out his black suit with the palms of his hands. The air carried a sweetness from the garden flowers.

He turned around and trudged back into his home, slamming the doors behind him; the reverberations carried their lonely tones on the wind, then quickly died out in the quiet night.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Scott Paul Hallam is a short fiction writer living in Pittsburgh, PA. His work has been published or is forthcoming in Cease, Cows; Ghost Parachute; Unnerving; and Night to Dawn magazine. He earned his Master's in English Literature from Duquesne University and first fell in love with the written word when his dad would read him stories by Edgar Allan Poe as a kid.

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A banner for Sirens Call Publications. It features a dark background with two pairs of hands, one on the left and one on the right, holding up a face. The face has glowing yellow eyes and is partially obscured by the hands. The text "Sirens Call Publications" is written in a large, red, serif font. Below it, in a smaller, red, sans-serif font, is the text "PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION".

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Cliffhanger | *Oliver Lodge*

My wife and I were holding hands, appreciating the spectacular view from a mountaintop. I could not have been happier. The sun beamed and the sky stretched out over the valley for hundreds of miles, offering dreams of a prosperous future for the two of us.

Our marriage had been a tumultuous one and this camping trip gave our relationship the rejuvenation it had so desperately needed. Trust had been an issue with us for years. To such an extent that we came close to getting divorced several times. But making love by the campfire combined with soulful talks that lasted deep into the night created a connection between us even more passionate than when we had first starting seeing one another. The soothing breeze brought relief to our resentments, affirming renewed strength in our vows.

We had been standing close to the edge of a cliff while taking in the landscape. Spotted with shrubs and layered with peach and crimson sands, the expanse of rocky terrain made me dizzy with awe. My head swirled with giddiness and I lost my footing. My wife let go of my hand and I fell over the edge of the summit.

Extending from the side of the cliff a few feet below me was a juniper tree. Had I not caught hold of one of its branches I would have surely fallen hundreds of feet to my death. My heart pounded in my throat as I clung to the tiny tree for dear life. I looked up to where I had fallen. I could not see my spouse.

“Bethany!” I called out to her. “I’m still here!”

Her head popped out from over the edge of the landing above me. Her face had the essence of the moon and her dark eyes glowed with infinite light as locks of her raven hair danced in the wind. “Oh my God!” she gasped. “You’re alive! Hold on tight, Jeremy. I’m going to go for help!”

“No!” I cried. “Don’t leave me! I’m not far from you. Just give me your hand and pull me up!”

“You’re too heavy for me,” she said. “If I give you my hand then you’ll pull me down with you and both of us will die. The tent is only ten minutes away from here. I’ll grab the rope and come right back!”

I pleaded with her to stay but heard nothing in response. She had already gone.

Half-an-hour passed. What happened to her? Did she get diverted by the ranger? He had stopped by the campsite the day before and recommended we take this historic hike. He clapped me on the back and went on to tell me about a spot in the woods where he took women whenever he got lucky at the bar.

Bethany was into birdwatching. She had spotted a species of particular interest to her while the ranger and I were talking. Each and every feather of the bird was a polychromatic prism. I had never seen, nor imagined, that such an animal could exist. My wife held her hand out to it. Her newfound friend fluttered over to her and landed on her pointer finger, which she had held out for it to use as a perch. Delighted by how gentle and friendly the bird was, she looked over to

me and smiled, hoping that I too, had acknowledged the mystical scene. I waved and smiled back.

She probably wanted me to take a picture but the ranger was talking my ear off. Out of the side of his carefully manicured goatee, he suggested I check out some of the nightlife in the area, maybe after my wife had fallen asleep. He was about to get back to work when Beth came over to us. She took out her list and jotted down his contact information. There were no symbols beside his name because he knew nothing about her. That meant trouble for me. Competition.

Every single one of her family members, lovers, and acquaintances knew she was a liar. But all of them were willing to tolerate her lies to a certain extent, and even go along with them if it suited their own personal agendas. Because of this she meticulously kept a list of all of them. Along with a copy she kept in a file cabinet with other important papers, she stored this list in a drawer beside our bed and never left the house without it. Beside each name were a series of symbols. This coding system was used to identify who was willing to believe her side of a story and what she would have to do for that affirmation. For example, an asterisk would be beside someone with the same political beliefs; an arrow pointing upwards signified that she would have to screw or give head to that individual for him to be willing to play along with her charade, and so forth. My name was the only one on her list that did not have any corresponding symbols. This was because I believed all her lies.

Whenever Beth would break up with me and disappear for a while, I would remove this list from the file cabinet and contact everyone on it. I'd hang up on anyone who answered. I'd let the call go to voicemail if they called back. I had nothing to talk to them about. I just wanted the pain I was experiencing from her abandonment to be acknowledged.

One of her lovers left a message stating that my old lady was with him. He had bought some dexedrine from my cousin to get them both more pumped up and prolong coitus. He gave my cousin an extra ten bucks to pass on to me. It was 'for my troubles'.

My entire body began to shake when I thought about this. I was losing my grip on the branch but refused to let go. I'd die waiting for her to come back if I had to. Wouldn't that be ironic? I could already see the headlines: 'Man lives out the rest of his natural life while hanging from a cliff.' By the time I was found I'd be half-eaten by scavengers with a dozen ticks burrowed into my skin.

What was taking her so long? She was so wishy washy. Undependable. I could never trust her. She would go out to run some little errand and then disappear for a month. The minutes would drag by like hours every time she abandoned me. I'd pace the floor pining for her, looking out the window every five minutes to see if she had pulled into the driveway. Now my very life depended on her.

Leaving me holding on by just three fingers, my thumb and index finger slid loose from the branch. These were the same digits she used to finger the mailman's asshole. She admitted to me that he delivered more than just the mail when I wasn't around. He'd break through the front door and she'd struggle to get away but this was just an act to increase their arousal. He'd shove it in when she was still dry and call her the most vile names, then throw a shower of overdue

bills over her naked body, his warm seed still oozing from her gash. “Better pay your dues,” he’d snicker before making his exit. “Don’t wanna lose your pool and precious suburban home, slut.”

She told me how much bigger his dick was compared to mine and complain that I needed to be more aggressive in the sack like he was. I always failed to do this and would get lambasted for it.

Another time she informed me that a man from Detroit was going to be visiting her and that I would have to leave the house for a week while he was there.

“But this is my house too,” I retorted. “Where am I gonna go? Why do you keep doing this to us, Beth? We’re married! I thought we were in this together.”

She mocked me with fake tears. “Figure it out yourself! What kind of man are you anyway? I bet you wanna hit me, don’t you? I wish you would. There’s nothing I’d like more.”

I left but set up hidden cameras throughout the house so that I could watch every lustful act from my laptop in my hotel room. I’d shove paperclips and pipecleaners into my dickhole while watching them fuck in all kinds of different positions. When he’d finally cum, I would wrench them out of my urethra and watch blood pour out of the head of my penis as a means of vicariously participating in the depravity.

My stomach quivered anxiously as I hung there high in the thirsty air, replaying these atrocities over and over again in my mind. Sweat was now pouring down over my temples in scalding rivers. A few of the roots from the juniper tree broke loose from the side of the cliff. It slumped downward suddenly, almost jerking me off of it. Orange rocks crumbled down past my feet while mosquitos helped themselves to transfusions of my blood. I looked down at the valley far below. The stream running through it was a hairline fracture in the earth—a broken capillary reflecting the hot sky. Smoke from a nearby forest fire blew past me.

My mind returned to my absent salvation. She insisted she had used protection with all of her boyfriends. I found out that this wasn’t true when I came up positive for HIV. She returned to the house on the afternoon the test results came back. She’d been MIA for a week. I told her that I was going to file for a divorce if she continued to see other people.

“Are you giving me an ultimatum?” she asked me. “You know how I feel about ultimatums.”

She turned around and walked back out the door after saying this, disappearing for another week.

My forefinger slipped loose from the bark. Now, all that prevented me from plummeting to my death was a trembling pinky. I held my breath and prepared for the plunge.

A black cloud was drifting directly above me. Coated with soot, the exotic bird from yesterday descended from it, the cloud evaporating into wisps of ash the moment it landed beside me on the branch from which I clung.

I had asked Bethany what kind of bird it was on the way up the mountain that day. She told me it was a nightingale.

It didn’t look like a nightingale to me. We promised we wouldn’t argue on this trip. I aired my doubts by telling her this anyway.

This particular breed was believed to have gone into extinction over a century ago, she explained. It was unlike anything I had ever seen because I had never seen it.

I didn't believe a word of this but let the matter lie.

Fearing the bird would peck at my one remaining finger, I tried to shoo it away with my free hand. Instead of taking flight, the passerine grasped me in its talons and lifted me to the safety of the bank of the cliff. Contrary to what my wife had claimed, I was not heavy at all. I was as light as a feather. I thanked the bird when it released me from its grip. It did not respond. It flew away to a part of the forest that was not in flames.

I kissed the ground before making my way down to our campsite from the mountain.

Insects had taken it over. The deer I had shot still lay on the roof of our jeep. Its flesh had almost completely rotted away. Flies and gnats buzzed around the carcass; hollow clefts were all that remained of its fearful eyes. To map out the never-ending task of foraging for their queen, yellow jackets and red ants carved trails into the putrefying hide of the animal. The campsite stank of decay.

I found Bethany giving a blowjob to the ranger inside the tent when I threw open its flap. I knew she cheated on me, but she was always discreet about it. What she didn't tell me I could deny. But now I was confronted with the ugly truth of her betrayal.

The man's cock was in her mouth when she looked up at me. Her appearance contradicted the image of the beautiful woman who had left me for dead on the mountaintop. She had advanced in age. The vitality I had once found so attractive had long gone into extinction. Engorged with the shaft of the ranger's erection, her distended maw was proportionate to the muzzle of a dying mule. Replicating a butternut squash left behind to rot in the sunset of autumn's final harvest, blistering patches of oral gonorrhea speckled the crest of her upper lip. The ruddy blush of some unknown pox crept through the crevices of this infected outgrowth of rubble. Dark circles looped under her eyes, which were bulging out of their sockets. She looked anemic and worn out—a hag so ghastly and embarrassing to behold that she wouldn't even qualify for a freakshow exhibition.

I shot the ranger in the face with my hunting rifle and watched him writhe around in the tent, his feet and arms entangled in the sleeping bags. Blocked by his collapsed Adam's apple, an upsurge of blood gurgled in the cad's throat. Still glazed with his pre-cum, Beth's jaw hung down in horror. Petrified, she knelt beside him. Shock had wedged open the lids of her giant eyes. Seeing their dark wetness stirred by the final spasms of her lover's fatality brought a smile to my face.

At gunpoint, I lead her to the cliff where I had fallen. She frantically offered one excuse after another for what she had done. But I had already crossed myself off her list. I had the barrel of the gun pointed to her back as we walked. Every time she turned around to feed me more alibis, I commanded her to turn around—to look straight ahead.

I dug my mangled knuckles into her bra and ripped it open to remove the infamous list of names she kept between her breasts. I wadded it up into a ball and crammed it inside her mouth.

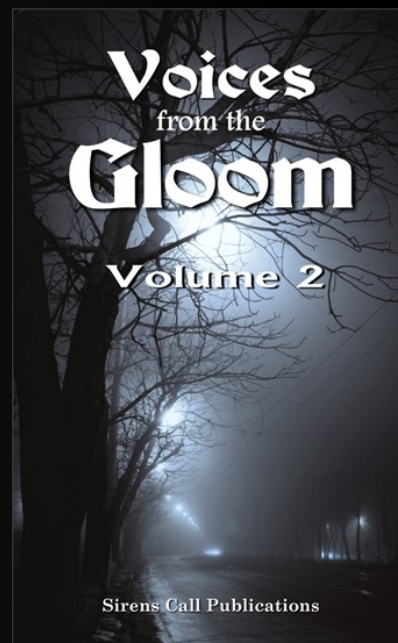
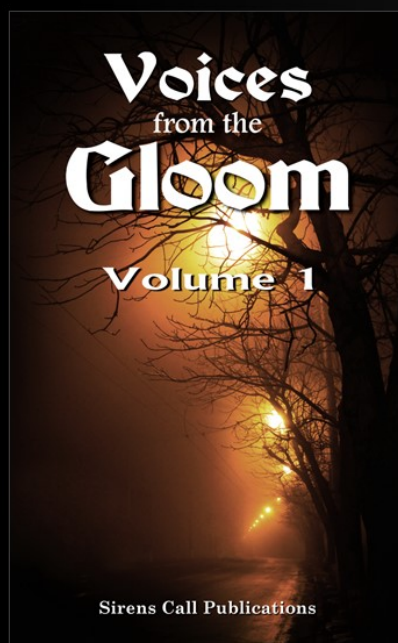
After doing this, I told her that she would not be granted any last words. Everything she had ever said had been a lie. The proliferation of so many tall tales had served as a negation to her very existence. In other words, her entire life had been no more than a lie, therefore rendering it altogether meaningless. There was no longer any need for me or anyone else to listen to her fibs and excuses.

The rope intended for my rescue was thrown at her feet. I had her put it around her neck herself. She did so without argument.

With the steadiness of a pendulum, her corpse still swings from that branch, jutting out of the side of that cliff where she had left me hanging.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Oliver Lodge is an author who lives in upstate New York. He has been published in *Ravenwood Quarterly*, *Creepy Campfire Quarterly*, *Aaduna*, *ANON Magazine*, *Yellow Mama*, *Inner Sin*, *Gutter*, *Grimy*, *Scum*, *Whorrorhouse*, *Body Parts Magazine*, and *Blood Moon Rising Magazine*. A website and collection of short stories to be published by Nihilism Revised is currently in the works. Until then, many of his works can be accessed via his author page on Facebook — [Oliver Lodge](#).

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Nurse Jeannie | *Hayden Quinn*

The patients whimpered as she passed their locked doors. It made her smile. As she walked by, she counted. Eight patients that she was now in charge of, something which filled her with glee. She only wished there were more.

"Please Jeannie," one of them pleaded, "it's been a long night and it's after breakfast time."

She closed her fist and thumped the door twice, "You have no way of telling the time," she looked at the clock on the wall and chuckled to herself, *What do you know? It's ten o'clock*, "and it's Nurse Jeannie to you!"

Silence.

"I'll let the others out but they can thank you later, you're not coming out until after dinner." The ring of keys clanged together as she opened the other seven doors. The one's who requested breakfast received a sharp slap in response. Her hand stung with the effort. It was almost a relief to release the two anorexics who simply smiled slyly to each other instead.

"Social engagement time!" Nurse Jeannie announced with pride. She led them all to the day room and turned on the TV. There seemed no reason that watching TV together wasn't social enough, not many people understood that.

It quickly became dull to watch them all. Supervising was her favourite part of the job but it could only entertain her for so long. At first it had been enough to drop something heavy on the ground and watch them all jump at the sudden thud but even that didn't do much for her now, days into the role.

Walking backwards down the hall so as to keep an eye on them, she had an idea. The room that still contained a patient, from which the sounds of deep sadness emanated, had an inch tall gap under the door.

Nurse Jeannie went to the staff kitchen, to the fridge, and took out the jar of maggots she'd placed there the day before. They'd been collecting on all of the rotten lunches left in the kitchen, she knew she'd find a suitable use for them.

Returning to the door, and ensuring that everyone was where she left them, she bent down and silently removed the lid from the jar. The maggots were more enthusiastic to escape than some people appeared to be. As soon as she laid the jar on the floor, they slithered through the gap in search of their next meal.

It didn't take long for the screaming to begin. It reminded her of the time some days earlier when she'd set a small collection of slugs loose on another patient's bed in the middle of the night, and she'd awoken to one sliding across her neck.

"No...no!" They'll eat me! Let me out!" the patient cried.

Nurse Jeannie leaned on the wall of the hallway, doubled over with laughter. None of them had ever understood why she knew with such certainty that she was superior to them, and yet there they were.

Some of the others shifted uncomfortably in their seats, one lowered her head and cried. Nurse Jeannie was laughing too hard to punish them for not joining in.

At lunch time she warmed the slop and dropped their trays in front of them. Six of them forced it down hungrily while the other two only beamed since they no longer had to take part.

When they were all done and safely locked in their rooms for nap time, Nurse Jeannie put together another round of slop trays and loaded them onto the trolley. She pushed it to the end of the hallway and unlocked the door at the far end. She held her breath as the stench filled the air as it always did at feeding time. There was no getting used to that.

“Food’s up!” she announced, waking the one nearest the door with a kick to the ribs. It seemed to reverberate around the room and wake the rest. Careful to keep a safe distance from each one’s free hand, she placed each tray on the floor.

“How’s everyone doing?” one of them asked.

Jeannie dropped her tray from higher up, causing it to spill over.

“It isn’t talking time!” she yelled, then lowered her voice, “and it’s too late to pretend you care.”

“Of course we care,” another one piped up, “that’s why we became nurses.”

“Now I’m the nurse and you’re my toys, just like I was yours. If you asked them, they’d tell you how much their lives have improved with me in charge.”

“Calling yourself a nurse doesn’t make you one! You’ll always be psychotic.”

For that, Jeannie stamped on his tray. When they looked down at her footprint in the mess, she heard his stomach rumble, his heart break, his spirit crumble. Not all of them though.

“If you were a real nurse, none of this would be happening. We wouldn’t be handcuffed to radiators, we wouldn’t be pissing and shitting in buckets, that are going to overflow soon by the way. You’re just an average crazy who managed a power grab. It won’t last forever, not with seven other crazies down there.”

A deadly silence fell upon the room. Then the only sound was Jeannie’s footsteps as she approached the arrogant woman who had tormented her all year and now dared to speak out of turn. Jeannie raised her foot and kicked over the bucket beside the woman, so hard it bounced before it landed on its side, spilling its contents over the floor.

“It won’t overflow now,” she smiled, some of the rage abating, “see you tomorrow. Maybe.”

As she let herself out, she heard more than one of them begin to vomit at the sight and smells that filled the room.

Down the hall she found her patients still calmly staring at the TV screen and smiled. It all belonged to her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Hayden Quinn is a YA writer who recently started using her lifetime of horror fangirling, and the terrible things in her brain, for her work.

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An Interview with Author Lee Andrew Forman

Sirens Call Publications recently expanded, taking on Lee Andrew Forman as an editor and low and behold, he's an author as well. So we decided to sit down with him and poke his brain a bit to see what would fall out. Aside from the macabre musings and a few skeletons, our chat was entertaining and we're going to share it with you.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Lee! Why don't you take a moment and introduce yourself?

Lee Andrew Forman: I've been a horror fanatic since childhood. I found my love for the macabre by renting movies from the local supermarket as a kid when my parents took me grocery shopping. This of course was when VHS tapes and Blockbuster Video still existed. I'd pick movies that either had the worst cover or the vilest title, which is how I discovered all the campy 80's horror I still love today. You could say I was born with an attraction to the genre, being a third-generation horror fan, starting with my grandfather who was obsessed with the classic Hollywood Monsters. Other than writing, I love to play music, and have learned multiple instruments including guitar, bass, and piano.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

Lee: My love for reading is what made me want to write. I found solace in books during some difficult times in my life. They eased stress, took me out of a negative frame of mind, and allowed me to experience a different life while I was engrossed in a good book. I wanted to provide that same feeling to others, to create characters and situations that made normal life seem not so bad.



SCP: Tell us about your most recent work of fiction?

Lee: My most recent published story, 'A Walk with Grace' is a short piece with an ending no one expected. The story was designed to draw a conclusion from the reader before the end, then surprise them with something completely different. I love the responses I got about how it differed from everyone's expectations and I'm very proud of the effect it achieved!

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about you before they read your work?

Lee?: I take a lot of inspiration from horror movies, often more than I do from literature. Books gave me the motivation to be a writer, but movies drive the content of what I tend to write. I love creatures, always have. Movies, books, art, monsters are always in the forefront of my imagination. Creating my own original horrors is profoundly satisfying.

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

Lee: Although I do sometimes plan out a project before starting, most of the time I just write and see where it takes me. I usually don't know how the story will end, or even what the characters are going to do. In a way, I allow the characters to tell the story themselves. I put them in situations, then try to let their actions flow naturally rather than trying to force my own personality onto them. Sometimes I wonder if I'm a puppet of their will, instead of the other way around.

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

Lee: So far the most difficult challenge is keeping up with all my current and future projects. I'm juggling writing for a magazine, a website, a podcast, working as an editor, and trying to finish multiple novels. I've had to make sacrifices in other aspects of my life to keep up with organizing my ideas and meeting deadlines. Even though it's hard to do, I'm content with it. Writing has been the best decision of my life.

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

Lee: Right now I'm about to begin reading my first Neil Gaiman novel, 'Neverwhere'. People can't believe I've never read Gaiman before, and they always insist that I do. So I figured I've waited long enough!

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

Lee: I love Clive Barker, John Saul, and Richard Matheson, among many others in the horror genre. But I also have a deep love for science fiction, my favorite author being Arthur C. Clarke. It's hard to choose favorite novels, but the first three that come to mind are *1984* by George Orwell, *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski, and *Rendezvous with Rama* by Arthur C. Clarke.

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

Lee: Different writers define success in different ways. And although making a full-time paycheck writing is my end goal, it's not my motivation. My idea of success is getting work published, read by others, and enjoying the process. Writing has made me happier than anything else ever has in my life, and that to me is the greatest success I could have hoped to achieve.

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?

Lee: I would advise new writers to read what they want to write. If you want to write a short story, read them. If you want to write a novel, read as many as you can. But don't *only* read in the genre you want to write. Branch out, explore the world of literature, consume knowledge from genres you *haven't* read. I've gotten tons of inspiration for horror that came from books that don't even come close to the subject. Once you've sucked up as much information as you can, just start writing. Even if it's terrible. Write it anyway. It takes practice to get to the good stuff. If you can't accept writing a bad story or two, you may never get to that amazing piece you probably have floating around in your imagination somewhere.

SCP: What one piece of your work are you most proud of? Why?

Lee: Although it's an incredibly short piece, I'm most proud of a flash fiction I wrote titled 'An Ensemble of Worms'. The words, ideas, and imagery flowed with that piece like no other. And the feedback I received from the publisher was one of the most uplifting reactions to any of my work I've ever received. Ever since then I've strived to achieve that same effect, reach that precise level of blending words and ideas.

Thank you Lee for taking the time to sit down with us!

An Excerpt from *The Bones of Hillside* by Lee Andrew Forman

The hatch remained hidden and locked in the cellar. Rusty chains and an iron padlock held it down, kept the thing inside from escaping. For years, Robin feared it would break through the rotten wood planks and wondered why it never did. But he gave up thinking about it long ago; all that mattered was that it worked.

He opened the shed to get a rake but gazed past it at the Halloween costume hung on a nail—a black cloak and devil mask. He stared into the empty holes where the eyes of a child would be; emptiness stared back.

He leaned to get the tool, wrapped his fingers around its splintered handle, and retreated, slamming the shed doors behind him. Sweat ran down his brow, and he wiped it with his sleeve. Icicles stabbing at his spine made every part of him shudder. The shed was not a place he favored visiting.

Attempting to clear fallen leaves from the grounds of an entire graveyard with a rake would have been insane, more ludicrous than what his job already entailed. He had a riding mower with a leaf vacuum attachment as well as a leaf blower. But he raked them from graves the old fashioned way. He did it with care and gently brushed the grass in fine strokes. He couldn't just ride the tractor over their resting places or use the noisy leaf blower. It didn't matter the coffins contained no remains; he had to respect their memories.

The crunching of leaves diverted Robin's attention, and he looked to see a blue uniform approaching. Cops always rattled his nerves. The thought that they'd find out what he'd been doing repeated itself daily. Handcuffs and a free ride in a police car were never far from his thoughts.

"Good morning," the woman said. "I'm Officer Gabel."

Robin smiled. "Morning. Robin Thomas. What can I do for you?"

"Well, with Halloween coming up I just wanted to check in. You know how the kids are around here."

He let out a forced laugh. "Yeah, I've had to chase them out of here at night many times."

"I know what you mean. It's a busy night for us too. Just be careful and call if you need. We'll be running extra patrols near the cemetery tomorrow night because of what happened last Halloween."

Great, Robin thought. That's all I need. Cops snooping around here.

"Thank you, much appreciated," he said. "They did some real damage to the headstones last year."

"They sure did. What kind of person desecrates a grave like that? It makes you wonder... Well, good luck to you. And happy Halloween."

"You too."

He waited until the uniform went out of sight before going inside to retrieve a beer from the refrigerator. He popped it open and drank quickly, opening another as soon as he emptied the first. With his hand to his chest, he breathed deeply in an attempt to curb the oncoming tremors.

He wanted to run, get away from the nightmare, but his conscience tied him there with a tight noose.

After finishing off a six pack, he felt okay enough to go back outside. He peeked through the curtains to ensure no more police had come. He despised the paranoia, but being arrested and locked away seemed insignificant to the consequences that would surely take place after. That's what really terrified him—not jail, not losing his freedom, but the fact that his imprisonment would endanger the lives of innocents.

Moving out into the field of the dead he started the grim task of choosing which grave to take from. He rubbed his chin and scanned the area, keeping note of which graves he'd already exhumed, so he didn't waste his time digging up an empty coffin. Autumn always entailed extra work—more digging, more bodies, and of course leaving no trace of his extracurricular activities.

The beast's appetite always grew ravenous in October. Something about Halloween riled up the thing living in the hatch, and it took additional meals to keep it satiated. Robin never believed in superstition, but after fifteen years, his outlook on the matter changed. Maybe Halloween was more than just a children's holiday. Maybe it really did have some supernatural significance. Either way, it certainly did in the cursed place he'd been stuck tending to.

"Albert Combs," he read on the headstone. "1935 to 1974. Poor bastard didn't live long." It made him consider his own mortality. Hell, he was nearly pushing 40 already. But he suspected he'd live a long life, cursed to continue on until he joined the ranks he cared for.

Will someone dig me up someday? Will I end up as a meal for that horrible thing?

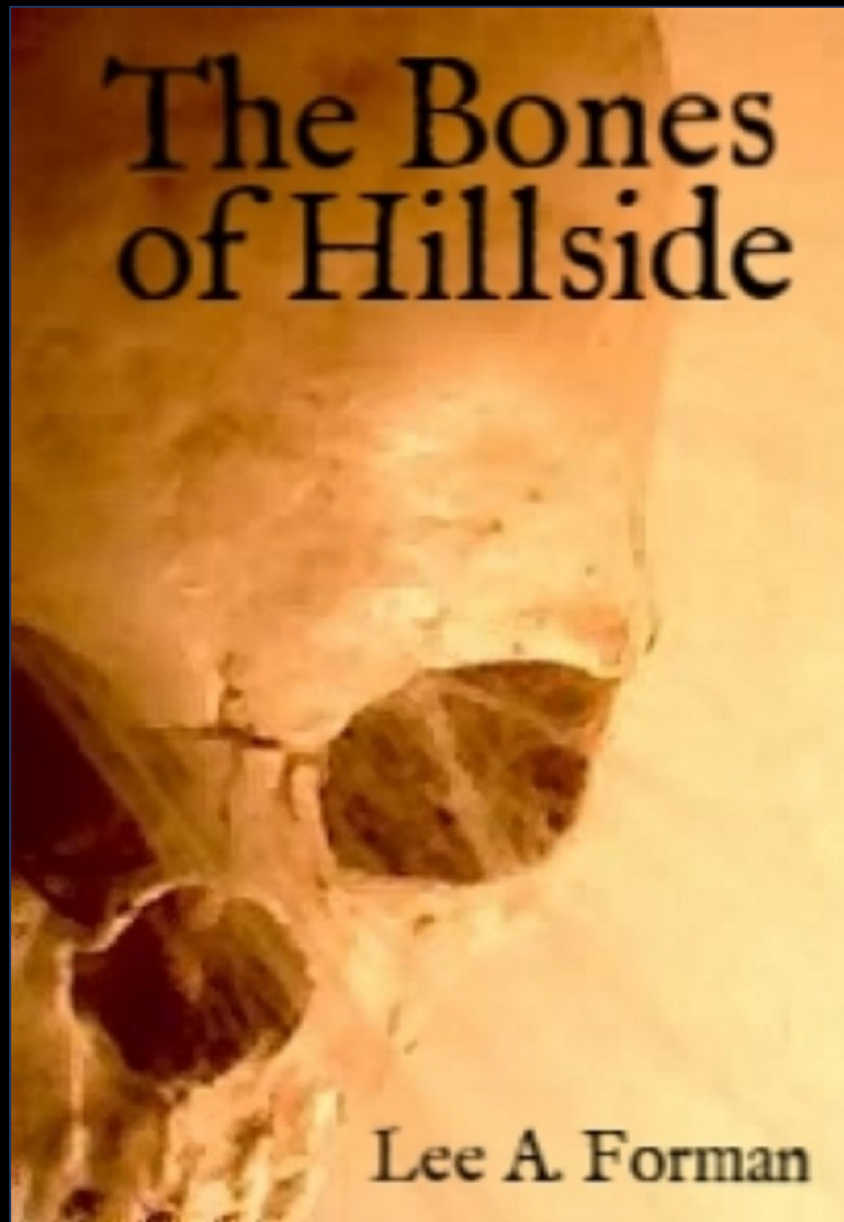
He waited until nightfall, grudgingly opened the doors to the shed, tried not to look at the devil mask, and retrieved the shovel. He carried it to his chosen site.

"Sorry about this Albert, but it has to be done."

He stuck the shovel's point into the soft earth and stomped with his boot until it sank in. He pried up the dirt and repeated the process until it felt as though his back would break. The moon waltzed along the sky, and by the time he'd reached bottom, it was nearly dawn. He wiped the last layer of dirt away by hand and stood over the coffin a long time, dreading its opening even though he'd done it countless times before.

"Hey there, Albert. Sorry I have to disturb you like this. But think of the good you'll do. It's an honorable cause." Robin sighed and pried open the lid. "Hope you lived a good life, pal." He tied a rope around Albert's waist and climbed out of the grave. With both feet firmly planted, he hoisted old Albert out and carefully placed him in a wheelbarrow. "Come on. Let's go for a little ride."

Robin Thomas is cursed with a grave task,
and Halloween is the darkest night of his year...



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