



The Sirens Call

December 2014

issue #18



Scripum in Morte

*Poetry, Short Stories,
& Flash Fiction
written in the
words of death*

*Artwork by Author
and Artist,
RL Treadway*

*300 Word
Comparative Flash
Fiction*

*Interview with
Joseph A. Pinto,
Author of
'Dusk and Summer'*

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Goodbye 2014: An Editorial *Nina D'Arcangela*

Yet another year has gone by, and as tradition now holds, our final eZine of the year centers around death. We titled this issue 'Scriptum in Morte' which, depending upon which translator you use, and whether you translate from English to Latin, or Latin to English, means 'written in death' or 'words of death'. While choosing a topic for this year-end editorial, I was a bit stymied. The stories, flash fiction, and poetry contained herein all speak of death in some manner so I chose to take a slightly different approach and write about words that have 'died'. How does a word die, you might wonder. After all, we write to live in infamy, do we not? So if a word can die, how can the words with which we have expressed our creativity and ingenuity live on forever? Easy. While there isn't much a writer can do to resuscitate a word vocally, we can certainly do so in our tales of wonder or woe. I've dug around and come up with a word that, while it may not be entirely flattering in its connotation or stricken from knowledge altogether, is one I believe deserves another chance at a thriving life.

The word? Oh, you'd like to know... The word I've chosen is '**Bookwright**'. A 'bookwright', according to Daniel Lyons's *"Dictionary of the English Language"* (published 1897), is a writer of books; an author; (and apparently) a term of slight contempt. Hmm... A writer of books; it seems a significant term to me. An author – again, equally as significant and worthy of revitalization. A term of slight contempt? Contemptuous in what way? Could the implication of 'bookwright' be a term previously used to describe one who dallies their life away on such nonsensical things as providing entertainment, enjoyment, and perhaps even escapism for many or even just a few? Was this word only relevant when the movers and shakers of our world were in the throes of an industrial revolution thereby making anything less productive useless? I enjoy using the term 'wordsmith', when will someone deem it unfit for use, and what gives them the right? I can't tell you when, but I believe I have a good handle on why. If those of us who write allow the death of a word by not employing it in the context of our work, then surely it will fade from memory and eventually fade from our written lexicon.

Where does this leave us? (I know, question after question – but the intent here is to make you think.) Do we let our words die like the words that came before ours? Do we attempt to cram

unnecessary words into our work simply to ensure they remain significant? I have my own opinion, and guess what? You're going to have the privilege of hearing it, and perhaps even choose to take up the gauntlet to defend it. I say to hell with the death of words! I say we, those that have the opportunity to make use of such words, start doing just that – not simply to keep them alive, but to use them effectively. Get out a shovel, dig up an old grave, and let's start re-educating the common reader with words from the past and ensure that our words don't suffer a similar fate. Words are important, and while I probably don't recall half of the words I utilize when writing in my spoken language, I can at least make sure the obscure and obsolete re-enter the world in tiny little squeaks by way of my written voice. If you find the 'death-of-a-word' concept to be an injustice, stand-up and shout about it too. This little foray into the used-to-be-known has sparked my imagination, and while I'm not suggesting you regress to an earlier time in the written world, I am saying why not have a little fun with it and revive the dead!

Here's another great one: '**Spermologer**' – a picker-up of trivia; of current news; a gossip monger. What we would today call a columnist. (source: *"The Word Museum: The Most Remarkable English Words Ever Forgotten"* by Jeffrey Kacirk) I say go for it – have a little word fun and you may just save one from utter annihilation!

Happy New Year, folks! May 2015 be full of joy, prosperity and good health for all, bookwrights included! Even the somewhat contemptuous ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR –

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx explorer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay and old grave yards. Nina is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a member of the writing group Pen of the Damned, and the owner and resident anarchist of Dark Angel Photography.



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2014 Year End: An Editorial *Gloria Bobrowicz*

This year has flown by, seems as though we just started the year and now we're at the end of 2014 already.

What am I thankful for? I am thankful for many things, above all, my family and good friends, my partners, my continued good health, and the growth of Sirens Call Publications.

Christmas is my busy time. Besides editing our stories, my time is taken up with gift buying, wrapping, cookie making and of course planning the family Christmas dinner. Traditionally dinner is at our house. We have four Christmas trees, my talented husband is in charge of decorating. He decorates everything in the house, and I do mean everything – even the chandeliers. The house comes alive with the spirit of Christmas. Even though it's a lot of work, it's my favorite time of year.

With all those preparations, I often forget the New Year is just around the corner. I am excited

to see what new adventures will be coming my way in 2015. I look forward to the many submissions from the talented authors that we will receive. Having worked with some very nice authors last year, I can't wait to begin working with all of our authors, new and old, in 2015.

My one wish for the New Year would be to extend the day past twenty-four hours so I could do more reading for pleasure. I've got stacks of books waiting to be read in-between reading for work. My Kindle is always close at hand.

To all our talented authors, our artists, our readers, our staff and their families, I wish you a great holiday season. Best wishes for a healthy, happy, prosperous new year.

Now get writing and send in those fantastic dark, edgy, horror stories.



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

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PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION



MISCORDIA *Matthew R. Davis*

We caught them on the beach, and all around us they lie with limbs frozen forever in that final stride toward freedom. Now she is the last, on her knees before me as the reddening tide seeps in around us, eager to claim one more cooling heart, and I raise my blade to the indifferent sun.

Most would beg or weep or look down at the sand; many have. But she stares up at me, into me, and her eyes are dry and clear. I see an entire life there, right up to this final moment: pain, perseverance, loss, joy, suffering, survival. And for the first time in my life... I hesitate.

Why? It's not beauty staying my hand – I've cut down the richest of blossoms, nipped unripe buds without a second thought, and she hasn't the classical looks that inspire verse or song. She's beautiful in an everyday sense, bearing the grace that comes of a kind heart and hands worked to the bone without a moment's complaint, and she exudes the kind of strength that most men will never understand or even recognise – the strength to birth them, build them, be bedded by them and bury them, even as we blind ourselves to their sacrifice with wine and wenching and war. I see this, and still wonder why I have yet to dash that beauty from her... for when I die, the path I walk will be awash with blood, and every step of the way I will be judged by the ignoble and innocent alike.

She does not blink. This once, I do. And then I feel a wave breaking within me, a high blood-tide stemmed by its own fury, and the rage that defines me – that *is* me – is gone. My sword is suddenly so heavy with the weight of its wretched work that my hand begins to tremble.

It is enough, now. A point has been made, underlined, scored deep into the sand. One more death proves nothing. We are *done*. Life goes on; let it be as it will.

But her eyes. So strong, so clear – there's fear there, yes, but also acceptance – a grace I cannot begin to put into words, a strength I will never know. She has waited all her years for this moment, and she is ready to embrace it. We have taken everything from her, but now she will have it all back and more, forever. In this moment, it is more than inevitable; it is *right*. There is a grim beauty to this, one it is beyond me to despoil. I would let her stand, walk away, for this one time I would not deny mercy – in this moment, I would give her anything. But I know what it is she wants most.

The blade falls, and she takes that final stride toward freedom. She was the last, and now the sea claims one more cooling heart. And with it, my own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Matthew R. Davis is an author and musician based in Adelaide, South Australia. He's currently preparing a novel manuscript for submission, playing in alt-metal band icecocoon, mixing his score for a short film, and editing more short fiction.

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Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

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Sexting in Cemetery Suburbia *Maynard Blackoak*

A crescent moon, a diminutive sliver of vivid white, sat high in the star speckled night over Odd Fellows cemetery, as teenaged Chris sat with his back against a tall headstone with a cell phone in his hand. Perusing the names in his secret list of contacts, he mulled over each one, trying to decide which of the young women would be his partner for a night of salacious fantasies fueled by explicit messages and pictures. Each entry he read brought an instant recollection of a face, and revived lascivious memories of past wanton escapades via text messages, save a lone exception. One name, Fancy, brought no such remembrances or did it give rise to a spark of recognition.

Puzzling over the mystery of the girl who conjured no memories, Chris pulled up her contact information, hoping to find some clue about her. Unlike the other women in his contacts, there were not any notations, sordid or otherwise, associated with her. Even the ringtone assigned to her number had been set to the default. In fact, the only information in his cell phone pertaining to her was a name and phone number. Perhaps she had been someone he had added to his special contacts months prior and then had never chanced to connect with her. After all, he had created multiple accounts on websites designed to assist people looking to make sexual connections. So many in fact, he struggled to remember the screen names and passwords he had created for each one.

Unwilling to waste any further time considering an unknown, he moved on to the names in his list with which he was familiar. New girls, he reasoned, were for those instances when his preferred females failed to respond, or were otherwise engaged. Moving on to another name in his list, he studied her explicit photos and read the notations associated with her. However, he found himself unable to focus on her information, for his mind doggedly insisted upon returning to Fancy. Each subsequent name brought the same the aggravating result; his thoughts obdurately refused to dwell on anyone except the mysterious Fancy.

What the hell, he muttered inside his head, shrugging his shoulders. *I'll give her a shot. If she sucks, I can always go on to one of the others.*

His fingers typed out an innocuous message, and touched the send button. Almost instantaneously an amiable, albeit slightly evocative, response appeared on his screen. His interest piqued, he unzipped his pants, releasing his excited genitals, and responded with a suggestive reply more suitable for the moment. Nearly immediately, a graphic message accompanied by a picture of pert, bare breasts materialized on his screen. Another text soon followed, requesting a picture of his hardened penis, which he eagerly complied. On and on for nearly an hour, the messages, and salacious pictures flew back and forth between them, until each had experienced the ecstasy of self-gratification.

Catching his breath, Chris decided to inquire as to where he had gotten Fancy's phone number. It seemed an iffy venture, taking the risk of offending her merely to learn how and where they had encountered one another did not appear prudent, but the curiosity was overwhelming. Hesitant fingers typed the text, and then he sat ruminating over his decision at length before sending it on its way. Several long moments later, came a single word reply, "Lol!"

Both relieved and puzzled, he attempted to word a response, typing out several messages in the process, but ultimately deciding against sending each of them. As he sat, pondering his next text, a notification of a voice message showed on his screen.

"We have never met anywhere. I placed my name and number in your phone last night while you were otherwise occupied." a beatific voice spoke in a seemingly ethereal tone.

Chris smiled and chuckled softly. Then a veneer of bewilderment suddenly washed over his countenance, as the recollections of the previous night wandered into his thoughts. *I was here last night...texting with Lisa...and my phone never left my hand...How in Hell did she get her number in it?*

Over the next few nights, circumstances had prevented Chris from leaving his house. The first night, he had been denied use of the family car for failing to perform his daily garbage detail. The next day, a neglected and overdue school assignment had forced him to spend his evening and night in the confines of his bedroom tending to his schoolwork. The final day of his captivity had come thanks in part to the poor grade he had received on the overdue paper.

Despite being sequestered inside his room, he had still managed to find the time to exchange sordid texts and pictures with two young women, who had been his second choices in texting partners. Each night, he had attempted to engage Fancy in some lascivious pleasure, and each night his texts had gone unanswered. He feared that their liaison was destined to be a one-time occurrence, as had been so many of the encounters he had had in the past. However, he held out hope that would not be the situation with her. Not only did her naked form in the pictures greatly appeal to him, her explicitly, racy messages suggested that of an older woman, experienced in the exotic ways of lovemaking and that utterly captivated him, such as none of his other texting partners had been able to do.

Freedom to visit his favorite texting location presented itself in the form of an unplanned trip his parents needed to make to attend to a family crisis across the state. Though given explicit instructions not to leave the house for any reason other than school, the moment his parents disappeared from his view, he began making plans to drive to Odd Fellows cemetery for some wanton fun.

Retrieving his cell phone from a pocket, he began typing a message to send to Fancy. Once it had been sent, he waited and waited, hoping to receive a reply. After several minutes without a response, he dejectedly slunk back into the house, believing he would not be hearing from her again. Sifting through the other names in his list of private contacts, he began prioritizing a list of those he would be contacting later that night. Despite her lack of contact, Fancy remained at the top of his wish list.

That night, as he sat propped up against his usual tombstone, he began typing a text, hoping Fancy would respond as she had before. Before his finger could touch the send button, a notification of a message popped onto his screen. His eyes twinkled and his visage brightened, noticing it was from her. As he began reading the message, he noticed straightway the tone of it was different. There was neither sexual innuendo nor explicit language. It was an ordinary text, such as the many he had received from friends during the course of a typical day. After reading to its end, he was struck with a perplexing realization. The timbre of the message suggested she seemed to want to become acquainted with him.

Chris zipped his pants. *Looks like it will be regular texting tonight. If she wants us to get to know each other, what the Hell? Let's do it. Who knows? It might lead to some really good real sex down the road.*

Letting his fingers do his talking, he inquired as to why she had failed to respond to any of his texts sent from his home.

"Lol! Silly boy! I can only receive texts that are sent in this cemetery."

Upon reading her message, his head jerked from side to side, scanning the darkened grounds, and only spotting the glow of the granite and marble stones, as they reflected the dim illumination of a distant pole lamp.

If she's here, I damn sure can't see her. He reasoned in his head. *Maybe she's toying with me, hoping I'll get up, and go looking, so she can pop out, and scare me...Or maybe she's somewhere naked and waiting for me. Well, if it's a game she wants, I can play too.*

Adroit fingers typed a response, first jokingly remarking about the poor quality of her cell phone's coverage, and then clumsily seeking a clue as to where she was hiding.

"I'm so close 2 u, I can c u."

Jumping to his feet, Chris, both anxiously and studiously, panned his vision about the cemetery. Still unable to detect any sign of Fancy, he began wording another message to send her.

I want 2 c u. Tell me where u r so we can talk, he spoke inside his head, as he typed.

"We r talking now, lol," her message mockingly stated, causing his level of agitation to rise.

U know what I mean. Let's talk in person. I want to c u, the words reflected in his brain, as he replied.

"U really want 2 c me?"

Yes! His thoughts shouted, as his fingers did his talking.

"Sit down. Close your eyes and I will come 2 u."

Chris complied, readily and gladly. Seated on the ground with his back and head against the tombstone, he began to feel a tingling sensation in his feet, such as if soft feathers were lightly touching them.

"Keep your eyes closed until I tell you to open them," a gentle voice instructed him.

With his eyes tightly closed, the sensation began moving into his legs, progressing slowly toward his inner thighs and genitals. His level of excitement began to grow and harden. For a brief instant, a notion to open his eyes sauntered through his mind, but, as if reading his thoughts, Fancy directed him to keep them closed.

“Now you may open your eyes.”

His eyes set upon a lovely vision of a young woman, near his age, perhaps one or two years older than himself. Her face was ghostly, a lighter shade of pale that almost seemed translucent. Draped upon her body was a flowing, white gown, which trailed behind her like gossamer wings, caught in an ethereal breeze. His heart jumped inside his chest, smitten with her ethereal beauty. A spectral hand reached toward him, moving in an enchantingly, graceful motion that held his eyes mesmerized, as it entered his chest. A brief moment of pain ensued, followed by an awareness of a piece of his essence being pulled from his body with the removal of her hand.

“What...What just happened?” he queried, gazing in bewilderment, suddenly realizing he was no longer seated.

“I was on the ground and...” his voice abruptly tailed off, as he stood looking at his stilled body slumped to the ground with the frozen gaze of death reflecting his eyes.

“Now we can be together always,” she said through a wisp of a smile.

His vision bounced from Fancy to his lifeless body, and then back to her wraithlike countenance. The grim truth flashed in his brain, draping his face with shock and horror. In his wanton desire to satisfy his base urges, he had awakened the same in a lonely spirit, who had decided that only by taking his life, could they truly be together.

If only he had not wasted many nights, seeking sexual gratification through lurid words and sordid pictures, violating the consecrated suburb of the dead in the process. If only he had taken the time to view the other side of the tombstone, against which he had propped his head and back. If only he had read the words inscribed upon its marble surface, *Fancy Lynn Johnson, beloved daughter and sister*. If only he had taken notice of the cell phone embedded in her tombstone that remained functioning nearly two years after her death. Then perhaps he would not be standing over his own corpse, facing an eternity as a ghost's lover.

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

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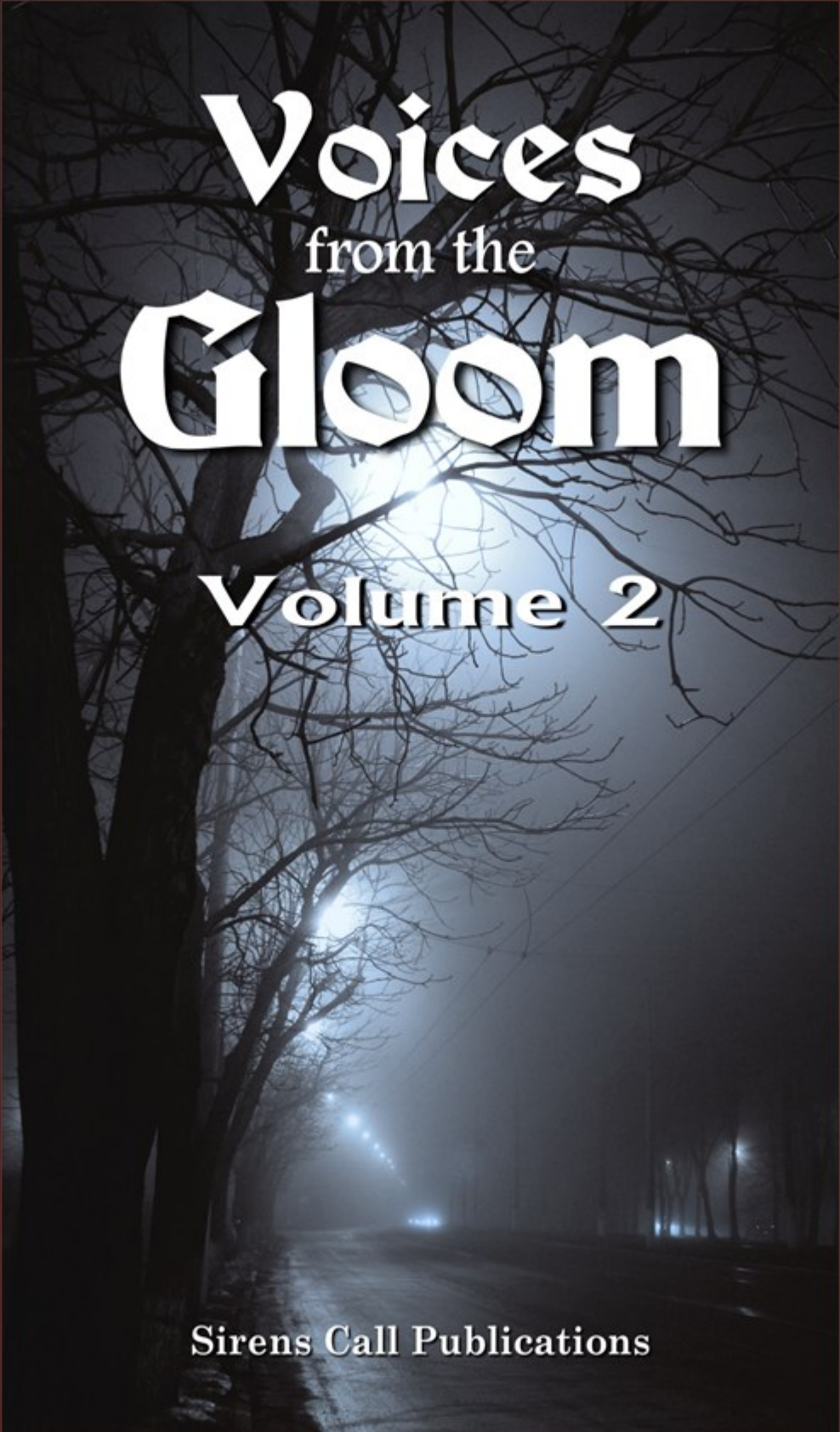
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Cup and Ring Carving *Kelda Crich*

Take this pick made from deer horn that you found in the woods where she liked to walk.

Leave the village where your brothers silently split thin branches. New wood, green wood, does not burn well.

Walk onto the moors which are bathed in sunlight, sliding through the clouds, patterning the land bright and happy as cheerful woven cloth.

Go to the outcrop, where she would sit, and the wind blowing her hair from her face. The wind snatching her laughter.

Fall to your knees.

The wind blows cold on the moors. Think that you will never have the strength to rise.

Take this horn pick and into the stone make the carving. The cup, the depression, encircled by two rings. Two rings for each of the ten years of her life.

Look at the small symbol. Simple, unlike the carvings on the boulders of the barrow, interlaced connecting of carved rings, and spiral, ladders, linking all to all.

Now the ashes of her bones are mixed with the dead. Think that she is free.

This carving. The cup and the two rings. So simple, like her life. Run your fingers gently over the stone. Remove the flecks of dust.

Think that such a small carving might be washed away by wind and rain, but that it will endure for a good few years. Think that you can come here and remember.

On the prehistoric cup and ring carving etched into a Yorkshire stone, five thousand years ago. The meaning of such petroglyphs has been lost.

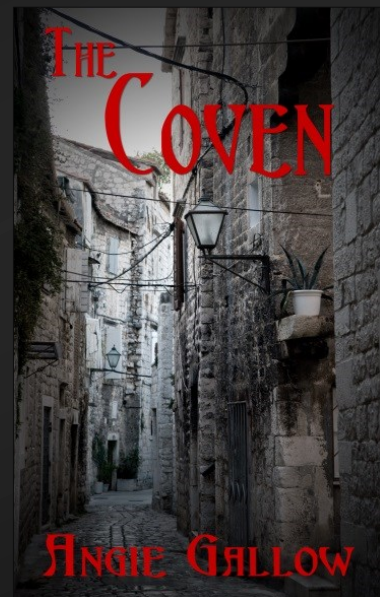
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kelda Crich is a new born entity. She's been lurking in her creator's mind for a few years. Now she's out in the open. Find her in London looking at strange things in medical museums.

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The Coven

Available on Amazon,
Barnes & Noble, Kobo and
iTunes



Dinner on the Ground *Rivka Jacobs*

They have returned. Lively and talkative, smelling of strange harsh perfumes, they flow into these wooded spaces. They carry trowels and shovels, clippers, rakes and hoes. Men, women, and children wearing gloves; they haul boxes of flowers and bags of dirt. They are dressed for church as they fan out and mark the four corners of our universe.

For many years the tools changed little, the clothing stayed the same. Horses pulled buggies, carriages and wagons. The living did what we did before them in our time. More recently the quiet has been broken by roaring motors, the sounds of internal combustion and treads on stone.

Grand vehicles with rubber wheels and glass windows park on the meadow just beside us. The men move cutting machines back and forth, clearing away the thick stands of honeysuckle, wild grass, and vines. The women rake and scrape the earth, removing the dead leaves and wreathes of yesteryear. The children run up and down between the trees along the rows, pointing out the gray, weathered markers that are almost invisible, swallowed by overgrowth and age.

We are the living and the dead. We are a family that extends through time.

In a few hours, the old gravestones are squared and cleaned, floral displays are placed, garden patches are filled with new soil and favorites are planted--daisies, black-eyed-susans, lavender and phlox. The blooming rose and lilac bushes are pruned and relieved of curling, choking vines. Overhead the sun flickers through the canopy of oak and maple leaves as a soft breeze caresses them, letting them know how much we appreciate their care.

They put away their tools now, and gather before the eldest of us. Some twenty-five adults and young, they hang their heads while one of them says a prayer. Then they sing. Every year it is a different song.

All of us feel the excitement, the anticipation. An elderly woman known to many of us--a daughter, a sister, a wife, a cousin--calls out with shaky strength, "Let's eat!"

And they go to their trucks and cars and vans and return bearing cartons and baskets and bundles. They are chattering now, telling stories about us, gossiping about us, and we listen, amused and pleased. Quilts--some heirlooms, others newly crafted--are flung and flapped and fly on the air, settling in waves and ripples on the ground beside relatives lying underneath who have waited all year for this moment.

The aroma of fried chicken fills the world as huge platters of it are passed around from group to group each sitting on a soft, colorful rectangle of stars and rosettes and geometric designs. Soon every person present is surrounded by all manner of vegetables, fruits, bread and rolls, and so many different kinds of cakes, pies, puddings, and other sweets that it is impossible to name them all.

Their hearts pumping, their lungs filling and expelling air, their mouths watering, they pause to say grace and to toast us with lemonade and fresh iced tea. Someone calls out, "Come and get it!"

We shiver with expectation and rise, passing through loamy dirt into the dapples of sunshine, dancing into the light. We search for our loved ones, some of us twittering like birds as we recognize our kin. A few of us circle and circle like darting dragonflies, confused and sad because no one they remember is there. They hover like tiny, invisible flames on the edges of the throng, for a time feeling lost and alone.

But soon someone munching on an apple or stuffing a piece of cornbread into their mouth, tells a story about "that old so-and-so, Mamaw's second cousin, Sam," and one of the outliers swirls and flares and settles down cross-legged on the quilt where these distant relations have invoked his name, feeling wanted once more.

Our shared dinner on the ground is bittersweet. For while we are moved and warmed by life, remembrance, and love, we also are once again reminded of passing and sorrow and the inevitable forward motion that steals life with a flash or chips away at it bit by bit. For us, there is no other time. For us, it is a harsh admonition when we realize that hours have passed and the sun is setting and these flesh and blood folk are shedding tears as they begin to pack up the remains of their feast and fold up their quilts.

For those of us who choose to stay, to cling to the world, this one day, Decoration Day, Memorial Day is our only day. Everything else is eternity.

The quilts disappear into hampers and totes. In the distance, engines sputter and rumble into life like growling animals. Women and men collect the last vestiges of their meal into boxes and bags, others heft small, exhausted children who lay their tender heads on broad shoulders, their cheeks flushed and

their hair mussed. The darkness grows. We hover in the mists and last golden rays. We shake and sigh with the fluttering leaves and creak with the swaying branches. We cleave to the very air with electric thoughts, not wanting to let go.

The people straggle away amidst the noises of opening and slamming doors and spinning tires. In the twilight a middle-aged woman remains to kneel at a grave, weeping once more while a young man squats down to adjust the floral arrangement on his grandmother's plot.

After a while we become aware that they are all gone. It is wrenching to say good-bye. Once we were them, leaving those who came before us in the darkness. Now one by one we descend to our rest, and we wait. We wait for next year and their return.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - I grew up in Miami, Florida, and have lived in West Virginia for thirty-five years. I have master's degrees in sociology and mental-health counseling, and a BSN. I'm currently an RN specializing in psychiatric nursing. In the 1980s I published stories in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the *Women of Darkness* anthology. Recently I've published stories in *The Literary Hatchet*, the *Riding Light Review*, and *The Sirens Call* eZine

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TILL DEATH *Alex Woolf*

One way or another, Maurice and Felicia were connected by death. Both were orphans by the age of 20; each made their living out of other people's bereavements; and their romance began at a funeral. Maurice's company, Novel Undertakings, specialized in bespoke burials: coffins shaped like boats or planes for die-hard sailors and pilots; the motorcycle and sidecar hearse for the former hell's angel; cremated ashes made into glassware for lovers of crystal; mummification for Egyptologists; even Viking funerals for those lately departed for Valhalla.

While Maurice took care of the bodily remains, Felicia catered to spiritual needs. A medium, self-proclaimed soul whisperer and amateur telepathist, she somehow failed to predict her fateful first encounter with Maurice. Felicia was accompanying one of her clients to the funeral of her husband, a mobile phone entrepreneur, who had hired Maurice to fulfill his dying wish to be buried in a scale model of the Nokia 6500 Classic. With his final breath, he had managed to convince his wife that he would soon be texting her from beyond the grave. Felicia, already fascinated by the psychic possibilities inherent in electronic communication, did nothing to disabuse her client from this belief.

Maurice was not so preoccupied with his duties that he failed to notice the slender, pre-Raphaelite beauty with the mass of curly auburn hair that flowed out from beneath her black hat. As the coffin descended to the tune of the deceased's favourite ringtone, Maurice tried and failed to catch Felicia's eye. At the reception, he approached her. He struggled to control his facial twitches, the weakness in his jaw muscles, as he listened to her talk. Her bone structure was pure-bred Irish-Celtic, the wide-spaced eyes, the fine, straight nose; her skin pure and child-soft; her eyes the colour of the hills of Kerry after rainfall. Those eyes bored endlessly into his own as she in turn listened to him. They penetrated the inner spaces beyond his retina and optic nerve, beyond his cerebrum, his hippocampus, beyond even the amygdala, the very seat of his emotions, to something or somewhere of only theoretical existence.

She liked what she saw. Or seemed to. In any case, they began to date. Six months later, she moved into his Edwardian house in North London, an inheritance from his parents. Felicia took over the upper rooms for séances and spirit readings, Maurice continued to use the basement as his studio, while the ground floor became their joint living space.

From the start they were aware in an amused yet nervous kind of way of their radical differences. For Maurice, there was nothing more in heaven and earth than the evidence of the senses, and nothing more glorious. But Maurice's love affair with the physical world was matched only by Felicia's boredom with it. She seemed to dwell almost exclusively on non-physical planes; constantly flitting between hot and cold emotional states; those fathomless eyes of hers forever seeking out aspects of people and objects that Maurice could only guess at. She was deaf to his paeans to her beauty – her looks were a matter of supreme indifference to her. If either had been honest with themselves, they may have suspected trouble ahead. But Maurice could not see beyond those cheekbones, those eyes, that skin. And Felicia was too enthralled by Maurice's sexy black and silver aura to notice that it completely failed to align with hers.

The real trouble started two years into their relationship, when Felicia met Robin in an internet chat room. She was upfront about it from the start. "He has a beautiful spirit," she sighed to Maurice over breakfast. "Carefree yet careworn; old yet young. We're like soulmates, even though I've only known him a few weeks."

"What does he look like?" asked Maurice between desultory gulps of coffee.

She looked surprised. "I've no idea... I'm not even totally sure he's male... Although the yang is very strong in him."

Over the next few months, Maurice saw less of Felicia. Though they continued to share the same house, they often took their meals at different times. A distance grew between them. Maurice suspected that she was getting closer to this Robin fellow. Privately, he turned the man's name into an adjective to which he appended whatever noun came to mind: 'bastard' was one of the milder ones. To mask his jealousy, he assumed an attitude of amused indifference. "I'm surprised you need to use anything so pedestrian as the internet to communicate with this soulmate of yours," he mocked. "Why bother with HTML when you can use telepathy?" This sent her into a rage that resulted in the breakage of at least four pieces of his late mother's best crockery.

A week later, Felicia announced she was leaving. She was going to live with Robin. They were standing in the bedroom. Maurice watched her pack. He felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. Gradually he remembered how to breathe, and then how to speak. "But you don't know anything about him," he groaned. "He might be a nine-year-old boy. Or an old woman."

"I don't actually care," said Felicia, closing her suitcase with a snap.

Maurice could only look at her, scared to the marrow at the thought of losing her. His pleas for her to think again had no effect. She was like a limb on which he'd always relied that had suddenly gone numb and cold on him. Odd, apparently rational thoughts began circulating in his brain. I could knock her out, tie her up, keep her imprisoned in the basement. I'll tell her clients she had some sort of accident.

He watched as she made her way out into the hall, dragging the big suitcase behind her. She opened the front door. Sunlight flooded through, catching her hair in streaks of pale gold.

"Good-bye Maurice," she said, turning. "I'll write with my address, so you can forward my stuff."

"Wait," said Maurice. "Why don't you at least stay for something to eat? For God's sake. What's the hurry?"

Something in his face or aura or whatever must have snagged at her heart just then. She relented and agreed to stay for a bowl of soup.

When he added the dimethyltryptamine to her soup, it wasn't with a specific plan in mind. He just wanted to buy some time. He'd found the bottle in the bathroom when he went to wash his hands. He knew she sometimes took hallucinogenics. She claimed it helped her achieve the trance state necessary for her work. He watched her as she drank the soup. He barely touched his. His stomach felt like a solid ball of cement. As she got up to go, she keeled over. Perhaps he'd overdone the dosage. Maurice noted the pupil dilation, the increased heart rate, the laboured breathing. She was smiling at him, whispering very slowly, though he couldn't understand a word. He watched her for a while, then went through to the front room, fetched a cushion and brought it back. "I'm sorry, my darling," Maurice said to her.

"I'm shorry," she mimicked, giggling.

He placed the cushion over her face and pushed it down hard. "I just can't let you go," he told her through his tears. He felt her body contorting beneath him, her fists beating him, desperately at first, then gradually weakening.

When she was dead, he carried her body down to his basement studio. He stripped her, then washed her in a disinfectant solution, all the time bending and flexing her arms and legs to keep her supple. He used adhesive to keep her mouth closed in a smiling expression. Her eyes he allowed to remain open. He injected the embalming solution via the right common carotid artery, removing her blood from the right jugular. He used an aspirator and trocar to suck out her internal fluids, puncture the hollow organs and fill the cavities with formaldehyde. He worked slowly, taking more care than he had over any previous corpse. It took him nearly three hours. When she was ready, he carried her upstairs and placed her in a large wooden chest in her office.

While he had been working on her, Maurice had been calm and professional. Now, as he laid her in the box, he broke down. "I'm sorry baby," he mumbled, his tears falling on her glacial cheeks. She stared back at him, but her eyes no longer sparkled with mysterious understanding.

When he was calmer, he sat down at the computer in his study on the ground floor and sent out emails to Felicia's clients, informing them that she had left and that he would write again when he had her new contact details. Then he installed a wireless router to switch all her incoming emails to his computer.

One evening a few days later, Maurice was in his study preparing his speech for a forthcoming undertakers' conference, when he heard a noise coming from upstairs. It sounded like someone was moving around up there. He got up and walked cautiously into the hallway, having little appetite to disturb a possibly armed or drug-fuelled burglar at his work. It sounded like the shuffle and creak of bare feet on floorboards. Slowly, he mounted the stairs. The door into Felicia's office was ajar. Perhaps they were stealing her computer. He hesitated. The sounds had ceased. With his shoulder he nudged open the door and fumbled for the desklight switch. His fingers brushed against something warm and yielding – it felt for a second like someone's hand. Maurice jumped backwards as if from an electric shock.

“Christ! Who’s there?”

No answer. After a further desperate bout of mad fumbling, his fingers closed on the hard plastic of the switch. The light came on. The room was as it should be – empty of life, save for a large moth that fluttered near the window. Maurice relaxed. The insect must have brushed against his hand just now. He looked around to see if anything else had been altered. He had come in here often over the past days and, as ever, his eyes and thoughts fell on the wooden chest. Just one quick peek, he told himself – while I’m here, I might as well. He opened the lid.

As he looked down on Felicia, he could not help but admire his handiwork, skillfully complementing what nature had wrought. “Now her beauty will live forever,” he murmured. “I will never have to watch her age.” As he rhapsodised to himself, he noticed something slightly amiss. Some embalming fluid had escaped from her left tear duct and had welled on her cheek. He wiped it away with his handkerchief and closed the lid.

Back at his desk, Maurice noticed an email from someone called Robin Thorpe – Felicia’s internet lover, it had to be – rerouted to his computer from the one upstairs. “Where are you, my darling?” it said. “Why weren’t you there at the airport as we agreed?”

Maurice allowed himself a smile as he typed his response: “She left here on Tuesday, Mr Thorpe, I assume to meet you. I have no idea what could have happened to her.” As he was typing this, he became conscious of a change in the atmosphere. The temperature rose, he felt a warmth pressing at him from behind, particularly against the back of his shoulder. A man of science, Maurice was not given to irrational thoughts and feelings, such as the idea that he might not be alone in the room. This was the product of a faulty thermostat, solar activity or too much coffee. That soft, breathy echo he just heard close by was the hot water coming on. Yet Maurice had to concede he was scared. He noted the tightness in his chest, his increased pulse rate, the wateriness in his gut. He tried to be dispassionate – observe these things about himself and then ignore them.

Once the email was sent, he forced his attention back to his speech. His computer announced the arrival of a new email with a ‘ping’. It was another from lover boy.

“I’m confused by what you say,” Thorpe had written. “You claim that she left a few days ago. Yet I’ve just received this from her. See below.”

What nonsense was this? Maurice scrolled down the page until he saw the words, in green type:

im uiiiiire wwwwwwwoieeeeeee ooiooo;isji; joim;oiam m l;m ssertiiiiill herrrrrrre roobiinn hhre
woooooooullllldnnntt let mmmmmme goooooe hhhhheeeee kkkkilllllled mmmmmmmeeeeee!!!!!!!
sstuuckkkkk wwwwithhhh mhiimmmm nowwwwwww ttttttilllllll deaaaathhhhhh ussss doooooo
parttttttjjkajhfjk!!!!!!

Maurice leapt away from the computer, revolted by it as by something familiar suddenly turned hideous. Forcing himself back, he hit reply and typed a hasty response. “If this is some sort of sick game you’re playing, I’ll get straight onto the police.” He then switched it off and fled the room. Running up the stairs, two at a time, he burst into Felicia’s office. The laptop on her desk was warm to the touch. The thing was actually on when he lifted the screen. And there was that email to Robin, sent just a few minutes ago. Half-crazed now, Maurice flung open the chest. The same glazed beauty stared up at him, except... except the smile he had originally crafted on her lips had been warm and loving. The smile she now wore was more pronounced, with a hint of teeth. The eyebrows had tilted imperceptibly downwards, changing the smile into something approaching the demonic!

He raced downstairs to the kitchen and fetched the meat cleaver, then charged back up to the office. Without a second thought he fell upon the corpse. Within a few minutes, the beauty he had hoped would awe generations was an unrecognizable mess of flesh and fluid.

He stripped off his clothes and headed for the bathroom. “I’ll bury her tomorrow,” Maurice told himself as he showered. “No one, not even Robin Thorpe, will be able to pin this one on me!” Dressing in clean clothes, Maurice felt a powerful urge to get out of the house and its oppressive atmosphere. He

needed to be in crowds, the bigger the better, fill his lungs with the life of the city. He donned his jacket, stepped into the hall and opened the front door, sucking deeply on the cool, misty air. But the air didn't feel so cool on him as he strode towards the underground station – it felt uncomfortably close, like in the hour before a storm. Entering the empty station concourse, he approached the small ticket booth. “A one-day travel card,” he requested of the small, snaggle-toothed man behind the glass.

The man's face creased into a puzzled squint. “Just the one?” he asked.

“That's right.”

“What about your friend?”

Maurice eyed him. “What friend?”

The ticket seller's frown deepened, then he shook his head and sighed. “Sorry mate, I must be getting tired. It's been a long day. I could have sworn I saw a red-haired girl behind you just now.”

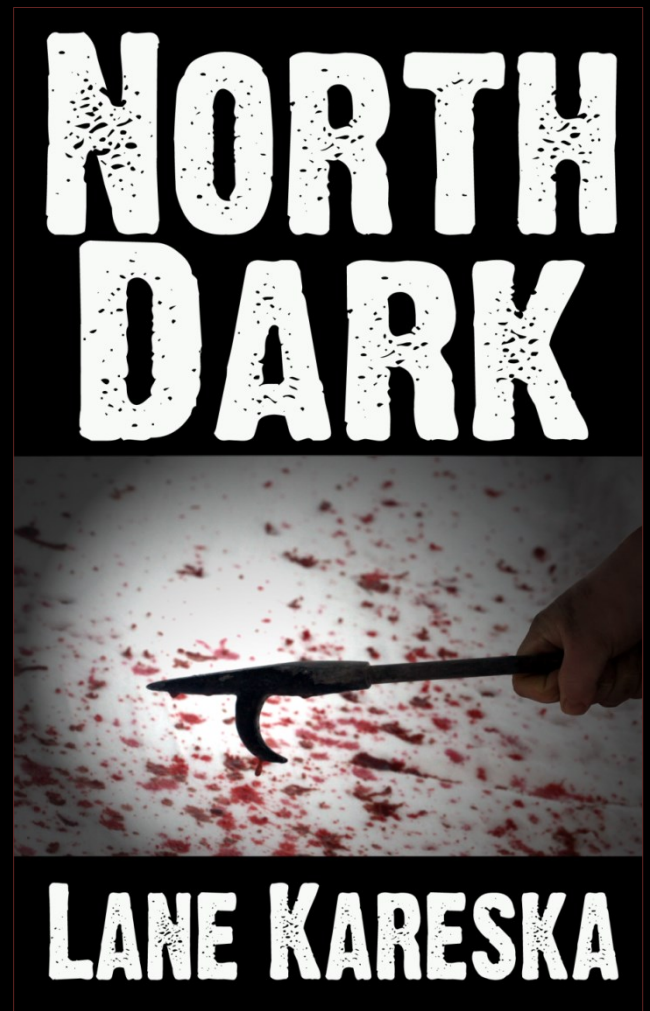
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Woolf is the author of over eighty books, mostly for children and young adults. His fiction includes *Chronosphere*, a time-warping science fiction trilogy, *Aldo Moon*, about a teenage Victorian ghost-hunter, and *Soul Shadows*, a horror story about flesh-eating shadows, shortlisted for the 2014 RED Book Award. His latest book is the first in a new steampunk series called *Iron Sky: Dread Eagle*.

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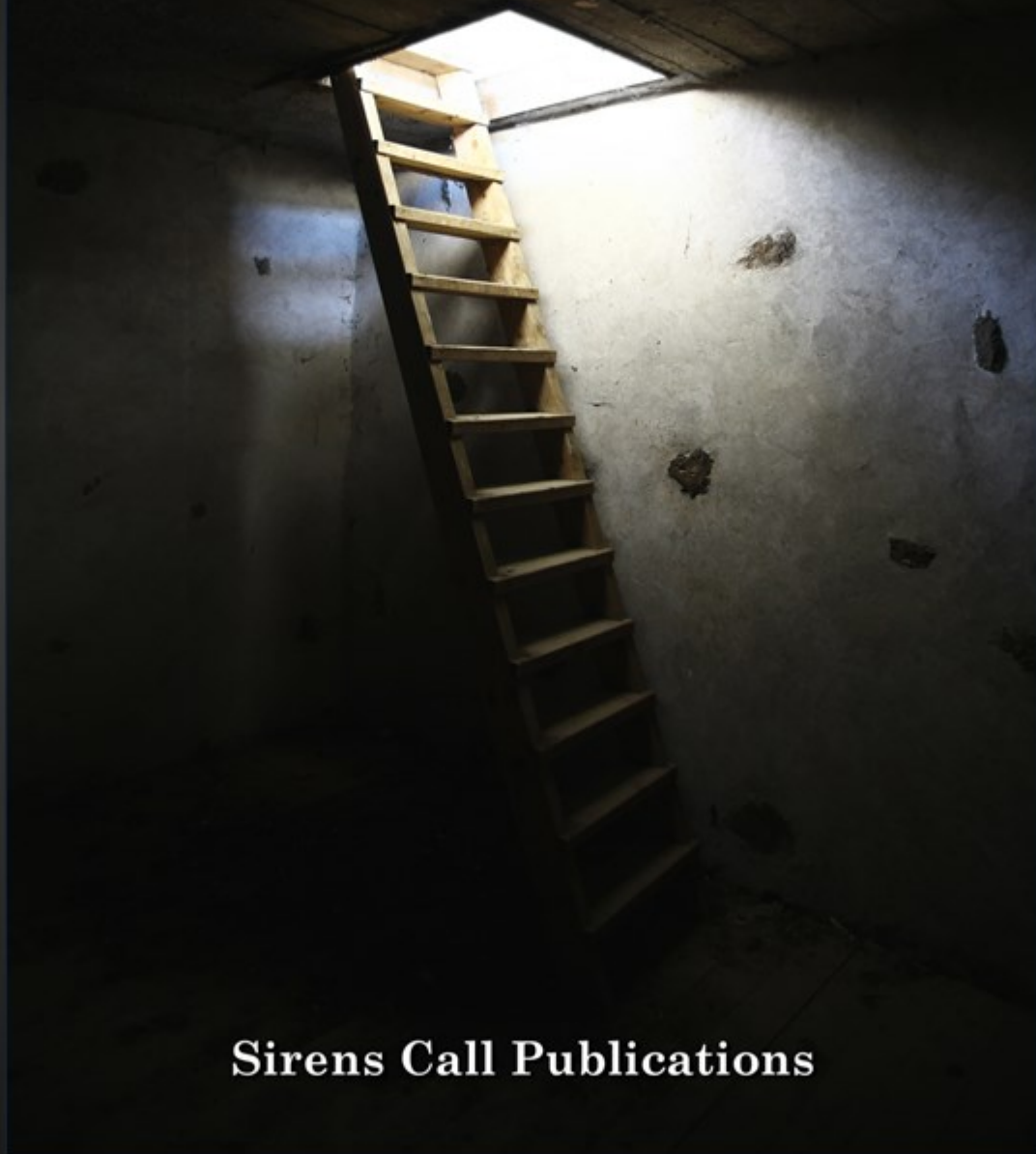
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Of the Dark



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Pythia Dave Dormer

The two officers looked up and sighed in tandem when Earl arrived on the scene. They'd barely finished securing the area when the white-haired, potbellied man removed a black duffle bag from the rear of his van with magnetic signs affixed marking him as *Coroner*. He approached them with confident strides.

"Hey Earl, how's business these days at the gas pumps?" One officer said with a sneer while elbowing his partner.

"Yeah. Yeah. You two wouldn't know your ass from Alice." The elderly man replied as he brushed passed the two patrolmen. Earl headed straight for the body that laid sprawled and unmoving on the grass. "So, what do we have here, boys?"

"Isn't that why you're here?" The officer responded without pause. The two men stepped aside and continued grumbling behind Earl's back.

"Oh, and Earl, don't mess this one up. We'd like to have *some* evidence to work with. Maybe even catch a criminal. Wait till the city's investigator gets here this time."

"Don't you guys have more barrier tape to string up?" Earl's chest inflated even further as he began his survey of the scene. "The scene may be yours, but the body's mine." Earl removed a small notepad, pen, and a tape recorder from his bag while the two patrolmen looked on.

Earl knew he had an audience and his efforts to appear methodical, like a respected surgeon, was more than one officer could stomach. Before returning to his cruiser, strobes still flashing he added, "If we're lucky, one of these days it'll be Earl's body lying on the ground."

The other officer wasn't so lucky; he had to remain at the scene's perimeter with logbook in hand next to Earl. The elderly man was too engrossed to hear the patrolman's insult. It wasn't often anything interesting happened in their small-town and being its Coroner, left considerable leisure time for Earl. Excused from his duties at the town's only gas station, he was virtually vibrating. Earl surveyed what he could from outside the tape. He slowly paced the perimeter jotting notes in his pad and taking snapshots with his 35mm camera. He saw nothing overhead to cause injury or to fall from so he quickly assumed the victim suffered an overdose or heart failure. Foul play didn't seem likely.

"Since you guys won't let me in, I'll go check inside the house."

Earl picked up his bag and headed for the front door when one of the officers shouted, "Don't fuck with anything, Earl."

To avoid argument, Earl stopped at the door, slipped booties over his shoes, and squeezed his chubby hands into a pair of latex gloves. Once inside, Earl removed a thermometer from his kit and took some readings. He moved carefully, staying on the hardwood flooring to find the home's thermostat to compare results – no variation. From all angles, he took photographs of the interior, especially any carpeted areas of flooring for footprints.

After checking the fridge of its contents, and looking specifically for medications that could point to cause of death, he spotted another door. He moved toward it and carefully pressed his ear up against the cool surface. Everything was silent except for his pounding heart. Earl loved this job. It was the only time he didn't feel like a failure.

He opened the door and descended the stairs into the basement. The lights were still on in the cool, damp space and it gave him gooseflesh. He quickly pulled the thermometer from his pocket and recorded its reading.

He hadn't seen anything so curious. The basement was barren except for a large cleft that spanned the basement's length and air rushed from the darkened chasm. Chairs sat along the crack in the floor and the oddest article was the antique bathtub that straddled the chasm. Earl moved closer, snapping photos as he went. Beside the tub, which he could see now was perforated, sat a table that held a tape recorder and a small stack of cassettes. Then, the pungent odor of fumes hit him like a slap in the face.

He scratched his head leaving behind a trail of wispy, white strands of hair that snaked across his forehead. He dislodged his upper plate of false teeth, a habit he formed when he was deep in thought, which now protruded sickeningly from his lips. He thought of ways to keep the officers from finding this.

Earl needed to find out what this all meant on his own. Maybe, they wouldn't need to rely on a *so-called* expert. They'd have Earl.

He marched up the stairs and turned out the lights to the basement below him. He peered around the house making sure it remained empty of law enforcement and made his way to the bathroom. He opened the medicine cabinet and continued his search. It was obvious that something troubled the man that lay on the grass outside. Several prescription bottles of sleeping aids dominated the shelf. Earl grabbed a bottle, emptied its contents into his pocket, and left the bottle and cap strewn on the sink counter with gloved hands.

Back outside, Earl marched toward the officers who now watched the newly arrived, big city investigator examine the scene.

"Looks like an open-and-shut case," Earl said with an annoying grin. "You'll find an empty bottle of sleeping pills on the bathroom counter, boys."

Both officers and the investigator rolled their eyes and lowered their heads in response.

"If you don't mind, I'd like the keys to the building. I'd like to return for further investigation." Earl asked. "You can never be too sure. I'll make sure to keep you guy's informed of anything new."

With Earl and the investigator's comprehensive examination of the body complete at the morgue, and a brain aneurysm discovered as the cause of death, Earl signed the death certificate as natural cause. With relative ease, he rid himself of the big city investigator and resumed his role as full-time gas station attendant where the contents of the dead man's basement invaded his every thought. Earl fumbled with the man's house keys in his pocket and waited for his shift to end.

Earl descended the basement stairs like a kid on Christmas morning and pulled up a chair alongside the table that held the dead man's recorder. He used his own digital recorder that he placed on the table to monitor his findings within the basement and rewound the tape that occupied the dead man's recorder. Then he pressed play.

Earl could hear signs of struggle. It sounded as though someone floundered within the bathtub followed by a long silence. A voice broke the stillness of the recording, one that didn't suit the man who laid dead on the grass only days before. Earl listened to the tape in its entirety while the cool vapors escaping the crevice lulled him into a trance. He shook his head to rid the haze and rubbed his throbbing ears. The pressure in his head felt like he was on a plane climbing into the clouds. He gathered the remaining tapes, the recorder, and escaped the basement.

A week passed and Earl reviewed each of the cassettes. Each tape captured a different session within the basement and each session featured a different, disturbing voice. The tape's content seemed consistent to a reading from the dead man's past or future from what Earl could gather. Some of the readings sounded as though intended for the dead man's audience. Other voices on the recordings he could occasionally hear in the basement verified his assumptions.

Another week had passed before Earl had the courage to visit the home again. He listened to the tapes repeatedly before finally figuring what the dead man was doing while the sessions took place. If he could repeat the dead man's sessions, there would be no end to the possibilities or Earl and his future.

Again, Earl crept into the basement and moved to the table beside the antique bathtub. Not wanting to take any chances, he brought both his and the dead man's recorder and placed them on the table. He pressed play on both and clumsily climbed into the tub. His mind raced with questions that he could ask. Questions the world wanted answers to and would make him rich by supplying them answers. He would be able to interpret the past and see the future. Cold vapors danced around the tub and seeped through the perforations. His mind dulled as they wrapped around his overweight, elderly form. His body convulsed as the trance enveloped him and his limbs flailed against the metallic tub. Before Earl slipped unconscious, he spotted writing scrawled on the ceiling above him that he'd never noticed before now that read, *Know thyself* and *Nothing in excess*.

His body trembled in frenzy and it enlarged. His white hair stood on end as if statically charged and a voice, not his own, escaped his lips while both recorders ran. Images of history bombarded his mind. First, beginning in ancient Greece where a woman clad as a virgin uttered gibberish from her perch within a

cauldron that spanned a chasm while priests surrounded her, deciphering her oracle from the gods. The visions continued through time wracking Earl's mind. Blood began to leak from his nose and ears and then his body went still. The god's voices eventually stopped wheezing from Earl's dead lips.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Dave Dormer lives and writes in North-Western Ontario alongside his wonderful (and patient) wife and four children.'

Website: <http://dormerdave.wix.com/writing>

Fading Love *John H. Dromey*

A woman with a glum expression entered the police station.

"I'm here to report a missing person," she said. "My husband."

"When did he go missing?" a detective asked. "Over forty-eight hours ago?"

"I can't really say. He's been slowly disappearing for months."

"What do you mean?"

"It cost him an arm and a leg to refinance our home last year. Then a couple of weeks ago I found his hand in the cookie jar."

"Why didn't you report this sooner?"

"I wasn't too concerned before, but now I'm worried that he may have lost his head over another woman."

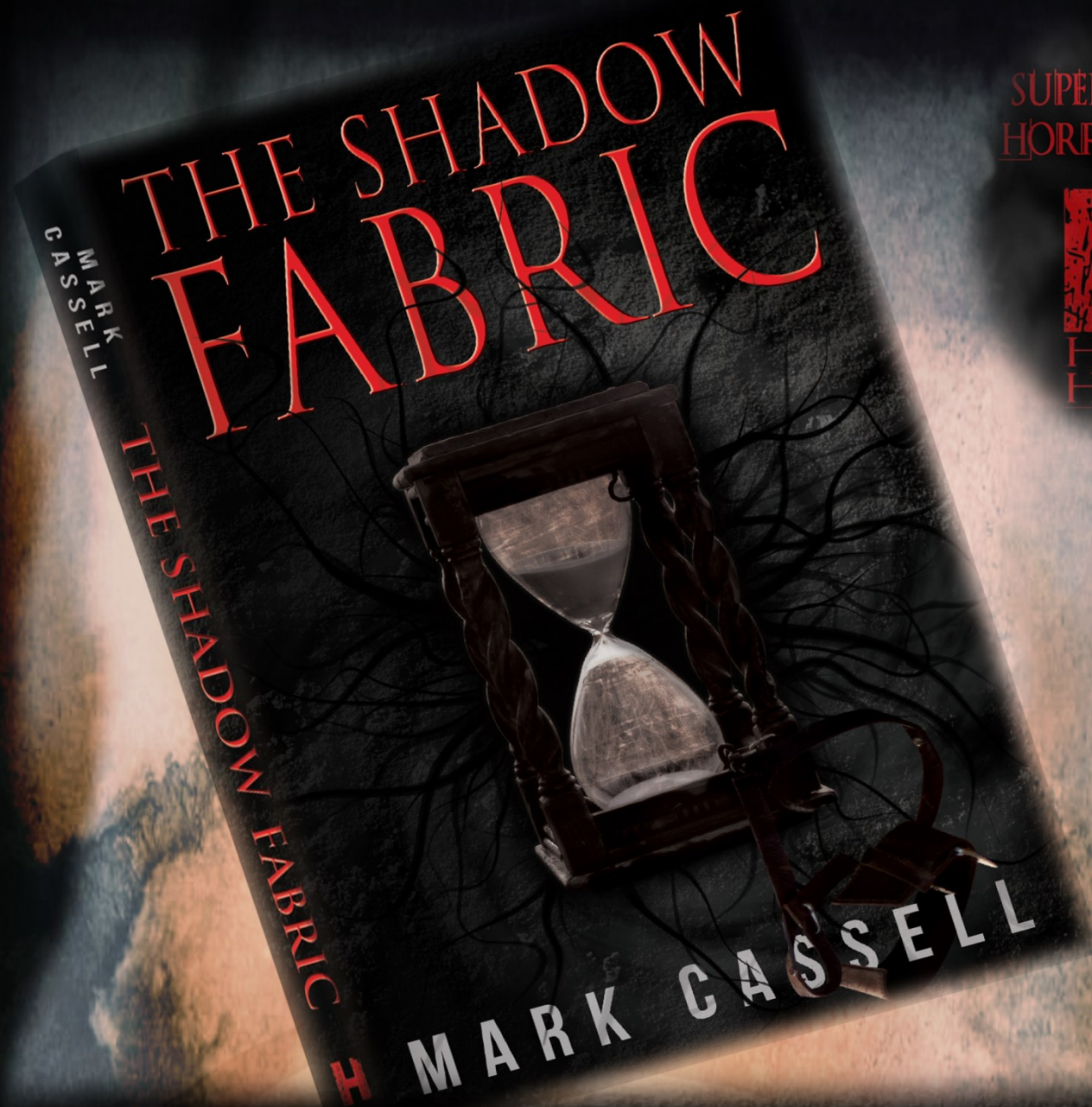
Pieces of Hate *John H. Dromey*

Hansel Murgatroyd wanted to make a name for himself in the ghostbusting business in the worst possible way.

After several failed attempts to land high-profile paranormal investigation assignments—whether real or imagined—any one of which would guarantee some degree of fame and fortune from book and movie rights, Hansel became increasingly paranoid and resentful.

In an act of desperation, he rented a yacht and set out determined to clip the wings of the *Flying Dutchman*. Instead of succeeding, however, Hansel was a victim of impressment at sea and became just one more anonymous member of the ghost ship's crew.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He's had short fiction published in *Acidic Fiction*, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, *Black Denim Lit*, *Stupefying Stories Showcase*, and elsewhere, as well as in a number of anthologies, including *Now I Lay Me Down to Reap* (Sirens Call Publications, 2012).



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The Gardener and His Wife *Magenta Nero*

Nature whispered her secrets in his ear. His garden was a ripe lavish spectacle, a thing of pride and envy on a drab suburban street. Intriguing, that this display of sensitivity came from a man so violent. As if a spark of beauty buried deep within him would not be denied. He spent his life drinking alone in that garden, grunting and chuckling, stumbling around and passing out, discovering himself bruised, scratched and bleeding in the morning.

The gardener said to his wife, "Why me? It should have been you."

He sits propped by pillows and he stares at his hands. Soft, pink and clean, so unlike his own hands. And his arms, once slabs of tough muscle, are floppy, withered flesh hanging out of his generic gown. His face squeezes and contorts as he struggles with the weight of his false teeth. He asks for something and everyone reaches for it at once. A glass of water, a tissue, another pillow. His voice is a dry rasp. Sometimes he is too weak to speak so they sit around him, a silent jury. A family drawn together by an invisible thread that they don't really understand. It pulls them close despite their dislike and embarrassment of him. They look at him, they look away, they look at each other, they look away. Nowhere for the eyes to rest, no place not touched by this. This vague horror. This stark disbelief. This self gratifying fear. So brutal and futile, to watch death at work. No way to assimilate the devastating lesson, your own death is yet to come.

The gardener's wife said, "I know I should feel something but I don't feel anything."

Forty years of bitterness. She does what has to be done. Sitting beside him night and day. She is wiping the drool from his chin. She is raising a cup of iced water to his mouth, pushing the paper straw between pale lips. She is moaning over his dead body, preened to look alive again, it seems like a weightless shell on the cushioned white satin.

She is placing a pink carnation on the coffin lid, with a shaking hand, before it is lowered into the ground.

The moist earth ready to receive him, new secrets to be whispered in his ear. His body a garden itself now. The cemetery a garden of bones. And waiting for him to arrive, a heavenly garden of no more pain.

A stream of doe eyed guests come to offer their condolences. They sit up straight in leather dining chairs and are served bitter coffee in tiny gold rimmed china cups. Delicate sugared pastries arranged on a silver tray. Starched ivory linen tablecloth. Her hands rest before her, right hand laying over left so that the gold wedding band gleams like a strange smile. With calm resignation she repeats the details of his illness, his treatment, his death, over and over again until the flow of guests finally stops.

She begins to clear the garden. Slowly and methodically, she chops and rips and hacks. She digs up the vegetables, they remain overturned, rotting in the sun. The flowers are torn out by their roots. The rich jungle of ferns, snipped away. She prunes the grape vines and roses and fruit trees until only thick, bare, oozing stems remain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Magenta Nero is a fiction writer, poet and artist. She loves to spin tales of dark disturbing fiction, her favourite genres are Gothic horror, fantasy and erotica. Her work has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, Sanitarium Magazine, and in many recent anthologies from James Ward Kirk Fiction and J. Ellington Ashton Press. She is a contributing writer to Pen Of The Damned. Magenta was born in Italy, has lived in the UK and Japan, and currently resides in New South Wales, Australia.

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Do You Know Who I Am? *Shannon Yingst*

I come as I am called, there is no need for me otherwise. Sometimes I lurk around the corner in the darkness and peer into your life; it is only to make my presence known, for you to respect that I have more power than you can ever know. There is only one of me, despite what you may have heard. I do not cry. I do not whine. I am never late. I am not joyous, jovial, or jocular. I do not laugh... scratch that, I laugh only on special occasions, but you will never enjoy my laugh. There is nothing I can promise you that you will enjoy.

You will never know where I am or when I am due. Some may try to predict my coming, but no one can ever successfully know when I may come. It will hit you like a wave of cold water, shocking you into a kind of trance. Your eyes will look as if they are carved from glass as I float toward you, my black aura my only constant feature. Otherwise, I am what you want me to be. You see what you feel, making me into your own little nightmare.

I do not offer second chances. I do not accept bribes. I do not allow goodbyes. There is one job I must do and I will succeed at any cost. You can run, you can hide, but I will find you. There is no way out; once I am called, I cannot go back without you.

You can scream.

You can cry.

You can fight.

I will always win, no matter what. I am everywhere you go, everything you see, and everything you embrace. I will take you. There is not a doubt in my mind that you will come back with me. I am death and I own you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Shannon Yingst is a college student with big dreams. Growing up in Southern New Jersey, she never thought that life would change much. Upon attending Monmouth University in the glamour of a rich town, she wanted more. Now a senior in college, she is working towards being the next big thing in writing. She plans to make a lot of money for her shoe addiction.

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

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/shannon.yingst.5>

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The Remembered *Jon Ingoldby*

I was working on an old farmhouse just north of the village of Yaxley. I'm an electrician by trade, ex-Royal Engineers, known as 'Amber' then. Army traditions never die, and nor did I.

I've always been good with my hands, and sometimes a commission comes along that I can't resist, and I do most of the work myself: the usual stuff, new kitchen, bathroom, electrics, radiators, pipework. This place had everything to tempt me: a wealthy new owner who didn't want to move in until the work was done, a more than handsome fee, accommodation at a pub in Browerton thrown in. It had been more than worth my while to accept, despite the fact it landed me out of mobile signal contact for every working day as I was too far from home to contemplate more than a weekly commute.

Marcia had not been keen. She had been very low since her mother's death (at ninety-two I thought the old girl had done all right but what I thought counted for not much), and the prospect of my being away for such long periods of time brought her to pleading. We bickered and fenced around one another until I grew tired of the whole thing and said that *of course* I still loved her, but I was going no matter what. It was a plum job, and we needed the money, and that, at least was true: our own house needed nearly as much work as any of my commissions, especially the wiring, which was erratic at best and occasionally plunged us into unexpected darkness.

I was working in the living-room of the farmhouse towards the end of the first week, and not much looking forward to going home the following day. I had rung Marcia from the pub, where there was a signal, each evening, and she had sounded tearful and morose. Last night though there had been no answer, and she hadn't called back or responded to my text message. Pretty typical, by no means the first time. Perhaps she had left to stay with friends. No excuse for not picking up her mobile though.

The house was very quiet: it was far from the road, at the end of an old, ill-maintained lane, with farmland all around. So when I heard a noise in the hallway, I started a little, and looked instinctively at the door. There was a slight shuffling sound, the same that had disturbed me, then a small voice, perhaps of a child or young girl, called out, "Hello?"

I smiled to myself. A local, who, seeing signs of occupancy in a house long uninhabited, had wandered in out of curiosity. I had become used to them in Bosnia, defusing bombs planted in the ruins of wrecked homes, meant for us. There the children had walked among the dead every day. And we tried to smile at them, and shoo them out, and they would run off, either laughing at us or terrified of us. I called hello back. "Come in, but be careful. Don't trip." In truth the house was no deathtrap, but the liability lay with me, so I had to be careful.

She appeared in the doorway: slight, bony, with long, dark hair and pale skin. A teenager, I guessed, not a child. Despite the season she wore what looked like a cross between a Victorian country dress and a nightgown.

She looked at me. Her expression held no fear, no curiosity either, which intrigued me. "It's a haunted house," she said abruptly.

"Haunted by what?" I asked.

"Memories."

I smiled. "All houses are haunted by memories."

"Me then," she said.

Humour her, I thought. She looked so serious, so preoccupied, so sad, so reminiscent of those lost souls straggling among smoking ruins and dead legacies, that I didn't have it in me to mock. "You're a ghost?"

Her expression was far away. "I'm a messenger."

Original, I thought. Play along.

"For whom? And, er, what's your name?"

"Myself." She peered about the room. Daylight was fading fast and it had been a heavily overcast day that belied the coming of spring and the few bright daffodil buds that had begun to poke up from the chill late winter soil. "My name is Marcia."

My wife's name. I said as much, and as I did so I realised that she actually looked a bit like my Marcia when she was young: similar hair colour, similar build and bone structure. The girl appeared uninterested. Her eyes, unlike Marcia's, were unusually large and very dark, pupils now huge and black. I

felt the first hint of unease. I strode to the door and flicked the light switch. Nothing happened. Of course not. I was rewiring the room, and had intended to be gone before dusk. The first smudges of night had crept swiftly upon us, and the girl was now no more than a dark shadow, motionless.

Sensibly I had a torch with me, plus a halogen work-light, as useless now as the circuitry in the walls. I could barely see my toolbox, the gloom was so intense, and could no longer locate the girl in the room.

"It won't be long now Stephen. But she will be remembered."

I jumped, almost cried out. How the hell did she know my name? Her voice was right next to me. I could feel her cold breath on my ear. I looked to my left, and two huge saucer-eyes looked back. If she touched me, I was certain, I really would shout, try to fight. My sudden fear was deep and heart-sinkingly real. People's eyes do not shine in the dark, not like that.

"Who are you?" I whispered, despising myself for the tremor in my voice.

The eyes winked out, returned. She had blinked. Then a line of white teeth appeared, and I flinched, and she said, "Marcia", very slowly, and the teeth disappeared. Fuck it if she hadn't been *smiling*.

I dashed across the room for the torch, stumbling over a chair, knocking my hip against the corner of the table, yet grateful for this as the pain served to galvanise me, and the objects orientate me. Falling on my hands and knees in front of what I was sure must be the fireplace where I had been working, I groped about wildly, feeling blindly for the torch.

There was a breath of air behind me. Cool, bony fingers slid sensuously around my neck. There was no pressure, they rested lightly there, a cold, cloying caress. My own fingers closed on the handle of the torch, the touch of rubber a blessed reality, and just as I switched it on I heard the word "*Soon*", a sibilant whisper, in my ear. With light came courage, sanity, and I swung round immediately, prepared to use the torch as a weapon if necessary.

'Marcia' was gone.

I realised I was shaking. I had never understood what this meant, it had never happened to me on active service. You lose control. Your fingers will not grip when you command them to grip, and for the first time you realise that you do, indeed, *command* them to grip. And your legs to move, your mouth to remain shut or to open. I was not just shaking though. I was shuddering, almost convulsing, as if all the sensory overload of the last few minutes in that darkness was now being released into my system. This, then, was terror. I had had comrades who had known it. Been destroyed by it. Now I knew it too.

But I did not.

Command is everything. When my convulsions had finally subsided and I had regained my composure, rationalised, done everything my training had taught me to do to survive in the face of death, I went to the hall and re-set the fuse box, then flicked on the light. Then every other light on the ground floor. I doused my face in the cloakroom. With great reluctance I returned to the living room to retrieve my toolbox. I left the ladder, that could wait. Then I drove jerkily to the pub, and on the course of that journey through the dark, sodden countryside, my nerves began to settle a little, so that by the time I reached the *Jolly Poacher* I was able to approach the bar and ask the landlord for a stiff whisky, which he provided without comment. Then I went to a quiet corner and phoned Marcia. No answer.

I slammed the phone down angrily, downed the whisky and tried, again, to rationalise. Who was 'Marcia'? Why had she come? What did she mean? I wanted to believe I had hallucinated her, fallen asleep perhaps, but I knew this was impossible. She had been real, as my terror had been real. Yes. Hunched in my little corner of that bar I felt on the precipice of madness. I had seen death in many forms: witnessed it, inflicted it, and one day I would suffer it. I had never expected to *meet* it.

Stress is exhausting. Once you feel safe and have the chance, you will sleep. And sleep I did, unencumbered by the nightmares I was sure would come, and the next day I rose late, with no intention of working at the house. I packed neatly, told the landlord I would be back on Monday as arranged, and after a half-hearted nibble at a sandwich in the bar, began the long drive home.

I arrived in the early evening, weary from traffic hold-ups and still confused by the events of the day before. Our own street was a tiny replica of miles of mundane suburbia, the tarmac and pavements slick with rain, the stuttering sodium streetlight outside our house providing just enough illumination to prevent

a fall. Shivering, I pulled my key from the jacket of my work-coat. The house was in darkness. I opened the door, threw my bag before me into the hall, wondering for a fleeting second why it made no noise as it landed, and flicked the switch by the door.

Nothing.

The house was bitterly cold too. Bloody fuse box gone again. No wonder Marcia had left. I retrieved the torch from the van, hurried back along the path, and shone the weakening beam into the hall, heading for the understairs cupboard. Because I held the beam high it did not catch the obstruction that brought me tumbling down, just by the foot of the stairs. The torch rolled a short way and stopped. Its beam shone half on my face, and half on the hand that lay next to it.

Marcia had not left.

Her wedding ring glinted in the dim torchlight. Her hand was clutched in a claw of agonised supplication.

"Marcia?" I croaked.

No reply.

I pulled myself to my knees, picked up the light, and steeled myself to shine it upon her. What, I wondered, was worse? To sit here in the dark and gradually reveal, piece by piece, bone by bone, the state of my wife's injuries, or to have discovered them revealed in all their extremities, courtesy of snapping on a bright electric light?

This was terror.

But it was not.

I flicked the beam across her crumpled form. She had landed awkwardly, her tumble down the stairs in the gloom trying to get to the fuse box arrested, I thought, by her over-long nightgown. Her left leg was half-tucked beneath her, clearly broken. I was positioned at the top of her head, her body stretching away from me, the untwisted right leg pointing at the front door. My bag lay across her midriff at an angle.

Had she died from the fall? I shuddered, envisioning a longer, more lingering death, from pain and hunger and thirst, helpless in the dark and the cold, unable to move and call for help. She could have been lying there for nearly three days.

I moved the beam back along her still body to her face, and was surprised to find her eyes were half closed.

Then they opened, and her upper arms moved, and her fingers closed weakly around my neck. They were dry and cold, weak and fluttering, shivering like a dying bird. We stared at each other, and what little life was left in her eyes dimmed, and, in the same moment, the torch battery gave up on me at last.

"Hello?" A voice floated along the darkness of the hall. With no time for guilt, no time for weeping in the face of this new, shocking intrusion, I grasped the newel-post and forced myself to my feet, involuntarily stepping on Marcia's hand as I did so and hearing a small 'crack' as a finger-bone snapped. I peered through the gloom towards the kitchen door, from where the voice had come. I was terrified it would be *her*, that having brought Marcia's death she had come to deliver mine. But it was not. As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw not a young woman but a child. He came slowly towards me, his large, amber-yellow eyes staring without blinking, and then he stopped and gently touched my face with chilly fingertips. *"My name is Stephen. It won't be long now. But you will be remembered."*

This was terror.

And like a child, I began to scream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jon Ingoldby is an editor and writer. He has just completed his latest collection of short stories, *The Last Fire*, which he hopes to publish next year. One of these stories, 'Shambles', has recently been published by Flash Fiction Magazine. He lives in Sussex, England, with his wife and two cats. You can learn more about Jon, and contact him, via his website.

Website: <http://www.joningoldby.co.uk/>

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Death's Ahead *Mark Cassell*

The branch had punched through the windscreen and speared Tracy into the seat.

Silence. No pain, just warmth. Even her heartbeat's thunder had diluted into the silence. All she felt was the blood pumping from her chest, drenching her clothes. Her hands failed to respond, her legs just as dead. It was as though it was Death's hand that had snatched the car from the road and slammed it into the tree.

Her vision flashed in a patchwork of light and darkness, and somewhere amid those trailing shadows came the swoop of black and yellow wings. A moth, floating in a gloom she assumed to be night's approach. Its legs thumped the dashboard. Each leg didn't just titter, they *crashed* into the plastic, stinging her ears. Sharp, penetrating. She winced.

The moth skittered closer—the thing had to be at least the size of her hand. With antennae twitching, its proboscis swayed and reached out. A black goo dripped from the end and blistered the dashboard. A curl of smoke drifted upwards, the smoldering stink burning her nostrils. This winged creature leapt toward her, clutching at her face. Pinching, scratching...and the proboscis stabbed her skin. A needle of lancing agony. In. Out. In and out. In-out-in-out-in-out. In.

A fire raged beneath her flesh.

Out, and in again.

Shadows clogged her periphery, this time more a liquid darkness rather than the promise of night. Her heart smashed against her ribcage and her stomach churned. She coughed and blood spattered the steering wheel.

In-out-in-out.

In.

Out... In.

The moth detached itself, wings whipping the air as it hovered near the shattered windscreen.

And the flames raged through her every pore, spreading, sinking deeper, seething upwards, downwards, filling her body. An energy pulsed and slammed where her heart thrashed out its final rush of life.

Silence. Dark. A quiet nothingness.

Her fingers twitched. And a hot darkness raced through her veins, powering her fluttery movements. Her muscles flexed. Life? Her arms jittered and rose higher, and one at a time her fingers gripped the branch. This *un*-life surged. She squeezed and the bark split beneath her fingers. Her nails splintered with the wood. She yanked the branch from her chest. Slurp. Gush. Blood—and darkness—spewed from her torso. Glass cracked and metal wrenched; the sounds shrill to her ears.

She tore off her seat belt, shredding the fabric, and kicked the door. Metal screeched. It echoed through the woods.

Charged with this fierce energy, she clambered from the wreckage, her life force drained...now replaced by a welcome blackness.

The moth drifted with the shadows, just ahead. Tendrils of that peculiar darkness teased its abdomen, seeming to beckon her, taunt her, promising an existence beneath the veneer of her past life. Beneath...

Shadowy curls toyed with its antennae, and on its thorax she saw a reflection of Death's grin.

And Tracy followed the winged creature into the welcoming fabric of shadows.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mark Cassell lives in a rural part of the UK with his wife and a number of animals. He often dreams of dystopian futures, peculiar creatures, and flitting shadows. Primarily a horror writer, his steampunk, fantasy, and SF stories have featured in several anthologies and ezines. His debut novel, *The Shadow Fabric*, is available from Amazon.

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

Blog: <http://www.beneath.co.uk>



Omega Quiz *Ken MacGregor*

"Oh look," Ben called to Ashley. "Another online quiz."

From the kitchen came the sound of a spatula scraping a pan and the tantalizing aroma of sautéed onions.

"No. Way. What's this one?" Ashley asked. Ben couldn't see her from his chair in the living room, but they could hear one another well enough.

"It's called 'when will you die?' and when my friend Jake took it, he got 'you will die in 2048 in your sleep.'"

"Those quizzes are so lame," Ashley said. The sound of something popping and sizzling in the pan peppered her words. "You gonna take it?"

"Yeah."

Clicking the link, Ben answered several questions. Some were pretty obvious, like 'are you a smoker?' but some seemed random: 'how many letters are in your middle name?' After a few minutes, he clicked the 'finish' button and got his results.

"Well... Shit," Ben said.

Unplugging the laptop, he brought it to the kitchen. Tiny bites of steak were browning among the diced onions in the pan. Ben's stomach growled in anticipation.

"Hey, hon," Ashley said, leaning in for a kiss on the cheek. Ben obliged her and showed her the screen.

"Look at this," he said. "I don't think this is funny at all."

Ashley kept turning the meat with the spatula while she looked at the quiz results. She smiled at her husband.

"Oh, come on. Aren't you the one who's always pulling practical jokes? About time somebody got you instead."

"Jokes are one thing. This isn't funny. It's sick. I'm going to post a nasty comment. What if someone got this result who was emotionally unstable? This is seriously uncool."

Ashley glanced at the screen again. It now said Ben would die of an aneurism in eight minutes. At first, it had said ten. With wide eyes, she turned back to him.

"It's counting down, Ben."

"What?"

Turning the screen back to himself, Ben stared at the number. He was certain it had said ten and not eight. Glancing back at Ashley, he saw fear in her eyes.

"It's a trick," he said, but his voice cracked.

The screen showed a seven.

"Here."

Ashley handed Ben the spatula. While he stirred, she opened a second tab on the screen and started taking the quiz.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking the quiz. If you're going to die in" - she flipped screens to check - "six minutes, I want to know how long I have to live a widow."

"I don't find this nearly as funny as you do," Ben said.

"Sh. Almost done."

Ben added pepper to the pan and stirred. Ashley hit the 'finish' button on the screen.

"Fourteen minutes in an explosion," she read off the screen. "Well, at least I won't be a widow for long."

Ben took the laptop from her and handed her the spatula with a scowl. He checked the screen. One minute. He glanced at the wall clock. The second hand seemed to sweep unusually fast past the numbers.

"I love you," he told Ashley.

"I love you, too, but you're not going to die. It's just a silly algorithm, honey."

The screen in Ben's hand said 'now' and a flashbulb went off in his head. The smell of burnt orange peels drowned out the onions and steak. The world leaped sideways under Ben's feet and the plastic crack of the laptop as it hit the floor sounded far away.

The massive aneurism ended Ben's life in seconds. With a screaming cry, Ashley threw aside the steel frying pan and dropped to her knees by Ben's side. Cradling his head in her hands, she tried to call him back. Ashley's tears fell unheeded on her husband's face.

Behind her, the heavy pan full of still sizzling meat sat wedged between the stove and the wall. The plastic hose that ran gas from the basement gave off a noxious smell as it melted.

The laptop flipped screens on its own. The time read 'eight minutes'.

Scrambling in her pocket, Ashley dug out her phone. She called 911. They answered a few seconds later.

"My husband is dead," she shrieked into the phone. "He just fell over and he has no pulse. Please help me."

The dispatcher asked Ashley to try to stay calm and asked where she was. Taking a deep breath and letting it out, Ashley gave them her address.

"We have a unit on the way, and an ambulance," the voice said. "They should be there in about five minutes."

Thanking them, Ashley hung up.

"Come on, Ben. Come back to me, honey. It was just a stupid quiz. It's not supposed to be real."

Ashley jerked her head around to look at the screen. Four minutes. An explosion. She could smell melted plastic and something else - something familiar that she couldn't immediately place.

In the distance, Ashley could hear sirens.

"It's okay, honey. It's going to be okay, Benny. Help is on the way."

She petted his face with one hand and tapped the phone on the floorboards. The sirens were louder now, but Ashley didn't see any flashing lights yet.

On the screen, it said 'one minute' and Ashley whipped her head around toward the kitchen.

An explosion.

Gas.

That's gas I smell.

"Oh, shit."

The police cruiser and ambulance arrived at the house seconds apart. Before they could get out of their vehicles, there was a muffled *whump!* The windows blew outward, flames hot on the heels of shattered glass.

Vince stretched out on the faded corduroy couch. He grumbled at the game on his tablet. The blood spatter on the screen when his character died was rendered in fantastic detail. Vince yawned and swept the screen away with a finger. Opening one of the four social media sites he visited several times a day, Vince glanced at and ignored the seventeen messages. Scrolling down, he kept going until something caught his eye.

"When and how will I die?" Vince asked aloud.

"What's that, babe?" Kevin shouted from the bathroom.

"It's a quiz, Kev. I'm going to take it."

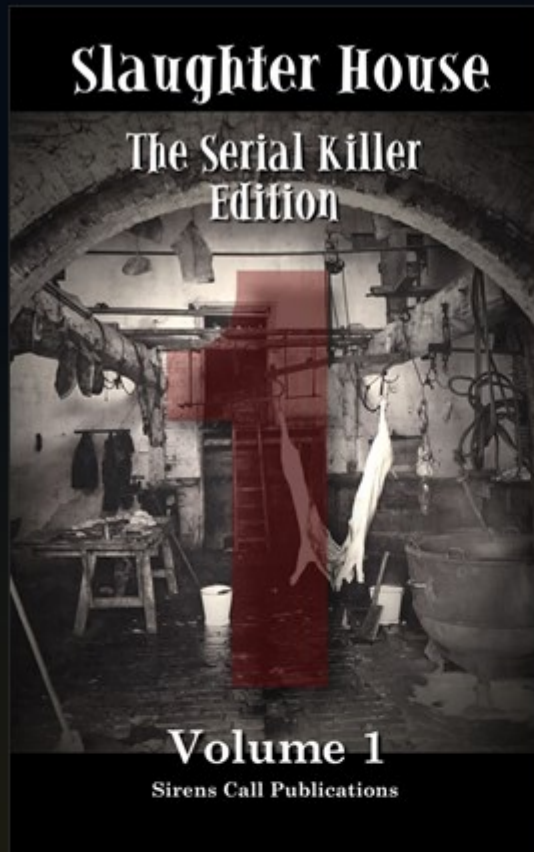
"My turn when you're done."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Ken MacGregor's work has appeared in dozens of anthologies, magazines and podcasts. In 2013, a collection of his short stories, called *An Aberrant Mind*, was released by Sirens Call Publications. Ken is a member of The Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers and an Affiliate member of HWA. Ken's the kind of guy that, if he found himself stranded somewhere with you, would probably eat you to survive. Ken lives in Michigan with his family and two unstable cats.

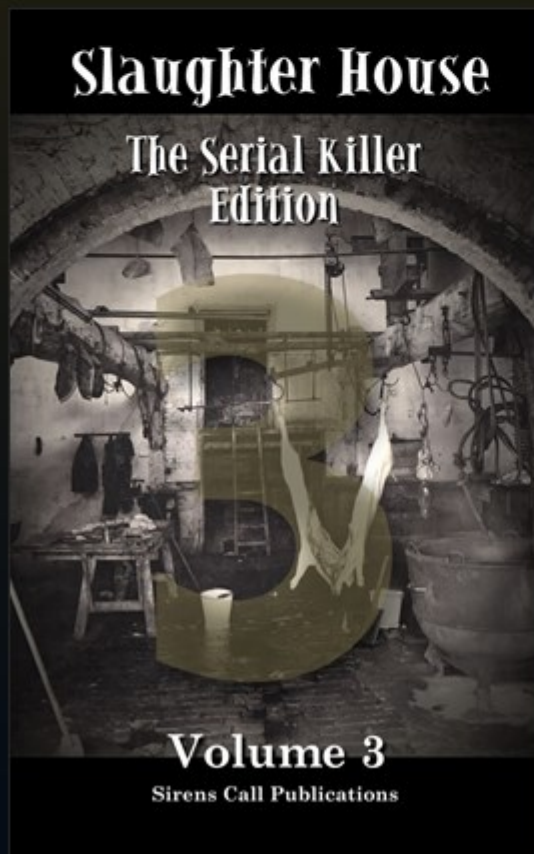
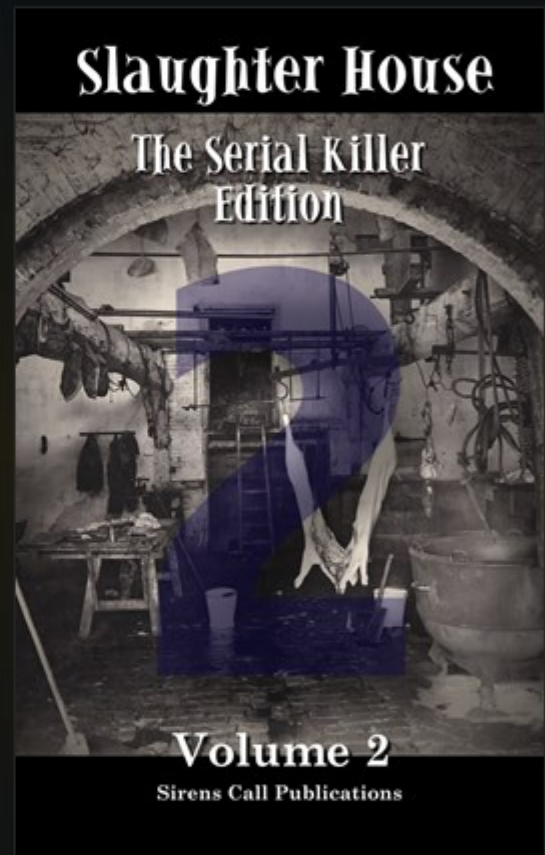
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Last Thing *DJ Tyrer*

"I want to remember everything that happens."

Those were the final words she spoke before she stabbed him in the chest. He bled out rapidly with a surprised look upon his face. His blood pooled beneath his body and spread across the black vinyl flooring in strangely coiling patterns that seemed to imply some meaning.

He had met her at a nightclub earlier in the evening, out with his mates – he had dismissed them when he pulled her. She had looked gorgeous in a skin-tight red leather dress and waist-length black hair; her eyes had enticed him with their scarlet contacts. Sinister, yet sexy. Dressed in black leather, he complemented her perfectly as they danced to the echoing rap of The Laughing Man, London's latest craze.

She invited him back to her flat, a promise in her grin. They never exchanged names. No strings attached. None at all. The place was not much to look at, a cheap council flat that didn't quite match with her style; not that he minded. He only had one thing on his mind and interior decoration wasn't it.

Leading him into the sparse bedroom, she kicked her scarlet shoes off as he tugged off his jacket. He couldn't wait to watch her peel away the dress that clung to her every contour. As he waited, he could see a poster for The Laughing Man pinned to the wall: black with highlights of red; a sinister clown gazing at them with dead eyes.

She had stepped up to him and smiled with red-smeared lips, a giggle escaping them that seemed utterly out of keeping with her image, and she said: "The joke's on you!"

That bemused him, but he wasn't about to complain. As long as he got what he wanted, who cared? Besides, they'd both smoked plenty of pot that evening.

That was when she had spoken those final words, words that sounded alluring, not threatening.

As he lay on the floor, his life ebbing away, he noticed movement, two figures standing behind her. He had no idea who they were and died before he could clearly see them. Had he lived just a little longer, he might have heard her proclaim that "Death awaits those who fall into the clutches of the Laughing God!" although it is unlikely the words would have explained anything to him. As it was, he died mystified and barely aware that his life was ending.

Blood on vinyl. Black on red.

She crouched down and dipped her finger in his blood, tracing its swirl. That was the last thing he saw. It was over – the joke was told.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published, in *Scifaikuest*, *Cyaegha*, *Carillon*, *The Pen*, *Tigershark* and *Anthology 29*, and online on *Poetry Bulawayo*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Scifaikuest* and *The Muse*, as well as releasing several chapbooks. Forthcoming poetry is slated to appear in the anthologies *Beyond The Cosmic Veil* and *Mightier Than The Sword* from Horrified Press.

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The Ferryman *Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd*

(Originally published in Nightmare Stalkers & Dream Walkers)

*So now you've reached the end,
the open at the close,
Viewing a world born of sin
leaving fates damned and sowed.
Don't worry; it won't be long
till they awaken to their lives
Returning to normalcy,
clutching daydreams to survive.
Yet, somehow, somehow, they all expect
to be the one to cheat death.
But you and I know the truth which awaits;
one cold and final breath.
Hell eternally licks its lips
for the broken and lost
Still so many live in evil
despite the hidden cost.
I row this endless river,
to this boat I am bound,
Searching for the wicked,
those not wishing to be found.
Here is where he flourishes
that one you call reaper,
To his domain we shall travel
my master, your keeper.
Along these crimson capillaries
You'll find nothing to bring joy;
Twisted minds more plentiful,
personal demons seeking to destroy.
Flesh eaters, blood suckers,
your worst nightmares come to life
Phantoms of guilty pasts
all individuals' hells are alike.
For they are built from fear
lurking in your darkest thoughts, alone...
Because in the end lies only fear-
fear is all that you will know.
Now, now, do not fret
for the end is almost nigh;
You mustn't dwell on what you've seen,
even nightmares have to die.
Here we are! We're at your stop,
It's time for you to wake!
Alas, this night, it's not **your** soul
The reaper plans to take...*

Lincoln Andrews awoke with a start, his heart pounding frantically in his chest as his old eyes scanned the impending darkness surrounding him, searching for any remnant of the horrific images he had just witnessed.

Advanced in his years, with dementia slowly setting in, there were times he struggled with muddled

thoughts. He shook his head as if trying to push away the scattered cobwebs that seemed to be infiltrating his brain more and more lately.

There were times when he had difficulty comprehending things, times when he couldn't remember names, places or faces.

But as that phantom figure had rowed the large boat resembling a canoe, sticking an ancient staff into the water as he maneuvered the vessel through capillaries branching out from a crimson river, Lincoln had recognized it all.

Remembered it all.

He tried to calm his breathing as he lay in his bed, afraid, and alone, wondering if the end might be knocking at his door.

Is that what the dream had meant?

Or had it simply been years of writing horror, finally catching up with him?

It has been said that your life replays before you when you are near death.

But it wasn't his life he had seen, in what he was now certain had just been a dream.

On those smoldering shorelines were scenes from his novels.

All the horrific ideas that had made him infamous over the years beckoned to him as the boat passed by. Even the phantom ferryman guiding the craft had been one of his ideas. A ghoul he had dreamed up to haunt poor Beth Norton, in one of his twisted tales.

The terrifying creatures and supernatural villains that had brought him fame and fortune had manifested before his very eyes, and Lincoln had cowered in the back, trying to hide, trying not to look.

But the worst had been the victims.

And they were there, too. Staring at him with venom in their eyes...

Lincoln shivered and his feeble fingers clutched his blanket, tugging it up to his neck. Seemed he could never get warm these days. The constant chill he carried all the time felt as if it had manifested into icy claws that were wrapping around his soul, trying to snatch it from his body.

What if he did die right now?

Was there really a Heaven and a Hell?

Hot tears burned as they rolled down his cold cheeks and Lincoln thought of his beloved wife who had passed some years back. He thought of his kids, his grandchildren.

Had he not been good to them all? Provided well? Given to charities? Helped people in need... Sure, his writing had terrified many, but he had done good things in his life to counteract his sinister imagination.

If the gateway to the next realm was opening, where would it take him?

What time was it? Would this night never end?

Would the breaking dawn arrive for Lincoln Andrews this day?

He let go of his covering with one hand and felt for the pair of spectacles he always kept on the nightstand. He sighed when his hand felt the glasses, right where he always kept them.

Once he could see, he could turn on the light and...

The frames slid from his cold, stiff hand as he tried to grasp them, falling to the floor.

"Nooo!" he cried out. He knew if he tried to get out of bed without any help, he would most likely fall. He was alone in this old mansion until his nurse arrived in the morning.

He considered trying to phone his daughter. What would he tell her? *Can you come over; I've had a terrible dream...*

Surely she would laugh at him. Her father, the scariest man she knew, afraid of his own shadow tonight.

Phew! But even as he chided himself, the unease lingered. His chest hurt something awful. He had never had heart issues, but he was, after all, eighty-two.

Desperate for some semblance of comfort, he reached out in the blackness. The small Bible his wife read was always kept at his bedside, next to her picture.

This time he held on, bringing it tightly against him...

The voice on the other line was that of her father's nurse, Beth Norton, and Rebecca braced herself,

because she could tell from the tone of the woman's voice it was not going to be good news. Beth explained that her father must've died peacefully, in his sleep, holding his Bible.

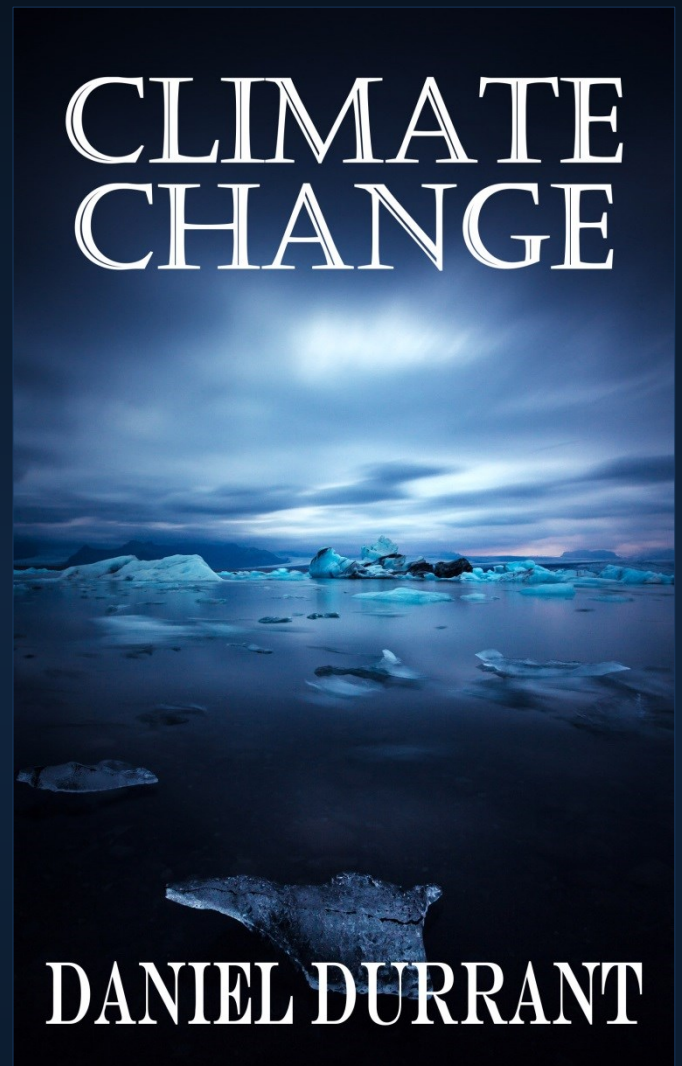
As Lincoln Andrews grief-stricken daughter sobbed, she barely heard the last phrase uttered by her dad's nurse.

"Funny," the woman said. "I never took your father for a religious man."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS - Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd are writing/editing partners. Together they've had 30 short stories published and have edited four anthologies, including the award-winning 'Nightmare Stalkers & Dream Walkers'. The duo hopes you'll check out their short story collection, entitled 'Adventures in Horrorland', and look forward to completing their novel sometime within the next year.

Climate Change

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A Single Haunted Memory *Barbara Ferrer*

The wipers swept across the windshield, a rhythmic counterpart to the steady hum of the tires on the wet asphalt, the two combining in a chorus of *Home soon, home soon, home soon...* Matthew had gotten lucky, pushing the 350Z hard enough through the Peninsula to catch the five o'clock ferry. Not much longer now and he'd be home. Embraced within all that was familiar. He hoped. He'd been so swamped in life at the Academy it was like the rest of the world had come to a standstill. Or more accurately, didn't matter. The sacred mantra: What *they* were doing there mattered. Their individual gifts mattered. More than anything or anyone. And something about that just didn't sit right.

He'd planned on staying until Christmas break, but the more he thought about it, the more he couldn't. Not after three years. Three years spent toeing the line. Three years spent becoming the ideal student, the one held up as a shining example, the one who not only did everything right, but did it better than anyone else. And that had been enough until lately. But as his particular gifts strengthened, bringing him to the attention of the higher ups and generating talk of an 'exceptionally promising future,' that's when he'd started questioning that carefully mapped out future. A future he wasn't even sure he wanted any more.

Only real way to know for sure, he figured, was to take time to be ordinary. He wanted it so bad, he could practically taste it.

Home soon... home soon... home soon...

The dark curving road narrowed, the surroundings closing in on him like a snake winding around its prey. He stretched and rolled his head on his neck, shaking off the prickling sensation crawling up his spine. Tightening his hands on the steering wheel, he leaned on the accelerator, knowing he was going too fast, but he knew these roads. This was home,. He was almost home.

Rounding a curve, his headlights swept across the landscape, briefly illuminating a grinning jack-o'-lantern and above it, a small, pale face with wide eyes that glowed in the glare from his lights. Eyes that continued to glow as he slammed on the brakes and wrenched the wheel to the side, the car shuddering as the big tires fought for purchase on the slick road. He felt himself slammed against the car door, his head ringing, a force like nothing he'd ever felt crushing his chest and pinning him to the seat. A high-pitched squeal, like a scream from a horror movie, pierced the sudden silence as he clawed at nothingness, trying to find something to grab, to hold onto, but everything stayed just out of reach, taunting him, like the bottom dropping out of a sinker, his bat slicing past it, hitting nothing but air.

"No!" His voice felt like it was being ripped straight from his gut, floating out into the night, hanging there as lights streaked in white-hot slow motion arcs around them and finally exploding. Leaving behind an eerie vacuum of silence that he had to try to break because it felt wrong—

"I'm sorry, Matt."

"Tucker?" It was his voice, but not—muffled and thick, his tongue too big for his mouth.

"I'm sorry..." What was Tucker doing here? This wasn't his home. It was Matthew's home. Tucker was more at home at the Academy. Always had been. He fit there. Better than Matthew ever had. Despite his gifts being far less than Matthew's, Tucker's mentality, his entire being, was far better suited to the Academy.

He was the perfect soldier.

"Get me out, 'kay?" He gritted his teeth against a sharp, blinding pain as he felt his arm roughly yanked from where it'd been pinned. He couldn't see who was moving him, but he could feel cool metal against his palm, his fingers instinctively curling around the relief it provided from the searing heat knifing through his chest and the sharper pinprick of pain in his arm.

"I'm so sorry, Matt. But you did this to yourself."

He really didn't need this smug crap from Tucker right now. Matthew knew he'd been driving too fast. Too fast... and there was that small pale face with the big eyes, like a cat... or a demon... or a ghost... Then everything spun and lights and the rain...

So hot on his face. No... *no*... that was wrong, too. It was autumn. The rain should be cold. Why was it hot?

Tuck's face was very close. "You shouldn't have left, Matt."

Matthew squinted, trying to bring Tuck into focus, but he was so damned fuzzy and now he was

getting smaller and smaller, disappearing into a dark hole, like Alice falling down the rabbit hole. He laughed out loud then, imagining big, bulky Tucker dressed in some frilly blue dress and chasing a rabbit down a hole, exploding fireworks trailing behind. He laughed again, except it sounded more like a cough and hurt like a mother, a deep burning pain that brought tears to his eyes.

"Tuck, man... it hurts. Come on, now... get me out."

But there was nothing there but darkness and pain and a shrill wail echoing throughout the suddenly empty space.

"Come on kid—hang in there. We've got you."

Matthew blinked up at the looming figure, so close that he shouldn't have felt the rain any longer, but the wet heat continued to trickle down his face and into his eyes, washing everything in red. A red rain. Heh. His mom loved that song. She loved Peter Gabriel. Whenever Matthew claimed the dude was stuck in a time warp and out of touch with the real world she'd shoot him the evil eye just before shaking her head, laughing, and turning the volume up.

What he wouldn't give to hear 'Red Rain' right now. To hear Mom singing along with it, making it real.

"C'mon, kid, stay with me. How about you tell me your name?"

"Ma-Matthew." He reached for the light dancing in front of his eyes. Tried to trap it. "Want... music..."

"Okay, Matthew. You promise to stay with me and I'll do my best to get you some music. Who do you like?"

"My mom likes..." He coughed, feeling more rain spilling down his chin. "Peter Gabriel."

"Yeah? How about you?"

"La-lame." But right now, he really wouldn't mind it.

The light kept waving back and forth, like fireflies. There shouldn't be fireflies. It wasn't summer. And Seattle didn't have fireflies. He'd only seen them once before during a baseball tourney back east. They'd hovered over the infield like live Christmas lights.

"I need a backboard and C-collar, stat! Definite head trauma—pupils blown, pulse weak and thready... Not sure how much longer I can keep him!"

The fireflies were too bright. He'd close his eyes... just for a minute...

"Come on, Matthew, stay with me. Let me know can you hear me."

He blinked, then immediately closed his eyes again at the blinding brightness. Too bright, man.

"No, no, no, Matthew... open your eyes again. Keep them open."

No... no... he couldn't take it—the pounding against his skull, duking it out with other voices and intensely bright lights and it was all just too much.

Too much, too much, too much...

He wanted out. Wanted the kind of quiet he liked best—late at night in his room, staring out the window at the night sky. Out of the corner of his eye, Matthew noticed a deep blue-black expanse, beckoning. Yeah... now that's what he was talking about. Deep and soft and warm, like the one time he'd gone scuba diving in Hawaii, gliding through the depths, weightless, surrounded by a whole world, yet somehow held apart from it. Almost as good as the night sky. He reached out, felt himself lifted, drawn towards the endless expanse. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw a group of people clustered around a table, frantically gesturing and yelling, even though he couldn't hear anything, couldn't feel anything other than sorry that they were so stressed they couldn't even notice what was waiting for them. What lay just beyond their reach.

All of a sudden, pain radiated out from his chest, arms and legs tingling as if he'd been hit with a live wire. Glancing around, he noticed a cluster of stars just behind him. For what seemed like forever, he stared at them, trying to figure out what constellation it was. It wasn't like anything he'd ever seen before. It was beautiful. The most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

He stood absolutely still as it throbbed, dimming and brightening with the rhythm of a beating heart, then reached out and wrapped itself around him like a blanket, little sparks of sensation sinking into

his skin, smothering the pain and cold. A moment later, it unwound itself and began trailing away in a determined shower of sparks, pausing only to swirl around him once more. Curious—and unwilling to relinquish the soothing warmth—he followed, feeling himself growing lighter with each step. Only once did he pause, glancing back over his shoulder, seeing more figures gathered around the table and spilling out into the hallways. He took a step back, one hand reaching out—

"Mom."

Pain shot through him, a harsh breath burning through his lungs. Panicked, he looked for the stars, trying to figure out where they'd gone, wanting them to take the pain away. He ran, taking corners and running up endless flights of stairs, wanting the pain to stop. Wanting it to stop *now*. Whatever it took.

The pain shrieked through him, driving him to his knees and forcing him into a tight ball. He squeezed his eyes shut as he crossed his arms over his head, folding his arms tight over his ears. Trying to block it all out. If he opened his eyes, he'd be home. Home. Please... he just wanted to go home.

Matthew.

The sound of his name prompted him to cautiously open his eyes, blinking slowly as he took in his new surroundings. It was a large, light room—or would be if the blinds were open. Instead, the room was lit by the particular hazy dim glow that indicated daytime waited on the other side of the window.

When had daytime arrived?

And why was he standing by a baby's crib?

As if sensing his presence, the baby opened its eyes, their eerie dark green glowing the same way the room did—like there was light and life just waiting to be welcomed in.

You.

"Yeah."

The baby blinked solemnly.

You're Matthew.

"Yeah."

The baby yawned. *Will you be here when I wake up?*

"I... I don't know." Matthew looked around, noticed the sleeping woman in a nearby bed, an exhausted looking man slumped in a chair, holding a teddy bear with a pink ribbon wound around its neck. "I don't think I'm supposed to be here."

Please don't leave. I like you.

He stared down at the baby, at her chest rising and falling slowly, a tiny hand opening and closing against her cheek. He was an only kid—he'd never been this close to a baby. Reaching out, he ran a curious fingertip across the tiny hand, snatching it back as it disappeared into her skin, a hot flare of sensation shooting up his arm.

"Emily?"

The baby's eyes opened. *You know my name, too.*

"Yeah." *How* he knew that, though, was kind of taking a back seat to what he suspected was turning into a way bigger issue. Carefully, he touched his finger to the blanket wrapped around Emily's small body, the hot tingling running up his arm again as his finger appeared to dissolve into nothingness.

"Why did you call me?"

Those eyes kept staring, intent on him and yet at the same time, focused inward in a way he knew. Way too well. A way that sent a current of fear through him as he repeated, "Emily, why did you call me?"

She blinked, the twin focus of her gaze never wavering.

Because I could.

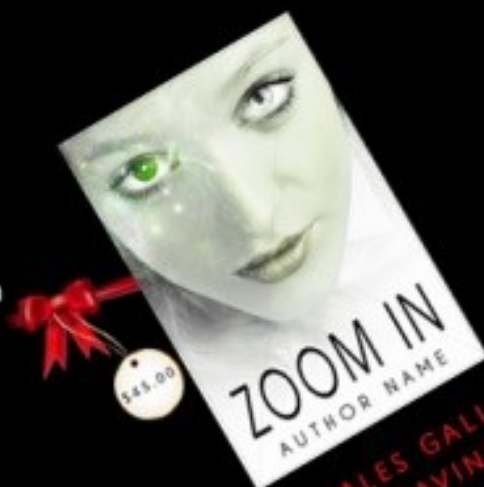
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Barbara Ferrer always knew she was meant for the arts—she just thought it would be onstage, belting out smoky torch songs. Her subconscious clearly knew better, prompting her to weave stories, initially for her own entertainment. Several novels and awards later, her subconscious delights in regular taunts of, "Neener!" A Single Haunted Memory marks her first foray into speculative fiction.

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

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Songs of Orpheus

Mathias Jansson

I dig deep in the cellar soil
Seeking the secret book
Hidden since ancient time
In the ruins of the monastery
In an abounded graveyard
A book bound with human skin
The lost songs of Orpheus

I find layer after layer with pages
Filled with ancient spells and signs
Runes, hieroglyphs and cuneiforms
Crawling fat as slimy worms in my hands
Filling my mouth with a taste of death
Filling my soul with whispering voices
Words that open gates to forbidden worlds
Songs sung by ancient demons from hell

I feel the earth shaking
The rock cracks under my feet
From below he is rising
Crawling from the mud
In front of me he stands
Orpheus the necromancer
Ready to take my hand
Guide me on a journey
Bring me back home
To my burning cell in hell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 90 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press etc.

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/gameart>
Homepage: <http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se>

The Return of Fortunata

D Ceder

Ah, merrily merrily,
Scented, sweet wine
Flows down thy lips
We lovers entwine
In morning lights misty
In light motes sublime
Drink the dew deeply
And you will be mine

Ah, see me now
As I fly the sky
In desperate flight
I appear to die
When I return
Will you be mine
One week
One month
One year
In time

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - I am an English author, whose anthology 'One in a Hundred and Other Stories' is available on Amazon.

Recent credits include:

'The Journey' published in Deadhead Miles,
'Remotely Viewed' published in Edge of Oblivion,
'Starlight, Starflight' published in Amok! Short
Sharp Shocks,
'Something Forgotten' in The Sirens Call #14,
'The Tentacled' in The Sirens Call #15.
'Learning' to be published in Unsung Stories Jan
2015.



Murder Scene

DJ Tyrer

Horror show-a-like
A body-strewn killing ground
The cop shrugs blasé

Grim Game

DJ Tyrer

Sat before chessboard
Would rather play strip poker
Public spectacle
Than this twilight chess with Death
Grim Reaper checkmates his soul

Shell

DJ Tyrer

Serial killer
No-one said death was easy
Bleed them out slowly
Watch the light die in their eyes
Soul gone leaving body shell

Death Updated

DJ Tyrer

No longer a scythe
Death now shuns his hooded robe
Carries an iPad
An updated ensemble
Like a slick used-car salesman

Lamia's Kiss

DJ Tyrer

Her kiss is a bite
The life's blood is her delight
The blood is the life
She drinks him down into death
Unresisting in her arms

Dying

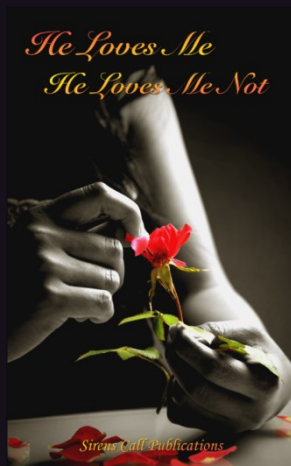
DJ Tyrer

Gaze grows unseeing
Limbs growing leaden and chill
The room loses form
Voices come from far away
Approaching the blinding light

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published, in *Scifaikuest*, *Cyaegha*, *Carillon*, *The Pen*, *Tigershark* and *Anthology 29*, and online on *Poetry Bulawayo*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Scifaikuest* and *The Muse*, as well as releasing several chapbooks. Forthcoming poetry is slated to appear in the anthologies *Beyond The Cosmic Veil* and *Mightier Than The Sword* from Horrified Press.

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

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



He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

Available on Amazon, Barnes &
Noble, Kobo and iTunes

The Horrible Loneliness of Death

Michael Cieslak

He sits, black shadow amongst the darkness
Staring at the gathered as they ringed 'round their mother, grandmother.
Shrunken, withered, already more corpse than woman,
her state did not repulse them.
An encouraging hand resting on her arm,
a gentle touch to a cheek.

All of the action denied him.

He, with his horrible Midas curse,
his very touch which stilled hearts
and forced the life breath from lungs.

Not fair!

His work, without question, for eons.
Reaping.
One after another.
Alone.
Untouched.

He gazed upon the family for a long moment,
lost in his own loneliness.
His empty eye sockets had long ago lost their ability to cry.

With a sigh, he stood,
lifted his scythe,
and got back to work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Michael Cieslak is a lifetime reader and writer of dark speculative fiction. He lives near Detroit with his wife and dogs in a house covered with Halloween decorations in October and dragons the rest of the year. His works have appeared in numerous anthologies. He is the Literature Track Head for Penguicon. His Dragon's Roost Press imprint published its first book, Desolation, 21 Tales for Tails in 2014.

Twitter: [@thedragonsroost](https://twitter.com/thedragonsroost)
Website: <http://thedragonsroost.net>



GOING HOME

Peggy Christie

It's been so long.
Lingering in between
I've floated in nothing.
Time is meaningless but still I track it.
Why can't I go home?
Why won't they let me go?
The hell of this void hurts so much more
than any blade against my flesh.
My last memory:
twisted steel,
shattered glass,
dripping blood.
The only images I can see.
Crying,
the daily news,
familiar voices.
I can hear them all.
Warm water,
cool lotion,
silky skin.
I can feel them all.
But I stay frozen, locked in stillness.
Only my mind screams.
Then...
Hard scrape on tile.
Soft swish of heavy fabric.
A frigid caress on my cheek.
My eyes open for a dark figure.
He holds a skeletal hand out to me.
Finally, I'm going home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Peggy Christie has been writing horror fiction since 1999. Her work has appeared in several websites, magazines, and anthologies, including *Necrotic Tissue*, *Code Z: An Undead Hospital Anthology*, *Black Ink Horror*, *Elements of Horror*, and *Vicious Verses and Reanimated Rhymes*. Her collection, *Hell Hath No Fury*, was published by Hazardous Press in 2013. Peggy is also the Secretary of Great Lakes Association of Horror Writers.

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

Website: www.themonkeyisin.com

Prophet Death

T.S. Woolard

Prophet Death cometh!
Calling our name when it's time,
A lonely relief.
Prophet Death cometh!
An escort to the river,
A soul cloaked in grief.

Prophet Death cometh!
A slave for the afterlife.
Life shudders away.
Prophet Death cometh!
Taking us to the unknown,
For our judgment day.

Prophet Death cometh!
A fear wrapped in a shadow,
As the family cries.
Prophet Death cometh!
Never to come back again,
When the heartbeat dies.

Prophet Death cometh!
Calling our name when it's time,
A lonesome relief.
Prophet Death cometh!
Step across the River Styx,
Fade into belief.

MARETHYU (a haiku)

T.S. Woolard

The reaper of souls.
A darkened figure of fate.
The angel of death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his wife and four Jack Russell Terriers. For more of his work look for *Indiana Horror Review 2014* and *Cellar Door III/Hell II* by jwkfiction, *Floppy Shoes Apocalypse* by J. Ellington Ashton Press, and his standalone short story collection, *Solo Circus*.

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

Blog: tswoolard.wordpress.com

In The Graveyard

Jaye Tomas

I stood in the graveyard and let the soil pour through my hands
and I felt naked
with only my grief wrapped around me
hiding nothing.
And the birds called overhead and in my madness
in my need
I imagined they were cursing the ground I stood two footed upon
while I cursed them for being able to fly
and for a heart that beat too fast to feel itself breaking.
And I wondered how hard I needed to listen to hear you sighing away from this place
and if the last sight of me stayed on surface of your eye lingering like a too bright flashbulb
and if I pushed your eyelid up would I see myself.
And does the dirt remember the bones that collapse into it
and do they merge together
or is it like small ramshackle buildings crowding together
tumbling against each other.
And I remember the last time I saw you not dying
and you laughed at something on TV and drank tea and there was no moment of clarity
no clap of thunder
no warning bell to tell me that this was it
this was that moment
the one I needed to have caught and kept in a silver box
with the dried flowers withering upon it.
While the birds still curse I leave the sad space
this mourning in rectangles
with all the stones poking up to mark places where the ghosts begin
and I wonder if they see me walking away and try to follow
or if they just want to stay...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jaye Tomas has 'scribbled' all her life but finally found her niche after creating her blog Chimera Poetry. Her first book, 'Nocturnes', has been very well received and she is hard at work on the second. Originally from Chicago, she is currently residing in the UK, but has begun to cast her eyes in other directions. She loves books and all things hedgehog.

Twitter: [@JayeTomas1](https://twitter.com/JayeTomas1)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/jaye.tomas.7>



THE MAN WHO WALKED INTO THE HELICOPTER BLADE

John Grey

His body parts fly
in a thousand different directions.

Jimmy's mother always warned him,
"Don't put your finger in your ear."
She said nothing about a stranger's finger.

Martha wondered how she'd look in red.
She need not wonder now.

Bob's comb-over
now includes a scalp-over.
Moira's trying to catch someone's eye.
She succeeds.

Beth has always been accused of
being kind of mouthy.
Two extra lips only add weight
to the argument.

The Helicopter pilot
is a shuddering, ashen,
human wreck.

He breaks apart
but it gets him nowhere.

PRESENTLY TENSE

John Grey

Every stranger could be a killer.
My nerves stretch the worst possibilities
taut as tow lines.
No bad eventuality is excluded
be it a thrust in my gut with a knife
or two rough hands around my throat
squeezing the life out of me.
Wherever I go
on this dark down-city night,
my fears stick close to me,
my heart's like a rat in a sack
struggling to escape.
"Got the time?" asks some guy.
Yes I have got the time.
Until this very moment at least.

DISPOSAL NIGHT

John Grey

Something's tossed from the bridge
over the McKenzie River,
lands with an almighty splash.
A large heavy canvas bag
is rolled down the bank of Briar Lake,
floats for a moment or two,
then sinks to the muddy bottom.
Where bodies of water
are not immediately available,
the chopper and green plastic bags must do.
Sure, the fish will be disappointed
but rats are more than up to the task,
and will dog-paddle in blood if need be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - John Grey is an Australian born poet. Recently published in Oyez Review, Tulane Review and Spindrift with work upcoming in New Plains Review, Big Muddy Review, Willow Review and Louisiana Literature.

ONE PHOTOGRAPH – 300 WORDS ONLY

COMPARATIVE FLASH FICTION



Symphony *Nina D’Arcangela*

There was nothing for me to fear, he assured me; I smiled. He motioned, offering a seat in front of his desk while he moved around it to take the accompanying chair. A breath of frustration escaped him when he realized I hadn’t been released from the leg irons and handcuffs that shackled my limbs. As I moved to sit, he held up a hand and looked with disapproval at both guards; his expression clear, disgust obvious.

A single attempt was made to dissuade him, which only seemed to exacerbate things further. The guards exchanged a worried glance. He snatched the keys and removed the restraints himself. Another glare and the two behemoths reluctantly left the office. With the air of a Shakespearean production, the doctor over-played his role as the empathetic friend. He introduced himself as John, said there was no need for formality – we all shared a common goal; the wellness of those fortunate enough to be in his care. His grin was pretentious as we shook hands; we sat. He asked if he could call me Ted; I replied that would suit me fine if he could spare a light. He forced an uncomfortable laugh as he reached for a pack of cigarettes and the file on his desk.

I informed him I didn’t smoke; my only need was for the lighter. His hubris slipped away as easily as his skull shattered on the edge of the desk. “You know, you really should have read the file before dismissing the guards.” I broke a window, set the drapery alight, dropped to the ground and began walking. By the time I reached the road, the roar of the fire drowned their screams, but I didn’t need to hear; I knew the symphony of agony they sang for me.

Ashes *Julianne Snow*

It all lay in ashes. Hopes, dreams, love, heartache, despair—all of it reduced to flakes of carbon staining his thick fingers. With his head in his hands, sooty fingerprints mingling with tears, all he could do was stare at the life that was once his. In ashes at his feet.

The anger came after the sadness, his booted foot rushing furiously through the remains of his life. Why did everything have to be so hard? Why did he always have to be the one who lost it all? He knew eventually he’d rise again, but it took so much energy to start over each and every time it happened. But that was likely just his lot in life—the boulder he was meant to push up the hill for eternity. But he’s start again. He’d rebuild—he’d be damned if he was going to let them get the better of him. No one got the better of him—the anger was always better. It fueled him to figure it out, to discover why things had gone wrong this time. What could he do differently to prevent it?

His gaze swept over the pile again, his vision coming to rest on a half-torched piece of paper—a fragment of his medical degree. While they may have assumed he’d stop, they were wrong. He had a job, a service to provide, and come hell or high water, he was going to do it. They could burn his practice down but that wouldn’t stop him. People weren’t going to stop indulging in their carnal desires, nor would the products of an ill-advised affair. This community needed him to take care of the mistakes they wrought upon themselves. They needed him to play the devil and it was a job he secretly enjoyed.

Interview with Artist RL Treadway

This issue of *The Sirens Call* features artwork by and an interview with the artist RL Treadway. We sat down with RL and asked her a few questions about her work.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome RL! Why don't you take a few moments and introduce yourself to our readers.

RL Treadway: I'm a writer, self taught artist, stock photographer, and photo illustrator. My website is [atrtink.com](http://www.dreamstime.com/atrtink_info). My stock portfolio on Dreamstime, which I hope to update soon is: http://www.dreamstime.com/atrtink_info. I offer book cover design services, interior book formatting – eBook and print. Sometimes proofreading services, if I have the time and it is the right genre.

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

RL: I normally work with pencil sketching and ink – then put it to digital work on Photoshop :). My painting medium is usually acrylics, and gouache. Oil is something I have yet to try – I discovered water-soluble oil and bought a starter kit on sale.. It still smells, and still takes a long time to dry. (that and the price are the reasons why I haven't tried yet :p) I have some small canvasses to work on, trying to decide on a concept.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

RL: The darker side of things – horror, the paranormal, supernatural, ancient world mythologies, Carmina Burana by Carl Orff – and Dead Can Dance.

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

RL: Alan Lee, John Howe, and Larry Elmore – but I'm not worthy.

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

RL: I put it away for another time.

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

RL: Since I do write fiction, I can tell you it's pretty much the same experience – but more frustrating. I don't really combat it – I set it to the side and do something else. A piece of artwork, or a story isn't finished for a reason, usually the mind is working out the little details on its own. :p

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

RL: From some of the strangest places and circumstances. Usually though, I get the bizarre and creepy ideas from sleep deprivation. Inspiration is everywhere when you keep mind, heart, body open to your environment.

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

RL: Depends on the inspiration behind the art. Most of what I do on a personal level are varied shades of dark in the human psyche, painting in abstract. I'm heavily influenced by Epic Fantasy, as well. Dragons are my favorite. :) I like stark contrasts, monochromes when it comes to photography (Will sound weird but I "see" more colors in black & white) but also vivid colors – particularly Cerulean Blue, and Brilliant Purple. I tend to dither. :)

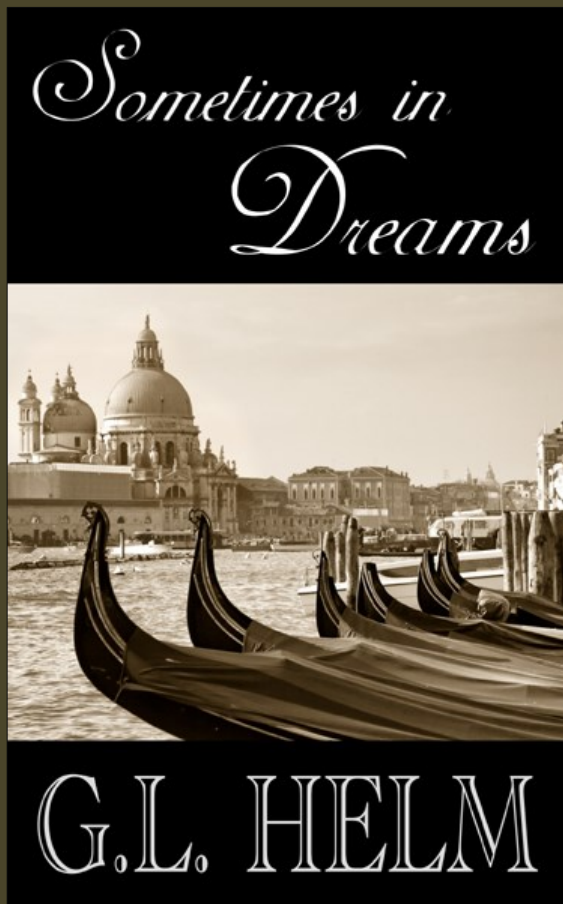
SCP: What is your favourite piece that you have ever completed? Why is it your favourite?

RL: It's the dragon that I sent you. It was the first time I had a large canvas (16x20) and a ton of red acrylic paint someone gave me. It was a gift to a friend, but I had a photograph made of it before I sent it to her.

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

RL: That would be '[Nightmare](#)' by Henry Fuseli. More contemporary – the cover art from the Dragonlance Series. An image of Raistlin and Crysania.. You can use Google image search, its usually the first image to pop up. It's an interesting contrast of black/white – Good/Evil, and she's turned away – blinded by it. (Or choosing to ignore his darkness)

Thank you for taking the time to answer our questions RL!



Sometimes in
Dreams

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Schrodinger's Victim *Michael Cieslak*

You've been following my work for quite some time now, haven't you? Sure, at first it was just the idle curiosity. Your ears pricked up when you heard the news stories about a corpse fished out of the swimming pool at the new rec center. Morbid, but essentially idle curiosity. When a second victim turned up with similar wounds it became the prime topic of water cooler discussion at your place of work.

A body, discovered at the site of a controversial new series of windmills on the lakeshore. Is the killer, you asked of me, trying to make a statement about new developments?

The third time, as they say, is a charm.

This time it wasn't a new victim, but one who predated the now infamous pool girl. News and local authorities had started to worry about the possibility of a connection with previous unsolved homicides. They started checking previous crimes for victims which might match the two that were the topic of so much speculation. They seemed to have struck pay dirt when they discovered my 'first' victim, Helena.

You already knew her name, didn't you? Just as you memorized the names of all the victims which have been attributed to me so far. Unlike Dianne, and that poor unfortunate whose hippy parents named her Sunbeam, there was very little of Helena left to examine. Fire has a tendency to do that. The Medical Examiner was, however, able to determine that certain organs had been removed, as had her tongue. While the actual evidence had turned to ash, the police assumed that it had been placed in Helena's right hand before she had been lit ablaze.

Victim one had been burned, victim two had been staged near the pool, victim three the wind-farm, all that was needed was buried corpse or one that was somehow associated with earth and you would have the complete set. Couple that with the organ removal and the name Elemental Ripper was inevitable.

Not a name I would have chosen for myself, but then I'm not really in it for the glory.

Which brings us to one of my favorite topics, why do I do it? Why am I peppering the metropolitan area with the dissected bodies of young women? Why do I remove precisely three internal organs from each? Why are my cuts so precise? Most importantly, why do I remove the tongues and place them in the victim's right hands before leaving them?

Honestly, there is more discussion of why I do what I do and how I do it than there is of who I am. You have all decided that for me. I am the Elemental Ripper. Any other name is superfluous. No one really gives a crap about Clark Kent so long as Superman saves the day each time.

My theory? You are all afraid that there is no real difference between us. Am I a retired surgeon driven mad after losing on too many patients on the operating table? A failed medical student trying to prove his worth? A butcher with aspirations?

What about the tongues? Was it a warning to someone not to speak about what they had seen? Am I simply torturing the women because I enjoy it? Were the victims being punished for speaking out? Was I forcing them to literally hold their tongues?

There is much speculation about my motives. Just the other night I caught some footage of an FBI agent discussion signatures and compulsions. It was all rather interesting. I am so glad that the local gendarme realized how out of their depth they are and contacted the Feds. They always make for much more entertaining theater.

What really has you all on the edge of your seats is who will be next? When will I strike again? No one seems to think I am done. Most of them are of the opinion I could not stop if I wanted to, that whatever drove me to act in the past will continue to drive me to kill and mutilate in the most depraved and creative ways until I am caught, die, or spiral out of control. Most of them secretly hope the spiral starts soon. It will be so much easier to catch me or kill me once I do.

At least that is what they say on the broadcasts. Deep in their ugly little hearts the reporters hope I will continue to kill because it makes for good copy. The cops and the Feebs don't want me to stop until they stop me. I'm a name maker, a career launcher. I've got the Golden Ticket except instead of a fine film of chocolate residue it's dripping in semi-congealed blood.

Regardless of who you ask, no one thinks that I am done. Everyone knows that I have to at least finish what I started. I've got my fire, wind, and water. I have to do an earth. Some of them are afraid once I finish the sequence I will disappear. Either the lust that drives me to act will dissipate or I will leave for better hunting grounds.

Rest assured, the bloody trail does not end with Sunshine. There will be at least one more. There is indeed an earth. She has not only been chosen, but she's lying trussed up at my feet.

You should see the fear in her eyes.

Her name is Faith. I do not know if her name fits her personality or not. I suppose I will find out once the cutting starts.

She does not yet know who has her, only that she has been abducted. Right now she still thinks that there may be some way out of this for her. She has not seen the blades, read her fate in the bloody runes of her own entrails.

She still has hope.

Would it surprise you to discover that Faith is not the final movement in this particular piece of music? She is not the end of a cycle, but the beginning of a new cycle. She is actually the beginning of my third cycle. Helena was not the first, not by a long shot. There were five before her. She was my second *fire*. The first was a strung out junkie whose demise was ruled Death by Misadventure before the coroner had even arrived at the scene.

Most of the other victims were like her. They were people who no one noticed. Men, women, the type of people you would look through rather than see. These are the ones who are not missed. Homeless, alone, a pensioner with no close relatives. The first *water* was drowned in the bathtub of her own apartment before I started cutting. Her boyfriend is currently serving a life sentence. The police found him covered in her diluted blood after he tried to save her. It was a useless action. By the time he arrived home from his third shift job she was blue and cold and missing her heart, one lung, and her pancreas.

No one noticed them in life and sadly, no one really paid attention to their deaths either. I had to move on to bolder statements to make you all notice.

Yes, I wanted you all to stand up and take notice. It appeals to my sense of the dramatic.

No, I will not give you their names. It will be easy enough to find them, if you truly search for them. The only name that I will give you is that of poor Faith, whimpering behind the gag that blocks her voice.

Faith, who still lives. Faith who could be saved, if just someone was smart enough, fast enough to put it all together.

Take a moment.

Stop and really think.

Is that what you want?

Do you want it to be over? Do you want her to be found safe?

Or do you want the gory details of another person gutted, torso a bloody mess, organs missing, body in a shallow grave or on top of a hill or found at the gates of a composting facility? Do you want life or another right hand gripping a tongue torn free at the root from a still screaming mouth?

What you need then, ironically enough, is faith. Perhaps a little hope. As long as you do not read the details of the death then as far as you know, Faith lives. Never learn about her mangled corpse. All you have to do is stop reading.

Unless, of course, you are the one with the compulsion. Can you walk away from this? Can you stop?

Life or death. Hope or gruesome reality. The choice is yours.

Do you turn the page?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Michael Cieslak is a lifetime reader and writer of dark speculative fiction. He lives near Detroit with his wife and dogs in a house covered with Halloween decorations in October and dragons the rest of the year. His works have appeared in numerous anthologies. He is the Literature Track Head for Penguicon. His Dragon's Roost Press imprint published its first book, Desolation, 21 Tales for Tails in 2014.

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A YEAR AT THE WELL OF SAN PABLO *Shawn Scarber*

Over the year, twelve people died at the Well of San Pablo.

One a month.

January brought Miguel Rodriguez who robbed the tavern at the edge of town. He mounted his horse, spurred her to run, and when she reared up Miguel fell from the saddle and cracked his skull on the stones of the well's walls.

February 28th saw the lovers, Louisa and Gerome, who ran from *Federales* and held the baker and his wife hostage. Close to midnight, when the *Federales* charged in, Louisa and Gerome jumped from a window and cut their arms and necks. They bled out at the base of the well, but Louisa held on to life until March 1st.

In April the blacksmith found his son hanging from the well's rope with a note detailing spurned affections from the baker's wife.

In May the *Federales* investigated the murder of the baker's wife, her body discovered at the well with her heart cut out, but they couldn't find the baker for questioning or the woman's heart.

In June the territorial governor came on a campaign to bring the railroads through San Pablo, but while delivering a speech in front of the well, his heart failed him and he fell to the ground, never to get up again.

A Yankee came in July with a motorcar and after a night of drinking at the tavern with a prostitute named Leticia, they crashed the motorcar into the well, breaking her nose and blackening her eye. The Yankee choked on his own vomit as he lay passed out on the ground.

In August a prospector crawled in from the desert dragging a sack of fool's gold. When told his treasure was worthless, he gave up his spirit taking his last drink from the well.

A priest from the church came in September with a message of redemption for the town of San Pablo, but the notorious outlaw Brutus Clime shot him in the chest three times by the well.

When they hung Clime on a platform built for such justice in October, he told the gathered crowd that his bullets were the Holy Trinity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost.

The baker returned for revenge in November with a bullet for the blacksmith, but the blacksmith was faster on the draw. He shot the baker in the heart, who died at the well where his wife had been found.

In December I arrived. I am the baker's sister. I have shot more men than there are years in my life. I shot the blacksmith in the head from across town. He fell to his knees at the foot of the well where he slumped over like a man in prayer.

It is January again. I am told the *Federales* are on their way. I will stand at this well with my pistol in my hand and I will stack their bodies at my feet or give another life to the Well of San Pablo.

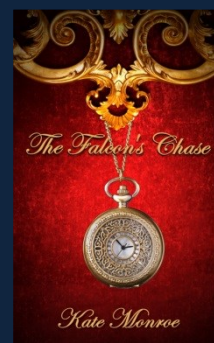
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Shawn Scarber is an application developer by day and speculative fiction author by night. He resides in North Texas with his teenage daughter and a cat named Oliver. His work has appeared in *The Best of Abyss & Apex*, *Heroic Fantasy Quarterly*, and he graduated from Clarion West Writers Workshop in 2006.

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The Falcon's Chase

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Kobo and iTunes



Dunroamin *Glenn James*

Of course, it was overcast. Slate-grey regiments of foreboding cloud, inching their way across the sky like a granite frown. Not an auspicious night for a celestial being to visit the lowly world.

Being unable to find the head of a pin, an Angel alighted on a fencepost. Old creosote sizzled for a moment at the final beat of his wings, and then settled into blessed inertia.

He had carefully checked of course that there was no one around for miles, as such beings as are normally unseen like to settle into visibility when the world is empty. But when one of them is visible so are all the others, and a pasty grey goblin scowled at the new arrival, lifted a small sack which kicked and struggled, and barged his way into a rabbit hole.

The angel sniffed the air, and noted the scent of rain. His halo cast a sunny glow around him like a ray of summer sunshine, and a couple of late daisies came into bloom in response. Looking not unlike a living icon, he settled into his physical form, shifting the flowing sleeves along his arms. Nearby, a watching squirrel took up the remains of a windfall apple, and crunched as it watched with interest.

The angel frowned. You got to visit some rum looking dives in his line of work, but the house before him looked long abandoned, even by usual the standards. Lying at the end of a vanishing track, the shrubs, bushes and grass flourished throughout the lost garden, and hid a house which was already long since misplaced to any visiting neighbour. It was a lonely spot to begin with, miles from anywhere, but in the years since it had been abandoned even the locals had forgotten about the house at Belladonna Meadow.

The Angel smiled to himself, as he had found it quite easily. But then again, they never need a satnav.

Convolvulus and ivy ran riot across the roof of the bungalow, jabbing roots into the defenceless slate. Dust-trap windows barred more light than they allowed to enter, and the blistered door had given up the last of its paint ten winters ago.

It was a miracle in itself that anyone had found this place before it subsided into the soil again, but strange to relate, someone *had*....

Gliding gracefully across the tips of the grass the angel headed for the door. It is a measure of the state of the mildewed wood that it even took a supernatural being two attempts to get it open. As he touched the door a second time, the Blessed Ethereal Tristan noticed finger marks scorched into the surface, and he *frowned*.

Inside lay a caricature of later 20th Century domesticity. A dusty mustard-coloured shag pile carpet, who's only accompanying piece of furniture was a vulgar round Formica coffee table with three legs, and a collapsed ancient television on a metal shoe rack, which was, incredibly, still on standby. The peeling wallpaper held bare rectangular patches through the grime, where long forgotten pictures had been removed, long after the paintings had sealed the wallpapers pattern in its newness. The whole room was draped in cobwebs, thick and dusty.

The blessed Tristan peeked through time, to days when this was a happy family home. He saw images of children in 60's clothing, singing Beatles songs around the transistor radio, and happy parents with a new Mini Cooper car and sharp mod haircuts, before work and life was moved elsewhere by fate and circumstance, and the house was left to stand empty.

The room at the back was darker still, and Tristan knew that this was where his business lay. In the silence of the country, where woodlice stamp and mice run round like lorries, Tristan heard the steady sound of someone breathing. There was a steady stirring of air as the lungs drew in and out, moving the dust microscopically. Tristan saw it moving, the tell tale sway of the atoms drawn by a life. He was an erudite angel, and had made a study of life forces.

But.... At the same time, the temperature in the building was far too high for the time of year, and he steeled himself, wondering about the faint whiff of sulphur in the air.

Rather than materialising in the next room, or waltzing casually through the wall, Tristan walked through the door. When collecting souls he tried to be as human as possible, to help ease the transition period. The Afterlife can come as a bit of a shock, especially to atheists.

Years of disuse had tightened the door in its frame, and the angel had to squeeze uncomfortably around the edge. The little room was once a study, with trendy venetian blinds and free standing bookcases. Light slanted reluctantly in, and spiders had energetically claimed another territory for their empire.

Seated in the centre of all this, motionless in an armchair, sat a young man. He cannot have been above 22 years of age, but he was clearly very sick. His skin was waxy and pale, and his bones were prominent in his lean face. Both his eyes were tightly shut, stubble grew raggedly across his cheeks, and his travel-worn clothing had clearly seen better days.

A few miserable possessions lay scattered around the floor, and his feet had been bleeding from more walking than feet deserve.

Down on his luck and lost in the wilds he had entered this worn out house, and dropped his sick form into an old chair. This was the man's lot, and here he was to die. Tristan never questioned fate, as he took it all as part of creation; He tended to steer clear of the philosophical side of his job, and sensing that the role of his professional calling was drawing nearer, Tristan moved closer to the transitional soul. Surely it couldn't be long....

But then a cheerful voice suddenly called out, "He's in a coma, Sport..."

Tristan spun around, just as a black corner of the room flared brightly with fiery orange, and it revealed a scarlet haired demon sitting in the corner, playing patience on his own to pass the time.

Blessed Tristan of the Sacred Lancers, Veteran of the Battle of Heaven, cast his opposite number a look of Miltonic annoyance, and thought *Oh no.... Not you*. Tristan remembered him only too well.

Still, there were formal niceties which had to be observed, and both bowed to each other stiffly.

"The Black Infernal Nichodemus, Blood-Haired Exponent of Guile and Guilt, at your service," said the demon with a flourish.

The Angel returned the compliment, "The Most Blessed Archangel Tristan, Portent of Judgement Day."

The demon whistled, "Ah, finally a genuine portent now, eh? Promotion is *slow* up there, isn't it? Dead men's shoes, Tristan?"

The angel looked smug, "Job sharing and Hot Desking, actually. You should try it."

"Hot Desking? Walk a mile in my hooves, friend." Nichodemus gave him a rueful grin, "You should sign up for the exchange programme, there's no end of opportunity at our place, and they *really reward* initiative. What are your hours like nowadays?"

Tristan grinned, "Very reasonable, actually. And you?"

Nichodemus rolled a cramped shoulder, "There aren't enough hours in a millennium, it seems to me, and you should see the fighting for overtime..." He sighed, "We used to get marvellous bonuses for coming up with a really horrific nightmare, but what with the recession....."

Tristan smiled privately at thoughts of his own about inflated bonuses, and said "Money is the root of all evil, you know."

"Not in my office, mate." Nichodemus scowled, "But you have to be a bit careful about showing talent these days," he looked over his shoulder nervously, "*The boss has got a bit of an ego problem...*"

Tristan's halo glowed a little brighter, but he said nothing.

Right at that moment the sick man moved in his oblivion, and moaned slightly. The worn soul stretched in its sleep, moving the fragile body.

The two supernatural observers, alert at once, moved closer to the casualty, both patient but curious about how this unfortunate had come to such a pretty pass. A man dying so far from help or comfort filled Tristan with compassionate silence, but Nichodemus was highly amused, tickled by this caprice of fate in its unrelentingly black humour. The victim was certainly worn thin by the misfortunes he had seen in his short life, most of which had undoubtedly been unfair, cruel, and unremitting. A wicked sense of humour, the governor had got. And what an artist, the way he could cripple a life with such panache. You really had to admire his handiwork. There had been no need for him to sign *this* canvas.

As the ebb of life wound its way out the two waited, one either side, for him to give up the ghost. The uneasy spirit dreamt fitfully, in heaven knows what realms of the imagination, as the two speculated privately on what kind of soul they were expecting. Had he led a good life, or where they going to find him paying the wages of sin?

The devil's advocate always found a quiet pleasure in the bewilderment of death. The sheer shock of life after death always threw the newly deceased into such confusion. The alarm of seeing their own

dead body, the inability to communicate with their loved-ones, and then, best of all, coming into contact with himself.

Few took it quietly and nearly all became hysterical. And in these godless times the realisation that there really WAS a hell was so delicious to observe in the unrepentant hedonists, who had spent their lives wildly without a thought for eternity, or where to spend it.... They pleaded ignorance, clutching spectral mobiles which had permanently lost their signal, and bottles of Krug, as with a nonchalant gesture he returned them to their pre-plastic-surgery-selves, before dissolving them to an altogether darker dimension. A common cry on disappearing was *"My NOSE!!! You've given me back my old nose...."*

Tristan was preoccupied by altogether different thoughts. Confident that the clear evidence of suffering in this man pointed to a blameless life of innocence and hardship, Tristan could hardly wait to see him transcend to heavenly bliss. Cases like this were a joy to behold.

But sick and silent as he was, their charge gave no indication as to whether he was going to join the choir invisible, or take the elevator to the ultimate basement. Coma victims, as both knew, could lie suspended between life and death for years, and so there was nothing to do but wait.

The hours sneaked by, stretched out father than temporal elastic, and although the demon ordered a pizza, the delivery boy got hopelessly lost. The patients' breathing was gentle, with a slight rasp, and both his observers knew that each breath might be his last. They couldn't quite relax, being on duty, and listened intently and dutifully, waiting to catch the spirit like two very tense wicket keepers.

But the coma seemed to stabilise the patient in his frailty. Or was it, thought Tristan, something else?

Scholars once speculated about whether a tree makes a noise, if it falls down in a forest and no one is there to hear it. It might also be questioned as to whether someone can actually die when utterly alone, if no one mortal is there to see them go?

Wheezing asthmatically in an old chair, miles from anyone or anything, this unfortunate was not even known on sight by anyone for 90 miles. No one knew he was there, or even that there was a house there at all behind that overgrown, distant garden, and unfortunately, an angel and a demon, being supernatural beings, do not count as mortal observers.

And so, they say, there he stays, deep in a subterranean sleep, away in his dreams and paddling in a brook with his girlfriend at the age of eight, reliving his happiest memories. He has altogether lost all awareness of his real situation, and his mortal form hovers between life and death until seen by mortal eyes, while an angel and a devil play poker for matchsticks and squabble about his soul...

Or has he lost all awareness? Does he know they are there, and take a mischievous pleasure in hanging onto life on purpose? Because if either of the two clockwatching immortals paused long enough to look, they would see there is now a very faint smile playing around his wasted lips.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Glenn James is a passionate Gothic Fantasy Writer & Artist, who is carving a niche with his finely wrought shadowed tales. With an ancient Celtic inheritance from both sides of his family, he has been described as having "A true talent for Darkness." An accomplished radio writer and performer, his dark prose has appeared in print & online on both sides of the Atlantic.

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Just One *Tabitha Thompson*

Just one more... so I wouldn't have to relive the pain of my husband and kids being torn away from me. Just one more so I don't have to be reminded that I'm out of a job and weeks away from being homeless, so I could forget all of the lectures and looks from family and friends about my looks and living conditions. Deep down I know they care by giving me interventions and spending money and time setting me up for various rehab centers despite my refusals but they could only take so much and told me that I had to be responsible for my actions given the path that I chose to take.

I've chosen and stuck to this path for 10 years, I wanted nothing more than to feel that high again. I'm gripped by an enemy that I cannot fight. My once shiny, healthy hair and nails has now become dry and brittle and my use has also caused some of my teeth to rot and fall out. As I tighten my shirt on my arm, I slightly notice the scars, bruises and pus filled abscesses that appeared but like with my teeth, I simply ignore it. Using the veins in my hand as a last resort, I inject just once more. Immediately after I noticed something didn't feel right as my heart began beating weaker and my breathing became shallower as I witnessed several drops of blood stain my carpeted floor.

However for the first time in 10 years, I finally reached the high that I was desperately searching for. Nothing and no one else mattered as I fell onto my carpet floor, took my last breath, my eyes rolling back for one final time as I take my final trip into ecstasy.

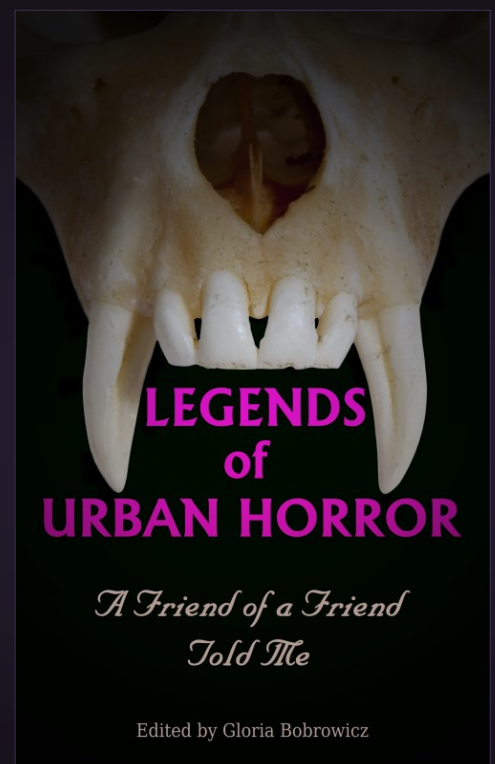
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - My name is Tabitha Thompson a Florida native who's a lover of anything horror, books, coffee, tea and shopping. Recently I have published stories with Sirens Call Publications in Dec. 2013 issue "Dead and Dying" and the Aug. 2014 issue 16 "Apocalyptic Fiction." When I'm not writing or reading, I'm studying for my degree in computers and studying people for new ideas.

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Legends of Urban Horror:
A Friend of a Friend Told Me

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MAGICK HANDS *Dave Dormer*

The funk of teenage sweat filled the silent dressing room as Jordan studied the half-dressed boy that now lay face down on rubber mat flooring meant to protect their skates.

The room's trash bin lay toppled and its contents emptied; a result of the boy's collapse. Jordan wished he had his old teammates and coach back and thought of the game that just ended.

Ryan, his defenseman and a kid he simply despised, cut across his crease chasing the rebound, "Geez-us Jordan—don't screw this up for us!"

Jordan winced, still holding his breath long after the slap shot from the blue line rang off the glove hand post. Above the game's action, he plainly heard gasps from the near miss fill the arena's stands. He could also plainly hear taunts like, *'You Suck'*, from a group of boys who didn't make the team, perched behind his net and behind the glass. He did his best to follow the play while the heat in his face began to rise. He knew he was a good goalie in peewee, everyone told him so, but now after advancing to bantam, the player's shots rained down on him quicker and harder. He had to focus. Only two minutes remained in the game and his new team was only up by one. Thoughts of blame from his teammate's and their parents haunted him to distraction. *If he were to let in a tying goal?*

Earlier, he had complained to his mother, this season's team manager, that it his teammates were getting away with murder. He told her his defense would be constantly out of position, or if they did make it back from a rush— they would screen him from shots anyway. No one noticed or said a word about them. His forwards, more often than not, would shoot directly into the chest protector of the other team's goalie, but if Jordan made a mistake, everyone knew it. He bit his lip and focused on holding on to a win for his team.

Everyone, his parents, past coaches, and friends told him that this was the path to the big leagues. If he wanted to play in the NHL, he had to be a member of this team. He'd faced many of his new teammates before throughout previous tournaments and formed friendships and a few rivalries. Some players he simply despised, and he assumed they felt the same about him. He always felt like an outsider. They would invite him to hang out with them occasionally, but he knew they were simply being polite.

With more gear to remove than the rest, he was usually the last one out of the dressing room. Players raced to be the first ones out, but certain players took turns lingering behind with the goalie. Jordan knew his mom accepted that he'd be the last one out every time, but any who accompanied him would receive venomous stares from impatient parents waiting outside. Today it was Ryan—the boy on the floor.

Jordan stared at Ryan's eyes and mouth hanging wide open like a fish out of water gasping for breath. He looked down at himself in his under armor and hockey pants and wondered what he should do. *Should he run out half-dressed to a concession area full of parents to get help for a kid who constantly put him down and made fun of him?*

No.

He finished dressing not taking his eyes off Ryan. He'd never seen a dead person before. He thought it would affect him more, but because it was Ryan, he was indifferent. The boy's face was pale-blue and his arms lay twisted unnaturally beneath him. It was plain that Ryan didn't even have a chance to cushion his fall. He simply collapsed.

He watched his mother curse amid the clutter of jerseys in her sewing room. Frantically, she stitched player's name-bars as straight and centered as she could while referring to the player roster to coordinate numbers.

When she realized Jordan was in the room she grumbled, "Why do I get stuck doing this every year—the parents should be doing their own damn kid's jerseys. It's always given to me to do, last minute."

"Maybe the coaches think you do a better job at sewing," he said, trying his best to calm her. She didn't reply at first. She finished the jersey currently jumbled around her sewing machine then spoke, "What's up, Jordan?"

"I think the guy's blame me for not doing anything—you know with...Ryan. What was I supposed to do? He just fell down."

His mother examined her work then neatly placed the jersey atop the others in the pile, "What happened to Ryan wasn't your fault."

"I guess," he replied. "I don't think the guy's wanted me on the team in the first place—some of them think I suck in net."

"You're a good goalie, Jordan and you know it." She replied and looked at the crafting cupboard against the wall. "You deserve to be there. Probably more so than some on the team."

He watched her open the craft cupboard door, the cupboard all of her kids were warned never to mess with, and began searching for something.

"What are you looking for?"

She shuffled through small bolts of material, jars of strange ingredients, and little dolls made from various colors and fabrics. She removed a piece of leather and eyed up Jordan as if sizing him for a tailored suit and a grin slowly spread across her face. "I can make you something—a good luck charm, but you have to really want this. I mean, really want this. There's only so much I can do to help. You go upstairs and I'll call you when I'm done."

With a shrug of his shoulders, he walked from the sewing room and closed the door behind him, but not all the way closed.

His stomach twisted. He'd never seen his mom look so strange. He crouched down carefully and peeked into the room through the door's crack. He watched her cast aside the pile of team jerseys and gently trace lines over the piece of leather she removed from the cupboard. Then, carefully she began to cut. He knew his mom was creative. She loved to cook and bake and had a pantry full of herbs and spices, but he had no idea what else she occupied herself with down in her craft room. The hum of the sewing machine filled the room and she looked enthralled with what she was doing. She stopped the machine and returned to the cupboard. She rummaged through jars and returned to the table with a weird assortment of items that she now stuffed into the unfinished leather doll. He held his breath, crept away from the door, and headed upstairs.

In less than an hour, she called for him. He entered the room; for the first time in his life, she frightened him.

She spoke with a gleam of pride in her eyes, "Jordan, this is your good luck charm. Keep this in your hockey bag and show no one. When you feel you need it, rub it and make your wish, but you have to *really* believe in it. The rest is up to you."

She handed him the creepy leather likeness of himself, "Uh, thanks Mom."

Pucks flew toward him as fast and hard as ever. His lateral movement across the crease was seamless. He anticipated each shot as though it was telegraphed, and each one careened from his pads, blocker, or chest protector harmlessly into the corners. His glove hand responded with lightning speed picking pucks out of the air without so much as a flinch from him awaiting the sting in his hand. His teammates skated across his crease tapping his pads with every jaw-dropping save. Jordan loved his new doll.

The team continued to celebrate their win in the dressing room. His play drew the team together and his coach said so as he tried to address the team above the excitement. He waited for the kids to settle before he continued, "Great job, guys! If we keep this up—we'll be going to the finals for sure this year." Again, the kids stirred into a frenzy.

Ryan's death only two weeks earlier went unanswered. It seemed long forgotten until the coach held up a small black doll that crinkled like newspaper beneath his fingers.

"Guys, Ryan's parents asked me to find out if this belonged to anyone here—they found it in his hockey bag?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Dave Dormer lives and writes in North-Western Ontario alongside his wonderful (and patient) wife and four children.'

Website: <http://dormerdave.wix.com/writing>

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Fallen *Karen Soutar*

At first, he doesn't believe he's falling.

It's only when the black-blue bruise of the sky is rushing away from him that he realises he's gone over.

He grabs for something, anything, but she'd had more power than he thought possible. He can't reach anything to stop his fall. How could something so small have such strength?

Forever and no time at all passes. The air is unforgiving as it gashes him with frozen knives. His body twists into shapes it has never made before; an echo of the pointless writhing and squirming she once did to escape. He tries to scream, like her, but his voice is pulled from him in a pathetic squeak. Fear savages his mind. The stars flash with laughter as they watch his final moments.

He evacuates all his waste as he hits the ground with a sickening thud. He doesn't hear that, or smell the stench of his bodily fluids. He doesn't feel the blood exiting the back of his head and pooling around his neck. But his mind is still working, in a body beyond repair. He wonders what happens next. Some primal part of him knows he is dead, or dying.

The sky changes from a bruise to a wound, as a red maw opens above him and regurgitates a nightmare.

Etiolated fingers reach for him, ragged lips stretch in a rictus of evil. The thing has his own features, warped into the face that truly lies beneath his own skin. He whimpers as it speaks.

"Come, Steve," the creature whispers, "It's just a bit of fun. Don't tell Mummy, remember? This is our little game..."

His blackened soul yells and screams and begs, but his Death ignores him as it scoops him up and carries him towards the hideous rip in the night sky.

She still stands on the crag, little hands balled into fists at her waist. Smiling as she surveys his broken body below. Grinning at the creature that carries his soul to his ultimate fate. Her lips form words he can't hear.

Death enlightens him, bringing its hideous mouth close to his ear. A putrid stench caresses his face, stinking of beer and chips and cigarettes. His own breath.

"She says, 'Merry Christmas, Father'."

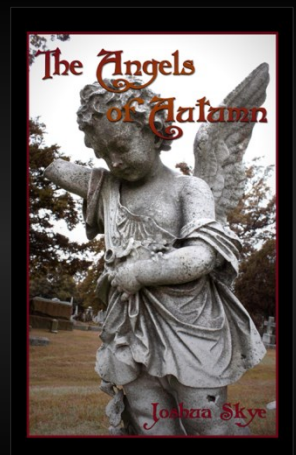
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Karen Soutar is a blogger, and a writer of short fiction. She loves to write spooky and creepy stories, and occasionally sexy ones. She is also working on her first novel, a tale of witches - and rock stars! When not writing, Karen is a driver trainer, rock chick, and crazy cat lady.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

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The Angels of Autumn

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Highest Stake *DJ Tyrer*

"They say you can't be beaten at cards."

"At anything."

There is a certain private room in one of the more exclusive casinos in Las Vegas where the most daring or desperate can wager for the highest stake of all. A literal life or death wager.

In that private room, three nights a week, there can be found a tall, lean figure in an expensive black suit with pale, pale skin, no hair and ice-blue eyes. You might think to look at him that his face is a skull; you might be right. He is Death or the avatar of Death or Death's incarnate servitor, the stories vary; the details are not terribly important, neither are they comprehensible. All that matters is that he is the embodiment of the termination of existence. He is the one with whom you must bargain if you do not desire to die. He always has plenty of people to play against.

But, what can you bargain with when you are petitioning Death? What does Death desire? He has no need of wealth, nor of someone to serve him, nor physical pleasure of any sort. That is why he cannot be bribed, no matter how wealthy you are. To him all the riches of men are ephemeral. It would seem a bribe is an impossible thing. What he does seem to crave, however, is novelty or some sort of distraction from his eternal chore. Hence Death's oft-recorded fondness for games from Chess to Candy Land, although he is said to have little interest in Clue(do) and Operation due to their resemblance to his usual fare. Challenge him and he is certain to take you on. Especially if the game involves in dice.

These days, the game of choice is mostly stud poker, hence the man dressed like a cowboy trying his luck tonight. He has an aggressive form of cancer and really, *really* doesn't want to die. Not that most people want to die, but facing his mortality like this has made him especially fearful. He has lots to lose and a lifetime of regrets. Nonetheless, he is feeling pretty confident. Well, it is his only chance.

"Are you ready to play?" Death asks.

"Uh-huh. I surely am."

"Then, what do you wager?"

"Wager?" He hadn't expected this. He had imagined you just played Death, nothing more. Most people do.

"Yes, wager. A bet is not much of a bet if only one participant is laying a wager."

"But, what can I wager?" It's a good question: if you can't bribe Death, what can you offer him as a wager?

"A life."

"A life?" If Death gets everyone in the end, why would he ask for a life? It doesn't make any sense to him.

"A life," Death repeats. "It is symbolic of your desire to live. If you lose, I get both you and someone you care about. Dare you take the risk? If you win, I defer your death. If you lose, not only do you die on time, but the one whose life you have wagered dies, as well. If you would prefer not to risk depriving a loved one of life... walk away now."

"I'll play."

"Then, who do you wager? Remember, it must be someone who holds value for you."

The man is silent, bites his lip, lifts his Stetson from his baldhead and scratches at his scalp as if massaging out a decision. There is really only one answer he can give, but he hardly dares think it.

"Well?" Death has all the time in the world – or, rather, exists outside the constraints of time – but doesn't like to be disrespected by those who fail to appreciate the importance of his role. If he were mortal, he would be a busy man.

"My daughter," the man says at last. His tone is anguished. She is the only person he truly cares about and he knows just what a risk he is taking. He wonders what it says about his life that he has nobody else.

"A fine choice." Although his expression never changes and his tones remain leaden, the man is almost certain he approves. Death appreciates a good wager. "Would you care to shuffle and deal?"

"Sure." How can he pass up the chance to – literally – stack the deck in his favour? The bet is too desperate to be left to chance. He had to do whatever he could to win.

Death smiles to himself, recognising the ploy. Maybe he should be annoyed, but he finds the notion

endearing and, besides, cheating death is such a lovely phrase that he cannot be angry. Especially as it makes no difference.

They begin to play as the man deals them each a hand.

Death decides to let the man win. Sometimes he does, sometimes he doesn't; he is as fickle in person as the myriad ways in which people can die. His reasons vary, but today he is impressed with the man's bet and desire to win against the odds.

"Congratulations, it seems that you are the winner."

The man is delighted.

"You will live out what would have been your lifespan if you had not contracted cancer." Death does not inform him that that represents only a few precious years in which to walk his daughter down the aisle and see his grandchildren born, the paucity of years being thanks to an out-of-control juggernaut in his future. Still, it's better than what he faced – more years and a quick death rather than a slow, painful one. A net gain.

The man is relieved and delighted. He rises to leave, but pauses and looks at Death.

Death looks back at him, face blank.

"I thought you said you couldn't be beaten."

"I did."

"But, I just beat you..."

Death smiles a skull grin. He doesn't explain.

"But, I beat you," the man reiterates.

"Yes, but only temporarily, just enough to postpone the inevitable. I come for everyone in the end. I will see you eventually..."

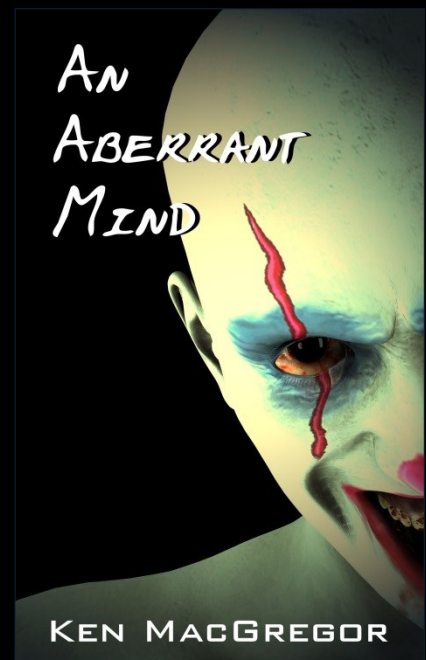
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published, in *Scifaikuest*, *Cyaegha*, *Carillon*, *The Pen*, *Tigershark* and *Anthology 29*, and online on *Poetry Bulawayo*, *Poetry Pacific*, *Scifaikuest* and *The Muse*, as well as releasing several chapbooks. Forthcoming poetry is slated to appear in the anthologies *Beyond The Cosmic Veil* and *Mightier Than The Sword* from Horrified Press.

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Pink Moon *Gwendolyn Kiste*

Millie Obernesser stood at the picture window, examining the symmetrical rows of dried azaleas in the front yard garden. Autumn had trampled the once vibrant colors, and all her April to September work disintegrated from the world like desiccated leaves crackling beneath heavy winter boots.

Her husband loved the cold weather. Their sons did too. But Millie loathed it. Fall signified an end, a death of sorts. A death that reconfigured the landscape and broke it into pieces that never quite fit together again.

"It's just nature's way of falling asleep," her husband told her, though Millie never believed him.

But spring. Spring was the Phoenix. March and April sloughed off the snow and cold and decay, and May repopulated the earth with its pirouettes of life and blossoms. Spring could never heal the wounded trees and carapaces left behind in the alcoves eyes so rarely searched, but the light on the cusp of darkness created new trees and new bodies, and that wasn't such a terrible second best.

Yet it was fall now, and the splendor of spring and waning beauty of summer were as far away as they could possibly be. This profound distance—measured not in miles but in longing—pressed into Millie's chest as if she were hollow and might crack like an empty eggshell.

The sharp zest of cinnamon and nutmeg mingled through the downstairs rooms, reminding Millie to check the oven. Her stomach twisted into itself, and her temples throbbed. But the dinner party had been planned for months. She couldn't cancel now. Their social circle wouldn't permit it.

And at least the pumpkin tart needed her care.

Lowering his newspaper, her husband peered into the kitchen.

"How's it going in there?" he asked because the question seemed benign, even though it wasn't.

He didn't trust her with even the most menial tasks, but Millie endured since his endless questions provided him a sense of domestic purpose when he would otherwise have none.

"Everything's fine," she said.

"I would hope so," he said. "You've had all day to prepare."

All day. Every day.

Millie felt his gaze burning into her back as she removed their best porcelain from the top cabinet.

"You were thinking about your garden, weren't you?" he asked.

"What does it matter?"

"Because I know you," her husband said. "You're always thinking about that garden like there isn't anything in the world besides azaleas and daffodils and morning glories."

"There are more than flowers," she said. "There's cooking too."

Though Millie hated fall, she had long ago mastered the gastronomic permutations of the season. A pumpkin tart cooled on the counter next to a pitcher of homemade apple cider. Butternut squash soup bubbled on the burner. And a chestnut pie steamed with glee on the windowsill.

The acrid flavors mocked Millie and told her how she might never again taste the blithe offerings of spring.

Their sons returned home early, just like their mother had requested, just like their father demanded. They skulked into the kitchen, hungry as always, and tried to dip their fingers in their mother's masterpieces.

Millie swatted their hands. "Not until everyone else arrives."

The guests were scheduled for seven that evening. Though it was the 31st of October, they didn't celebrate Halloween. Halloween was for children, for pagans, for those who needed masks and makeup to conceal faults. No, they were adults, and they were proud of who they were and where they'd been. No reason for phony revelry. Their celebrations could be austere and true.

"You boys run off and get dressed," she said to her sons. "I want you both to look presentable for the party."

They whined and kicked the floor and went anyway.

Her husband sighed. "I need a shower," he said and studied his wife who flitted back and forth in the kitchen like a nervous undertaker, preparing this coffin of a casserole and that half-wilted arrangement of cut flowers.

"Remember it's only a party, dear," he said. "No need to look so morbid."

Then her husband followed their sons upstairs and left Millie alone to ready the festivities.

She folded the napkins and set out the forks and spoons and knives. And the plates. Seven plates. The odd number vexed her. She preferred even numbers. They were cleaner and more civilized than odd numbers. And seven. Seven was a prime number, a particularly dangerous integer that had no companion except itself and one.

She counted herself out of the group, and that made six. And six was a safe number. A good number. And Millie was content.

On the table, the food waited in chic silver serving dishes that lingered in cobwebs and darkness every other day of the year.

All that was left was the punch. The ginger ale and neon sherbet fused in the hand-me-down punchbowl her mother had so emphatically willed to her. Millie stared into the concoction like a witch dangling eye of newt over a cauldron. But unlike most, she knew eye of newt was merely the fancy name for commonplace mustard seed, and that was an herb that had no place at her dinner party.

She pulled the final ingredient from under the sink.

As Millie stirred the green punch, her husband—primped and fresh from the shower—wandered into the kitchen to inspect her work. Or perhaps to inspect her instead. He looked at her and past her and through her and from every other possible angle. There had been no time in her life he hadn't known her, so he could forecast Millie in ways no one else could.

"Do you need any help?" he said with no inflection, and she passed him the glass bowl, heavy with syrupy enchantment.

The doorbell rang, and as if he suddenly had misgivings, her husband regarded her.

"Are you sure you're up to doing this?" he asked, pretending for a moment that Millie's comfort was his utmost concern.

"They're already here," she said and answered the door.

It was a small gathering. Just Millie and her husband and their sons and the high school coach who'd guided the boys to state championships and the history teacher who'd assigned the boys passing grades they didn't earn and the principal that gave the boys every other advantage they needed to succeed.

A small gathering indeed.

They sat at the long table, three on each side and Millie at the helm. It was the only place where she was elevated above the rest, and she reveled in the honor.

Her six contented companions sampled every dish and sipped the punch she'd devised, but Millie quaffed water. Her stomach would tolerate nothing else.

"Aren't you feeling well?" the principal asked her.

"Sometimes Millie can't eat," her husband said. "The doctors say it's normal. Just *nerves*." He struck the last word as if to say, *Doctors will tell a neurotic woman anything to keep her quiet*.

Millie listened to the glug-glug of rolls drowning in butternut squash soup. The partygoers alternated between apple cider and frothy punch, and the tart and the pie merged on the plate with other more savory dishes.

It was fall, and Millie's guests didn't want to waste a moment.

"You two boys must be looking forward to college next year," said the history teacher.

"We are," Millie's sons said in unison.

Twin boys, she thought.

The coach scowled. "Let's focus on getting my quarterback and running back through the season first."

Athletic boys with football scholarships.

"You must be so proud of them, Mrs. Obernesser."

Charming boys with beautiful, blond paramours who sat at home waiting for her boys to call.

"We are proud of them," her husband answered for Millie. "Very proud."

Naughty boys who did more than pull girls' pigtails.

"Of course," Millie said. "Why wouldn't we be proud?"

Large boys that held smaller boys underwater in the school pool.

"Aw shucks," her sons said.

Dishonest boys who claimed they never did anything bad.

The coach smiled. "The best two kids in the whole damn county."

Perfect boys who everyone believed, even the coach and the history teacher and the principal who saw all but pretended otherwise.

Her husband raised his wine glass. "To my pride and joy!"

Strapping boys the other mothers envied and praised.

"If only those were our sons!" they'd tell Millie.

If only they were.

"Can we have wine?" the twins asked, and her husband passed them the bottle.

Millie had tried to guide them. She had shown them the garden and explained what it meant to tend something, to care for it, and to see it grow.

But their father undid every kind word she imparted, and soon her boys—her babbling boys, her love, her devotion, and her whole world—were mirror images of the man who had trapped her when she was only seventeen. The man who hadn't let go since then.

And in the days to come, her sons would grip their cheerleading blondes or maybe other blondes from a lineup of beauty queens that flocked to them. And like their father, her boys wouldn't let go.

And they'd grip more boys who were smaller than them and hurt them too. Hurt them badly but in a way that would never leave bruises, not on the outside anyhow.

Yes, her sons' futures were set, provided no obstacles impeded.

An obstacle like last May when one of the boys' victims hung himself after school. It unnerved Millie that anything could die in the spring. That was a time of rebirth, not death. That shouldn't have happened, and she knew it.

But her husband was simply relieved there was no note left behind that indicted their sons.

"Imagine the scandal," he'd said. "No college would touch them after that."

But the twins had their pick of the best schools in the state. Like everyone else, colleges loved the boys. Millie's children were easy to love.

Crumbs drooping from his lips, the coach examined her sons. "Where are your girlfriends?"

"Mom didn't want them here," they said.

The principal snuffed. "Why ever not? This table would have been even more beautiful with their lovely faces at it."

"Tonight isn't appropriate for them," Millie said and then said no more for a long while.

The meal complete, the men loosened their belts as though it was a compliment to Millie's cooking.

"Was this all from scratch?" the history teacher asked.

"Yes," Millie said, "the pumpkins came from our garden."

"And the apples?"

"From our apple tree."

"And the chestnuts and the butternut squash?"

"All from our backyard," Millie said.

The history teacher smiled. "You have a little bit of everything, don't you?"

"I try," Millie said and excused herself from the table.

Her husband followed.

"I'm sorry you're going to be disappointed," he said once they were both in the kitchen and out of earshot of the other guests.

Millie rinsed her glass. "Why would I be disappointed?"

"I know what you did," he said like a father lecturing his progeny. If only he'd been the kind of father who lectured.

"What did I do?" Millie asked, her eyes wide.

"You used the box from under the sink. The one meant for the rats." He shook his head. "I knew you would."

"Did you now?" She dried her cup and set it on a shelf. "So what did you do? Fill the box with white

sugar when I wasn't looking?"

Her husband hesitated. "Yes."

"Of course, you did, darling," she said brightly. "I only used it because the sugar bowl was empty, and I wanted to sweeten the punch."

"Oh," he said, almost disappointed.

"You really think you know everything about me, don't you?"

Her husband frowned, so she smiled to counterbalance his sentiment and steady the room again.

They retreated to the table where the conversation flowed as effortlessly as the wine.

Millie waited. One by one, their bodies slumped. The history teacher went first. Someone thought the middle-aged educator had only choked, so the Heimlich maneuver was quickly attempted and just as quickly failed.

The coach went next, and the way he went was ugly. All contorted and melodramatic. No elegance to it at all.

Like everything else they did, the twins departed together, collapsing to their knees and grasping their throats as if someone or something cut off their airways and strangled them. Just like the boy they sent to a springtime death. For a few bittersweet moments, they understood how he felt. In the end, Millie's sons learned empathy.

The principal put his head on the table and never looked up again.

Her husband was last. He searched her face and asked her why and clutched his place setting. Millie was glad when he didn't have the strength to yank the tablecloth and all the plates and dishes onto the floor, though it was clear from his hideous convulsions that he wanted to. Even in death, he endeavored to criticize his wife's housekeeping.

Finally, the whole table slumbered. All except Millie. She stayed behind because someone had to align them in a respectable fashion. The bodies resumed their proper seats, and elbows rested on laps, not placemats.

When she was done, there were two neat symmetrical rows, three guests on each side of the meticulously set table.

Six was a good number indeed.

Millie ladled the last of the green punch into a cup. She savored the drink and scoffed.

"Rat poison," she said. "As if I needed rat poison."

No self-respecting cook would use toxin designed for pests, not when she knew about chestnuts.

Sweet chestnuts.

Horse chestnuts.

How to pick the chestnuts with tassels on top if you were making a dessert.

How to pick the chestnuts without tassels if you had other plans.

How to add a dash of monkhood to the pie for good measure.

She washed the punchbowl and waited for spring to reawaken them. Soon the partygoers would return to the world—in one form or another—and like the Phoenix of yore, they would be better than before. Better thanks to her help.

Millie stood at the picture window again and thought how it was going to be a gloriously quiet winter.

Perhaps her husband was right. Fall wasn't so terrible after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Gwendolyn Kiste is a horror and fantasy writer based in Pennsylvania. She contributes genre editorials to Horror-Movies.ca and Micro-Shock, and she is the resident "weird wanderer" for the travel-centric Wanderlust and Lipstick. Her short stories have appeared in Strangely Funny II, History and Horror, Oh My! and Whispers from the Past: Fright and Fear.

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SORROW'S BAPTISED *Catherine Connolly*

Erin had been baptised in pain and a flood of saltwater tears, earth still crusted beneath her fingernails from the silt laden waters. She emerges still riding her rage; the tang of blood at her lips, ratty snake tailed hair hissing into her ears, the ghost of a slit-smile kissing the base of her throat. Somewhere beyond this, she can hear her call. To her, it roars. She is clear where she must be, though crimson colours her vision; the beat of fury coursing – quickening - through her veins. His name is the curse clamouring upon her lips. He is where she must go. He is the favour owed her before the remainder. Before she truly becomes one of those formed from sorrow, favouring the wronged, seeking to restore balance through chaos' call.

Dark limbs on shadowed wings' flight, she spreads them wide, to travel swiftly, skirt shifting slightly with the winds. His pain will be her pleasure – the necessary price. She knows this to be true; the justice of blood for blood. She is his storm cloud summoned.

Justin. An irony, that. One date and she had known herself drowning deep, though she might still have made an escape - then. She hadn't meant to fall in love. By the time she had realised, she was already teetering on the brink - and then up and over. She had thought herself loved. Told herself he had had a bad day when they had words. Stayed. He had made a mistake. It wouldn't happen again. Trite self-assurances.

It is difficult to remember the night it happened; blurred as it is beneath her collapse into unconsciousness. She recalls sticky, carmine stained fingers, clutched towards her throat, before the floor rose up to greet her. The silver scar tracing her skin reminds her of the end. She touches a fingertip to its ridges. There is satisfaction in seeing into the secret depths of others, where once one could only guess. Now, she can know the truth; can practice virtuous vengeance where its weight sets its summons upon her.

Erin feels pressure pulling in her bones, where previously they were light. She is near now. She dips lower, boots coming into contact with tarmac as she lands; the slight initial shock of impact reverberating through her soles. The suggestion of feather shading at her shoulders fades as she stands. A slight smile as she recognises her surroundings. It *would* be here.

Crouching slightly, Erin pushes the four figure combination into the key safe, hearing the click as it opens on its hinges. The code is unchanged. He could scarcely have expected her return to use it, given how he had left her. Still, she is here, restless coils slithering - soundless now - about her temples, whip wound about her waist. Raised by her calling, claimed by blood's bindings, irrevocably promised to her mission once it is over. Once she is beyond him.

The stairs towards the bedroom are steep; higher than in the average house. Erin is used to their proportions. She has climbed them many times before. It is the first doorway on the right. She turns the brass handle slowly. It creaks if one is less than careful. A light jump and she is past the raised floorboard just beyond the entrance, liable to catch one's toes and stub them. He is a slight snore beneath the duvet; a cocooned length in its white folds.

The movement about Erin's head increases as she nears the bed. The red is with her now, singing through her body. She feels dizzy drunk on its spinning, as it pulls her under. Somewhere, there is shouting, a frenzy of serpentine seething and they are eyeball to eyeball as Justin startles straight from sleep into wide eyed stare, immediate. Locked into contact, Erin sees a form of recognition, accompanied by something else, as his gaze cracks. She sees herself reflected upon his eyes, as they stare openly into hers. Leaning forward slowly, gently, she bestows her final kiss upon his lips. He is still as she does so; unmoving, scarcely breathing; blinking rapidly now. Somewhere, inside, she hears him scream. And cry. And cry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Catherine Connolly resides in the North West of England amidst increasing numbers of books and story ideas. She is a member of The Poised Pen writing group and runs with the #FlashDogs pack. Her work has been published by Paper Swans Press, the Opening Line Literary 'Zine and in J.A.Mes Press's "In Creeps The Night".

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The Death of Peace *Michael Nero*

Milan, Italy

03:59hrs

Paolo Grecca inexplicably woke from his sleep. He felt drained, but that was to be expected given he only had a couple hours sleep. He reached out to take hold of his wife's hand, but found Maria no longer there: the sheets still warm from her body.

"Maria," he called out to her. "Come back to bed."

Eager to share his excitement over the latest rounds of negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, he wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Maria?"

She didn't reply.

After months of work and being away from home, Paolo was the closest he had ever been to resolving the matter of the disputed territories between the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government. He had decided to take a well-deserved weekend off from the negotiations to be with his wife, and had only arrived home four hours earlier, flying in from Israel on the red-eye. Maria had been asleep when he finally got in and Paolo had decided not to wake her, instead snuggling up beside her and peacefully drifting off to sleep.

"Maria," he called out again.

Paolo got out of bed and quickly checked the ensuite before moving onto the remainder of the apartment in search of her. He beckoned out to Maria as he proceeded, his calls met only with silence.

Finally he walked into the study and saw her sitting in a chair, her back towards the doorway. She seemed to be looking out the window of their exclusive apartment.

"There you are. What are you doing? Come back to bed," he said as he walked over to her. She didn't respond.

"Maria, are you OK?" he asked, a sense of panic washing over him.

He rushed over to her side. "Maria!"

Her eyes were closed and she didn't seem to be breathing. Paolo shook her shoulder trying to wake her, prompting her head to flop unnaturally to one side.

Terror set in.

Taking hold of her body, he brought Maria to the floor. "No, Maria, no!" he screamed.

Leaping up to the nearby desk, he pressed the duress alarm hidden beneath its rim. Despite the futility, he fell back down to Maria's side and started performing CPR. That's when he noticed a figure standing in the corner of the room.

"Quickly, call an ambulance. She's not breathing," he commanded, assuming it was one of his bodyguards responding to the duress alarm.

"It is too late for her," the man said as he approached.

"What?" Paolo exclaimed, looking up.

"Who are you?" Paolo yelled, realising the man was an intruder. "What are you doing in my home?"

The man stood well over six-feet tall. His hair was so blonde it almost seemed white. At first his eyes appeared dark brown but as he approached they looked almost black.

"I am an Angel of God. I am here to bring about your end, Paolo Grecca," the man said calmly.

At that moment the front door of the apartment burst open and heavy footsteps rumbled down the hallway.

"Mister Grecca, are you OK? Where are you?" a man called out.

"Maria, she's dead...there is a man in here. He killed her!" Paolo yelled out.

The stranger smiled at Paolo.

"They cannot help you," he said calmly.

Two men entered the room, their Berretta 92fs pistols at the ready. They peeled off to either side of the doorway and stopped, their weapons trained on the intruder.

"Don't fucking move!" one of them yelled at the stranger.

"Get down on the ground now!" the other exclaimed.

The stranger calmly turned towards them.

"Well which is it: don't move or get down on the ground? I can't do both," he said with a smile on his face.

As the bodyguard standing to the right of the doorway began to respond, the stranger surged towards him. In a flash he was by the bodyguard's side, taking hold of his extended arm and twisting it in a violent arc. The bodyguard's arm broke like a twig. He began to yell out in pain when the other guard took aim and started firing rounds into the intruder's back. The stranger didn't even flinch, responding with a back kick that propelled the second guard across the room and into a large book case. Using the heel of his palm, the intruder struck the first bodyguard under his chin. The force of the blow was so powerful that the bodyguard's jaw disappeared into the top of his skull as his head snapped back. The guard's lifeless body hit the floor, leaving the intruder free to turn his attention back to Paolo.

Still kneeling beside Maria's body, Paolo's was paralysed with terror. His mouth wide open, he was amazed at the ease with which this stranger had just dispatched his bodyguards.

"What are you?" Paolo asked as tears ran down his face.

The killer walked over to Paolo and took him by the throat, lifting him off the ground.

"My name is Samael. I am an Angel of God. I am here to kill you," he said calmly.

"Why...why kill my wife? Why kill me?" Paolo croaked, struggling to utter the words through Samael's vice-like grip.

"Do not weep child," Samael whispered, wiping the tears from Paolo's face with his free hand. "The age of man will soon be done. This is just the part you have to play."

Paolo began to gargle as he tried to speak again. Samael's grip was too strong now. He struggled to take his last breath.

Peering down at his wife's body, it was not fear or pain Paolo felt, but utter sadness. He thought of all the time he had spent away from Maria, all those moments he would never have. As the world closed down around him, all that remained was regret.

'I should have woken her up when I got home. I should have told her I loved her one las—'
Everything turned to darkness.

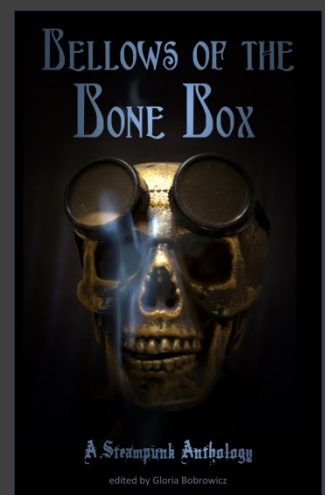
ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Michael Nero is an Australian Author with a Postgraduate Diploma in Psychology and a Graduate diploma in Criminology. He has worked as a Crisis Counsellor, Child Welfare worker and has even served overseas as a United Nations Peace Keeper. Michael Nero's debut novel, 'In the Shadow of Angels,' has recently been released on Amazon and Kobo to five star reviews.

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Bellows of the Bone Box

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Fire *Laura Jamez*

All her life she had been told that she was sick, didn't deserve to live a normal life. Her love had caused nothing but pain to the world and so she had been banished, forced to live in seclusion, meals delivered through a hatch at the base of her cell door. But all that was to change.

Her meal was passed through as normal, but the contents were far from normal.

No drink. No hot meal. Nothing edible.

All it contained was a can of lighter fluid and a box of long kitchen matches.

She stood for a long time just staring at the tray. Then her love surfaced and she stretched out her hand snatching up the box of matches and cradling them to her breast. Moving slowly she crossed to the far corner of the room and sat down, her breath catching in her throat, the anticipation of what was to come ensuring her senses were on full alert.

The first match was removed and lit. The flame was so bright, so hot. Match after match was lit, each one bringing her to the cusp of ecstasy, yet she could not find satisfaction. The room was filled with the flavour of ash, the air musky.

Dare she push the boundaries of her passion? How long before she was discovered?

Deep in her soul she knew there was only one way to finally become one with her true love.

Tucking the box of matches lovingly into a pocket she carefully removed all the bedding making a nest in the center of the floor. The single chair she possessed was balanced under the door handle to prevent easy access should anyone discover her plan.

Turning to the lighter fluid she carefully squirted it onto the bedding and the clothes she was wearing. At last she was ready, the room was pungent with the smell, her skin slick with fluid. Sitting in the center of the nest she had made, she started to light the remaining matches.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura Jamez, a mother of two from Dunfermline, has been obsessed with horror from an early age. After successfully publishing tales in every *Sirens Call* of 2014, (personal goal achieved) she has decided it is about time she released her own book. Look out for it late 2015.

What the Devil Did *Kyle Hemmings*

I nuked major cities, had leaders blame each other, turned girl against boy, mother against son, bird against fish. After a good long laugh and some vintage Chardonnay, I bathed the world in its own blood. Then a giant radioactive wind swept up the blood into massive and pretty swirls. It all turned into a gigantic abstract painting. But with everyone dead, I never received the credit. Slowly, the wind traveled toward me, melted me. And I too became part of that abstract picture. I was the blackest of the swirls, the ones clamoring to be foreground.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kyle Hemmings lives and works in New Jersey. He has been published in *Your Impossible Voice*, *Night Train*, *Toad*, *Matchbox* and elsewhere. His latest ebook is *Father Dunne's School for Wayward Boys* at amazon.com.

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Blog: <http://upatberggasse19.blogspot.com/>

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



Available on Amazon,
CreateSpace, Barnes &
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and the iStore

Stranger Danger *Rachel Byrne*

The rain pounded on the windshield as Jess tried to sit patiently in the car. She stared out into the darkness, and even with the headlights on, she was barely able to make out a thing. This part of the city was strange to her. She knew it wasn't the good side of town, the graffiti along the brick walls confirmed that, let alone her boyfriend's warning to stay put.

"I just need to drop this off. I'll be right back, stay in the car," he said slamming the door behind him, locking the doors.

It was a slight detour on their romantic anniversary night, but Jess made sure she didn't seem bothered by it. So there she sat, patiently, in the pitch black with a broken radio, wearing a red dress that was a tad too tight, and listening to the rhythm of the windshield wipers. Her only entertainment being the raging storm above.

A huge bolt split through the sky, illuminating the strange city before her. She took the opportunity to inspect her surroundings when her eyes fell upon a figure standing in the street. Jess leaned closer to the windshield trying to examine the figure, but only making out what seemed like a dark-haired man wearing a drenched white shirt standing with his back to her. Jess wondered if he might need some help, but as her hand hovered over the door handle a chill swept through her, the back of her neck in tingles, as her boyfriend's warning echoed through her head. Another monstrous flash lit the area, and this time her eyes were ready for him. He was closer. Facing her, his ravenous eyes seemed to pierce into hers. Jess' heart pounded against her chest like a rock. The flash fading as fast as it had arrived; her eyes burned with the image of a large dark stain on his shirt, and his arm swinging something back and forth as if taunting her. No, she thought, he can't see me, there's no way. Her mind raced with images of the man crashing through the window glass, and attempting to hijack the car.

Unexpectedly, the vehicle rattled underneath the booming thunder, causing her to gasp loudly. She slapped her hand over her mouth; afraid the stranger might hear any sound. The strong wind thrashed the rain against the car making it hard to hear anything. Jess knew he could be inches away without her knowing a thing. Breathing slowly, her wide eyes scanned the area, stretching them to the far end of her skull until it hurt. Silently, she scooted further into her seat and waited to make out any movement. Fog grew on the windshield making it harder to see, and the red dress constricted against her chest like a coiling snake as her body trembled. Feeling like a sitting duck, Jess gathered her knees into her chest, rocking slightly as panic rose to her throat in a lump she couldn't swallow, just waiting for the next flash. Adrenaline pumped through her, preparing her flee if the stranger struck. Her eyes snapped ahead when another lightening bolt finally burst through the night, its jagged line dancing through the sky, but there was nothing to be seen except the heavy rain splashing onto the drenched pavement. She swiveled her head around, aware that he could be anywhere, but the dark wall of rain was too thick. She felt blind, cautiously letting her legs and shoulders drop, she inched closer to the glass, squinting to try and see something, anything. The next lightning bolt revealed the same vacant street. Jess couldn't help letting out a little laugh for overreacting, a wave of relief finally washing over her. He was gone. Shaking off the damp cold that had seeped into her skin, she relaxed her head into the seat.

A loud door slammed across the street, and Jess shot up in anticipation, expecting her savior out of this place. As the distancing lightening storm revealed her boyfriend making his way to her, her heart sank into her stomach when her eyes fell upon the familiar looking stranger not far behind him. She couldn't breath. Terror ripped through her, draining the life out of her body; she felt paralyzed in the moment.

"No, Jake!" Her chest tightened in knots, tears streaming down her face. More bolts, one right after the other, as if to purposely make her watch. Jake was halfway to the car, but the man seemed so close behind him. Without another thought, Jess lurched over into his seat, slamming her hands against glass and screaming at him to run with everything she had. Not sure if he could hear her, she fumbled for the locks, opening the door, but right as she did, a hand grabbed the top and swung it open.

"What are you doing?"

Looking up, the cold rain felt foreign on her burning cheeks. She was relieved to see his familiar face, and wanted to grab onto him, hold him and protect him. She rushed over to her own seat, "Get in, Jake, hurry, please!" she screamed, her body heaving with sobs, no longer able to hold her anxiety in.

He rushed inside the car, slamming the door. "Jess, what's happening? What's going on?"

Concern covered his face, but tears of panic just kept falling from hers. "Lock the doors, lock the doors. Please, let's just go!"

"The doors are locked," he sounded ignorantly brave. "Can you talk to me?"

A crash followed by shattering glass and gusting wind came from the backseat. Jess screamed as she saw the stranger try to climb in through the rear windshield. Jake reacted, immediately starting the car, and slamming his foot on the gas. He fishtailed the car trying to shake the stranger off, but he kept climbing further inside. Jess held her head down to her knees, her eyes squeezed firmly, but she couldn't stop her cries. The screeching of the tires was almost unbearable to her ears. Behind her closed eyelids she focused on her parent's house, and the comfort that would surround her as she stepped in, the ever-familiar smell of cinnamon and vanilla of her mother's embrace soothing her. The stench of burning rubber intruded on her nostrils, and brought her back.

"Hold on, Jess!"

Her body hit the side of the car with abrupt force, causing her to cry out in shock and pain. She curled her legs closer to her chest when, suddenly, she heard a rolling clatter, and a strange man's shout. Jess whipped her head around to the back and saw the man's body rolling away down the wet street behind them. Her smile spread wide across her face, as she cheered in glee.

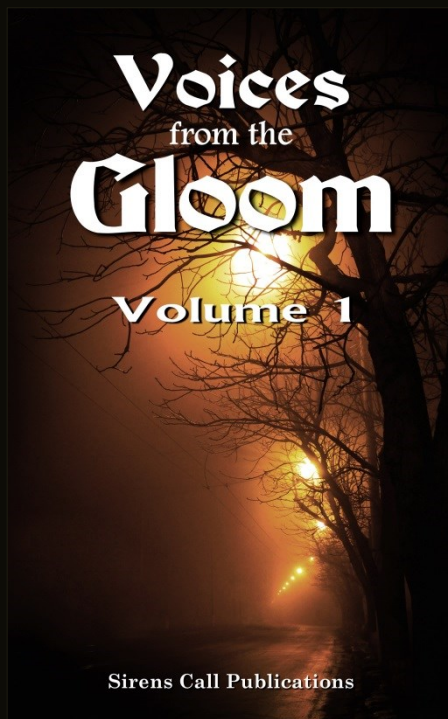
"Jake, you did it!" She turned to him with bright eyes, grabbing his arm, but the thick red streak that ran down his cheek killed her elation.

"Jake?" his head fell forward on the steering wheel, the obvious shape of a hammer's face sticking out of his head. "Jake!" she screamed, but the car continued to accelerate. A large horn blared that made Jess' head snap back forward to see two large yellow orbs just inches ahead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Based in Orono, ME, Rachel Byrne is a fairly new writer with a passion for horror and all things thrilling. Byrne is a recent graduate from the University of Maine with a Bachelor's Degree in English.

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Voices from the Gloom – Volume 1

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Life After Luke Stephen Crowley

The wonder boy, Luke's new name.

Luke started to actually believe invincibility exists. He simply reminded himself. *I just won't die*, Luke thought in the silence of his plush apartment. *I should be happy*.

Yet despite escaping the clutches of Death's shadow, Luke felt far from happy as he failed to move a muscle, just a sunken wreck on his sofa. Unanswered phone messages remained that way from his employer wondering where the hell Luke is. A need swelled, the need to move on from the city, seek a life elsewhere, somewhere incapable of reminding him - of her.

Sorry, can't come to work for a while, leaving Los Angeles, Luke thought staring at the blinking number of unread messages on the voice mail next to a framed photograph of his Photography major. A prestigious city magazine publisher laid his path out of living with Mom and Dad shortly after graduation a few years ago.

His private city apartment now felt empty. Like the city outside, every corner of his abode, every shade, just reminded him of Amy: the times they spent making love next to the fireplace, the good times, the lost times.

Just leaving the city, not enough.

His attention swayed to a Los Angeles Times headline: The luckiest man alive. A book nearby on a coffee table captured his curiosity: *The Death Cheaters - Why death will find them in the end*. The book covered tales of many cheating death, flukes similar to Luke's recent escapades. Luke felt curious, *why so lucky*.

Just a couple of years from thirty, Luke wondered if the past five months really belonged to him. He felt like a miracle. He just won't - die.

"Why do I survive each time?" Luke's unanswered question echoed around his apartment.

Sombre thoughts filled with the horror of that day, *why Amy?* The speeding Ferrari, Luke and Amy waiting on a red light, the smash into the rear sending Luke's car bursting forward, the flaming wreck of both cars, someone tugging at Luke to free him from the vehicle, another trying to pull Amy from the car - in vain. The twisted metal sealed her fate.

But Luke lived. She was gone.

Since the car accident that should have killed him as it did Amy, life for Luke continues to be far from normal. The speeding Ferrari, Luke and Amy waiting on a red light, the smash into the rear sending Luke's car bursting forward, the flaming wreck of both cars, someone tugging at Luke to free him from the vehicle, another trying to pull Amy from the car - in vain. Two weeks later in hospital, Luke's injuries healed up well baffling doctors as he strode out of the ward.

Luke pondered. *Why were my severe injuries not life threatening?*

That sounds strange. Perhaps just lucky. *No way*, Luke thought. After the crash, things reached a whole new level of weird - escaping death, almost unbreakable.

He offered to help his Dad repair a leaky roof a month after the crash. Anything to take his mind off her. Luke's job, nail the new shingles. A slight error of judgment and Luke found himself tumbling off the roof slates onto a hard paved drive. His skull smashed like a melon into the asphalt, strike one. Next the nail gun he held in his hand went off as he hit the ground. One six inch nail after another buried into his neck and skull missing his spinal cord and brain stem by a fraction.

Luke cheated death again. He made it to surgery where doctors basically informed his folks of the miracle: Luke surviving fatal injuries. A few weeks later, he walks out of hospital; no prolonged brain injury as his wounds and fractures just healed, baffling doctors.

I should be happy. Luke dwelled on an image of her in his mind, a snapshot from time, caressing each other on the sofa. And suddenly, he felt warmth, then a gnawing pain. Someone was missing from his life. Luke grabbed a photograph of him and Amy - smiling, happy.

"Was I supposed to die with her, huh!" Luke yelled to the silence of his abode. The last few words broke apart as Luke fell to the carpet clutching the photograph to his forehead. Attempts to sway his eyes from her photograph clutched in his trembling hand failed. Eyes fixed on her smile, her crystal eyes, unable to even blink. He rubbed the glass as a question incapable of an answer floated on sombre breath. "Was I supposed to die with you?" He just let the photograph drop to the carpet. Luke glanced at various corners

of his lounge, cupped his mouth, eyes burnt red with remorse. He begged for something, anything, to fill him with gratitude. Though, true happiness had abandoned him.

Amy.

Above the fireplace, other frames showed snapshots of moments when a smile raised as easy as breathing. The pain of her loss still surged through his veins, the pain, the loss, failing to ease.

"I should not have left these photos here, time to go." Luke muttered as with one hard swing of his arm, the photographs slid off the mantelpiece, a couple missing the flame tendrils by an inch. He continued muttering to himself, eyes closed. "I must move on, must move on."

Luke ambled over to the balcony overlooking the city from the tenth floor. He clutched the railings, felt the cold autumnal winds picking up, brushing his face harder and harder. He peered at the overcast sky and shook his head.

The freefall. Now that should have killed him two months ago.

As the wind picked up velocity against his face, he recalled the jump. Luke just wanted to try something different, inject some excitement back into his life. Dating failed. The minute a girl showed, Amy's face stared back.

After a few freefalls, the chance for a solo jump arrived. He pulled the cord. Nothing. Surely this was splat time. Nope. A farm haystack prevented him from forming a massive pizza stain on the ground. Unconscious, he woke to doctors peering down at him musing over his injuries. He spent a few weeks in traction at the hospital where doctors began to consider him a new medical project. Or perhaps even a medical wonder.

Someone leaked his death defying freefall to the press and within a week, Luke found his new name 'The Wonder Boy'. Doctors remained mystified over a sky jump resulting in just broken legs, skull fractures again, and broken vertebrae leaving Luke paralysed for less than a month. First the crash, then the fall and nails, then a freefall - surely not. Doctors felt dumbfounded as to how he survived each time.

Luke felt pain, oh yes, the pain as much a bite as for anyone else. Though, he recovered quickly, he lived.

He defeated death yet again.

It became the highest freefall disaster survived leaving Luke and the entire medical profession only wondering - how.

Luke peered over the balcony. *Jump, try it, maybe I won't be so lucky,* Luke thought, *unless I have nine lives so still have some knocks to take.* Luke wondered if he could probably leap off the balcony, drop many floors to the ground, and have another reason to uphold his reputation as The Wonder Boy.

Luke's phone buzzed. He cautiously hit the answer button. "Hi Rick."

Rick, his best friend, and while handling it better, was also sore over Amy's passing.

"Luke, where the hell are you, still at home? The boss has been wondering if you are coming back."

"Rick, look, I don't know..."

"Luke, don't think a day goes by, it doesn't. I know what she meant to you. It just needs more time. Let me pick you up in the morning. Your photography career is hanging by a thread dude. Hardly been here with all your accidents." He snorted. "Not that...maybe...you are lucky to be here at all. So pick yourself up."

"Maybe."

"You know what, I think you hit your head harder than you think after that freefall to hell. Or maybe those nails actually did do some real damage..."

"Yep, maybe, who knows Rick. Maybe I was supposed to die, maybe I am dead now and just don't know it yet, sure feels that way." Icy winds blew across the balcony. "Maybe I just don't care, not anymore."

"What?"

"I just can't be here anymore, got to run, sorry."

"Huh," Rick drew a long sigh, "I miss her too, she was special to me...too, Luke. I'll pick you up in the..."

Luke disconnected the call, and tapped his mouth with the phone lightly as he muttered to himself. "Why is she dead and not me. How can anyone survive what I have walked from?"

A buzz. His intercom. For a moment, Luke froze as he expected no visits so late in the evening. He

ambled across to the intercom, pressed the button.

"Hello." His voice still croaky from a few hours of painful reminiscence.

Silence.

"Hello," he repeated with a slightly higher pitch.

Luke

The muffled response, a female, something about the voice - familiar.

"Who...is it?"

It's me. We should talk.

Luke backed away from the intercom. The voice, her voice, he knew the voice.

He punched the button. "Who is this...?"

It is me, Luke we must talk, please let me in.

Clarity hit Luke like a sledgehammer. Amy's voice.

"No way, just go away!"

Bang. A sudden thump on the door sent Luke reeling backwards onto his posterior.

Let me in Luke. Invite me in. Don't make me have to break in. The voice now outside the door.

"How...how did you get..here...go...away..."

Guess I am not invited then, okay.

A click on the door as it unlocked.

Luke froze, his lips and chin shook as the figure strode inside. He stared but failed to see nor believe. Tears streamed down his face.

"Amy." His voice merely a whimper.

She stood there, steady eye contact. Her posture very still as she moistened her lips, sandy hair flowed in waves alongside her porcelain-like skin. Her eyes, emeralds, wide and bright - brightening Luke's world again as he hoisted himself off the floor.

"Can't be, can't...be you. I...saw...you buried."

Amy, smiled. "That is right, I am back, to try and convince you to come with me."

Luke's facial muscles tightened, he felt rooted to the spot. "Who...what...are you, and why do you look like my Amy?"

"It's me Luke. Come willingly with me. Both of us should have died. I have been sent back to you, to bring you with me."

"Just go!" He shut his eyes. "I...am just...losing my mind. No...I have lost my mind. I do not believe..."

Amy suddenly shuffled fast to within a few inches away from Luke. Words drifted along icy breath into his ear. "Open your eyes Luke."

Luke flinched, sniffing, nervous wagging finger raised to her prying eyes. "You can't be...her." He chortled at her. "You just look like her."

She moved closer to Luke, her emerald eyes swirled with a vortex of green fire. "You are right, you should have died Luke, with me. The crash was not supposed to take just me. But you have the ability to cheat death. You also have the ability to stop cheating death. It was your time, and mine, and this comes just once. You won't be killed at any other time. For almost everyone, there is a time to die, but some like you, survive."

"I am just...lucky. And you...are not...her." Luke edged backwards through the wide open balcony doors, the wind howled and rushed against him. Amy floated along, her hair flowing madly in the air.

"Attempts to take your life failed and failed. So they sent me, to ask you to join me, come with me into the dying light. I know how you hurt Luke. But, you have cheated. And if you come, you come with me, and we will be together, again and always."

Luke felt the cold stone balcony wall. Teardrops fell down a puffy face. Happiness had deserted him, living without Amy an unthinkable life. He rubbed the heel of his palm against his chest, his wet eyes met the eyes of Amy. A flat, monotone and brittle voice emerged. "Is it...really...you?"

Amy stood in the sliding doorway. She stretched out her ashen white arm. "All you need to do is take my hand."

Luke ran his shaking hands through his hair. He flinched. A cold mist rested on the apartment floor

like drifted snow. The smooth blanket of mist on the carpet crept up the walls and smothered the balcony, seeping over the edge in chilled wisps. Scattered powdered clouds began to swirl into a stormy sky, rumbling into a deepening gloom forming a swirling dance.

She floated forward. Luke raised a hand to her face. He caressed her cheek, felt warmth, felt her again. He clasped her hand. Her grip tightened.

"Do not fear death."

Luke embraced her. She wiped his teary eyes. "I fear nothing, you are what I want. Nothing else matters."

The mist engulfed them both, then cleared.

Both Luke and Amy, the apartment furniture, the scattered photo memories - gone.

Luke's eyes snapped open, unable to move, wedged between shards of metal. Smoke filled his lungs as the car door was wrenched off. Amy lay still, their hands locked. A river of blood flowed from a deep head gash on Luke. Arms reached into the car pulling Amy from the passenger seat.

Her lifeless eyes, a vacant stare. She was gone.

Luke smiled, whispered, "See you soon, my Amy." Then his chest stopped heaving - still.

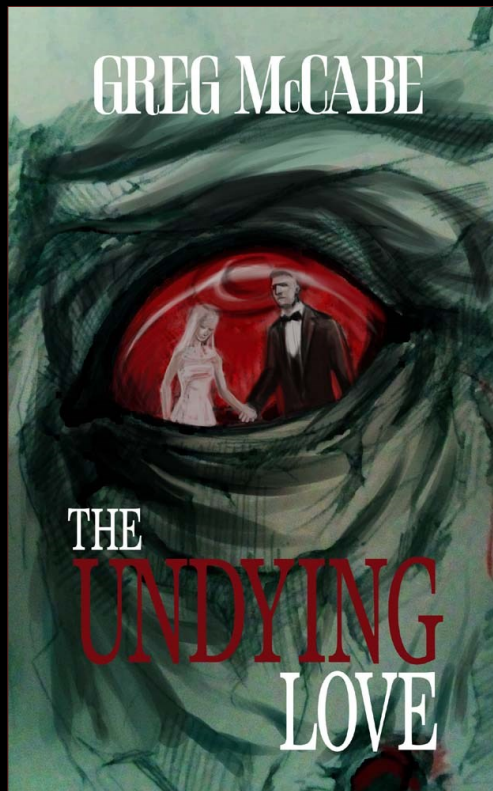
Their hands still locked together.

His time came.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Stephen Crowley writes short horror stories from micro-fiction length of 1000 words up to short tales reaching several thousand words. He is based in Leeds, England. Inspired by early horror movies and great authors including Stephen King and James Herbert, Stephen spends his free time honing his writing style. For some time, Stephen has entered global flash fiction and short story competitions.

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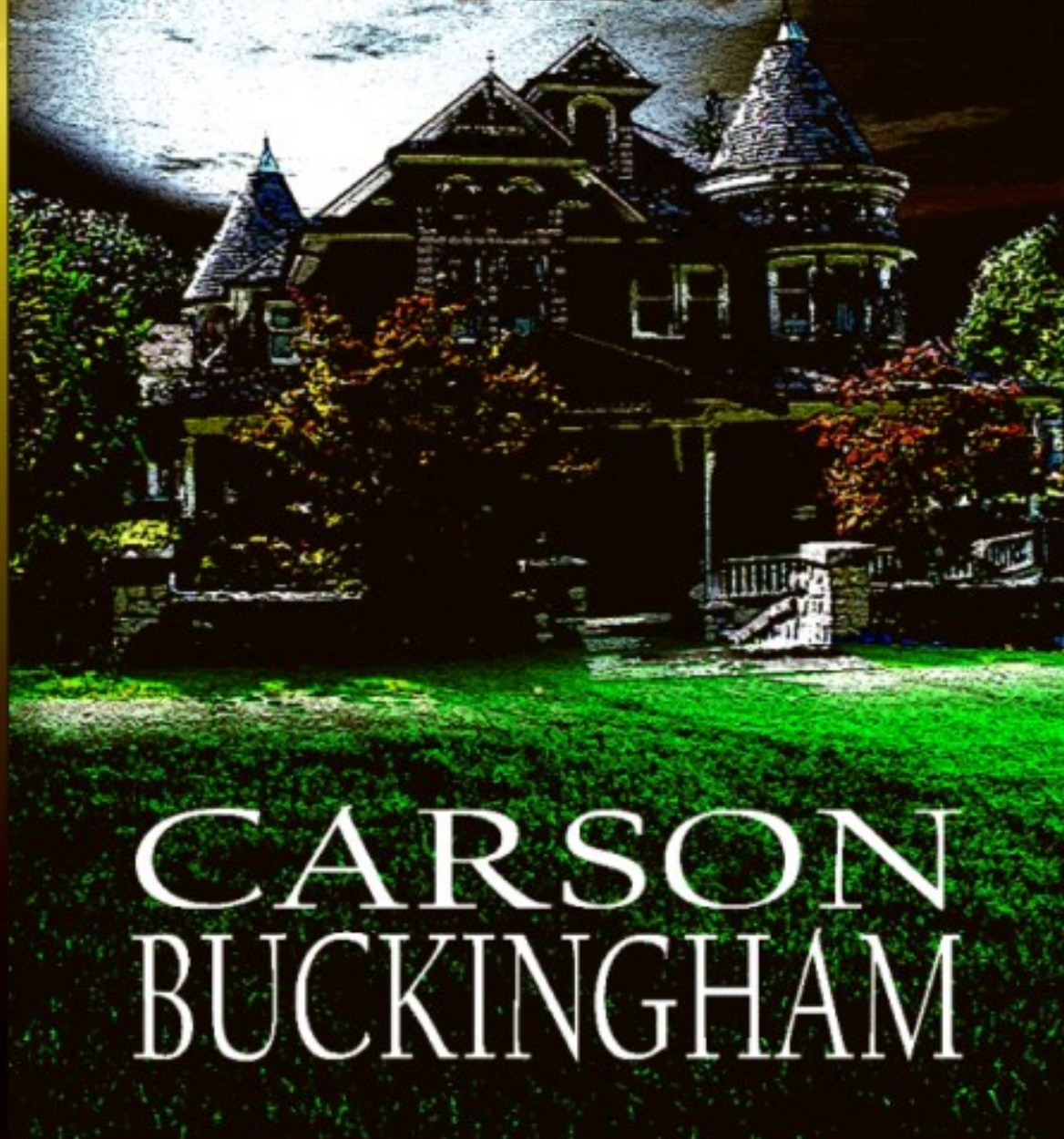


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The Sweet Taste of Death *A.J. Walker*

Bob pushed back his greying hair, adjusted his position in the old armchair - then pressed record.

His blue eyes sparkled as he started confidently. "The day has come. It only took a few clicks and it was all sorted. I'm at peace - so don't worry - this day has been coming for so long."

"I was told once by someone that 'Loneliness can eat away at you like a cancer of the soul'. It's bollocks. Since Linda I've been alone, but never lonely. Self contained - I believe they call it. Life goes on. But there comes a time..."

"Anyway, since those fuckers in government actually made a decent call for once and deregulated death it has been only a matter of time. It's actually been quite difficult to research the best supplier, it's not like there can be detailed testimonials on their websites - it's one of the few money making businesses that has a KPI (Key Performance Indicator) of no repeat custom."

"Who knows? This 'little blue bottle' lot could edit this and turn it into a testimonial. That's fine - if it turns out that they are a shower of shysters then don't come after me!"

His confident smile lit up the screen.

"Yes, I'm going for that lot with the catchy 'little blue bottle' jingle from the TV ads. The Blue Bottle Company website says that they have been providing the country's 'favourite' death solutions since deregulation. Apparently their taste of death is sweet like nectar. I'm not sure how they actually test that."

The door bell chimed and Bob turned off the camera.

At the door is a young man in a smart blue-grey suit, who smiles cordially at Bob.

"Hello, Bob I presume?" he says, holding out his hand.

"Indeed Mr. BBC," Bob said.

"David," said David.

The two men sit for a while drinking coffee and dunking chocolate hobnobs.

"Strange job you have, David."

"It's funny to some, sure, but delivering an easy timely death solution to our clients is beautiful. What could be more fulfilling, Bob?" said David, sounding practiced.

"Indeed. It's not a decision I've had a problem with... think I've had enough hobnobs for a lifetime now. Let's get to it."

"Fine Bob," said David, handing over the little blue bottle. "All you have to do is drink this. You'll feel a short period of euphoria, which will slowly ebb away. In about 10 minutes it will all be over."

"I have to stay here to make sure you drink it. After that? Well, that's not really going to be your concern now."

Bob nodded. "Can you just press play please? It's on repeat, so I may get to hear it twice."

"Sure Bob," said David leaning over to the CD, "It's your death."

Bob drank the liquor and sat back; it really was sweet. The Stone Roses 'I Am the Resurrection' filled the room and Bob smiled - contented. David smiled too at having delivered another fine client outcome - and the thought of this month's bonus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - A.J. Walker is a keen flash fiction writer from Liverpool, England. He is involved with The Poised Pen writing group and this year put together their two ebooks. He is proud to be considered one of the #FlashDogs. He also loves real ale, music, walking and footy. When he's not testing real ale or looking for dragons he occasionally updates his website.

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Sirens Call Publications
PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION



Art in Death *Jennifer Mccullah*

Dr. Browning took a deep breath and then came right out with it, "I'm sorry Sybil, you have Pancreatic Cancer and it is advanced. There are not many options as far as treatment goes. The best advice I can give you is to take advantage of the time you have left."

One of my favorite qualities about Dr. Browning was his straightforward approach. I looked around his pristine, sanitized office and replayed his words in my mind. I was dying. We all are in a way, but I was terminal and would be lucky to see the New Year.

The trip home was surreal. I thought about death and the way that western culture had sterilized it, much like Dr. Browning's office. I was fascinated by death, and had been since I was a little girl. I used to spend the weekends at my grandparents' house and at the age of seven, I found my grandmother dead. She was on the kitchen floor, stiff and grey. Her corpse was interesting and I looked at her body for a long time before I ran to find my grandfather.

I was sad that I would never be able to hug my grandmother or talk to her again, but there was also a curiosity. Her funeral was the first one I ever attended. The service was open casket and I spent a lot of time at the front looking at her body. It was an odd but pretty sight; one that made me think of Sleeping Beauty.

As I grew older, I started to spend time in cemeteries and began photographing the stones. Nothing was as lovely and peaceful as a graveyard. I guess fascination was the main reason I chose to open my own funeral home. My guilty pleasure? Photographing the corpses. It is an outdated tradition now, but during the Victorian era post mortem photographs were commonplace. I actually owned some gorgeous reprints; they were wonderful works of art. As for my own photographic endeavors, I did not take pictures of the dead for any sick or perverted reason. To me, it was just an artistic, beautiful way to memorialize those who had passed. It made me sad that there would not be anyone to take a picture of my own corpse. Even if someone did take a photo, I would not be able to see it. That seemed like such a waste.

When I arrived home from the doctor, I called my best friend Marie and explained the situation. I was not married and had no children but I did have a four-year-old tabby named Jinx. She and Jinx got along well and through her tears, Marie said she would be more than happy to take him. Knowing that he would not end up in a shelter made me feel better about my situation. She came over to stay with me that night. We got drunk, watched movies and talked about everything in the world other than my impending doom. As Marie left in the morning, she hugged me tight and told me to call if I needed anything. Then she left with her overnight bag on her shoulder and Jinx in his carrier.

I had a bucket list and started on it right away. There was a large savings account for my retirement, one I had been putting money in since I was seventeen. There was no need for a retirement fund now, so I decided to spend it. Within the month, I visited Stonehenge, The Grand Canyon and The Dead Sea. I got that tattoo I had always wanted and flew to Chicago to see Journey in concert.

My funeral would be at my own funeral home and I made all the arrangements so that my parents would not have to worry with any of it. Tommy was the assistant funeral director. I called him into the office and told him that I was leaving the business to him. He fought back tears as I explained everything, and Tommy said that he could not accept my offer, but I insisted. Who else would want this business? Tommy would keep it up and running.

I spent two weeks with Mom and Dad. We reminisced, looked through old pictures and told stories. They threw a huge barbeque and everyone came out to see me, cousins, aunts, uncles, old friends. It was great to see people I hadn't seen in twenty years. In spite of the fun and the laughter, there was also a lingering sadness in the air. People knew this would be the last time they saw me alive.

When I left my parents' house after the two weeks were up, saying goodbye was especially painful. That was the only time I've ever seen my father cry. It almost made me feel guilty for dying; no one wants to put their family through that kind of sadness.

I knew that I was lucky to have been able to make arrangements for Jinx, do the things I always wanted to do and tell my loved ones how much they meant to me. As grateful as I was for the way I would leave this world, I still wished my death could have been photographed. Memorialized.

I was lost in thought on the drive home and never saw that delivery truck run the red light. There was a metallic, crunching noise and then the sensation of being in flight. I blinked and I was looking down

on my mangled, bloody form. The unnatural twists of my arms and legs, the crimson splatters of blood and the way pieces of glass glittered in the sunlight, made me look like a real work of art. I was stunning, more beautiful in death than I ever was in life.

When the police and coroner arrived, they snapped several pictures of the scene. I smiled as I realized I would have my post mortem pictures after all. With one final glance at my lifeless body, I went away to have new adventures.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Jennifer Mccullah is a writer from Kentucky. She has been published in a few horror anthologies and flash fiction sites. Jennifer also has some titles on Amazon. When she isn't writing she likes to read, play video games and watch movies, especially horror. Jennifer works at one of the few remaining video stores where she goofs off and drives her mother/manager crazy.

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Flicker *Megan Stewart*

I feel my chest tighten and rocks drop to the bottom of my stomach every time I see her, my best friend, her body withering away with every injection, the venom poisoning her. I watch her, Adia, as she shoves another needle into her vein, hoping to cure the pain nestled in her heart. I hear her intake of breath as the heroin burns through her body like a disease that can't be stopped. We don't talk about the drugs, as it makes her remember. The drugs hold the memory at bay, making the days bearable, until she can find somebody to want her, to love her regardless of what has been done to her.

I hate remembering what happened, the way she looked -- ripped clothes, bloodied body and face, when I opened the door to her frantic knocking. That man, her mother's newest boyfriend had caused this.

"N-Natalie? Can I stay here tonight?" she asked when I answered the door. I didn't know what to do. I was in shock. My best friend looked like she had been tied to a truck and dragged behind it all the way here. She was holding up the sleeves to her ripped dress, keeping it from falling down and revealing herself. There wasn't much left of her shorts, and what was there was so stained by blood that it had me nauseous.

Her hair was matted down on the left side of her face, sticky with blood. Her hands were trembling so horribly that I couldn't help but notice the broken fingernails. It seemed as though she had tried to fight against what had happened to her. I could only imagine what this poor excuse for a man could have done to her.

I gathered her into my arms and she sank into me, crying on my shoulder for what seemed like hours, whispering to me what had happened, trembling as we slowly made our way to my bedroom so she could get cleaned up and in a warm set of clothes.

She doesn't see her friends or anyone; she looks right through us and continues to walk past. She goes through life as a flicker of the girl I remember. I miss who she used to be, the girl with flowers in her hair and holes in the knees of her jeans. I used to love the times where we would spend all day after school got out at the overgrown lot behind her house, running around and not caring about anything. Adia could always be found with a smile on her face and friends around for miles. I don't think she even sees me, at least, not as more than someone she can rely on for a place to crash.

I don't know how much longer I can watch her self-destruct. I want to help her, but I just don't know if there is anything I could do.

I can't stand being the person who enables her, but having her endlessly relive the night she was taken advantage of isn't an acceptable alternative for me: those months of therapy and talking to lawyers, of having to explain every detail--the way he touched her, where he touched her--had her on the edge.

Now Adia just goes through the motions of living and I have no idea how to help her, how to fix the broken mess that shows up on my doorstep more nights than not. How can you help those who are so lost they don't even know who they were, much less who they have become?

Tonight is no different. The heroin makes her eyelids become heavy. We talk for a time, but she still feels that I can't know what happens before she shows up here. I want to tell her I know what she does, that she goes to parties and spends most of her days on her couch, just wasting the hours in front of the TV. I won't judge her, but I'm afraid she'd sooner leave than trust me. I tell her about my day, about how I planted new flower buds in my makeshift garden, that I accidentally dropped a gallon of milk on aisle 14 of the grocery store and couldn't stop laughing, hoping something other than her next fix will spark her interest.

It feels like she isn't even here, that she isn't listening to a word I say. It worries me when she gets like this. I feel like she just wants to be forgotten, left alone. I talk about the garden I'm trying to grow in the back of the apartment complex. I tell her about the different flowers I planted for her, the roses, and tulips, and hoping she would visit them. The old Adia loved flowers. It didn't matter what kind of color: red, blue, pink. She loved them all.

Every time I look in her eyes, I see them dull a little more. If this keeps up, another accident will happen. Her last visit to the hospital was too close a call for me. When she flatlined while holding my hand, all I could think was that it was the last time I would see her. I froze at the thought, not knowing how I could live without my best friend. But But when she made it through that, , I tried to be calm for her, to let her

feel like everything was going to be ok, even when my stomach was screaming at me from the constant change of heavy emotions that flooded through me during that long day. I thought maybe she could make it through anything.

After that incident, Adia was placed into a rehabilitation facility, when she was stable enough. The hospital had placed her in a center that overlooked the ocean, letting those who were admitted the opportunity to look at something that would hopefully inspire them to get better. Palm trees covered the grounds and exotic flowers bloomed in every relaxation area. The close call scared her, as much as it did me. She was doing so well in the program, taking it seriously and trying to get her life back on track before her addiction consumed her. Each time I visited, she had more color in her face, a vibrance in her eyes that reminded me of the girl I knew back in high school, before her life fell apart. She would tell me how her sponsor was encouraging her to go back to school, to make something of herself.

Adia said she wanted to be like me, to graduate from college and become a teacher. She was tired of feeling like she didn't do anything with her life after high school. We would sit on her bed, my laptop on her knees as she looked at local schools where she could start taking classes online. I wanted to help her as much as I could, and even though I would graduate in a few months, I told her I would help her with her homework on the weekends.

For a time, after that first visit to the rehabilitation center, she was clean, but it didn't last long. She left rehab after two and a half months when her mother, Janice, came back in her life. With her, the memories Adia had tried to forget flared up from the recesses of her mind, and she did whatever she could to get rid of them. It was around then when she started sporadically showing up on my doorstep. Usually, she would crash wherever the party ended up, but with her mother in town, she felt my place was the safest. Even before the drugs and the partying and the drinking, whenever Adia needed a place to stay, I was always there for her, no matter what.

"Where's momma's baby girl?" Janice said as she made her way into Adia's room at the facility. "Come give momma a hug."

All I could do was stand there in awe that this woman had the audacity to come here, to visit her daughter when she couldn't be bothered to help her when she was abused, when she started using drugs, or when she was sent to the hospital. What did she want with Adia now?

"M-mom? What are you doing here?" Adia asked in a shaky voice.

"I wanted to see how you were doing, of course! Besides, I'm here to take you home. You're time's up," Janice said as she started to pack what little belongings Adia had into a small bag she must have picked up from the coffee shop down the street. "Don't you want to get out of here?"

"I don't want to go home." Adia slowly backed herself into a corner, hugging herself tightly.

"Don't worry baby, it's only gonna be you and me in my house. No men, just the way you like it." I knew this was going to be a problem, but what was I supposed to say to her mom? No, she couldn't go with her? All I could do was wait for it to eventually play itself out and pick up the pieces once again.

I watch Adia's eyes drift closed, ending our conversation. I turn on the television, wanting to end the silence that has settled over the room. I lie her down and cover her with the blanket draped over the couch. I don't need her shivering and catching a fever with drugs in her system. She's lost so much weight that the slightest chill will make her sick. The pink in her lips seems to be darkening, her complexion lightening. I throw another blanket over her, one with white rabbits that I'd given to her as a gift for her last birthday. I can't remember when I'd seen her so pleased.

Adia was getting healthy, mentally and physically. One day, I thought it would be nice to take her to the flower garden at the park, get her out of the dull, gray scenery she stared at for days on end at her mother's house. The tiny two bedroom was suffocating her. We bought tea at a local coffee shop and walked through the garden, stopping to smell the flowers. We sat on a small black bench surrounded by a bed of white roses. The smile on her face went on for days. I hadn't seen her that happy in years.

We watched a child tug on her mother's dress, asking about the different flowers. As the sun dipped over the horizon, the garden emptied, until only the two of us were left. The sunset that night was the most beautiful I'd ever seen. The vivid magentas and oranges and reds lit up the sky. Adia dropped her head on my shoulder, relaxing further into the calming sunset. Time felt insignificant, as we sat there on our little black bench.

For dinner, I took her to her favorite hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant. We didn't talk much during the meal, but our silence was easy. It wasn't anything special, really, but to her it was perfect. I was the only consistent person in her life; her mother was in the picture, but sporadically. It seemed like Adia lived alone, as her mother would be out at all hours, trying to find her latest man. Even our other friends rejected Adia, as they didn't want to deal with having drugs or anything else illegal around them.

She had told me not to get her anything for her birthday, that she didn't deserve it, but when I came across that blanket while shopping earlier that week, I couldn't turn it down. I knew her favorite band was Jefferson Airplane, and for her to have a white rabbit blanket would suit her perfectly. She teared up when she tore off the plain wrapping paper. It was at that moment I thought there was a chance for her, that she could be happy.

She used it every night, saying it helped her remember what waited for her when she decided to finally leave her mother's house. I dropped her off later on her birthday night, and she gave me a hug. Her smile lit up her face, like it used to, before this whole mess began.

It was shortly after this that her mother brought home another man, claiming once again that he was the one, that he was a decent guy, regardless of where they may have met.

"Oh come on, girls, he's not so bad. He even has a job!" Janice told us one night when I was over. I didn't think this was a good idea and asked if Adia wanted to spend the night at my house. We left shortly after, her mother yelling that we would meet him sooner or later as we closed the front door and walked the short distance to my apartment.

We met him a few days later, as I was helping Adia with some of her homework. He seemed nice enough, if you didn't look into his eyes. He spoke in a polite manner that belied his appearance. At just under six feet tall, he was a well-built man, clean cut, but with a piercing stare that left you feeling dirty and exposed. I tried to make the best of the situation for Adia, and for the first few months, it seemed like everything would be ok.

It wasn't until she called me crying from her bathroom that I knew something had happened with this man. He was gone by the time I got there. Adia had managed to lock herself in the bathroom before he could really do anything.

"He was so drunk, Natalie. I didn't know what to do," she said, shaking. "He grabbed for me, and I thought he mistook me for my mom so I tried to shake him off and let him know, but he just pushed me into the wall and tried to force himself on me." I barely managed to make out the rest of the story as her body was rocking so hard from her sobs. I was just glad that she was able to get away this time.

Feeling myself nod off, I turn off the TV and look down at Adia, planning to move her to the bed in the next room. Her arm, riddled with track marks, hangs out of the blankets. The color of the inside of her elbow makes me nauseous; the dark purples and greens are blaring with signs of infection. I shake her shoulder to wake her up enough for her to walk to the bed. Her skin is clammy to the touch. I run to the phone, dialing as fast as I can, talking hurriedly to the operator.

"911, what's your emergency?" the operator says in a calm voice

"Hello, yes. I'm at 1432 Tustin Avenue in Orange. My friend is here and I think she had a drug overdose. Please hurry!"

Shortly after I hang up the phone, sirens and lights draw closer as her pulse gets weaker. Tears stain my face with salty tracks as I hold her to me. I run my hand through her hair, my fingers catching in the tangles. I don't want her to go like this. I pray that she makes it through, like the last time she was in this situation, but this time feels different. She's too pale, too cold. I cling tighter to her emaciated body, wanting to share some of my warmth.

"Miss, please let go of the patient. We need to move her."

The paramedics rip her from my arms and strap her to a gurney, taking her vitals as she is lifted into the ambulance. I climb in after her, not wanting to be left behind. They intubate her and hook her up to an IV, but their calmness is doesn't reach their eyes.

The ride to the emergency room is filled with beeping noises and flashing lights. The paramedics ask me what happened to her, but I don't know anything, and all I can do is cry. I point out her arm, and tell them it was heroin. Their faces become serious.

The paramedics hurry, adding drugs to her IV bag with names too long to comprehend. Adia's only reaction is to turn her head. My hand shakes from the icy chill of her palm. Tears blur my vision.

We arrive at the hospital, and Adia is rushed into a room, doctors and nurses running next to her gurney. It feels like time stands still and speeds up, as I watch the clock hanging on the wall above the metal doors. The second hand seems to stop and repeatedly tick at the same number. I try to be patient and wait, sitting on a torn green chair in the waiting room. I am exhausted; all I can do is stare at the gray swinging doors, waiting for a doctor to come out with news and maybe some hope.

An older man with the first signs of graying hair and lines around his eyes comes through the doors with a solemn expression on his face. He tells me the infection had rampaged through her body unchecked. He estimates by the damage that the infection had been in her system too long, giving it ample time to spread. The infection, combined with an overdose, sent her body past its limits. All I can think about are the 'what ifs' and how I could have done something more for her, that I should have known. I can't help but feel guilty for not paying closer attention.

At 12:37 AM, Adia is declared dead. I still have no idea what to do for her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Megan Stewart resides in Southern California with her Shiloh Shepherd. She recently graduated with her Master's degree and works full-time as an automotive journalist at Motor Trend Magazine. When not working, she loves to write short stories, novellas, and poems that focus on the darker side of the human condition. She is currently working on a collection of short stories to publish at a later date.

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Gape

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An Interview with Author Joseph A. Pinto

In this issue of *The Sirens Call*, we're featuring author Joseph A. Pinto, whose novella *Dusk and Summer* is a poignant story of remembrance and survival after the death of a loved one.

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Joseph. Why don't you take a moment to introduce yourself to our readers.

Joseph A. Pinto: My name is Joseph Pinto; I'm a father, first and foremost. My beautiful little girl just turned six years old and is the joy that fuels me every day! I'm also a die-hard New Orleans Saints fan; I have an insanelly mad passion for my 1968 Ford Fairlane and am an avid reader and writer of all things horror – though the book I'm going to talk about today is anything but horror. *Dusk and Summer* is a contemporary fantasy that blends the reality of my father's struggle against pancreatic cancer with different elements of his life to create a journey that takes the reader from pain and loss, to an otherworldly encounter my father could only dream of experiencing.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

JAP: I don't think there was any one particular moment or event that made me decide to become a writer, but I certainly developed a passion for writing as a kid. I loved to read and found an element of mystique to books in general. They invoked such vivid imagery in my head that I wanted to do the same for others, so I started to write.

SCP: Tell us about *Dusk and Summer*.

JAP: I wrote *Dusk and Summer* over six years ago when my father passed away after a fifteen month battle with pancreatic cancer. I was overcome with grief and desperate to find a way to honor him. Watching him fight the disease the way he did...it was surreal, something out of a movie. One night, I sat down and started writing. Honestly, I didn't know what my intentions were at first. I didn't set out to start a novella; I simply needed a way of processing my own thoughts and emotions. But an actual story soon arose from aspects of my father's life, and I allowed it to carry me away.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Dusk and Summer* before they read it?

JAP: *Dusk and Summer* is honest and raw, and readers will know from the start that I bled my heart and soul into it. Some may think it's simply a story about my father, but it's anything but. Of course, I wrote it in tribute to him, but there's a true fantasy element in it that will catch many off guard.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

JAP: Beyond the shadow of a doubt, I am a pantser! If I had to outline a story before writing it, I quite honestly think I would die of anxiety. In my opinion, stories are meant to evolve and breathe. Planning it out beforehand denies it a life of its own. Plus, being the emotive writer I tend to be, planning would rob a tale of its feeling, its heartbeat. The fun of writing is doing so without a road map and not knowing where you'll ultimately end up. I believe the payoff for both the writer and reader is far greater if a story is allowed to write itself.

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

JAP: The hardest challenge I've faced as a writer is learning to free my mind of life's everyday stresses before sitting down to write. I never worry about what I'm going to write or how it'll end up. It's keeping my mind uncluttered enough to maintain focus that becomes an issue.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Dusk and Summer* apart from other books of the same genre?

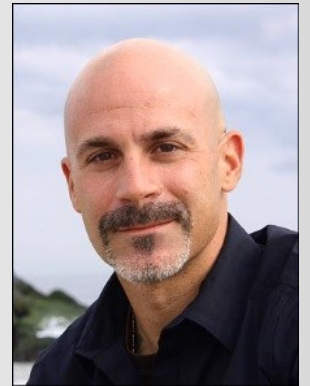
JAP: In my opinion, what sets *Dusk and Summer* apart from other books of the same genre is that it's completely genuine. It has heart. It will entertain you; it will make you smile, while at other times cry. It seamlessly blends fact with fiction and leaves the reader wondering which part was real. My prose is raw and easily felt; I don't hide my emotions. But the most important thing that sets *Dusk and Summer* apart is the number of readers who have told me it has helped them through their own period of grieving and loss.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

I just finished reading several novels I picked up at a recent convention and am about to begin work on a new book of my own. I always have something on hand to read, be it notable or not. Right now, I'm shifting from reading fiction to research material for my next piece. You can often find me at a library or book store looking for facts and legends to fuel my imagination.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

JAP: From my perspective, success as a writer means creating a legacy that I, my daughter and other loved ones can be proud of. Would I love to be recognized as a bestselling author? Absolutely. Would that be success? Undoubtedly. But it still wouldn't change the fact that I have to measure my own success by how I feel about my work, and the pride and inspiration I've instilled in those around me. Do I think I've been successful so far? Yes, I do. While I may not be able to write fulltime yet the way I'd like, and I may not be a household name, I'm extremely satisfied with what I see as the beginning of a career without boundaries – its only limiting factor, me.



SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are just starting out?

JAP: In the words of a great man from my past that will forever echo in my mind: write what you know, and then twist the hell out of it. To that, I'd add from experience: believe in yourself, and stay the course – no matter what. You may have to put your dream on hold for a bit, or slow it down because life interferes, but nothing is worth abandoning your dream for. If you abandon the dream, you abandon your true self.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

JAP: Readers should walk away from *Dusk and Summer* knowing that they just experienced a timeless, metaphysical connection between a father and son, and that the story within its pages lives on in more ways than one. A portion of the proceeds from each sale will be donated to The Lustgarten Foundation for Pancreatic Cancer Research. Not only will the reader be experiencing a great tale, but they'll be helping in some small way to advance the fight against this horrendous disease.

Thank you Joseph!

Dusk and Summer is available on:

Amazon: [US](#) | [UK](#) | [Canada](#) | [Australia](#) | [Germany](#) | [France](#) | [Spain](#) | [Italy](#) | [Japan](#) | [Mexico](#) | [India](#) | [Brazil](#)
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Does Heaven await beneath the waves? One man needs to know...



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

An Excerpt from *Dusk and Summer*

The Good Fight

I lost my father between dusk and summer.

Perhaps he left me long before I care to admit, long before he refused his last meals, long before his spent eyes flickered like candles behind cracked panes of some forlorn, abandoned house. Before his neglected muscles jellied into the folds of his stark white hospital sheet, and the rise of his chest grew shallow and weak. Maybe it was plain selfishness on my behalf; sitting at his bedside all those times, soothing his ears with encouragement as I squeezed his hand, desperate to impart the very courage and determination he had infused into me over my years. Even as he relied on me to raise a flimsy plastic cup of ice water to his parched lips. Had I become too scared to realize or just too blinded to ask: *whose fight did this now become?*

“...find me... from Tolten...”

I could have dismissed the words from his cracked lips as merely disoriented chatter, but his mouth pursed them too purposely, his tone too firm. Still, my father’s words jolted me from my bedside vigil. I bent over his thinning form, promptly taking his hand into mine.

“...go... now,” he croaked, his strength fading.

I held my breath, dared not speak. Gently, I massaged his fingers, marveling how thick and calloused they remained; my own always a child’s within their clasp. Typical blue collar hands, fearless of toil and grime. My father squeezed back, eyes widening. His candlelight flared, sparked brilliantly a moment before blinking away. I knew then I had been wrong. Someone remained home inside that deteriorating body after all. My father hung on, refusing to surrender. But what little had spilled from his lips now hung heavy between us. The message became clear. My father would not leave me.

Not until I finished his business.

My throat constricted as a terrible heat swelled within my chest. I gritted my teeth, blinked furiously and choked back the tears best as I could. Eventually, I eased him into continuing. A corner of his mouth curled. It gained momentum, spreading across his lips, his smile warming me. From within his cocoon of pillows, my father nodded his approval.

I leaned close, carefully straightening the air tube dangling from his nose. Caressed his cheek, returning his smile as his short, white stubble tickled my palm. Swallowed another blistering lump deeper into my throat. “Tell me what you want me to do, Pops,” I whispered.

I listened very intently to the scarce words my father pushed from his lips. *Go. 141 Sea Cargo Drive. Manasquan. You’ll know. Go now.* He did not tell me what I would find or even what I needed to do. He held the obvious trust that I would just as soon figure it out, and I was not about to question or let him down. I kissed his forehead, told him I would leave, that I would see him later. From the moment my father became sick, goodbyes no longer existed. Only *see you later*s. As I forced myself from his sallow room, he cleared his throat. *Must find me... she... come back from Tolten.* I froze, deluged with fear and for the very first time a sense of hopelessness as I questioned, but for a moment, the sanity of his words, the tenuous grip he maintained upon his own reality. No; I would have none of that. I squared my jaw, turned and measured my father. I did not see a sick and dying man. The matted wisps of white hair that returned after his last bout of chemotherapy were gone, transformed into thick, luxurious curls of chestnut locks brushed back in heaps. The sagging skin of his arms now tight, bulging with muscle, the tattoos acquired while stationed in the Air Force as crisp and fresh as the day they were etched. Shoulders squared, again capable of carrying the world as he had done so many times before. Chest, wide and broad—within, the power of a Titan, the pride of a lion. Skin so vibrant and pure. His sickness did not diminish his stature. My father grew before my eyes, every day becoming more the man I had known. I nodded, determined to accomplish what he needed of me.

I nearly collided with the nurse as I left his room. “Oh, I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed.

“No, it was me. I should’ve watched where I was going.”

Her thoughtful eyes washed over me. “How are you holding up?”

My father's nurse was one of the better ones and tended to him with sincere compassion. Painfully, I had encountered too many who believed my father was just another room number. I regarded her nameplate, my gaze lingering. Dawn. Normally I would have little difficulty remembering. I had seen enough of her—every day for the past week, too many, many times over the past months. All that while, I found it easier to address her with simple hellos, with downcast, fleeting glances. I disassociated myself from the moment she entered his room. For my own self-preservation, I could not bear to voice her name. I had no choice. To do so would have thrown me under the remorseless incandescent glare of reality and I liked it where I was, alone, lost within ignorant shadows. There I could disguise life; the curtained obscurity made things not so real. It took all I could do from dropping my head upon her shoulder and weep. The shrug I managed in response drained all that remained of me.

Hesitantly, Dawn lifted her hand, carefully rested it along my arm. Gave me a soft but reassuring stroke, then slowly pulled away. "The morphine drip you requested is working as well as it could right now. Your dad has been unbelievable, you know. Joking nonstop, up until..."

My features shifted. She read it well. No luxury of morphine existed to mask my own pain. Dawn stole a look down the hall. No one approached. "Has the doctor seen you recently?"

"No more than he needs to, I guess."

She offered a sad smile. "You should know your father's kidneys are failing. His... the truth is his entire body will eventually shut down. That's why his arms... they flop when he tries to raise them. His speech—"

"Incoherent," I interrupted. *Tolten. Tolten. Come back from Tolten.* "That is, when he can speak."

An uncomfortable moment passed. An eternity gutted my soul. "We've done all we can. But this is... you need to know this is the last stage. We're keeping him as comfortable as we can right now."

She must have believed I was strong enough to handle it. Wise enough to see the writing upon the wall. She knew little of my father's resolve however, nor of the spirit I lent him all these months, and I was not about to quit.

Eventually, even a fool must realize when one's own hand cannot bend fate. No matter how hard you try. "I appreciate all you've done. I really do." I gritted my teeth. "That's a tough sonofabitch in there."

She nodded. "And a good son out here."

Tolten. Come back from Tolten. My father's words haunted me. It was time for me to go. "Can I ask a favor of you?" I said.

"Yes, anything."

"You have my cell phone number in your contact list. Call me first should... should you need to. But not my mother. Please, spare my mother."

"Of course," she answered slowly.

Shuffling away, I whispered, "Thank you, Dawn." It was at that moment I was dragged from the shadows. Things suddenly became all too real.



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