The Sirens Call

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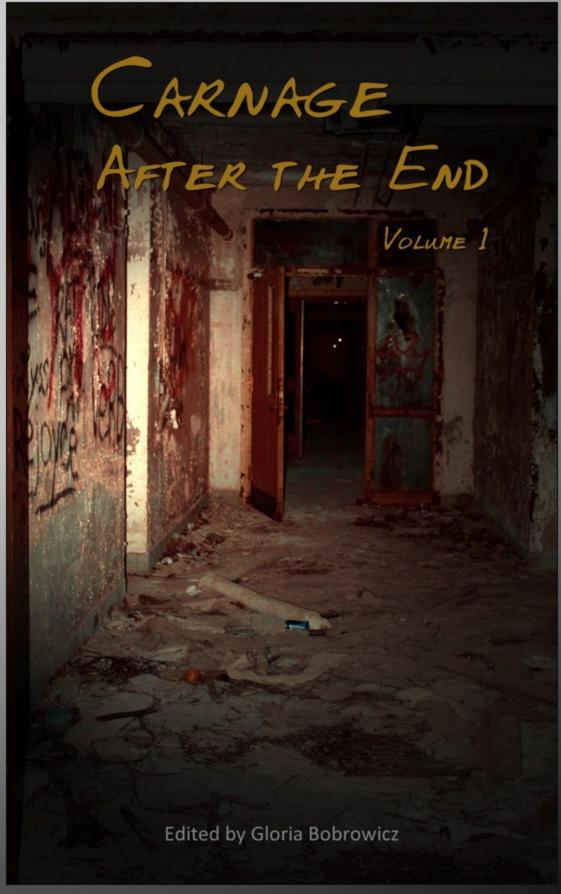
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An Editor's Point of View An Editorial by Gloria Bobrowicz

An editor's life is extremely busy. Authors put out short stories of 4,000 to 10,000 words, novellas and novels of 50,000 words or greater, which is a great deal of work, but someone has to look over each word, sentence, and punctuation mark. That someone is me. Do you have any idea how many of these stories come across my desk each day? My day involves handling submissions, emails, reading, interacting with the beta readers, formatting and much more for each story. At any given time, I'm working my way through stories for three anthologies, our eZine and a novel or two. All that said, I wouldn't have it any other way - I've met so many talented and nice people through my work.

I've been an avid reader since I was a child. As an added bonus, I get to read a wide variety of stories for free. I love horror and true crime, and this month's anthology call is about Serial Killers; one of my all time favorite subjects. I've read every book about serial killers that I could get my hands on without exaggeration. I love exploring the mind and behavior of these individuals, a morbid fascination I guess. I can't wait to see the submissions we receive for this one. I am so excited.

Some people think their editor is the enemy. Why do I say this? I follow several blogs to that effect. An editor's job is to make your story shine as best they can. To enhance the written word with proper grammar, correct tense, eliminate extra words to tighten up the story, and to avoid run on sentences. My job is not to change your voice or to write for you. I may offer suggestions as to how to fix things, but they are just that, suggestions. Some writers like to think of the editor as someone with a red pen that will rip their story apart. In my opinion, that is as far from the truth as possible. When you think of me, I want you to think of a friendly editor. Not as a gal wearing red pens in her gun belt, low on her hips, in tight jeans with thigh high boots, hanging over the swinging saloon doors with a cigarette dangling from her ruby red lips echoing, "Make my day". Ok, you can

keep the visual; just substitute the saying with, "Let's see how we can polish your already brilliant work and make it sparkle". Sometimes there are few edits, sometimes there are many. Do not take the edits as a personal attack on you or your written work. Editors are here to help you. Don't let yourself become jaded or let your ego get in the way; accept the help that is offered in the vein in which it is extended – one of kindness, caring and a genuine desire to help you shine as brightly as possible.

Wishing all of our readers and contributors a safe, happy, and healthy holiday season!

Your Editor, Gloria



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

Pen of the Namned



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

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Joseph Pinto



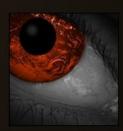
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Freezing - It's Not The Worst Way To Go... An Editorial by Nina D'Arcangela

This month's issue of *The Sirens Call* is themed 'Frozen', and in keeping with not only the theme, but my bitter dislike for this time of year here in the North-East region of the US, I'm going to tackle the topic of freezing in this editorial. So let's talk freezing to death, and why, in my humble horror writer's opinion, it's not the worst way to go.

I'm not going to get into the scientific details of freezing, like specific temperature or survival time in varying environments, you can look that up if you'd like – Wikipedia is chock full of details. Instead, I'm going to describe why I don't think it's the worst way to say adios to planet Earth.

Everyone says it — I'm freezing! — it's a common phrase, and we all understand what it means. I'm pretty cold right now while sitting here typing this editorial, and I'm thinking to myself, I'm freakin' freezing. But in fact, I'm not. I'm simply colder than I'd like to be. I'm one of those people who's always cold. Stick me in the tropics in the middle of a heat wave, and at the slightest breeze I'll shiver and torture whoever is with me by complaining, "Brrr, did you feel that breeze?" Yup, you'd wanna smack me too! But that's just me. Given that fact (or gripe as it were), you'd think freezing to death would make my all-time five worst ways to go, but the truth is, I actually think it would be one of the more peaceful ways of checking out... Why?

When you begin to freeze to death, you're 'uncomfortable' (which is doctor speak for 'this part is really gonna suck'). Your skin is raw and tender to the touch, your teeth chatter, and your body shivers uncontrollably much like a cold blooded creature attempting to generate heat through a form of friction. Not long after, your extremities and limbs begin to feel searing pain, which in a way is ironic considering heat is the essential thing you are lacking. Once your fingers, toes, ears, nose, and all the rest start to turn from a beautiful blue to a mottled greenish black, the ungodly burning stops, and you begin to experience a numbing sensation.

By this point, your motor functions have slowed to a crawl; your mental acuity is at an all time low; and your bio-chemical levels are firing at about the rate of a musket jammed with mud. Everything is starting to shut down...

This is where the 'freezing isn't the worst way to go' part comes in. For someone like myself who is constantly thinking in six different directions at once, with no way to turn any of them off, the euphoria of slowing to the point of a single thought process is mildly appealing. I have a few physical ailments which cause me constant discomfort I've learned to live with over the years, so again, even for the brief period it takes for my body temperature to drop below a survivable level – I'm feeling no more pain. It's almost as though both my mind and body can take a break, sit back, and enjoy the final stop on the Bullet train that is my life.

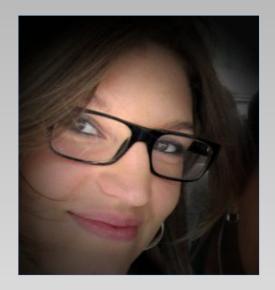
Call me a slacker, but if I was drowning — my natural instincts would kick in and force me to fight for a breath that I would never be able to attain because I can't swim. If I were burning in a raging fire, the pain would drive me to frantically find an exit that must be somewhere nearby, that I would never be able to find because according to my grandmother, I couldn't find my way out of a wet paper bag. If Godzilla were raging his way through Tokyo during the one chance in my lifetime I would have the opportunity to visit that magnificent city, I would be in the El car he was shaking like a Cracker Jack box, trying desperately to hang on while his enormous golden eye focused directly on me. (Okay, that last part about Godzilla would be awesome!) But if I were to freeze to death, my mind would be on blissful

pause, my body would be telling me not to bother moving – it's way too much effort, and my overall state of being would be one that involved a perpetual snooze button – just 5 more minutes Ma, and I promise I'll get up for school...

So given all that – is freezing really the worst way to go? My money's on nah, it really could be much worse.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic and fantastical things could be in her own head while the doll's was so very vacant.

Enamored by the imaginatively woven tales of Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burrows and Arthur C. Clark, magical worlds took form from their inspiration



keeping her awake night after night reading by flashlight under the covers, or nesting in a closet with the door shut. While willing to read just about anything that is well crafted, she has a soft spot for the darker side of writing in the Horror, Sci-Fi and Other World genres.

Nina can be reached through Sirens Call Publications at Nina@SirensCallPublications.com; or darc.nina@gmail.com. Please visit her on her blog "Sotet Angyal: The Dark Angel" at sotetangyal.wordpress.com; or "Spreading the Writer's Word" at ninadarc.wordpress.com; and feel free to stalk her on Twitter as @Sotet Angyal.



Twelve Tales of Retribution, Deceit, and Betrayal

Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

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Context: The Meaning of Words An Editorial by Kalla Monahan

Words can mean different things to different people. Okay, perhaps that is not entirely true - it's the context of those words that give them their meaning.

We use words every day; we talk, we write, we text, we email - I could keep going, but I won't. Some of us use them sparingly, while others take a different route; using their words to paint grandiose pictures for the imagination. Sentences can be simple or complex, and that's part of the seductive nature of words: they are ours to use in whichever style we would like.

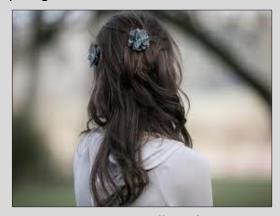
As a society, we use words to convey our emotions, actions, consequences, directions; without language, communication would be difficult. Many words have meaning across a multitude of languages. Take for instance the word no - it's understood across cultures. Then there are words that are identifiable to specific places; some are colloquialisms, while others are actual words that defy translation. Those words tend to be adopted to regular use, mainly because no translation can adequately capture the intended meaning. If you don't believe me, consider the word kamikaze. It's a Japanese word that has no direct single word translation into the English language and yet we all know what it means without needing an English counterpart for it because of the context in which it is used.

In order to go a little more into depth concerning words, let's discuss for a moment the theme for this eZine: frozen. There's the most obvious definition - made into, covered with, or surrounded by ice; it has to do with temperature. But consider for a moment some of these other definitions - rendered immobile; expressive of cold unfriendliness or disdain; kept at a fixed level; or impossible to withdraw, sell, or liquidate. From the placement of frozen within a sentence and the words used around it, you can readily understand its meaning; in essence it's context.

Taking it one step farther, you have conceptual meanings: frozen in time and frozen with fear - the list continues. Essentially, the application of frozen

extends past where the obvious definition stops. We haven't even considered colloquialisms or the urban dictionary yet. In the urban dictionary, frozen can mean such things as attaining a drug high, being so high that you've passed the stage of severe intoxication, wearing an extreme amount of diamonds, a syrupy juice sold out of houses in Southeast Asia, a state of being hung over, the next level of being cool, insulted to the point of inaction, and that's just to name a few.

In the end, it's all about what frozen means to you and how well you can convey that meaning. It's the beauty of words that can bring us together, or their use as weapons that can tear us apart. We use them to excite and to instill fear, along with a host of other emotions. The next time you open your mouth to speak or sit down to write, take a moment to think about the words that you string together. Communication is important and context is everything.



at SCP but don't let that fool you; get her started on one of our projects and she will passionately talk your ear off. And as the Publicist of SCP, it's valuable to have someone that can both listen to the tides of the publishing world and sing your praises. Her literary loves include horror, science fiction and the bizarre. While she does have a weak spot for a good Zombie storyline and will greedily devour anything in the genre, she does get titillated by works in any genre that are well crafted and full of great characters.



The Voice Joshua Skye

The voice. It sounded earthy, cavernous, a yawning resonance. It thundered from the ether, the very air around her. Trembling, she pushed herself out of the deep, icy mud and it dripped, dripped, dripped from her in thick tendrils. She tried to wipe it from her face but her hand was covered in it too and she only succeeded in smearing it. She choked, sputtered and spit a rancid glob of filth out as she crawled from the puddle.

It was so cold. She could see the wisps of her breath ebb and flow before her. Winter in Pennsylvania could be harsh, dangerous. Everyone knew it all too well. But it was particularly nasty that night. Ice storms had raged across the northwestern areas turning the world into a sparkling panorama so dangerous that no one had ventured from their homes since nightfall. No one that is, except for Shawna. She didn't have a choice. A mother doesn't have a choice when her daughter is taken, torn from her arms, and whisked out into the freezing nighttime.

The snow was encrusted, a plane of glittering ice. Her bitterly aching fingers crashed through it as she crawled along making her way to a nearby tree. She used it to help herself up. The bark was slippery smooth, but she managed. In the light of the half-moon above she glared down at her fingers, they seemed to burn as they curled into her palm. She watched as the wet mud froze into long, thin icicles. When she formed them into fists the ice shattered and showered to the ground.

The voice thundered again, scorning her, warning her. She answered it with a defiant, insistent scream. She would not give up. She would not fail her child. Though her limbs were numb, though it was laborious to move them, she struggled onward. She had to. She was a mother after all and she didn't have a choice. Each step sent searing bolts of agony up through her legs. The whipping wind cut into her face, split her lips, deadened her eyes. Even blinking was painful. But onward she went.

The Allegheny National Forest was a wild wonderland, a shadowy landscape of trees that bowed so extremely from the heavy weight of the ice that the woodland looked like some surreal arctic nightmare, waves of a frozen ocean polluted by the bounty of the forest. And into it she went crashing through curtains of ice and cascading frost. *Mommy's coming* she wanted to cry out, but her voice was gone. Only sighs and grunts issued forth. *Where's my baby? Where's my baby, curse you*.

As she trudged painfully through the devilish freeze she thought of the first moments after delivering her daughter. The world had been a haze, white and barren like the forest was at that bitter instant. There had been voices, so many voices. Some she'd recognized, others she hadn't. Her husband had said soothing things. Her mother had been awestruck by her granddaughter. And there had been doctors and nurses and strange beeping sounds and a radio blaring something completely and utterly inappropriate. And then the baby had been slipped into her arms. It hadn't been all nice and pink like they were in movies. Oh no, it had been gray and covered in something thick and gross. It had smelled. It had screamed. Screamed. Oh dear God, that's all it had done was scream.

For weeks after she hadn't wanted anything to do with it. It just bellowed. It never shut up. It never slept. It never ate. It tormented her so. And she'd hated it. Oh, what a terrible thing for a mother to admit but it was true. She'd hated the horrible little thing. And she'd wished and wished for it to just go away. She hadn't cared how. She'd just wanted it gone. And she'd said so. She'd told her husband. And he'd dragged her kicking and screaming to that crazy doctor. Post-partum depression the quack had called it, perfectly natural, perfectly fine. He'd been all smiles and phony compassion. *Take two of these every four hours and call me in a week*.

They'd numbed her, those pills. They'd turned her into a zombie, a lifeless thing that did as she was told without a second thought. Get up. Get the baby. Feed the baby. Burp the baby. Change the diaper. Hold the baby, love the baby, love the little baby, love the poor, wonderful, beautiful little baby...

And for some reason she started to. The morbid sentiment that had possessed her at the hospital just melted away and left her with a calm, dreamy affection for her darling little daughter. Oh, she was so

perfect. So precious. Such a blessing from God. And then the voice had come.

It had begun as whispers from the shadows whenever she was alone with Serena, a breathy rush of sound oozing from the dark. It had said terrible things. It had called for her to do those terrible things to poor little baby Serena. Once it mused of feeding the child an elixir concocted of milk, honey, and drain cleaner. Another night it had wondered about the result of a hammer's blow to her little head. And yet another dreamy evening it urged Shawna to throw Serena into the Conewango Creek.

The mother resisted the phantom influence, held her daughter all the closer when that voice leached out of the darkness. And then the persuasions deepened. *Kill her or the world will end*, it would murmur. *Kill her or all becomes nothing*.

She'd refused to tell her husband. She couldn't bear going back to that doctor, couldn't bear the thought of taking another pill. The first had brought the motherly affection for Serena she'd so desperately needed. What if a second would take it away? No, no more pills. It couldn't be risked. So she'd remained silent and endured those ghostly voices calling out to her, denied them, and cursed them.

But the longer she refused the commanding voice the more insistent it was, the louder it roared, the more thunderous it became until late one night she'd watched in trembling terror as the shadows from whence the demands had been coming became flesh, a writhing murk in the dark that reached out to her with bony, misty fingers, reaching, reaching, reaching from the gloom behind the television, under the bed, the depths of the closet, the fathomless night outside the windows. And with each subsequent night she rejected the urgings of the ghoulish fiend those fingers had gotten closer and closer and closer still until from the darkness bloomed an arm.

Kill the child. Kill her or else...

And then there'd been wings, unfurling folds of eddying black fog that had trickled over the expanse of whatever room she'd been in. At first there had only been the one but soon there'd been another uncurling athwart the ether, pouring across the ceiling, and draining over the floor. Oh, and then the other arm had swelled from the gloom, nearly corporeal nails searching, longing, ravenous.

Kill her or the world will end...

Still she'd rebuffed the demonic demands and that is when the face had bulged from the blackness, a quivering cloud of shadow with a swirl of piercing crimson eyes and a tangle of mouths with churning teeth. Amorphous, the lips twisted and burst as the creature spoke, *Kill her or all becomes nothing*.

And that had been the moment she'd screamed. Her husband had been there, home early because of the storm, the dangerous ominous tempest. And he'd tried to calm her, tried to ease her out of her terror. But the monster hadn't retreated and loomed behind him laughing, laughing, laughing. She'd pushed her husband away, embraced little Serena tighter, protectively. She couldn't let anything happen to her precious baby girl. No, nothing would touch her, nothing would lay its

filthy fingers on her.

He'd been so strong and yet so emotional, her husband. Even as he'd pulled his child from his wife's suffocating grasp he'd wept. Shawna had cursed him, clawed at him, demanded the baby back. But the towering fiend had laughed even harder as he slipped into her husband. She'd watched the man's eyes change, go from royal blue to bloody scarlet. And when that sneer had crossed his lips she knew the man she loved wasn't there anymore. She'd lashed out one more time, all her strength into the attack. It had only taken one swift blow to her chin to knock her unconscious.

When she'd awakened she'd known where the monster would have gone. He'd take Serena to her mother's house through the nightmarish woods. He wouldn't think that she would follow. He wouldn't think her so strong, so determined. So she'd wrapped herself in her warmest winter coat and trudged after them.

Through curtains of ice, beneath bended trees she went. She suffered deep muddy pools and thigh-

deep drifts of crisp, icy snow that cut into her. She endured vicious torrents of wind, survived a tumbling fall down a steep embankment and a plunge into the glacial creek, smashing through the ice into the stinging water. It seemed as though her fingertips split open as she clawed her way out and up that precipitous barrier of frozen snow. Burning. Aching. Lightning. She screamed and she screamed again.

The beast mocked her, rebuked her. Across the countryside came the rolling cacophony of splintering wood as trees uncountable surrendered to their heavy icy blankets. And the sky above split apart with the blinding explosion of innumerable flashes of lightning followed immediately by world rumbling thunder. A shower of ice pellets rained down. The storms had returned.

Shawna pushed herself harder, struggled through the anguish, thought only of her little girl as she trekked along. She couldn't let the monster have poor, precious Serena. She couldn't trust the baby to the beast inside of her husband and her easily influenced mother. They'd do something. They'd do something atrocious, unspeakable. Her breathing was shallow, her lungs felt as though they were on fire. Her arms were a tense, useless knot at her bosom. Her legs were going to go, she just knew it. Almost there, had to keep going...

Suddenly, the hail was bigger. Huge, jagged chucks of ice beat her as she went, tumbling their way down to her through the forest's drooping, frozen canopy. One the size of her fist smashed into the side of her head and sent her stumbling to the ground where she sunk into the crunchy snow.

Huffing, shivering uncontrollably, screaming at herself in her mind she tried frantically to thrash herself free of the white coffin. The snow spilled in on her the more she moved until she was buried in darkness. A weak wail escaped her throat as she forced her arms to unbend. The pain was unbelievable, tears that immediately froze stung her eyes. She reached up. Yes. Reached for the sky and flailed about madly until she had a hold of something. It didn't matter what it was. She wrapped her gory, throbbing fingers around it and pulled, pulled herself free of the snowy casket. She had to get up. She had to stand. And through the torment she did.

Almost there. Her mother's house wasn't much further. Her strides were shorter as she fought to keep going. Her legs wanted to stop, to buckle and drop her but she didn't let them. She had to get to the house, the house in the clearing just over there. She could see it now, the lights in the windows through the icy nightmare. Pelted by the growing hail, pushing through her misery she

finally, at last stumbled into her mother's front yard. Wreathed in the bitter yellow of floodlights the property seemed to shimmer. Looming around it the once mighty old oaks grandpa had planted were burdened with the same icy shrouds that were murdering the forest.

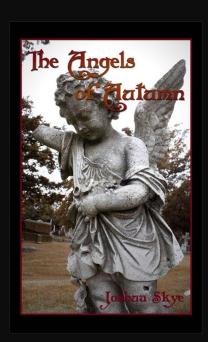
Just a little further. So very close. On the threshold she could feel the warmth from inside seeping from the seams around the door. Nearly shrieking she forced her right hand down, heard a snapping sound as she opened her hand, felt nothing when she took a hold of the knob. *Turn it, turn it.* It opened. A rush of warmth and the smell of chocolate bathed her. There in the living room was her husband. He was holding little Serena out to her grandmother. And there was the beast in his eyes, in his smile, in the victorious tilt of his head. Shawna tried to scream but nothing came out. She tried to walk but fell instead, her legs finally gone. As she pushed herself up, stretched to see what was being done to her precious child there came a thunderous splintering. Her mother looked to the ceiling just before the oak trees crashed through it. All of them, all at once yielded to the great burden of their frosty veils and in but a fraction of a moment all became nothing. The house was obliterated and all of its occupants were whisked into darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Joshua Skye was born in Jamestown, New York but predominantly grew up in the Texas Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. He is a graduate of K.D. Studio Actor's Conservatory of the Southwest and has worked on indie/underground films and on stage. He lives in rural Pennsylvania with his partner Ray of sixteen years and their eight year old son, Syrian. His short stories have appeared in anthologies from STARbooks Press, Knightwatch Press, Sirens Call Publications, Rainstorm Press, JMS Books and periodicals such as Blood and Lullabies. He is the author of *The Singing Wind*, *Bareback: A Werewolf's Tale*, *The Angels of Autumn*, *The Grigori*, along with the forthcoming *Midnight Rainbows*.

A Powerfully Profound Thriller...

The Angels of Autumn

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace & Smashwords



Push Matthew Kagle

Upon leaving his doctor's office, Julius Hornge did what many did when diagnosed with terminal cancer. He thought about his life, and what he had accomplished. Certainly, he was rich and successful by any measure. His investments in fringe technologies had paid off immensely, in spite of his own lack of scientific understanding. Still, with the end of his life looming ahead, he wondered if anything he had done was worthwhile.

Julius stopped in a cafe and stared at the image of the president on the television mounted on the far wall. He considered praying for guidance, but his phone rang, jolting him out of his thoughts. Julius put the phone to his ear and received the guidance he needed.

Julius gave the researchers more money and encouragement than they ever hoped for. His condition, that they test their "Dimensional Push" device on him first, broke all ethical rules. They tried to explain that there was no way back, that he would die within a day, that his body would be dust before anyone could get him to a hospital. In the end, his money won out over their moral qualms.

He had to walk through the Push chamber naked. Even gaunt and wasted, even with his hair shaved, his fingernails removed, and his epidermis nearly scoured off, his mass was nearly too great for the machine. When he came out the other end, he thought it hadn't worked. Then he noticed how quiet the world had become, how dim the lights were, and how nobody was moving or breathing.

He had been Pushed. He was living between the ticks of the clock.

The first thing he did was kill all the scientists. He was no monster; he knew his invention was too dangerous to trust others to use it wisely after his death. The researchers and all their notes had to be destroyed to keep the world safe. Julius walked from one person to the next, frozen like statues, and poked his finger into their hearts. It felt like pushing his hand through lightly packed snow.

Poking their hearts was the cleanest, most painless method he could think of, but it was still hard to watch them die, their blood spraying out slower than mud, slower than cold honey. He watched them for a while, waiting for their blank faces to register horror, but it would take hours, in Push time, before they died.

Julius walked. He had a long trip ahead of him, and he wasn't used to exerting himself. Soon he was shivering, and his feet were sore. Noticing a nearby house, he pushed his way through the door and found a closet. He tried to put on the clothes he found there, but they instantly tore to shreds. In the kitchen, he tried to eat an apple out of a bowl on the counter, but just touching one made it explode. He was able to suck some pieces out of the air, but they sat in his stomach in heavy lumps, and he gave up on food.

Disgruntled, Julius left the house. Outside, a woman was watering her lawn. He tripped over her hose and fell through her. Julius stared, horrified, at her severed head as it hung in the air. She still had a bored expression on her tanned face. As the woman's head slowly drifted to the ground, he swore he would stick to his task. From then on, only the president would die by his hand.

He had picked a day and time when the president was giving a speech on the front lawn of the White House. It was easier to get closer to him than Julius had expected, easier than for Booth, easier than for Hinckley. All he had to do was pick his way carefully to the podium where he stood. Julius felt he needed to say something, to give a sense of occasion to the execution of a powerful man, but he couldn't think of anything momentous.

"Sorry about this," he said, finally, "but you really suck as president.

Julius would have preferred to have killed him cleanly, humanely, like the scientists, but he didn't have the option. The president had to die horribly, gruesomely. Reporters all over the world would have to show his bloody death and speculate how his policies had led to his death.

As Julius raised his hand to strike the man's face off, he noticed a movement out of the corner of his

eye. He turned to look, but saw nothing but a sea of faces staring in his direction. Julius shook his head and turned back to his task.

It was a fatal mistake. He heard a sound and, before he could turn, a pair of strong, dark arms clamped around his shoulders. He screamed and fought, but he was frail and the woman grappling with him was trained and healthy. Julius flailed desperately at the president, but the woman threw him to the side. They both toppled through the podium, which shattered like it was made of toothpicks. Then the woman slowly choked the life out of him.

Hours later, the president sat in the Oval Office, waiting for the all-clear signal. The Secret Service had already reported on the assassin and shown him pictures of a desiccated corpse before it crumbled away. He still found it hard to believe.

The president took a page of official letterhead and a new fountain pen from a drawer and wrote. He started with the words "I was always against the Push Security program, because of the high cost in human lives." He ended with "Agent Juanna Carly has served more honorably than any could have expected. She and her family have my deepest thanks and condolences."

The president capped the pen and placed it on the note. Before he could even blink, both the paper and pen had vanished. In their place was a new page, with strange, smudgy brown marks on it like finger paint. He leaned closer and saw they were scorch marks; someone had rubbed her finger over the page so quickly the paper had burned. The marks formed the words "Thank you, Mr. President."

He sighed and leaned back on his chair. By the time he went to sleep that night, Juanna Carly would have died of old age. A new agent would immediately take her place, protecting him between the ticks of the clock for another day. The president did math in his head, multiplying his three years in office by the days in a year. Nearly a thousand men and women had died in service to him.

The president covered his face and fought back biter tears.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Matthew Kagle was born in Idaho in 1980 to a family of hard-rock miners. Not wanting to join the silver-mining business, he completed his high school education three months early and went to Stanford University. He dropped out after one year to follow his dream of becoming an accountant for the electronic entertainment industry. Matthew now resides in Pacifica, California where he designs video games for Vacuum Genesis Games (www.vacuumgenesis.com), writes about his life experiences on his blog (icanwritefunny.blogspot.com), and rides horses when the weather permits. This is his first fiction publication. You can find him on Twitter at @makagle.

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It Was Cold Jon Olson

Cheryl Arcane sat in the back of the ambulance with a wool blanket wrapped around her body and a Styrofoam cup of coffee in her trembling hands. Despite the blanket, coffee and the heat on full blast in the ambulance, she still felt cold. Not just the cold of the Nova Scotia winter, but of the thing that had saved her life.

"So let me get this straight, Miss Arcane," Sheriff Woodrow White of the Hawthorne Sheriff's Department asked staring down at his small notepad, "You're telling me you escaped after your kidnapper was attacked by... the cold?"

Cheryl nodded, sipping her coffee.

"Care to elaborate on what that means?" Sheriff White looked up from his notepad and into Cheryl's now haunted brown eyes.

Cheryl shook her head, "I couldn't exactly make out what it was, but I could feel it... it was so cold... and it just tossed him around... ripping... tearing..." Tears started to well up in her eyes and run down her red cheeks.

Sheriff White sighed, reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder, "It's alright now Miss Arcane, it's alright." Cheryl put her face in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

As Ian Hebert pressed the gun against the back of her head she had begun trembling. She was afraid and she could hear him licking his lips.

"Take this exit here," he said.

Cheryl nodded as she continued to sob. He had jumped her from behind in the parking garage at the Robert L. Stanfield International Airport and told her to drive, saying that if she did what he said then he wouldn't harm her, but they always said that. To make matters worse, Nova Scotia was getting hit with its worst snowstorm in recent memory, but Ian would not be deterred.

Cheryl tried to slow the car down as it drifted onto the off ramp where it began to swerve on the slick road.

"You better regain control or so help me God I will kill you." Ian said. She felt the barrel press harder into her head.

The car eventually straightened out and Cheryl maneuvered the large turn with no further trouble. Images from the news over the last three weeks kept replaying in her mind. Four women had been kidnapped, raped and murdered near Hawthorne; she could almost hear the newscaster saying her name in the same sentence as the fifth victim.

"We're almost there," Ian said. Cheryl felt his hand as he began to stroke her shoulder length brown hair, twisting it around his fingers, "almost there, yeah, almost there."

Cheryl shot a quick glance into the rearview mirror for the first time since leaving the airport and caught a glimpse of her kidnapper. He was wearing an old grey winter hat that covered up his greasy thinning black hair, and his face was covered with stubble and acne scars. The only features that stood out were his eyes. They were calm yet screamed with an animalistic fury.

The wind began to pick up and they felt the car shudder.

"I can relate to the storm," Ian said. Cheryl stole a glance in the rearview mirror again and saw that he was turning his head to look out the window, "an uncontrollable rage taking on everything in its path and showing everyone who has the power."

He seemed to daze off until a strong gust of wind suddenly rocked the car causing Cheryl to fight for control again.

"Straighten out," he said, "now."

"I'm trying," Cheryl shot back.

They were hit with a much stronger burst of wind which forced them off the highway. Cheryl raised her arms up defensively as the front bumper dug into the snow bank and the momentum flipped the car, first one flip then another, down into a field before coming to a complete stop upside down.

Cheryl didn't know how long she was out, only a few seconds at the most, but she could hear lan struggling in the backseat. He was tangled up in the seatbelts. Undoing her own, she tried to crawl out through a small space but couldn't get out. She was a little sore but wasn't seriously hurt.

"You think that was a good idea?" Ian moaned, "I think my arm is broken, you bitch."

"I... it wasn't..." she stammered. She felt a new rush of fear as the calm that had been in Ian the whole time was now gone.

Cheryl listened as he struggled to free himself but when he hit his broken arm against the window he howled. Suddenly his hand was gripping her hair and she felt a strong tug as he began to pull her into the backseat. Cheryl cried out but didn't struggle and once she was in the backseat she felt his stubble scratching her face as he leaned his head against hers.

"We're leaving. Someone might check on us when they see the car off of the road so we're going for a little walk," Ian said, "and if you try anything, anything at all, you will feel pain."

He kicked the window out of the backdoor closest to him and began to crawl out carefully so he wouldn't further injure his arm, while keeping his strong grip on her hair with the other. The storm seemed to be worse as Cheryl was yanked out of the car. Before starting to walk, Ian ripped her winter jacket off leaving her in just a white turtleneck as he put in on. He shoved the gun into her back between her shoulder blades and they started walking.

The wind picked up considerably and it seemed to bite into their flesh. Cheryl crossed her arms over her breasts to keep warm but to no avail. The wind made it hard for her to see or hear anything initially, but then she heard it. It was high pitched and similar to that of the wind but seemed different; almost organic. She must have stopped walking to try to hear it again for Ian struck her with the butt of the gun between her shoulder blades and she stumbled forwards into the deep snow, burying her face.

She felt lan's hands reach down along her waist and creep around to her front. His fingers searched for the top of her pants and were about to wiggle inside when another strong gust with the same high pitch wail struck them. His hands slipped away and she heard him cry out. She turned her head and saw him sailing back a few feet landing on his back, dropping the gun.

Cheryl tried to make a run for it but the cold kept her frozen in her tracks. The temperature had dropped so low that it was painful. What she saw caused her to drop to her knees and scream. She kept her eyes on him as the gusts of wind started to slam into him, tossing his body around like a rag doll. Cheryl thought she could make out a blur of grey seeming to move within the falling snow but couldn't be sure. After a few tosses, she watched as Ian was suspended in the air and all of the bones in his arms and legs were broken. He screamed in pain, pleading for her to help as Cheryl's jacket was ripped off of him.

His right arm was the first to be torn out of its socket with a wet tearing sound, and blood pumped out of the shoulder as the arm was tossed away. The left arm was next followed by the right and left legs. Ian somehow was still alive, suspended in the air with all of his limbs ripped off, then his torso began to rip open like an animal was slashing it with razor sharp claws. The cold finally got to Cheryl and she collapsed in the snow.

When Cheryl awoke, she was still in the field but the storm had let up around her. As she looked around she could see that it was still storming further off in the distance but she seemed to be in a clear pocket. The snow around her seemed to have been pushed away, and the jacket that Ian had taken was now on top of her like someone had placed it there. The blood of her kidnapper covered the snow a few

meters from her but she could not see what was left of Ian Hebert, nor did she want to.

Cheryl stood up and slipped her arms into the sleeves of her jacket, zipping it up. The cold that seemed to have bitten her skin earlier was gone. She took a few timid steps not completely sure what had happened. To her right, a beaten path in the snow seemed to have been freshly made. The wind picked up slightly, gently pushing her towards the path as Cheryl began to move and was surprised to see that the clear pocket in the storm seemed to follow her. It wasn't long before the path sloped up towards the highway and the wind helped her climb to it. Just as Cheryl reached the highway, an ambulance came into view and she began to wave her arms frantically.

Sheriff White stood with a cigarette in his mouth as he placed his cell phone back on his belt and watched the ambulance pull away, taking Cheryl to the hospital. Deputy Sheriff Gary Wilcox walked up to him from the crime scene.

"What do you think happened out there?" he asked.

Sheriff White exhaled and looked at the deputy, "I don't have a clue. I just got off the phone with a buddy of mine who's a Mountie and he gave me some background information on Miss Cheryl Arcane. This isn't the first time that someone got killed with her as the only witness."

Deputy Wilcox looked at him, "It's not?"

Sheriff White shook his head, "Her father was a sicko, liked to do things with her and her sisters. One night when she was twelve, her mother came home to find her husband torn to shreds on the front lawn with Cheryl sitting on the front steps. It happened during a particularly bad snow storm close to Christmas. The case was never solved," he flung the cigarette butt into the snow, "I can tell you this. Something isn't right with that girl. I don't know what it is but it scares the hell out of me,"

"Maybe she has a guardian angel watching over her," Deputy Wilcox said.

Sheriff White took out another cigarette and lit it, "Maybe she does," he turned back to the glow of the ambulance's receding tail lights, "One that has saved her, twice."

As the ambulance disappeared over the horizon and out of view, the storm began to let up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jon works as a Pre Board Screening Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L Stanfield International Airport. When he is not writing or working, he can be found at his home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia with his wife and four cats. You can connect with Jon on Twitter at @jonolsonauthor, on Facebook at AuthorJohnOlson, or on his blog http://jonolsonauthor.wordpress.com.



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DEREK THOMPSON

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Frostbite Alex Chase

Ross Jackson stared out at the white-washed landscape; an icy gale screamed, hurling snow and ice at his team. He paid no notice. He was too preoccupied with the prestige that would come with their triumphant return home.

"Look, all I'm saying is that I'm glad to live in a world where we don't need to carry guns around anymore. Walking around without a weapon... it's liberating, you know?" said Joshua Newman from the backseat of their all-terrain Humvee. He seemed to be too large for their vehicle- at six foot four and nearly three-hundred pounds, he dominated any space he found himself in. That's ignoring the fact that he almost always had a shotgun, assault rifle or other such heavy weapons at all times.

"What are you talking about? We're all heavily armed. And not five minutes ago you said, 'I love my shotgun almost as much as life itself'." James Wake smirked, staring at Joshua. James, conversely, was a wiry man who barely scraped five foot ten. He had his legs crossed beneath him and a belt of assorted grenades strapped to his chest.

"I said we don't *need* guns. I didn't say they aren't fun to have," he grinned, resting his hand along the barrel of his custom VT-19 combat shotgun.

The Humvee sputtered to a halt outside of a small metal tube that led to the International Antarctic Geological Survey Center. The frigid gray walls towered over them. Lisa killed the engine as Ross threw open the door, blasting the interior with snow. They clambered out and trudged carefully through the snow to the shelter of the enclosed entryway.

James looked over at Karen; her eyes showed fierce determination, but they also glistened with repressed anguish. They were a few feet behind the other five members of the squad.

"Are you ok?" He asked softly.

"Yeah, why? You wanna lecture me too?" She snapped. He drew back. "Save it, James. I don't wanna hear it. Don't give me that, 'You'll be ok, everyone lost family to 'em' crap, got it?"

Karen Jensen was the small arms technician; they hadn't found a single gun that she couldn't take apart and reassemble in less than a minute. She lost her temper just as quickly.

James glared at her, "Actually, no. I was going to say that it is ok if you're not ok. I was going to say that I'm here for you if you need to talk- though *some of us* didn't have family to lose. But you know what? Fuck you, Karen."

He stomped off towards Ross, who was working to cut down the door to the facility. She wanted to go after him and apologize but knew it wouldn't help. James had been an orphan up until the Newman family had taken him in while he was in fifth grade. He had no real family, and the only remaining member of his adopted family was right there by his side.

She covered her eyes. Guilt was the last thing she needed. "Pricilla... you were always so much better at this touchy-feely crap... I really should've listened when you gave me advice," she whispered. Pricilla Jensen had been bitten during a reconnaissance mission in the Swiss Alps and put down immediately thereafter.

"Almost got it- the power's been cut off, but there should be backup power to the research and residential wings. James, you and Joshua are going to escort Shadow to the data facilities to see what can be recovered. I'm going with Karen to the residential suite while Marcus and Denver are going to get the main power on."

"Got it," James growled, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Hey, James," Denver's high-pitched voice barely carried over the wind. "Is it true that you had the highest kill count out of any soldier?"

"He has the highest," Joshua clapped a hand over his back. "This little weasel came close to killing me more than a few times, but he's sent thousands of those god damned zombies straight back to Hell."

"And that's precisely why close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades," James patted the canisters on his chest.

"So you're the one who blew up the Golden Gate Bridge?" Marcus looked over.

James matched his stare. "Yup, that was me."

"Nice." His face couldn't be seen through his mask, but it was clear that he was grinning. James smiled back.

"How many did you kill in doing that?" Denver prodded.

"I don't know, honestly. At least ten, twenty thousand. Maybe more. We hovered over the center of the bridge in a helicopter. They were climbing all over each other trying to get to us, so it was hard to get a read on the body count."

Ross kicked down the remnants of the front door and motioned for the team to follow. They fell silent and drew their guns. They crept inside; the building was dark and cold. The screech of the wind through the open door echoed throughout the hallway.

"Ok, we're splitting up here. Keep your radios on and if there's any sign of trouble-"

"Come on, dude, we've been fighting this war for almost a decade. We know how to handle this. Besides, zombies are slow and stupid. All you have to do is point and click- as long as they're an arm's length away, we'll be fine. Let's just get this over with," Karen growled. She noticed James looking at her; she looked away, unable to make eye contact.

Ross glared at her. "Be careful- we're still not sure as to how many bogeys we might find here."

"Hold up," James called. He gave a package of remote explosives to Marcus and another to Ross. "Leave one in your respective bays... just in case." They nodded.

Marcus started off towards the maintenance bay. "Do you have any idea how to work a generator?" He whispered to Denver.

"Don't worry, I think I've got us covered," she laughed. Her voice still bore the light-hearted melody of one who hadn't seen bloodshed. Though she'd been at the forefront of the war, her role was always within the bases she was stationed at. She never ventured beyond their walls. Her few friends were all kept safely within those confines as well.

Marcus had been a field "medic" - which meant it was his solemn duty to execute any and every bitten soldier he came across.

Ross and Karen tromped down to the residential suites. She spared a glance back towards James. He looked away, his countenance twisted by contempt.

"Let's go," James muttered. He led Joshua and Shadow towards the research labs.

"So, why do they call you Shadow?" Joshua looked over at the girl beside him.

"Why do you ask?" She said hesitantly; her low voice was barely audible.

He chuckled. "Look, I don't care about what you've done; in times like these, only what you do matters. First we clear the world of the undead, then we rebuild it; it doesn't matter what you did before. I'm just curious."

She shrugged. "I'm quiet and can get in and out of anywhere without detection. If something needs breaking into, I can guarantee I'll get you in, whether it's a building or a computer."

Joshua smirked, "Humble."

"Fact," she countered.

"Interesting," James grinned. "So what brought you to the war zone?"

She rolled her eyes, "I got sloppy. Someone caught me rerouting troops from within the D.O.D. mainframe. They said I could be a soldier or be bait. My choice should seem obvious."

"Why were you...?" Joshua squinted at her.

"Probably to ensure the zombies got distracted and went somewhere else, right?" James looked back. She nodded.

The group turned and walked into the main lab, where the computers were located. James and Joshua secured the room as Shadow took a seat in front of the glowing screens.

"We're lucky the backup power kept these working," James jutted his thumb towards her. She'd taken off her scarf and mask, exposing her angular chin, thin lips and pale neck.

Her fingers danced across the keys, the rat-tat-tat of her typing mimicking the constant gunfire that marred the better part of their lives. Sure enough, she'd broken through the facility firewalls within a few minutes. She thrust a flash drive into the USB port and began siphoning the data that had been collected, but froze.

"Hold on... there's a file marked 'URGENT' on the desktop. Doesn't look relevant, but you want me to examine it?" she turned to the men.

James nodded. She opened it up to a series of video logs. She selected the earliest entry and hit play. It was dated from nearly seven years ago, towards the beginning of the zombie outbreak.

The screen buzzed, displaying the image of a well-groomed man with dark brown hair and a white coat. "Dr. Spaulding here; we recovered a few bodies from the ice. They appear to have once been zombified, but perished in the cold. The molecules in their brain burst as the water within froze. To be safe, we destroyed the heads." The video ended.

The second showed the same man, looking notably more disheveled. It was taken roughly three days later. "I've just been informed that our evacuation has been delayed by an ice storm. Not sure if we have the supplies to make it until the end," his eyes darted about. He was scratching his neck profusely. "In case we don't... I understand. Whoever's out there, calling the shots... I forgive you... there are more important things to deal with than rescuing us. Just tell my family that I love them."

James stared at the ground. Joshua watched him. Shadow clicked the third video, taken later in the same day.

Dr. Spaulding was wild-eyed and shaking. "We were wrong to bring them here, so wrong, so very wrong! It wasn't just the water that froze - the virus froze too! It went into a dormant state, or something, became spore-like, and finally... it... it... evolved. The freezing made the virus more powerful, somehow.

"We breathed it in when we smashed the skulls. We're all infected now. One already turned... We shut down the power, he's locked in. The regular virus can live for a few weeks outside of a host, not sure about this version. It takes you over, you don't have to get bit to turn, you just itch, itch, itch... then stop being human. The new strain... keeps the flesh from decomposing. These zombies are faster... Stronger... Deadlier... Please... if you're watching this... run."

The trio looked at each other. James's hand flew to his radio and slammed down on the talk button. "Marcus, whatever you do, don't-"

The lights flicked on and the ventilation system gave a dull hum. Stale air washed over them.

"What?" Marcus radioed.

"Shit," James hissed.

"I don't understand," he radioed back.

"Let's get out of here," Shadow leapt up and started for the door when a figure blocked her path. It looked human enough - except for the blank, white, telltale eyes.

Joshua whipped out his shotgun, but the figure had already lunged forward, tearing out Shadow's windpipe in an instant. It threw her to the ground, snarling as it ran at Joshua.

He fired, blowing off its right arm. It stumbled and fell, but lashed out with its remaining arm and

caught his ankle. James fired, putting a round through the front of its skull, but the bullet missed its hindbrain. It sank its teeth into Joshua's ankle before he could pull away. He screamed, aimed down and smashed it's skull with the butt of his gun.

Joshua dropped to his knees, slamming his fist into the ground. James knelt beside him. Joshua was sure it was just the trickery of a frightened mind, but he could already feel the burning, festering sensation of the virus taking over.

The words "Man Down!" came through over the radio- someone else had been bitten too. James put out the same call.

"I knew I should've gone with semi-auto," Joshua tried to smile.

Marcus rushed in. "You too?" He looked down; Marcus had fresh blood on his jacket.

James nodded, biting his lip.

"Hey," Joshua thumped James on the shoulder. "We had a good run, right? Besides, I kinda always knew I'd die during this war... Killing zombies was the only thing I was ever good at. There's no place for me out there. Get out there and live."

James gaped, "But the video..."

"I know, but I don't believe that. I won't believe that. Just go... alright?" He looked at Marcus, then handed over his VT-19. "Do it with this, will ya'?"

Marcus nodded. James threw his arms around Joshua and squeezed him tight. "Wait for me up there... got it?"

Joshua nodded, "I'll have fresh coffee ready."

James choked back a cry and retreated to the doorway. "I'll miss you, bro."

"I'll miss you too." Joshua shut his eyes; so did James.

The roar of Joshua's shotgun echoed down the hall. James clung to the wall as he was wracked by sobs, hot tears spilling down his cheeks. Marcus laid the gun beside its fallen maker, grabbed James and ran to the entryway.

Ross and Karen met them there. They didn't need to ask what had happened.

"We're leaving," Ross growled. He started for the door.

"No," James's cracking voice stopped him. "You're leaving." He held up the remote detonator.

"James, come on... don't do this," Karen whispered.

"I have to. I'm ending this war in the only way I know how... I'm not letting some other team come back here and risk more deaths."

"You can come with us, blow it up as we go!" She yelled a bit too desperately.

"No... I can't... the signal wouldn't reach in these conditions," he waved his hand at the snow-strewn gale, "and either way... I won't."

"Come on... he's made his choice," Ross said, gently taking her by the elbow and leading her back to the vehicle.

Marcus turned to James. "I'm sorry." His eyes shimmered.

"You didn't kill him," James gave a weak smile.

Marcus nodded and walked off. The three remaining members climbed in and began driving away. Karen pressed her face to the window, taking one last look at him before the snow blocked her vision.

Nothing could prevent her from seeing the wave of fire tearing across the ice. A tear slid down the side of her nose.

It only took them a few minutes to reach the military transport plane. They drove inside, shed their snow-gear and tried to relax as the plane took off.

"That... sucked," said Marcus.

Karen sniffed and nodded, falling silent for a few minutes. Marcus scratched at his neck. "Is it just me, or is it itchy in here?" "I'm itchy too," Karen nodded.

"Probably just from the cold," Ross said. "Slight frostbite, you know? It's probably nothing. Besides, a little itchiness never killed anyone, right?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Chase is a 19-year-old man currently pursuing bachelor's degrees in English and Psychology. He is a horror aficionado, video game lover and coffee enthusiast. He is also the author of "Heartbreaker," which appeared in issue 04 of the Siren's Call e-zine, and *A Touch of Malice*, a self-published novel for which he is now seeking traditional publication. You can connect with Alex on Twitter at @alexc_theauthor, on Facebook at Alex.C.The.Author, or on his blog at http://theendlesschase.wordpress.com.

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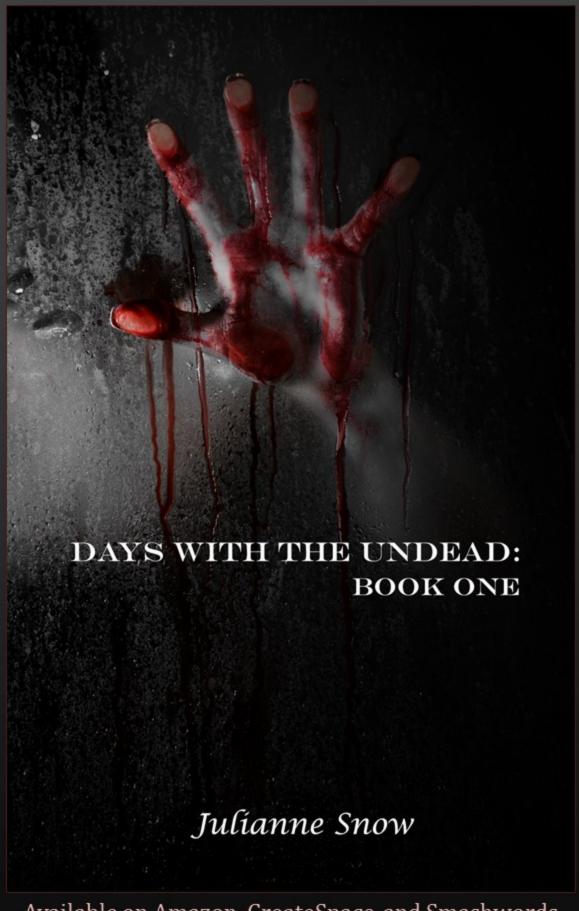


depraved deeds. Blood and gore are welcome, but the story must also be well thought out. Even axe murderers and maniacal doctors deserve to have their voices heard.

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The Microwave Tower Julianne Snow

I must have passed the same tower every day for the last thirty years. It stood so tall and yet, it blended so seamlessly into the background. I knew it was there, but it didn't register as anything other than part of the scenic backdrop to my focussed world. That was until the day it all changed...

Have you ever wondered how technology really works? Up until that day, I had taken it for granted. Sure, I had a working knowledge of airwaves, sound waves, and even microwaves, but did I really know what each of them actually entailed?

The answer to that question is a resounding no. As it turned out, the experts really had no idea either. It was a Friday. I remember the day clearly; it was the first time in ten years I took a different route to work. I hesitate to think of what would have happened had I not taken that right turn when I did...

I made it to work, a little later than usual, but I was still early. I liked that; having the time to grab a coffee from the tiny kiosk in the lobby before my busy day began. Nothing like a moment to yourself to clear and refocus your head after the hectic grind of traffic. It was at the kiosk that I first heard what had happened.

It's odd, you know. Hearing the news for the first time. I still find it hard to believe and if I hadn't seen them with my own eyes, I may not have.

You're probably wondering what happened and to be honest, I'd love to tell you. The fact of the matter is that I don't know what happened. That's not entirely true either; I know what happened, but I don't know why it happened. No one knows why.

The only thing we do know is that it was the microwave tower.

At 7:23am, the microwave tower sent out a signal or pulse or something that reached outward in a five kilometer radius around itself. Anything within that radius, simply stopped.

They stopped, but they didn't stop living. They just stopped moving. Everyone and everything froze in the exact place that it had been occupying at the moment of the event.

The vehicles. The vegetation. The people. All stuck in stasis.

At first, emergency responders were afraid to enter the circle, but with their first tentative steps inside the ring, nothing happened to them. They tried to render aid to those who were affected, but there was no help for them.

While technically not dead, they were certainly not alive either. The site has terrified some; so much so that the government attempted to cover them. You see it was impossible to move them; the pulse fused them permanently with the environment.

I remember the first time I passed the circle after it happened. The eerie feeling of utter stillness washed over me and for a moment, as the world around me slowed, I was sure it had happened again. My throat filled with my fear and I vomited onto the steering wheel of my car. Once the moment had passed and I was dropped back into a world full of movement, the waves of relief, tinged with a fair amount of disgust flowed over me.

Many months elapsed before I even had the nerve to drive by again. My heart still exploded into my throat and my stomach crinkled itself into knots; my breakfast, thankfully, stayed on the inside this time.

It was years before I could approach the ring without the security of my car surrounding me. By that time I was an old man, ancient by the standards of my grandchildren. I know why I felt compelled to search out those that had stopped that day, their souls and actions frozen in time, but that didn't stop me from being afraid to do so.

I stood just outside the barrier that had been erected all around the ring. It wasn't the type of obstacle that would stand in your way; it was more of a demarcation for people to comprehend that passing into the inner ring could have disastrous effects should the tower decide to malfunction again.

Even as I fought the urge to turn away, my body propelled me forward, through the fence and into the

living monument. In silence, it waited. For what, I cannot say with any certainty. The overwhelming emotions of despair and loneliness played along my nerves like a song of pain and nostalgia. It was a heady phenomenon, this mix of emotions that resonated deep into my soul.

As I walked along the sidewalk, I studied the statuesque people as I passed by them. Men, women, and children caught unaware in mid step, in mid swallow, in mid call. If you haven't seen inside the circle yet, picture the busiest moment on the street that you can remember and capture it for an instant, as if you've taken a photograph. That's the best way to describe it; a photographic moment etched in lifesized stone relief. Every detail down to the last wisp of hair blown awry by an errant gust, petrified against the elements that now assault it.

When I found her, my heart broke again. After I returned home that fateful day so many years ago, I had searched the house for her, hoping that she had never made it to work that day. My cell phone pleas had all gone unanswered and deep down I knew what that meant, despite the fact that I refused to believe it. The empty house was the proof I received.

The second piece of corroborating evidence came in the form of two FBI Special Agents about three months after the event. I had reported my wife as missing and potentially within the ring as the authorities had instructed us to do in the days following the pulse. My heart was heavy making that call, but what else could I have done? I wanted the answer even though I knew it would hurt to hear it. I knew what the truth was, but I still wanted to see it for myself.

That was why I entered the ring so long after the pulse. It had taken me that long to build the nerve to do it, the nerve to see Catherine again.

When I found her, it was like so no time had passed. She had been caught in mid stride, her left hand searching the expanse of her purse for something. She looked as if she might topple, but strangely, her body was balanced on the ball of her right foot. By the laws of physics, there was no way that she should have remained upright, but the pulse had somehow suspended them. I stood for a long time, my eyes gazing upon her beautiful face and my heart breaking because I know that deep inside her body still lived. Scientists who studied the phenomenon had recently let it be known that while time had essentially stopped for those caught up in the pulse, life had not.

Life. It's such a funny word. Those poor people were not living by the standards that you and I would define, but they were alive. Alive. Such a sad word when taken into context sometimes.

Placing one last kiss on her face, I left the circle from the way that I came; dreading the coming months of loneliness as contemplated my own death. Even in death, we will not be reunited and that is a hard truth to swallow.

And so the circle around the tower remains; a silenced and creepy garden of statuaries that stand in effigy of what can happen, of what did happen.

One thing is for certain, people no longer live within five kilometers of any tower. Anywhere. A lesson has been learned and a wariness of technology born from that moment. The moment that froze time and space in the oddest of ways.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - As the only girl growing up in a family of four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed a form of escape. She chose the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own. *Days with the Undead: Book One* is her first novel and you can find her short fiction in publications from Sirens Call Publications and Open Casket Press. In the next year, she has more stories being released in anthologies including *Death by Drive-In*, the Coffin Hop Charity Anthology. Connect with Julianne on Twitter (@CdnZmbiRytr), or Facebook (Julianne Snow & Days with the Undead Fan Page), and she entertains at http://dayswiththeundead.com and http://theflipsideofjulianne.wordpress.com.



Ode To November - Lady of the Night

Arnold Isbister

A million memories ago in fitful slumber, In the long nights and shadows of November The summer died and the winter wondered

She came upon me one night, touched me Fingers fair, light as her breath Hair long, draping, caressing her breasts.

Nails glistening by lights of the street She closed my eyes whispering, "Sleep, sleep." I dreamed lucid, live, all in time.

> Such pleasure I had no body foretold Her lips on mine draining my soul My will withered, a rose in snow.

An apparition weightless without flesh Hungry, stalking, a Siren's breath. Rising high, I saw my self, below.

My mind numb, senses dumb
She motioned my self to come.
An ecstasy enveloped me, body shivering.

Horror, piercing echoes in my ear, A cold wind encircled like never I felt And took hold as my spirit knelt.

My eyes wide, open, I am in awe. Her brilliant presence I recall. She smiles, a dull gleam glowing in her eyes.

Beguiled, entranced in fanciful fate I struggle, drowning slowly in wait. Under her I become frail, a servant.

"Please" I murmur, my throat aching, "Take me, I am wanting and without sin" Silent, she laughed in wicked splendour.

Ebony eyes lifeless, cold as coal Reached in seizing my soul. I whimpered, a dying boy moans. She sings, velvet melody, song without words
Teasing my ear, her tongue allured,
The Siren seduces; the will goes cold.

In wakeful wishes, in dreams desired I had conjured her, enticed her fire Wanting her bare body next to mine.

"Sweet boy, so innocent a burden you bare." Seductively she says "Come to me, come I dare." I came onto her, body spent, my mind blurred.

"Where - where did you go?" I awoke Wistful, listless, my spirit now broke, Her memory waning, I reached out.

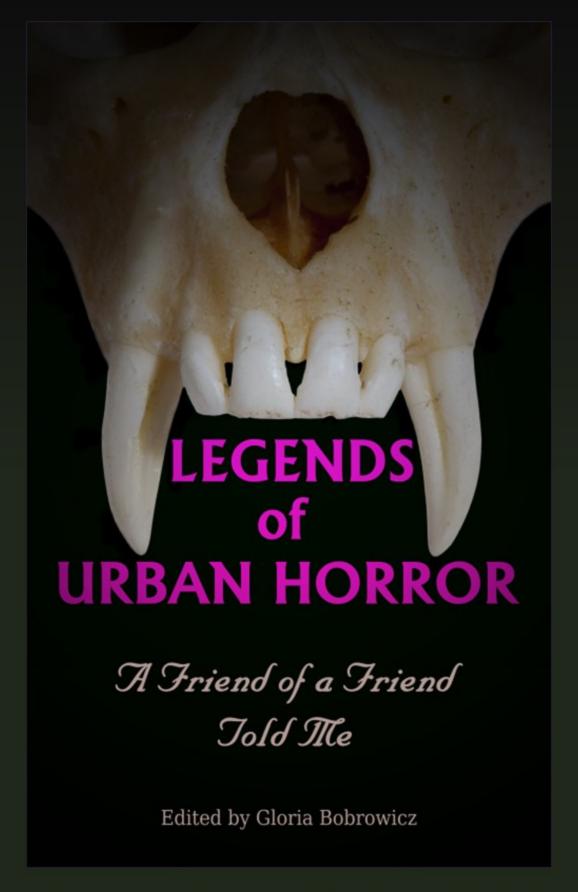
The sun shown into my dark pleasure And I closed my eyes to remember Her spirit, her beautiful body so enticing

Haunting my April soul.

Dreaming lost dreams as I grow old,
She eluded me in the winter's moonlight

But again we will meet in wishful slumber, As we did a million memories ago... My Lady of November.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Arnold James Isbister is a First Nations writer from Ahtahkakoop Band in north central Saskatchewan. He is semi-retired and is a visual artist in painting and photography but now concentrates on writing. Many of his stories are related to his Culture that bring an insight to his People's history, Spirituality, Beliefs and thinking. His first book was a compilation of illustrations and short stories pertaining to these issues, and was short-listed for Aboriginal-Book-Of-The-Year 2005. He has participated in workshops for policy development regarding Aboriginal Arts, taught "Native Art" classes to Elementary Schools and also was an Arts Instructor, Mentor and Leader for Troubled Young Adults who used Art as a tool to escape the "Street Life". You can connect with Arnold on his Facebook Fan Page Stirbugs & Screws or on his website http://www.redbubble.com/people/ajisbister



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One Photograph, Two Points of View: Comparative Flash Fiction



Window of Ice Kalla Monahan

The day I died started out like any other; except it was cold. It was the kind of day that made the insides of your nose stick together; that burned your skin on contact.

It scares me to think about that now; to think about what I've lost and who I've left behind. If I could do it all over again I would, but I know my death was beyond my control.

I died because I was cold; it's as simple as that. I didn't want to walk the long way around, so I decided to take a shortcut. That shortcut would prove to be the death of me.

My chilled mind reasoned the ice would be frozen, that it would be safe. I hesitated with each step, unsure of whether or not to continue. By the time I got to the middle of the pond, I was too far in to consider going back.

As I pressed forward, step-by-step, I heard the crackling of the ice beneath my booted feet. Looking toward the opposite bank, I saw I was almost there; almost to safety. My brain screamed to hurry up, move faster, but my frosty feet wouldn't carry me fast enough.

As the first fingers of icy water bled through my clothing and sluiced over my frigid skin, it was a rude awakening; like a slap in the face. Instantly my breath left my lungs and my panic drew me under the window of ice.

I could see the sky, admire the frosty blue expanse and knew it would be the last time I would gaze up at it. It didn't take long for the weight of the water to pull me down into its depths.

It was going to be a long winter spent in my icy grave.

Hunger Nina D'Arcangela

Lying beneath the chill flow; the murk and muck of time settled upon me as a cloak, I await the approach of the unsuspecting. This season of sparse abundance my natural ally.

There! One comes! I see it shimmer and slur as the icy water sluices past my vision. So delicate, so exquisite, so tempting a morsel.

It seeks to sate its endless thirst in the tide rushing over me. The desire to drink overwhelming the natural caution that fear has instilled in it. It hears the stream, edges forward to drink, and dips it's aquiline neck down to the chilled fluid. Not all trepidation shed, it pulls its lips back after the first suckle.

Does it sense me? Does it taste me waiting below the debris of this past year's fall? Has it heard my excited inhalation, the slight readying of my limbs for the attack? Or is this a natural response to its previous repose?

My innards growl, a sound drowned by the rushing of the water but all too shrill to my submerged ears. It seems unfrightened, still unaware. It peers about keenly, but with no fear in its black glistening eyes.

This one so young, newly released from its mothers care. They are always the most supple, the taste most delicate upon my tongue. Come little one, I croon in my thoughts, I will not hurt you. A lie. I intend to end its gentle existence to satisfy my own hunger.

Tentative, yet with the belief it has nothing to fear, it spreads it's hoofed limbs slightly wider to bring its lips closer to the cooling surface. I watch, it drinks — eyes still flicking about. Finally it closes its sight to the world to lap abundantly.

I strike, dragging its struggling carcass to a watery grave.

Oiran Laura Brown

How do you find yourself here, in my arms, you wonder, your face bleary with bliss; how do you find yourself, with me? How did I come to be here...where am I from you ask? Sometimes a courtesan is asked of her childhood; she never tells the truth. I will be the exception, my love. I will tell you the cold truth.

It was my second attempt at escape. Most don't bother after the first, but Mother said that though I may have been pretty, I was a foolish girl. I loathed calling her mother- she was not my real mother, just a greedy, painted crone who claimed she owned me.

My first attempt had been in the summer, before the plum rains. I had only been in the pleasure district for a couple of months, but I had come to hate it quickly. I couldn't stand the lilting, bird-like speech of the women, the vanity, the preening- the sounds of the courtesans taking their customers to bed. As a child-attendant, I was safe from that fate for a few more years, but that failed to comfort me. Nor did the distracting chores, the singing and dancing lessons, the beautiful clothing, or running errands for the head courtesan- the *oiran*- such as taking notes to her clients. One day I would have my virginity sold to an old man who would deflower me, and then my days as a woman of pleasure would begin. Only then would I begin to pay back my debts.

How does a child even incur debt?

Well, after such a short time in the district, not yet crippled by the mincing walk of the pleasure girls' pampered feet, and with good weather on my side, it seemed the best chance I was going to get. But I was caught anyway, and dragged back to the house, where Mother and Father both beat me far harder than my real mother and father would have done. I was far from the first to try it, or to be punished, and certainly not the last. But whereas the other girls in my house were deterred and made the decision to settle and make the most of things (not that it seemed much of a decision to me), my hatred for the place festered silently.

I was scolded many times for my ugly scowling as it was my beauty that had been paid for, but despite my unsavoury sourness (an attribute not all that uncommon in the district) it was assumed by all that I had accepted my duty and fate.

One night, many months later, snow came out of the darkness, and I saw a flock of late birds flurry up into the air to escape the clutches of winter. As the other girls pressed together for warmth, I took the birds to be an omen and knew I would leave that very week. I borrowed an almanac from a kindly geisha to check for good omens. The odds were against me, now that I had begun to act and speak as one of the caged birds, and especially with the snow. But as my reading continued, I decided that my downfall in the summer had been from failure to pray to the Gods before my endeavour. I went to the little shrine to leave an offering, before going to bed as normal.

I did not sleep- anticipation would not have allowed it, even if my plan had done so. The pleasure district never sleeps either, but amid the busyness and drunkenness, I managed to slip into the wilderness beyond the walls, like an eel into dark water.

I headed into the woods, aware that I was leaving tracks in the fresh snow, and believing the cover of trees would keep me safe.

The sound of snow crunching softly beneath my footfalls used to amuse me but as I fled, every noise I made terrified me, and seemed obscenely loud, amplified by the deathly silence of the woods. As the lights of the miniature dream city grew smaller behind me, I realised the reality- and significance- of my actions. I had escaped- but I was not yet safe. How far would even be far enough? Was I being followed even now? My feet were already stinging with pain from the cold. This was a far more foolish idea than I had realised.

The edges of my painted toenails began to burn and my now-graceful feet were turning into numb,

clumsy blocks. The air was mostly still, but its coldness penetrated the very fibres of my many layered, quilted robes, to piece my skin beneath like icy knives.

I was plunged into a world of silver and black. Civilisation was lost to the night now, and I had lost myself in a dead forest. The trunks were black beneath their coats of snow, skeletal and foreboding. I had long slowed down to a trudging walk, but lines of black and white continued to race past my face at bewildering speed. I glanced down at my hands, and they had turned deadly pale. I rubbed my hands across my chest and stomach, trying to keep my warmth to myself, but I realised that I had been totally unprepared. In the short time I had spent in the pleasure district, I had become complacent, a pampered creature used to comfort and luxury. I had forgotten my previous, rural life, exposed to the elements. There was a very real danger that the cold- or worse- would kill me.

For I knew all too well of the goblins, imps, spirits and demons that roamed the wilderness- if the cold did not snuff out my warmth quickly enough, any one of those numerous, supernatural beings could lay claim to my last, warm breath. I was in their territory now.

I did not, however, expect the *Yuki-onna*; the woman of the snow, a beautiful, but deadly and often vengeful spirit. She usually took men; weary travellers strayed from the path. But yet again, I was complacent- perhaps a child, no less a girl-child, I had thought myself somehow safe from their deadly attentions.

But warmth is warmth...

As numbness spread like poison throughout me, she approached out of the darkness in the trees.

She seemed almost to glow- the moon seemed to shine upon her, even here in the shadows of the forest. She wore a long white robe, the sleeves long like mine, but they floated on a non-existent breeze. Her hair was a sheer glossy black cascade, and this supernatural wind plucked at it also, strand by strand.

I had thought the women of the pleasure quarter, the courtesans, especially the oiran, beautiful; colourful singing birds in gilded cages...but here, this woman, all shades of black and white...she was the loveliest thing I had ever seen. Her beauty was ethereal, not of this world. It was not difficult to see how she would easily lead frozen, stumbling men to their ends in the cold darkness.

I knew I ought to be frightened of her, but I was already so close to death; the fight in me had been extinguished. I could barely stand. I was, however, captivated by her beauty. A sense of regret washed over me, as I realised that this was the end of my short life.

There was no sound, not a footfall or a rustle of clothing, as she approached me. Now, I know that she approached like a wolf, sensing weakness and frailty, approaching prey; but there was nothing about her that suggested a predator. She smiled a kindly smile. This I found odd, even as I was slipping away, I knew her mercy was an oddity...

"Fear not, little one," she whispered to me, her voice seeming to shimmer through the frozen air. "You are coming with me."

I would not allow myself to trust her, although I could not resist as she slipped her freezing arms about me. The cold was tenfold now, and I feared my heart would simply stop in shock. But I was no longer afraid. My time had come. I waited for her to finish me.

So when she passed icy fingers over my eyes and I slipped into blackness, I assumed I was dying...

...I woke up, stiff and...cold...but no longer in pain. The coldness...it was...not painful at all, instead it was...a profound lack of warmth, a numbness that didn't turn my joints stiff and red, but just made me feel as though carved from stone. As I sat up, lying on bedding, I saw the soft glow of lanterns and braziers, and assumed I must have been found in the woods, half-dead from the cold, and was back home in the pleasure house, recovering. But the room was unfamiliar, and nowhere near as warm as it

ought to have been. The room was lavishly decorated, but the noise was also too quiet. It was still dark-courtesans and clients should have been in the throes of passion by now, if not still dancing, drinking and joking.

I stood slowly, looking at my clothing. I was confused to see myself wearing all white, not the lurid colours I would usually wear. In alarm, I first assumed they were funeral clothes- perhaps I had been so cold, I had seemed dead, and I had been lain out in preparation for burial? White, although pure, is a death colour after all. But now- a quick examination quickly ruled that out; the robes were layered, embroidered, and far too lavish for the corpse of a worthless child like me.

There was no one else with me in the room, but I could hear low voices talking beyond the screen door. Wary and confused, I slipped quietly over the mats and to the door, where (out of habit) I gracefully sank to my knees before sliding the doors apart.

As I opened the doors, the golden, cosy light flooded in, and three women turned in my direction. All three were dressed as I was, in white, but in luxurious materials and brocades, and dressed in the style of oiran-layers of finery, obis tied daringly in the front, glossy black hair swept into elaborate coiffures, studded and bristling with combs and pins.

It took me a second to recognise her, dressed like a head-courtesan, and with her long flowing ebony hair now dressed and bejewelled, but I realised with a start that the lady on the right was the Yuki-onna who had found me. She smiled as warmly as a snow-ghost could, her expression mischievous yet kindher eyes and lips were painted as tradition, but there was no trace of white powder on her deathly skin; there was no need for it.

"Ah, our little one has woken up," she announced.

The lady on the left was just as devastatingly, deathly beautiful as the first, and dressed identically, her eyes agleam. I felt very nervous, all of a sudden. Why was I here- how was I here? I thought I had died in the forest, the last of my earthly warmth spent and stolen by the yuki-onna. It occurred to me in that moment, that with my alarm and fear, I should have felt coldness in my blood or the hotness of panic...but there was nothing...

The last woman, in the centre, had been sitting with her back to me- sitting at a dressing table it would seem, and somehow I did not notice her immediate irregularity. But she turned backwards, swinging her enormous coiffure- which was stark white. Whiter than even the hair of the oldest of crones, yet still glossy and healthy, coiled into the shape of the oiran, sending her little coral strings swinging. She, also, wore all white, but the lack of colour but for the red paint on her lips was so stark that it was almost ghastly.

"Welcome, little one," she said. "It has been so long since we had a kamuro."

That was the word for child-attendant. Agitated, I refused to prostate myself as I would have my old oiran. "I am no one's child-attendant!" I snapped.

The snow-women laughed- not the tittering, chirping laugh I was used to, but something more raucous, masculine. It was somewhat unsettling, and my heart should have been racing- I felt sick when I realised that despite my anxiety, I could not feel it at all.

"I could not leave you to die in the snow," the snow-woman on the right said. "You are a lovely child. You were so brave; you did not fight at the end like a struggling little rat, but stood firm and accepted your death like a warrior."

"Wasted in the pleasure quarter," the snow-woman on the left agreed.

"So I bought you back with me."

The white-oiran smiled a cunning smile at me- if she were not a ghost, I would have thought her a demon or a fox-spirit, so sly she was, so wickedly devilish was her expression. They seemed to be

waiting for something...and then it dawned on me, slowly. They were waiting for my realisation; and there it was, awful and cold, numb...

I looked at my hands- my nails no longer held natural pinkness. My heart should have been racing, but there was no pulse. I pressed my hands against my breast, but there was no warmth.

I had died. They had made me one of them.

"We will raise you," the white-oiran said.

"We will bring men back here, to feast and make-merry," 'my' Yuki-onna said.

"And then we will feed on them, when their hearts are most warm," said the last.

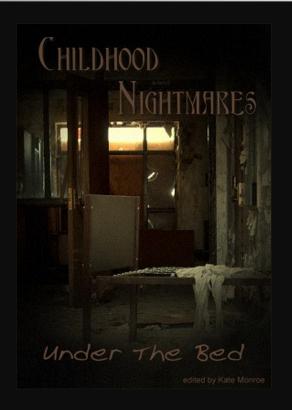
"But fear not, our little sister," the oiran told me. "For we will share our spoils with you."

And so you see, my little love, my poor one-night lover, my very first client, my very first victim...this is why you lie dying in my white arms. The little kamuro has grown up and is a courtesan of white death also. The birds were a false omen; I worked so hard to escape the gilded cage, but found one made of ice instead.

You came to me, and bought my first ever night, and we made love. It was the closest I have come to feeling warmth by touch for years...but it was this that I was waiting for. My sisters draw close as I snuff you out, drawing the warmth of your blood and breath for our own. You are dying with a smile on your pale face.

But I will forever remain frozen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura E Brown is a writer and artist from Hampshire, England. A lover of literature and the arts from a young age, she also writes under the pen name 'Blackavar', and writes for online magazine, EGL Magazine. She has been writing since she could hold a pen, but since the summer of 2012 has become a fiction author and begun to live the dream. A self-proclaimed Goth, bookworm, geek and rabbit enthusiast, she loves all things strange and unusual.



Twelve Stories of What Goes Bump in the Night?

Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace & Smashwords



The Ice Picker's Lament Ali Maloney

The bed was wet from where she had melted in the night. Piotr moaned and rolled into the cold puddle that marked her vague outline, hoping that if he cooled down enough in the icy water, then maybe tonight she wouldn't melt in his arms again.

As he did every morning, he wept in anguish and hurled himself at the soaking mattress in vain fury, as if she might come back to him that way. But she wouldn't, he knew. There was only one way; those were the rules.

He kept no lights in the house, lest they give off any heat, so he pushed his way through the dark to the bathroom; the gloom seemed to stick to him as he pushed through. Vague shapes, faces, and voices seemed to be just out of sight, bubbling almost to the surface and back down into the black that filled every space, hole, and pore in the house. But Piotr knew these ghosts well, as well as he knew the way to the bathroom without having to see. He could feel the deep gouges in the ancient banister and knew how many steps he was away. As his brittle hands brushed the flaking wallpaper, he knew he was approaching the locked room and kept huddled to one side. He had no need to feel for the bathroom door, he knew when he was through.

Inside, he could see no better, but instinctively knew where to reach to turn on the tap. The sound of running water seemed to echo around the pitch as if it were a much larger space, filling the house as if vying with the dark for dominance, but Piotr knew that if he could see the water it too would be black.

His lungs had long since succumbed to mould from the damp and he wheezed painfully as he stared at where the mirror would be. His reflection was nothing against the darkness, he dreaded the day he would look back; how feeble he must look compared to when he was the pride of his village. His mind tried desperately to recall how he had once stood proud with blazing red beard and fierce blue eyes, but he forced himself to resist; the memory would only make his punishment infinitely worse. He could feel, even as he stood there, his temperature rising as his mind tried to reach for the image; his blood pumping in his arteries, desperately trying to bring some warmth to his decrepit frame, to rejuvenate him. He leaned into the basin so the ice cold water could run over him until he was numb, but it wouldn't last. It never did, nothing would. He was tormented by warmth and his battle now was to keep it from seeping in, from destroying everything all over again. He had to get to work.

His only tool was a chipped and worn-down chisel which he felt around for on the table, he knew it should be a little off to his left. He dreaded the day she would take that too away from him. His fingers found it and he clutched at it desperately, as if it were not too late for her to have already taken it away today. The wooden handle had long since rotted away and the remaining metal cut deep into his calloused palm.

Moving slowly, lest his heart beat fast enough to raise his temperature, he descended from the bathroom, down creaking steps whose carpet had long since decayed to a pungent mould. Through a room that in any well-lit, living house may have served as a lounge - although Piotr had never seen if there were any furnishings in it to support this idea - and further down, into the stone cellar. Although he could not see his surroundings, it had always seemed less like a cellar to a family home and more like some goblin's fungal hovel. The dark here was thicker, more threatening. It tried to swallow Piotr. The stone steps down froze his bare feet and he took his time on each one, hoping that the bitter temperature would permeate his whole body and extend through his touch.

He knew he had reached the bottom when he stepped into a cold slush; the melting had already begun. He felt for the block of ice that sat, as it did everyday afresh, in the centre of the cavern and began his task.

It never ceased to amaze him that his hands instinctively knew how to carve the ice, controlled either subconsciously or supernaturally; although the actual movement was a tremendous exertion for Piotr;

his punishment did not involve a test of his technical abilities.

As his hands did their familiar frail dance across the ice, he could feel them sculpt limbs; the melting drips a pulse through enchanted arteries in the forming body. His fingers traced the outlines of armpits, breasts, navel, and neck. His ancient chisel carved the shapes of shoulders, lips, and hair. As he worked, he could hear his own laboured breathing matched by a tormented pant as the emerging figure in the frozen water took shape and began to wake. He pressed his body to that of his wife as her frozen body heaved and sagged with pained effort. He could feel her image strain to answer his lamentations and desperate love, but he had never been able to carve her internal mechanisms; her vocal chords and heart remained inanimate.

He didn't need the light to see her. His fingers could trace every curve and line that defined her shape, he could picture her as she had been all those years ago. The drippings of the melting extremities were her tears; the crackling ice, her muscles twitching into life.

When it was done, she took his hand, as she did every night; as she had when she had been warm flesh and blood all those years ago, before Piotr had ever even uttered how strong their love was, and led him upstairs. He hated to walk behind her as each cold puddle that he stepped into was a stark reminder of how frail she was and that she was already melting. She took him to bed, in a grim parody of their wedding night; the last night before they had been imprisoned and punished. As she had done then, she caressed him, undressing him, but each contact with his skin melted her further. As they lay down, she wrapped herself around him; he cuddled in close to her, feeling her body quiver as the contact with him eroded her being.

He wept; if only he was colder, maybe tomorrow she wouldn't melt.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ali Maloney is a slam poet, physical-theatre playwright and vocalist with CHURCH OF WHEN THE SHIT HITS THE FAN. He also makes multi-media art-terrorism under the name Harlequinade and has several albums of plunderphonica, noise and post-rap available (for free download - fact fans) on Black Lantern Music. He lives in Edinburgh, Scotland but is originally from NYC. You can fid out more about Ali on his website - http://harlequinade.weebly.com/.



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Canopy of White Nina D'Arcangela

She opens her eyes to watch as snow tipped trees of white birch flit past, their limbs as bare as her own. Looking up, she muses to herself, a canopy of white – yes, this is how it should always be!

Her eyes are the most crystalline blue he has ever seen, and he has seen many. They are so crystal clear as to be virtually devoid of color, much as her heart is devoid of compassion. He watches from a distance, wishing not to intrude on these moments of calm, they are so few for their kind.

The sleigh she rides upon follows a course set by no hand, but one reined by her imagination. Here she is ruler, this sparse forest is her place of rest, this mountain her only solitude in an otherwise riotous world. Looking around, she surveys her crystalline realm, assuring herself of its perfection.

What is this? She wonders as her gaze comes to rest on a new sapling, grown nearly a year already. She sees it struggling to survive in this wintery climate. Have I been away so long?

Guiding the sleigh to a stop, she gently descends to the opalescent ground. Her bare feet touching upon its icy surface. Wrapping a billowing cloak of snowy down around herself, she makes her way to the young sapling, leaving no prints of her passage, and examines it. It is a fine specimen, and will suite her mountain nicely.

She touches the sapling, welcoming it to her world. The brown bark instantly transforms to the silver white of its brothers. A serene smile dances across her lips; the same lips she now lays upon the tree, growing it to its full height – insuring its survival and vitality.

She giggles as she spins about on her toes to stare upwards, "I welcome you, friend, with open arms and an open heart, and ask only that you stand guard in my absence."

The tree wavers in the breeze signaling it's acceptance of her offer, snow already forming on its now mature branches. Still smiling, she returns to the sleigh and ascends. Her journey continues.

She comes across a small hare in a clearing. Slowing to a halt, she reaches a milky white hand down to the soft creature and lifts it to cradle in her lap. With a thought, the sleigh begins its trackless flight through the woods once more.

"Do not be frightened little one," she croons to the rabbit. "We all serve a purpose; there is no need for you to fear yours." Rubbing her wind blushed cheek along its cream colored fur, the animal calms. For now, it is in safe arms. She wraps it in her cloak to spare the poor thing any further fright.

Arriving at the snow wolf's den, she calls out, and he immediately approaches.

'Yes Mistress, you have need of me?' The majestic wolf asks in her mind.

With delight dancing in her eyes, she unfurls her cloak and reveals the shivering creature huddled upon her lap. "I have brought you a gift. I understand this has been a lean season, and food is scarce. This morsel is for you, friend."

The quivering rabbit looks up at her with large, disbelieving eyes. It seems to be imploring 'but I trusted you...' "So you did my gentle little friend, so you did. Trust me a moment longer and it will all be over. We all have a purpose to serve here on this mountain."

Staring into the frightened rabbit's eyes, she watches as fear turns to understanding, and understanding becomes acceptance.

"You are such a loyal creature." She snuggles the bunny once more. "This is not an act of cruelty but necessity; I will be served well by the wolf before you." With a final kiss from her petal pink lips, she tosses the rabbit into the waiting maw. The wolf wastes no time breaking its neck with the first snap of his teeth.

She watches as he pulls the small animal apart, devouring it quickly. Blood smeared upon his muzzle; he looks to her for approval.

"It was my gift to you, friend, you have done nothing wrong. Come to me," she beckons. The wolf lopes to the sleigh. She runs the back of her hand gently across his snout and all trace of the meal is swept away. The small lump in the wolf's stomach grows until he is fully sated.

"Would you care to ride with me, friend?" The door to the sleigh opens and her eyes beguile him as she pats the empty space besides her. With trepidation, the wolf climbs in and sits on the fur covered bench. The door closes. Before departing the wolf's clearing, she glides the sleigh to the patch where the wolf greedily consumed the rabbit. With a placid look on her face, her platinum curls falling in great lengths around her, she drapes one arm over the side of the sleigh; her fingertips barely brush the surface. With a single touch all trace of blood is removed, restoring the snow to its pristine white splendor.

Drawing her arm back, she lets out a sigh of great satisfaction. The sleigh lurches forward once more.

Yet still, he watches from a distance, unseen. Sadness upon his face, clutching at his stilled heart. This is her final chance to earn redemption, but she does not know it. He has heard tales of her for eons, observed her for millennia, but the few moments it would take to right the fracture in her mind are forbidden to him. He watches, he waits, she approaches.

Leaning to the side to nuzzle into the wolf's mane, she feels his heart beating faster than normal. A smirk of satisfaction flits across her face. "Are you frightened, friend?" she asks, mock innocence radiating from her voice as she snuggles deeper into his fur.

'I find myself wondering why I am here.' The wolf answers her with his subdued thoughts, remembrance of the rabbit not far from his mind. Things are said of her – things he wishes not to believe.

"Be calm, friend, I bare you no ill will," she croons as she sooths his worry by scratching deeply into his chest mantle, feeling his fur part beneath her fingers, his heartbeat slows to a calmer pace. He allows his eyes to close as she pacifies him.

After traveling through the blinding landscape for some time, they arrive at a cave opening. The wolf is instantly alert, a deep growl resonating from within his chest. She hushes him with a single word and calls to the one who resides here.

'Yes, Mistress, you have need of me?' The great white bear emerges from the cave.

"No friend, I have no need other than to help. Look what I have brought for you. A fully sated wolf to satisfy your hunger." Her smile as unwavering as it was in the wolf's glade.

The wolf turns to her, betrayal showing on his countenance, his amber eyes accusing her of deceit. "Come now, did you not greedily accept the gift I brought you and the place in this world that gentle creature served?" She asks him.

Knowing there was but one outcome; the wolf turns his head from her gaze and sits waiting for the door to open.

Her hand once again upon the wolf, she turns his head to face her. "Will you not give me your forgiveness, friend? Do you not understand the ways of this world?"

He stares past her and answers, 'I understand all too well'.

Displeased by his response, she flings the door wide and he immediately leaps to the snow. His paws digging gouges in her perfectly glittering world. He gazes at her one last time. 'I see the tinge of your blush has deepened. Do you perhaps feel shame?'

"I feel nothing whelp. Go in defiance if you will, but go to your death all the same." The great bear approaches. With solemn acceptance, the wolf lowers his head to stretch his neck in anticipation of the coming attack.

She watches as she always does, for the first time with no mirth. The wolf has stolen this moment.

When the great bear finishes the meal, he approaches the sleigh confident that his size alone will keep him from becoming its next passenger. She sees this in his eyes and the distrust infuriates her. With a swift blow, the back of her hand strikes the bear across the mouth, cleansing his white fur of the gore. Storming from the sleigh, she kicks at the sullied snow, vanishing all traces of ickor from it as well.

Pivoting in a fury, she tramples her way back to find not the bear, but a man upon its seat. The door still open, the sable fur lining now a deep blood red.

Craning her neck, she calls out to the bear, but the subdued response comes from her own sleigh. "I am here."

Turning slowly towards this man she has never seen before, she assesses him. He is dressed in all black, his hair is as dark as coal, his eyes are the color of smoldering ash. He is the opposite of everything on her perfect mountain.

"Who are you?" she asks, shaken by his presence.

"I am everything you banished from your perfect world. I am the same as you, but different in so many ways. I am in fact, your friend," he grins at her, all the while willing it to end some other way, but knowing it would not. "Come, sit beside me," he says as he pats the seat next to him in the same manner in which she beckoned the wolf. "We all have our purpose to serve here on this mountain."

Confusion rushes through every pour of her being. How could this be happening? This is her world; she controls each moment within it, each second that passes, each snowflake that falls. Where has this unwelcome stranger come from?

Quickly, she darts away from the sleigh into the cave, only to realize her mistake too late. There is no snow in the cave, nothing glistens here – there is no magic. It is a rocky tomb of barren grey and deeper shadows. In its center, a fire burns. Blindly rushing to escape this hell she did not know existed in her flawless world, she runs directly into his waiting arms.

His eyes shut for a moment, his own black cloak slipping to the floor. He draws in a deep strong breath, one scented with everything that she is, and will never be again.

Looking down into her frantic icy blue eyes, he hushes her with a cooing sound and raises his finger to her pale cherry lips. A gentle contact, but from it a small black smudge begins to grow. Removing his finger, he allows her to ask the question he reads in her eyes.

"What are you?" she pleads to know.

As he strokes her luxurious curls, turning them raven with his touch, she remembers the small hare she found earlier in the day.

...The quivering rabbit looks up at her with large, disbelieving eyes. It seems to be imploring 'but I trusted you...' "So you did my gentle little friend, so you did. Trust me a moment more and it will all be over. We all have a purpose to serve here."...

Seeing the recognition in her eyes, watching it turn from confusion to understanding, understanding to acceptance, he smiles with a great deal of pain and remorse, and responds, "I am you, I am the hare, I am the wolf, I am the bear. But unlike you, I take no joy in this. I am here because your actions made you my next prey, friend."

When he touches her fair skin for the second and final time, he lays his open palm upon her exposed throat forcefully shoving her flaxen head backwards. As the shadow steals through her crystalline blue eyes and over her creamy white skin, a scream echoes from the cave, and the mountain begins to melt, sending a torrent of glistening tears to flood the valley below.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Quirky little horror chick who likes to write soul rending snippets of despair; reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter; an UrbEx explorer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay and old grave yards — Nina is a cemetery stalker, beware!

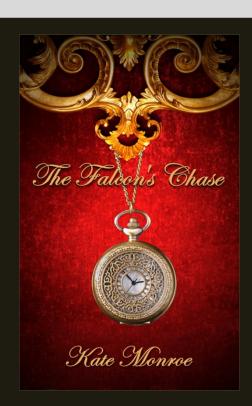
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A Steampunk Romance for the Ages...

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Domicile 4.5 Matthew Williams

"I'm telling you Gerald, we shouldn't have waited so long to upgrade. Have I not said that any dilly-dallying will cause us to fall behind as soon as the next upgrade comes out? If we're to stay current, we need to be quicker about these things."

Gerald sighed. "Yes, honey, you have. But I still think a little caution is warranted. As an engineer, I know that it takes time to work out all the bugs and that we should wait for all the patches to be made available."

"Well, caution is fine, when it doesn't leave you in the past."

He sighed again. There was no arguing the point, and he could feel his stomach starting to rumble. The sign in the lobby said they were serving lobster bisque and T-bone steak, and he wanted to get there before the rush deprived him of the chance.

Nearly half the hotel was filled with people who had chosen to take the weekend to conduct their house upgrades. Inputting the latest updates into their home's central computer and letting the nano-assemblies reformat to incorporate them. When they returned home, they would be treated to new walls, new tile, new counters and new appliances. But he and his family would be walking into an entirely new home, at least as far as bells and whistles were concerned.

He cast his jacket on the nearby chair and looked over at the large rug that covered the living room floor. Timmy sat there, admiring the old-fashioned wood furniture and the log-cabin walls. For several minutes now, Rufus was running around and fetching the small ball of paper they were using to play fetch. The sheet was of the nanopore variety, and didn't crumble as nicely as the real kind. Still, its super light properties made it more bouncy and entertaining for Rufus, the wild trajectories he sent it on playing havoc with his sensors. Every time it bounced Rufus made another wild bark and began jumping at it until it descended back to the floor, and they would have another go at it!

He envied the little animatroid, simple pleasures and no need to listen to people arguing. For what seemed like hours they were debating, and all because of one idle comment made by their cabby. Of course, the fact that most of the town's people were to be found at the Inne or had hopped an airship to go overseas for a little holiday probably had much to do with that as well. His mother was obviously dreading what dinnertime would be like when they all went down to the resto-bar for some food and would be forced to make conversation with them. He knew their arguing points too well, he had heard them all made several times over now.

Rufus was on his way to fetching the paper ball as it descended to the ground once more, his front arms aimed at the ceiling and his back haunches erect and straining. His father was once more making a point about patches and nanowire glitches, when he realized Rufus had stopped yipping. He looked up at the dog, saw a standing statue at the edge of the carpet. His arms were aloft and his mouth open, no movement or sound emanating from him.

"Mooooom!" he cried. "Mom! Dad! Come help!"

Gerald rushed to the door of their room and poked his head in. "What is it, son?"

"It's Rufus, dad! I think he's sick!"

"Oh, son," Gerald said with a casual wave of the hand. "Petmodels can't get sick, you know that. Why if he made a mess or is coughing, I assure you it's strictly simulated to —"

He took a few steps into the room and stopped short. His eyes were fixed onto the edge of the carpet where Rufus had been frozen a second earlier. Timmy now stared at his father, seeing all color drain from his face and his features frozen in disbelief.

"Dad? Daaaaad?" he said. Slowly, his father raised an arm, his index finger pointed. Timmy followed its path, towards the edge of the rug and the small pile of grey goo that had formed there.

He gasped. They were both speechless. It was like staring into a mercury puddle, murky and warped

reflections swimming in its circumference. But the pool was growing larger, the image of his son shifting and cascading as it did. With every shift, it moved closer to Timmy. His heart leapt into his mouth and kept him from screaming to his son to move.

"What is going on in here?" they both heard Martha say as she shuffled in. She came to where her husband was standing and stopped, gasped, and began spouting hysterically.

"Oh-My-God! What-is-THAT?!"

Gerald emitted a small murmur. His voice had cleared, and he began to issue some automatic replies.

"It's okay," he said, obviously not convinced of that himself. He kneeled down. His breathing had gone short and he felt sweat forming on his head. "Son, come here, come to me. Just get up and come to me."

"But dad, where's -"

"Son! Come to me right now!" he snapped.

Getting to his feet, Timmy did as he was told, one eye on the small pile that appeared to be getting bigger. He ran to his father's side and felt his father's hand close around the scruff of his neck. He protested slightly, but Gerald would not let go. His other arm he had wrapped around Martha's waist, his grip tight so that they couldn't possibly venture anywhere near the small, metallic pond that was just a few meters away.

"Honey, what is that thing?"

"Yeah, dad. What is it? And what happened to Rufus?"

"Martha, son," he said in turn. "We need to get out here, right now. Go down to the lobby and tell the concierge we have an emergency in here, to call a nanoevac team immediately. Okay?" He looked at both of them direly. They both nodded. "Good! Go now, I'll get our valuables and meet you down there, okay? Go! Now!"

He released his grip, and Martha and Timmy both made a dash for the door. They looked back just once, at the edge of the doorway, to make sure Gerald was okay. In one hand, he had secured his credit slip and ID. In the other, he was madly grabbing at pieces of Martha's jewelry from the bed side table. He saw them standing there, his face went red and his hands began to wave frantically.

"I said I'd be right behind you, but you need to go NOW!"

And so they did. Right down to the lobby, no stops or even a pause to catch their breath.

It was perhaps an hour or so later. Perhaps it was several hours, neither Martha nor Timmy could really tell. All they really knew was that the sun had set, the authorities seemed satisfied that the grey goo was contained, and that nobody was hurt. This knowledge came only after they had answered all the Constables questions, after they had watched him interview person after person, questioning the hotel staff in the hopes of getting some kind of explanation, and the all evac technicians in full-body suits were finally done sweeping the building. Once that was all made clear to them, Martha and Timmy were finally allowed to see Gerald again.

He was sitting in the back of the EMR carriage, a white towel wrapped around his neck and a person with a mask and goggles on was checking his vital signs and running a sweeper over him one last time. They both ran to him when they saw him, another Constable stopping them along the way.

"Whoa, ma'am! Wait until he's been cleared!"

"It's alright," the emergency technician said through the filters of his mask. "He's clean. And all vitals are stable."

"Alright," the Constable said, releasing them and letting them both embrace him.

"Gerald! You gave us both quite the fright there!"

"I know, I'm sorry dearest. We had quite the brush there though, didn't we?"

"What happened daddy?"

"I'm not sure, son," Gerald said, running his hand through the sweaty mop that had become of his hair. "But I'm afraid we're going to have to get a new petmodel."

"WHAT?" Timmy's face went red and his eyes swelled up with tears.

"Gerald," Martha interrupted. "Was that thing... Rufus?"

"I'm afraid so, honey," he said, looking back to Timmy and putting his hand on his son's cheek, wiping some of his tears away. "A nanoware meltdown is what we call it down at the workshop, or nanomelt for short. It's where the nanomaterial breaks down and loses its prescribed configuration. Were just lucky none of it came into contact with us."

"Why?" Timmy said, his eyes still streaming with tears.

"Because it would have eaten the flesh right off your bones, son," he replied. Martha leaned in close, putting her head on his shoulder and shedding some tears of relief.

"Rufus would have done that to us?"

"It wasn't Rufus anymore, son. That thing was not the good doggy you knew. But we can get you a new one, one who won't hurt you."

They stood together a few minutes longer, Gerald patting his son on the head and Martha stroking Gerald's back. Each one taking comfort in the other, frightened, angry, but happy to be unharmed and together again. Slowly, things began to return to normal; that was, until an unwelcome thought intruded onto Gerald's mind. Involuntarily, he pushed Martha back and grabbed her shoulder with one hand, the other gripping Timmy's scruff again. Timmy tried to protest again, but Gerald didn't hear him over the sound of his own panicked thoughts.

"Honey! We need to check on the house now!"

"Wha - why?"

"We just need to go there now! Call us a cab! We need to go home now!"

"Gerald?!" she demanded. She didn't like to see him like this, certainly not twice in the same day. He could be so forceful when he was frightened. But she did as he asked, grabbing her phone out of her purse and punching in the number for the cab service. Meanwhile, Gerald ran to find the Constable again...

"Oh my God..."

It was what they imagined a smoking crater would look like, something out of the old black and white war reels where bombs were constantly falling on cities. Or perhaps a murder or accident scene from the turn of the century forensic shows. Either one would have been apt at the moment.

At the edge of the absence, the evac people were busy erecting a barricade, a ten foot high tent made of transparent material that was anchored deep into the ground, a vacuum forming inside with a loud hiss once the final slap was shut. Inside, the techs descended into the pit with their powerful hoses and containers to suck up the liquid grey mess that lay at the bottom. The Constables stood beyond this impromptu building, faces covered with masks and goggles and their hands with poreless gloves, putting up yellow tape to keep everyone back. One of them had to step past this line to hold Martha, make sure she didn't try to break through. Her face was red with fresh tears, anger and grief burning in her face.

"Ma'am, you have to stay back! This area is not safe for you!"

"Oh God, Gerald! Our home! OUR HOME!"

"I know, honey," he said, deflatedly. "I know..."

"Daddy, what happened?"

Gerald looked down, saw Timmy clinging to his leg. Once more, his arms were divided between them.

With one, he embraced Martha at the hips and cradled his son next to him with the other. He shook his head ruefully, doing his best not to let tears form in his own eyes. One of them had to stay in control, one of them needed to keep the others from doing something foolish. Trying to run inside to see if anything was left would only make things worse, he knew. He knew from his training that the only thing to do in cases like this was let the techs do their job and haul every trace of the goo away. Every trace that had once been their house, all the matter they once called home.

He felt a tear form, shook it away.

Martha spun around and buried her hot face against his cheek a moment later. Timmy saw this and wrapped his arms around his father's hips. Together, the two cried their tears into him.

"Oh Gerald, I'm sorry!" she said. "I should have listened to you. I never should have insisted we upgrade so soon!"

"It's okay, honey..." he said, patting her back. "You couldn't have foreseen this. I didn't either, and I'm the damn engineer."

Timmy looked up at his father, vaguely aware that he had said a bad word. But at the moment, no one could fault him for it, and he buried his head again into his father's flank.

"I just don't understand, how could the designers have let this happen?"

"I... I don't know..." he said, but he knew he was lying. In their mad rush to bring them something new, all the latest features, they had rushed production. It was the only logical explanation. Certainly no one could have hacked the designs and implanted a virus, that sort of thing simply didn't happen anymore! The authorities would investigate this, he knew. They would consider sabotage, as he had just now. They would eventually blame the designers themselves, perhaps charges would be filed and for the first time in generations, people would be charged with the actual destruction of property. But he was sure, in his gut, that sooner or later that the blame for this would have to fall where it needed to... on everyone.

For the second time in that day, they stood there together, the seconds stretching into minutes and even hours. The very concept of time melting away amidst the noise, the sirens, and the sounds of more evac teams arriving at the scene. All throughout the area, more and more tents were being erected, loud hisses sounding off as they descended into the craters that had once been people's homes. Every pile of muck that had been a four-point-five in the making just hours before.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Matthew Williams lives on Vancouver Island with his wife and family where he dedicates himself to teaching, martial arts instructing and writing. He has authored several novels, including *Source*, *Whiskey Delta*, and the upcoming *Data Miners*. He has also penned several short stories and over eight-hundred articles on the subjects of science, astronomy, technology and human history. He is a member of numerous online writing communities and is a contributing author to the websites of Universe Today and Were You Wondering? You can connect with Matthew on Twitter at @storybywill, on Facebook at HouseofWilliams, or on his blog at http://storiesbywilliams.com.



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SPREAD THE INFECTION WEEKLY

The Ghost of Childhood Derek Thompson

The steady rhythm of school shoes marched down through the years.

"Hello Ruth." The words chilled the air like a sharp frost.

Ruth lifted her gaze from the newspaper and blinked into focus. There was a moment's pause, a narrowing of the eyes in concentration, and shadowy memory relented, yielding dulled scenes of childhood. "Lottie? Is that you?" she puzzled and the moisture drained from her lips.

Lottie stared back, unable to speak, mesmerised by the vision of her nemesis. The past engulfed her and the world became a playground again, tormentors rushing in from all sides with a thousand rhymes to taunt her. It had *always* been Charlotte before, always. But Ruth changed that, shearing her beautiful name to Lottie, reducing her to a stranger for the remainder of her school days.

Ruth looked on and a faint smile of recognition slithered across her face - once a victim, always a victim. She relaxed a little, taking in long, shallow breaths as she sat back to enjoy the show.

Lottie saw that smile and flinched, shaking her head to banish inner voices. Her eyes glazed over again, captive to the past. Spectral children surrounded her, with tongues like curses; jeering, shouting, and clapping to the brutal *snip snip* as Lottie's hair fell to the ground in jagged tufts. And screaming, so much screaming; running through the schoolyard, half-blind with tears, and one face blocking the sky: Ruth's.

"I thought you'd moved away?" Ruth broke the silence, unsettled by Lottie's gaze.

Lottie rolled up a jacket sleeve by way of a reply, revealing the criss-cross scars that made a mockery of her clear, alabaster skin. Ruth gaped in horror at the wounds, transfixed by the mesh of bulged, screaming lines that burrowed beneath Lottie's skin like worm casts.

"So... what brings you back to the old neighbourhood?" Ruth tried to sound casual though the *thud* thud of her chest strained at the words.

"You know why I'm here," Lottie assured her quietly.

The station platform submerged into the fog without protest, its destination boards and sturdy red lamps drowned helplessly in a rolling ocean of grey. Ruth shuddered; it felt like one of those dreams where you can't quite wake up.

Lottie understood such dreams as well; she'd lived in one for years. A nightmare world of missing school ties and ink stains on new clothes, an unrelenting hell of torn books and mystery illnesses that no one would accept. Of pleading, pleading, don't send me in to school today. Until, finally, the only way for Lottie to show the depth of her pain was by etching it on her flesh. But by then it was too late.

"What do you want, some kind of apology? Alright then I'm sorry," Ruth snapped. "It was only a game; we never meant you any harm."

"A game?" Lottie repeated, and the words hung in the air like a condemnation.

Ruth rubbed her hands self-consciously, trying to distract herself from her own thoughts. It was getting colder and nothing would be moving in the fog. She'd be stuck there for a while so best keep the poor thing calm; no point creating a scene.

Ruth glanced up at Lottie, standing there like a vagrant. She'd hardly changed at all - she never used to be that thin though, surely? That'd be the illness. Probably explained the cropped hair as well. A pity - she always had such lovely hair. "Look, Charlotte," Ruth reached out to her, "I'm not proud of the past, but you just have to get on with your life."

"What life?" Lottie shrieked, pushing Ruth's arm aside as if it were poisonous. "You pulled at the roots of my life and you snipped them away!"

Ruth felt her ribcage spasm and braced herself for the onslaught. But there was only silence. Was that it? Her face burned. To think that she'd been holding on to this for years, dreading the thought of ever

seeing Lottie again. And when it came down to it, what did the silly cow have to say for herself except a few pathetic mutterings? Contempt welled up inside Ruth like venom, the distillation of years of shame. The little bitch had brought it on herself: Lottie was weak, and the weak deserved everything they got.

Lottie flung her head back and started singing, oblivious to Ruth's sneering. And it seemed, just for a moment, as if other voices joined in through the fog. "And all the King's horses and all the King's men couldn't put Lottie together again..." she crooned, swinging her body to and fro.

Ruth looked on in disbelief; the singing stopped. Lottie's lip trembled like a child's – she looked as if she would explode into tears. Then the moment passed like a façade, and a sinister calm crept over Lottie, sinking down into the furthest reaches of her suffering. Down where her shattered psyche knew only cruelty, where every injustice and humiliation festered inside her belly like the sores the doctors could never find. She smiled, contorting her face into a malign crescent. "They all run after the farmer's wife, who cuts off their tails with a carving knife..."

Ruth swallowed hard. She felt faint; her vision was blurring. She forced herself to look down, focusing on the fog trails by her ankles. There was something horribly familiar about this. It was time to be getting along; she'd heard Lottie out —she owed her that much — but enough was enough. The girl was obviously ill; maybe she'd escaped from somewhere?

No, stay calm, Ruth told herself, remember who you're dealing with. This was Little Lottie, who took her punishment sprawled on the ground pleading for mercy; Lousy Lottie, who needed the fleas chopped from her hair; Loopy Lottie, who ran through the playground, whining like a stray dog. "You'll get nothing more from me, Lottie," Ruth raised her courage, taking spiteful pleasure in the name. "I'm not afraid of you." The words fell like hollow beads.

"Remember these?" Lottie hissed, opening her school-jacket to reveal a large pair of scissors, nursed in one hand like a dagger. "It's my turn now."

"Come on Lottie," Ruth tried to reason with her, wide-eyed with fear. "Don't do anything stupid - they'll put you away again."

But Lottie was beyond reason. "I've waited a long time," she whispered, "and now your time has come."

Ruth slid along the bench, terrified of looking into those cold, cold eyes. In desperation, she lunged to the right and scrabbled to her feet. Lottie turned slowly, momentarily surprised, and stared ahead into the grey.

Just a few steps to the side, Ruth told herself. All she had to do was keep quiet, very quiet; she could make it to the stairs and over to safety. The newspaper fluttered up and Lottie seized upon it, raking the pages with frenzied scissor blows.

"Nowhere to run and nowhere to hide," Lottie recited gleefully, swishing the blades and listening for the chorus from the fog.

Ruth tapped her foot frantically, edging forward. The platform ended abruptly, disappearing to an open chasm somewhere beneath the fog. Okay, deep slow breaths. If she took her time and moved carefully she could still make it; it couldn't be much of a drop. There must be a phone box on the other side, or a ticket office. She could get help; she could get the police. Her mind raced and her pulse screamed, and the fog pressed tightly around her chest as if to smother her.

She heard a noise, like an animal scratching about for food. Then seconds later a blade came arcing through the grey like a talon, missing her face by inches. Ruth screamed and threw herself back, catching her heel on the platform edge. She fell away, arms outstretched like a sacrifice, illuminated in train's

glare. Rage and regret burst from her lungs as the train roared in, but its shrill whistle snatched away her final words.

Ruth opened her eyes as the sound of the whistle receded. The fog had started to lift, revealing patches of platform and the distant stairs. She felt the rough, comforting concrete beneath her, solid to her hands. Everything was still.

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" she shouted as she lay there, panting. "Another one of those stupid bloody dreams." She smiled; an anxiety dream, like the ones that she'd had a few years back. What was it Doctor McKinley called them? That was it, the ghost of childhood.

"A dream, Ruth?" Lottie's little voice carried along the platform, the rhythm of her school shoes becoming louder and louder. "Yes, that's right; it was a dream, for a time. But a moment ago, safe in your bed, you had a heart attack. No one will find you until it's too late – you'll die here in your nightmare, just as I did in mine. We'll be two ghosts together..." Charlotte walked up to Ruth, her face and the scissor blades shining with an ethereal light. "...And the next train isn't due for a long, long time."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Derek Thompson is a Brit writer of short fiction, long fiction, non-fiction and comedy. He has writing credits in the UK for The Guardian, BBC Radio Scotland, Channel 4 Radio and Discover magazine. He is also a member of San Diego based *A Word with You Press*, but never gets to staff meetings. His debut magical fantasy, *Covenant*, was recently launched in paperback and ebook - see full page ad in this edition for details. Derek can be found at: www.alongthewritelines.blogspot.com and also at www.strictlywriting.blogspot.com, and you can catch his tweets (mostly writing related) through @DerekWriteLines.

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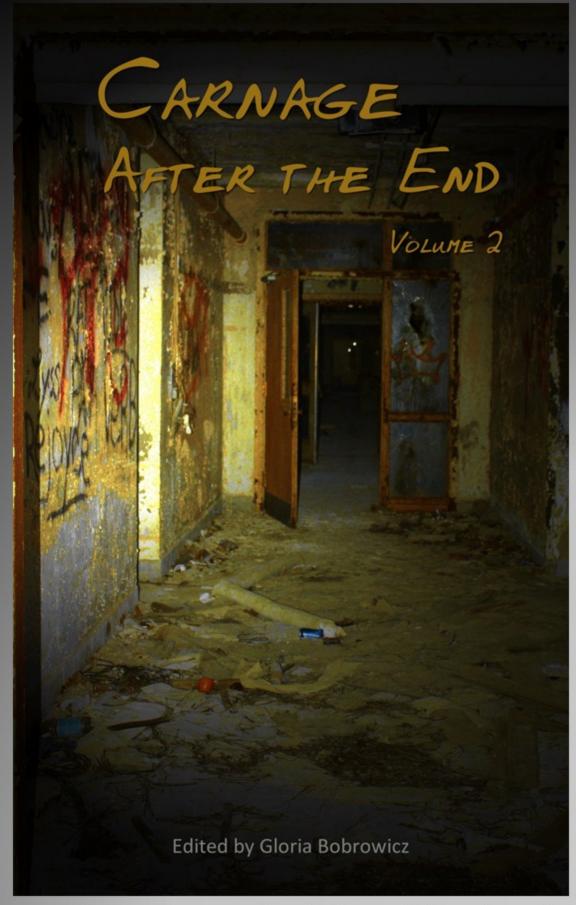












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Arctic Weaver Bruce & Suzie Lockhart

"What the hell are we missing, Woody?" Joanna Rimes demanded furiously, fisting one hand and pounding it into the other.

As she combed the area behind the Winfield's house with her deputy, Billy Woods, the shiver that ran through her wasn't caused by the cold Alaskan air.

Two children had already vanished, and now the Winfield's four year old boy had gone missing, too. Parents in the area were already frightened; Joanna feared this latest disappearance might send the town over the edge.

There had to be something they weren't seeing. It wasn't uncommon for people to go missing in Alaska, but three kids in two weeks?

Joanna's thoughts were in overdrive. Dealing with children disappearing, watching the grief on their parent's faces, only drudged up memories she'd buried long ago.

"Wish I knew Jo, this all here just don't make no sense. There'r no tracks, no nothing. The trail's dead."

Dead.

Dead like her little baby boy; dead like the children that disappeared would probably be if she didn't find out what the hell was going on.

Joanna's gut was twisting in a knot, she felt these weren't just random disappearances. Someone was targeting children. A dark force was at play here.

Something sinister.

She pulled down her sunglasses to shield eyes that had suddenly gotten moist. During her years as Sherriff, Joanna had to be tough. She couldn't afford to show any sign of weakness. The spurs on her boots crunched into a layer of ice now coating the light snow, which had fallen late yesterday. The morning sun was a faint white blur, rising against the dull gray Alaskan sky.

"Well, I'll be damned."

Joanna's gaze fell on the eight legged creature Woody pointed to. She detested spiders.

Woody bent down to get a better look. "Looks like an Orb Weaver." He stood back up and stretched out his back. "Awful late in the year for it to be out here, yeah. Maybe there's sumthin' to all that global warming bullshit."

"Humph." Joanna lifted her boot and stomped it down to smash the spider, but her foot descended into a deep hole hidden underneath the sticky web. She fell on her behind, and her leg twisted a bit. She cried out.

Woody quickly came to her aide, grabbing her under the arms and pulling her up. She thanked him, then struggled to get the fine threads off of her boot.

"Them web's are strong as Kevlar. Here, let me." Woody flipped open his pocket knife and cut through, freeing her foot. Joanna rubbed her aching leg as she studied the hole.

"You okay there, Sherriff?" her deputy asked.

"I'm fine, Woody." She pulled a flare out of her belt and tossed it down into the hole. As she did so, more creepy Orb Weavers scurried to the surface.

"Shit!" Joanna exclaimed, backing away.

Once they had dispersed, she walked back over and peered down into the deep hole. There appeared to be some kind of tunnel connected to it at the bottom. The circumference was just wide enough for a small child to slip through.

"Ain't no way we can get down in there. Too many trees around. Plus, the ground is frozen hard."

Joanna nodded. "Send out a call. I want the area behind the other children's homes searched more thoroughly. Tell them to look for any of those damn Orb Weavers, and see if there are similar holes." She

would bet her next paycheck there would be.

"Right away, Sherriff."

That's when she saw it.

Joanna walked carefully around the opening, and grabbed a handful of spruce. She cut off a section and carefully placed it into an evidence bag. There was blood on that tree, and she'd bet her life it belonged to the Winfield's boy.

Woody was watching her as he dispatched the units, shaking his head. They had worked together a long time; she knew he was thinking the same thing.

Jo crunched through the frosty snow to where her truck was parked, on the side of the road. Woody trailed after her. She wanted a cigarette. For the first time in three years, she *really* wanted one.

Woody opened the back of his SUV and pulled out a tackle box. He unlatched it and flipped up the lid, then yanked out a musty old map.

"GPS's don't have all the answers," he stated as he opened the map and spread it out on the hood of the truck. They both stared at it intently. All the cases were within a few miles of each other. Pulling a pen out of her pocket, she drew lines connecting them.

She started at the map in shock.

Where the lines bisected was an area near a military base rumored to have underground tunnels. Not far from her small hometown was the Caribou Pass, where men were always working on roads that never seemed to get done.

"Something's down in those tunnels, and I believe whatever it is, it has something to do with the disappearances."

Woody nodded his understanding. "You thinkin' whatever's down there is coming from somewhere close by, yeah?"

She paused for a moment. "In this harsh climate, there would have to be a center point for it to survive..." Joanna spun around to face her deputy.

"I'm going to take the ATV. You finish talking to the family."

"I don' like this here, Jo. It ain't safe, what you're planning."

Joanna turned back to the map. Her eyes scanned the circle in the middle of the three points before settling on what she was looking for.

"What else do you know about those spiders, Woody?"

She tried to focus on what he was telling her; about the zig-zag webbing, and about the venom being a much smaller dose than the notorious Black Widow.

Even if they had something to do with the disappearances, their bites were virtually harmless to humans.

What would spiders have to do with missing children, anyway? She shook her head, trying to clear away the mental image of a giant spider that had suddenly manifested.

Whatever was down there, it was making its way to the surface...

"No one else is going missing under my watch, Woody. Spread the news that people should only go out if absolutely necessary, until I can find out just what the hell's going on."

"I don't like this, Jo."

"Neither do I, Woody. Neither do I."

As the ATV sped towards the area Joanna had marked on the map, her thoughts were churning. Why were these spiders spinning webs over holes in the middle of an Alaskan winter? Certainly it couldn't be the spiders themselves taking those kids. Could it?

A memory was fighting to surface in her mind.

She remembered the disappearance of a teenager a few years back.

Marvin something. He'd been camping with his father, and vanished without a trace.

There also had been rumors of people disappearing at the old military base, but it was never confirmed.

About two years ago, the facility had shut down abruptly.

A drab gray building came into view in the distance, surrounded by a tall metal gate. Jo sped up, her heart racing as the cold air whipped at her face, stinging her cheeks.

She'd brought her shotgun, just in case. Maybe she'd watched one to many horror flicks. She loved horror movies and scary TV shows; they seemed to take her mind off of more troubling thoughts.

Like the son she'd lost.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. That's what the doctor had told her. Shortly thereafter, her marriage fell apart. She'd been alone ever since.

Her thoughts were violently interrupted as the vehicle spun out of control about 100 yards away from the military compound.

Joanna was flung out of the vehicle, landing with a thud on the ice.

"Augh!" Instinctively, she tucked and rolled, but Joanna hit the icy ground so hard that she felt a pop in her shoulder. Even worse than the excruciating pain was the fact that her shotgun flew across the slick terrain, far out of her reach.

Then Joanna heard it... she heard it before she saw it.

The sickening sound of ice cracking. She tried to scramble away as she saw the cracks shooting towards her.

Right before it began to give way, Joanna could've sworn she saw a giant web beneath the icy floor.

She wailed in excruciating pain; there was no time to react as the six hundred pound machine crashed through the layer of ice separating her from whatever lay below. The cold shard she clung to began to crack, jutting sharply towards her, as though issuing a warning that it was going to swallow her up.

Her hands clawed desperately at the frozen tundra, but they couldn't find purchase. She could feel the pull of gravity on her body, as if it were beckoning her into the bowels of hell. Within seconds, she joined her ATV, falling into the black abyss below...

It was pain that yanked her back to consciousness.

The pain in her shoulder was horrific, and her right arm felt like lead.

Good thing she was left handed.

She tried to push up a little on her left elbow, only to be met with a stabbing feeling in her head.

Sliding back down, Joanna muttered, "Where am I?"

She shook her head, trying to shake loose the cobwebs muddling her thoughts.

The kids, Jo. You're trying to find the kids...

That was enough to jolt her upright, but stars danced in front of her eyes, and she felt nauseous.

"Augh..." Joanna leaned across her left side and vomited until there was nothing left.

How was she going to find the kids and get them out of here in her current condition? Briefly her mind registered a scurrying sound.

As the numbness in her body began to dissipate, and feeling returned, a creepy-crawly feeling began running up her legs.

She snatched one of the safety lights from her tactical belt and ripped open the green foil packet with her teeth.

It took a minute for her eyes to adjust as the white light illuminated the darkness. Her eyes widened in horror as what looked to be hundreds of those eight-legged menaces scattered around her.

And on her!

Joanna jumped up, pain shooting through her body as she shook her whole body viciously, swatting at the spiders crawling all over her.

Oh, God! Some had found their way into her hair! She tore off her hat and loosened her ponytail. She combed her fingers frantically through her hair, pulling them out of her curls.

Joanna yelped when she felt the slight sting of their bites on her exposed skin.

She backed into the wall behind her, whimpering as she took in her surroundings. Jo watched fearfully, mesmerized as the small beasts moved down the walls surrounding her. They were moving away from her, into the blackness.

Then an overwhelmingly disturbing notion hit her. She would have to follow them.

Because wherever they were headed, was where she needed to be...

Jo gathered her bearings and reluctantly followed. She carried the flare with her, tucking it under her good arm as she drew her nine millimeter.

She almost didn't see the hole until it was too late. Regaining her footing just in time, the Sherriff dug her boots into the frozen earth and slid her gun into its holster. She took out another flare, shook it roughly until it emitted the fuzzy glow, then dropped it down. To her relief, the bottom only appeared to be a few feet down. Following the Orb Weavers as if in a trance, she slid down into the waiting darkness.

Her shoulder protested in agonizing pain, but she ignored it. She also ignored those hideous spiders; their beady eyes reflecting the light from her flare.

Claustrophobia was beginning to set in.

Once on solid ground again, Joanna scooped up the flare and hooked it on her belt. The spiders scurried down the narrow corridor in front of her. As they neared the end, Joanna noticed it began to get warmer. The air became sticky with humidity and, exhausted, she leaned against an old tank sticking out of the wall.

The tank felt sticky and wet.

Joanna tried to back away, but found herself entangled.

Her body stuck to something like Velcro. It seemed the more she struggled, the tighter it got.

Panic exuded from every pore in her body as she came to the realization that the tank was blanketed by a giant spider web; the familiar zig-zag of the Orb Weavers taunting her.

An unnatural voice echoed through the darkness, turning dread to panic.

The voice hissed and gurgled as it spoke. "Theey lisssen to mee. Theey bring mee food."

"Who...who's there?"

"Foood runn out. Soo weee play gamesss. Ffind ffoood. Childen'sss easssist."

Joanna's head was reeling; this had to be some kind of sick joke. But, slowly, ever so slowly, a figure came into view.

She knew beyond a shadow of a doubt this was no joke.

The indistinct silhouette was male. He was the size of a teenager, but hideously deformed, with hunched shoulders and huge lumps under his flaky skin. Greenish puss seeped through, and his tongue lolled out of his mouth, oozing more of the garish goo.

"Oh, God, Marvin...?"

Something registered in his milky eyes. "I fell. Theey bit me allll up. But thennn took care off meee."

Marvin stepped aside, and Joanna's eyes fell on three human sized webs. Three small forms in the center were covered almost completely with the silvery threads, giving them the appearance of small

coffins.

She shuddered, unable to hold back the hot tears that rolled down her cheeks.

Marvin was moving closer, spiders crawling freely over him. She struggled against the web. A giddy laugh escaped him; it sounded more like the guttural sound a dying animal would make.

Joanna noticed blood staining two of the small white coffins. She'd managed to keep her good hand free of the web, and she moved it slowly to her belt.

The third child was unscathed, and his uncovered head bobbed forward. The little Winfield boy.

Her concern was not for herself as Marvin dragged himself towards her.

Jo's hand was almost there, just a little further...

He was close, too close. She could smell the rot of death on him.

His jaw opened wide, almost like he unhinged it. His breath was hot, as misshapen, fanglike teeth bore down into the exposed flesh on her neck. Her body seized in agony as a shrill scream escaped her.

Joanna's fingers twitched violently, but she was finally able to clutch the handle of her pistol.

Bang!

Marvin fell lifelessly beside her. Half of him got caught up in the webbing. Orb Weavers swarmed over his body, consuming him.

Remembering what Woody had told her, she reached just a little further and gratefully grasped her pocket knife. She flicked it open and focused on slicing the web the way Woody had instructed.

She fell to her knees, tenderly reaching up to touch where she'd been bitten. Green puss surrounded her wound, sticking to her fingers. She doubled over and puked again.

She felt sick; venom was coursing through her veins.

Jo just wanted to close her eyes and rest. Just for a second.

Wait, she had to do something...?

The boy.

She crawled on her hands and knees to the web that held him. Using her knife again, she sliced through it until the boy was free. His lifeless form fell forward, small and pale as the snow outside.

Ignoring her own pain, she pounded on the boy's chest.

"Don't you die on me, too!" she cried.

She leaned over the boy, listening for a heartbeat. She breathed her own breath into the child, trying to resuscitate him.

She pumped his chest. "C'mon, baby, please don't be dead."

Tears fell freely, thoughts of her baby's death filling her head. Her precious little boy. He might have even looked like this child...

She hadn't seen Woody, and another officer, running down the corridor. He tried to get Jo away from the boy. She yanked her good arm free and pounded on the boy's chest again. "Breathe, dammit!"

Unconsciousness was nipping at her heels.

"I have a pulse!" The other cop exclaimed.

As darkness surrounded Joanna Rimes, she watched the Winfield boy come back to life.

"Now, you stay with me here, Jo! Jo!" Woody's voice was far away.

A smile crossed her lips as she faded. Was that her baby, just across the threshold?

"And I'm telling you doc! That bite on the good Sheriff's neck wasn't from no damn spider."

"Look, Deputy Woods. We found a large concentration of spider venom during the autopsy. That was the cause of death."

Bill sighed.

"I have other patients, Mr. Woods. Particularly the boy you brought in, who nearly died from hypothermia."

The doctor's tone was curt. "I'm sorry for your loss, but unless you can bring me the body of your mystery creature, I really must be leaving..."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS - After high school, Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh, but the gnawing urge to write always remained with her. Three years ago, she began working on an idea for a YA novel. When her son, Bruce, realized he had the same passion for storytelling, they teamed up. Together, they finished that book, which is presently being considered for publication. Their joint efforts have produced short stories in Dionne's Anthology, as well as the upcoming Sirens Call Publication anthology 'Mental Ward: Stories from the Asylum'.

Bruce has a flash fiction story published in Dark Eclipse, issue #7, entitled Afflicted. Suzie's first publication was in Dark Moon Digest's Frightmares, A Fistful of Flash Fiction Horror. Another piece will appear in January's Dark Moon Digest. She also has a short story in the October issue of The Sirens Call eZine, entitled The Last Temptation. Suzie is delighted to be one of the female horror writer's selected to appear in the upcoming anthology, Mistresses of the Macabre.

Both can be reached via e-mail at aspiringauthors@gmail.com and you can find them on Facebook at Suzie Wargo Lockhart and Bruce Lockhart. Suzie is also on Twitter @suzieartist.

Open Submission – *Mental Ward: Echoes of the Past*



In places where unspeakable atrocities occurred sometimes 'something' lingers, stuck between the worlds of the living and the dead. Those who believe in the grey area behind the veil will tell you that those places can become eternal cages that hold the souls of the deceased captive.

Give us tales of hauntings taking place in asylums; the places where the crazed, the insane, and sometimes the different were hidden away from society's view. Stories considered for inclusion must be set in an asylum and must be centered around a haunting. Instead of an open call period, we are going to be accepting and declining stories as they are submitted, and will announce when the anthology is full. If you want the chance to be included, your story will have to be dead on the mark, and submitted to us quickly!

Full Guidelines at www.SirensCallPublications.com



An Interview with Photographer, Irene Snow

Irene Snow is a landscape and nature photographer hailing from the wilds north of Toronto, Canada. She has been taking photographs her entire life and still has her old *Canon* Canonet 28. She has been featured a number of times in The Sirens Call, so we thought it was high time that you became better acquainted with the person behind the camera.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Irene. Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. Tell us, how long have you been a professional photographer?

Irene Snow: I have been taking photographs my whole life, but I started taking it seriously 20 years ago. My children were all in their teens by that point, so it was a good time to start focussing on some of my dreams. I have had different clients and sites over the years, and I'm currently in the process of developing a new website to present to the world.

SCP: What drew you to photography in particular?

IS: It fascinates me. Even as a young child, I loved to look at the photographs inside my parents albums. With a photograph, you can look into it and see time as it was at that exact moment. No two photographs are exactly the same; even the ones that are taken in succession are always a little bit different. It's a heady thought to realize that you've become an archival historian each and every time you step behind the lens.

SCP: Do you have a favourite topic or subject to photograph?

IS: I love to photograph horses. I used to ride as a child and it's something that I have continued into my adulthood, though at varying times. I love the way that horses move, the gentle and graceful way they complete each movement. Their regality is something that translates very well through the lens. Moving water is another of my favourite subjects. Whether it's the tranquility of the water flowing over the river bed, or the brutality of crashing waves, I love the way water captivates the attention and tells its own story. In the same vein as moving water, I love the antithesis of that: reflections. I love water so still that it mirrors the landscape above it to perfection, making it next to impossible to tell which aspect of the image is land and which is water.

SCP: What is your favourite photograph you have taken?

IS: Close to where I live, there was once a prestigious horse farm called Windfields Farms. In 2009, it closed down, but the buildings and such remained. My favourite photograph is one taken inside one of the barns. There's an eeriness to it and you can still hear the echoes of whinnies, snorts and hooves on the cobblestones when you view it.



SCP: Have you ever run across something so distasteful that you didn't want to see it through the lens?

IS: Traffic accidents. As a society we rubberneck far too often and while some of the best photographs are ones that embody the essence of a moment, it's hard to look at someone's pain or the destruction of a life.

SCP: Given a free ticket to anywhere in the world, where would you choose to go? Why?

IS: It's a toss-up between the Painted Desert in Arizona and Antarctica. The Painted Desert is such a beautiful place, full of colours and geological formations. With the changes in light and the gradations of colour, it's likely a dream for many photographers as the possibilities are endless. Antarctica is also a beautiful place; it's beautiful in its severity and desolateness. I would love to be able to photograph both before I put my camera down forever.

Thank you Irene. If you would like to discuss photography with Irene, she can be reached at IreneSnowPhotography@gmail.com.



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