



The Sirens Call

December 2015

issue #24



'Lost Souls'

*Featuring Short
Stories, Flash Fiction,
& Poetry*

*Comparative Flash:
One Image
Two 100 Word Pieces
of Flash Fiction*

*Photography by
Dark Angel
Photography*

*Featured Author:
Interview with
Joshua Skye,
author of 'Cradle'*

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The dawn breaks so fast. I need more time.

Rena ran her hand across the wind chimes, smiling at the random thought. She browsed in the head shop that doubled as a world market of goods designed to make the average consumer care for two minutes about indigent Balinese women suffering from dysentery while they hand-painted wooden beaded curtains for room dividers. She thought again, *I need more time* and stopped cold. She checked her watch. She was forgetting something. Something pressing and important.

One o'clock. Plenty of time to look around, maybe sample some exotic chips and salsa on the other side of the store. There was a pungent smell like tortillas and seasoned rice overlaying the scent of wood and pillar candles and she figured there must be freebies to munch on. As soon as she made a decision on some chimes, she would wander over to grab a bite. There was one more errand she needed to run. She'd meant to make a list. There was always something Rena was forgetting.

She gave a sigh, inward and heavy. Everything looked so familiar she figured she'd been through this store twice, holding these same wooden wind chimes. It was missing a bell on the end, or what would probably be a clapper and one of the arms – chimey-things, whatever – was broken into a jagged point. The string holding it all together looked flimsy and there was a film of dust or grime covering it from top to bottom that brought an unconscious grimace to her face, but she was falling in love nonetheless. She would see if perhaps there was a discount for broken or damaged merchandise but regardless, it was going home with her.

A loaf of bread, a container of milk, and a stick of butter. She remembered that from her days of watching Sesame Street as a child. All about the random. Her mind was refusing to focus this afternoon and it was getting later by the moment.

Okay, she needed to concentrate. Grab the chimes and do the thing she knew she needed to do before she got distracted by the chimes and the smells. Somewhere in the store a child was crying, a muffled, mournful sound as if troubled by baby fears in sleep. The chimes in her hands tinkled as she walked through the store and the child quieted. If she came across the mother she might convince her to buy a set, if there was a set that wasn't broken, that was.

The dawn breaks so fast.

Now three-thirty. Her decision, or lack of, would unravel her whole day, she just knew it. That she could stand in one spot trying to make up her mind about things like groceries or tires was a mystery to most people, but it was just the way her mind worked: all random thoughts and indecision.

Her stomach rumbled and she really needed to drag herself to the front. The chimes in her hands were bamboo, or what looked like bamboo, could have been particle board for all she knew. The tag on it said *Made in Indonesia* and the bamboo was smooth and weathered. Rena held it up and listened to the hollow noises the chimey-things made when they gently rattled together. The rocking chair nearby was nice too and when she sat down, it was comfortable, the rails conforming to her back like they were made for her.

The bowl on the counter was painted red and green and felt polished to within an inch of its life. It caught the light in weird refractions and looked bigger on the inside, expansive.

There was no real decision to make. Rena hadn't let go of the chimes since she walked in, practically drawn to them. If she would just make her way to the cashier, she could leave.

Five o'clock, and the baby began to cry. Rena shook her hand and the chimes made hollow tones. The baby quieted. There was always a baby nearby. Babies in headshops and second-hand stores were as common as the smell of fried rice these days. The store was cramped and it gave the illusion of being much smaller than it actually was. The fabrics were colorful and stiff and more than a little worn. The knickknacks were chipped, most items seemed broken or missing pieces, and there was a smell underneath the tortillas and rice like bloated wood and wet carpet. End tables were patched with brown tape, a bedframe was missing a knob. The more she looked around, the more the little store was losing its charm. Even the air felt second hand and used.

And the smell. It smelled like meat and blood, so very faint beneath the pervasive scent of fried rice and strong coffee. Little icy fangs of fear began to gnaw at the edges of her shopping euphoria. She thought knew that smell and she needed to get out. She could come back for the chimes.

She stood before the automatic doors and waited for them to slide open. Nothing. She ran her hands in front of the electric eye, slightly pushing on the doors, but there was no give. They wouldn't open. Someone turned out the lights and the store became the dark night just before the dawn, the last possible moments for evening tide to do its worst. "Hello," she called out. The baby began to cry again. She heard a woman's voice calming the child in soothing Spanish, soothing tones from something electronic and close.

She followed the tinny sound and more hurried voices in Spanish to a point not far from the doors. Her preferred language in high school was French, but these words she seemed to already know.

¿Usted tiene la cámara fotográfica?

Do you have the camera?

On the table with a tag that said *Made in New Brunswick* was an intercom and she picked it up, pressing the buttons, all of them. "Hello – who's there please? We're trapped. Can you send someone to open the door? There's a baby with me." Now real alarm in the answering voices "Hurry," she said again, her voice dropping to the whisper of desperate resignation. "Please, the dawn." Thoughts in the back of her mind began to break the surface like rays of light through a dirty window. It was too late. She'd missed her chance. Again.

Five forty-seven by her watch. She was already too late.

Above her a light went on, not the fluorescents or recessed lighting of boho stores and second hand treasure attics. It was dim and gray and bare, a simple overhead light missing the decorative cover. Rena felt despair. In the growing light from the window she did see not the automatic doors of a store, but a bedroom door barely cracked to allow a hand to slip through to flip the bare, dirty switch. All around her were sticks of broken-down second-hand furniture: an end table, a rocking chair, a crib. The baby inside looked up at her and cooed, his pudgy arms reaching up to her. His fingers - she was sure the baby was a he as sure as she knew she'd blown another night, another chance to escape - brushed the bottom of the wind chimes above his crib and she shivered.

The dawn took on a more golden hue, solidifying, canceling out the impersonal incandescent above. She brushed her fingers through the chimes and they gave a hollow clacking. The baby cooed again. The forgetting was over because the dawn always brought the truth. These chimes weren't made in Indonesia but Indiana where the man took her body, cut it into pieces with saws and lathes, and made things with the parts. Brown Wicker, not New Brunswick, was the name of the second-hand shop that received the delivery of furniture with no return address: the upholstered rocking chair from her ribs and femurs, the decorative bowl from

her skull, the painted lampshade of stretched skin. It must have been a deal for this family, as they'd purchased every single piece. An entire bedroom set made from her bones. 100% Authentic Rena. What they weren't counting on was the unmentioned extended warranty included the former owner of those bones, lingering, fawning over the merchandise, all because she couldn't remember to simply walk out. She needed to learn to trust her initial instinct, even now in this strange limbo of ethereal reality like she should have trusted the warning bells in her head when she'd met the man with the sharp knives who smelled like meat and blood and madness.

The bedroom door opened fully and mother and father stood in the opening, digital camera held by one, a drug store point and shoot by the other. Above the door a small round camera as if for a laptop or computer was mounted, pointed towards the crib. Watching. Probably for whatever rattled the chimes and disturbed the baby.

She knew the look of concerned parents when she saw it, as she knew the baby was a he, as she knew she was bound, tethered to this furniture. There was a flash of light followed by two more, and they stood with wide eyes, seeing her stand over their baby but almost not as the dawn's light got stronger and her form grew dimmer and less corporeal. Staring at her. "*The dawn breaks so fast,*" she said with words that sounded like the breeze through chimes of bone connected by intricately braided strands of her hair. "*I need more time.*" She spoke to them in tones only the baby could hear and he giggled.

She could leave this place if she could remember, if only she'd stop lingering over the merchandise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — MontiLee Stormer is a troublemaker, writing acts of mayhem and despair for her own selfish pleasure. Her interests wander from abnormal psychology to the storied Paradise Valley of Detroit. Published in strange and wonderful places like Daily Nightmares, Black Ink Horror and Murky Depths she currently reviews for Film Obsession. She's an active member of GLAHW, Supporting Member of HWA, and lives in Metro Detroit.

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

Website: <http://www.montileestormer.com/>

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The Day the Reaper Came | *Shyla Fairfax-Owen*

Discounting the mortal hiss in the air, it had been a rather ordinary Thursday. Jonah was tired, as usual, but forced himself to take his afternoon walk nevertheless. He fumbled with the buttons of his knee-length, thick polyester coat for longer than he had the day before. He sighed at that realization, then pushed it to the back corner of his mind reserved for disappointments. He covered his balding head with a black bowl hat and reached clumsily for his cane.

Outside the air was crisp and refreshing. Autumn had always been Jonah's favorite season. When he was a boy, he used to rake all the lawns on his street, and when no one was watching, he'd jump in the piles and pretend to be swimming on some opposite planet. His joints ached at the thought of doing that now, but he still quite enjoyed leaf-gazing. Actually, he had very few pleasures in life anymore, but Autumn walks were on the top of the list.

In the park he hesitantly watched the children play cops and robbers. They cackled and roared gleefully, and Jonah found the scene carnivalesque and difficult to watch. In his eighty-four years, and especially in the way he had chosen to live them, he had seen enough casual brutality. Children today; he had not been able to attain that level of desensitization until his sixth kill.

"That's not true, Jonah. You always had a cavalier approach to right and wrong, didn't you?"

Jonah looked beside him. The park bench he had been sitting on alone suddenly occupied a second body. The man seemed more a shadow, cloaked in a black hooded garb that left his face to the imagination.

"I suppose you're right," Jonah whispered, regrettably. He did not need to ask the shadow who it was, or what it wanted.

The man and the shadow watched the children play their grotesque game in silence for a little longer, while pigeons squawked uninvited at their feet.

"Are you afraid?" the shadow finally asked.

"No. Just tired." Jonah reflected on his reply, and then spoke again, still not turning to face his visitor. "What's on the other side for me?"

"That part, Jonah, is up to you."

Now they faced each other, and Jonah saw what was hidden beneath the hood. Empty eye sockets, like an abyss with a magnetic draw. Worms wriggled about the holes, apparently unable to decide if they would rather be inside or outside. The skull was spotted with rotting flesh, but was more bone than skin. The sight of the bits of flesh dripping and dissolving did not disturb Jonah in the least. Mostly, he was contented by the cognizance that there was no associated foul scent. On the contrary, all he smelled was Autumn.

"I must confess, then?" Jonah asked with a hint of disinterest in his tone. He pulled his attention away from the rotting flesh and un-eyes, disgusted more by the idea of confession than anything else.

"No." At this, Jonah turned to face him again, startled. "It is I who has a confession" he finished.

Jonah stared blankly until the voice resumed. It was low and steady; apathetic, much like that of Jonah's own father's had been.

"Jonah, it is not your time. But it can be."

Jonah felt a numbness overtake him. His hands, though shaking on the ball of his cane, felt disconnected from himself; as did the rest of his limbs. It *was* his time - he could feel it in his bones, in his lungs, in his heart.

"Jonah, focus." The voice was even softer now, and Jonah was wondering if he had altogether lost his grip on reality.

"You've taken many a life," he continued. "Today, you will be asked to give one."

The pigeons took flight in unison, the flap of their wings sending a chill straight through Jonah's thinning body.

"I don't understand," he whispered, his voice quivering enough to give way to odd cracks.

"His name is Eric. He's fourteen, the grandson of a Mr. Garret Lyon."

Garret Lyon, he had been Jonah's last kill.

"He's been quite ill. Right about now, his fever is blistering. He's home in bed, just across the street there." The visiting man did not point, but Jonah instinctively knew where to look.

"He's dying."

"Not if you're willing to make a trade."

"I have a choice?" Jonah's tone lightened.

"We always have a choice."

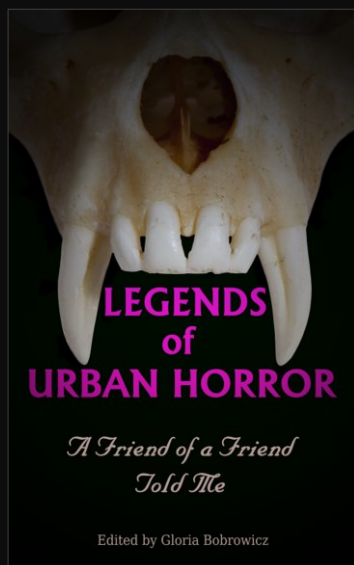
Yes, choice. That was something Jonah had always believed to be true. But for the first time in his life, having to make a choice was not a burden, but a blessing. Jonah's heart quickened and he began to perspire under his hat. Somewhere in the background, he heard the man say: "Give yourself to me, Jonah, and your soul's debt will be paid."

His heart continued to beat harder and harder against his chest and the sweat became profuse. Without so much as a word, he had made up his mind.

This was the end.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Shyla Fairfax-Owen holds a Master's Degree in Film Studies and a Minor in Women's and Gender Studies. Throughout her grad school career she specialized in the Horror genre, and has recently decided to follow her passion for writing speculative fiction. Her latest endeavor has been flash fiction, for which she launched a site that is dedicated to sharing those works.

Website: beyondthethreshold.co



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Church Bodies | *Ryan McSwain*

Tommy Alexander was the new pastor at First Christian Church in Flatland, Texas. A fresh graduate of Fredonia Bible College, he was a bit overwhelmed and trying to keep his head above water.

The stone church sat on Ingram Street in downtown Flatland. Built in 1923, First Christian had a disquieting gothic look. The building was last renovated in the '80s, when the city designated it a historic landmark. The interior was drab, and the smell and décor reminded Tommy of his late grandmother's house.

Like many older congregations, attendance was sparse. In all honesty, the church body was dying off one part at a time. There were no active members under age fifty-five. After the sudden death of the last senior minister, the elder board decided to hire a young pastor to bring life back to the church.

It was late Saturday night at the church, and Tommy hurried to get everything ready for the Sunday service. As he worked, he chatted with his fiancée, Izzy, through a Bluetooth earpiece.

"Couldn't believe when I got your text," Izzy said. "This Edna lady left you high and dry."

"Edna's a saint. If I hadn't missed her call, I'm sure someone would have helped me out. I was just too busy with Mr. Jenkins up at the hospital to notice the message. So what are you doing now?"

"Eating ice cream and pretending to work on this schizophrenia paper. And I'm missing you. Can't handle this long-distance relationship stuff."

"Yeah, I'm missing you, too. At least it isn't for much longer. You finish your degree in the spring, we get hitched in the summer, and you're sick to death of me by Thanksgiving."

"You should be so lucky. Still scrubbing toilets? I love a man who doesn't mind scrubbing a toilet."

"I'm up to bathroom trash and toilet paper replacement," he said, tying off a garbage bag. "Then I just have to vacuum the sanctuary, clean the baptismal, and make sure there's grape juice in the fridge for communion."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. It's almost one already. When do you think you can get out of there?"

"Shouldn't be long. I'm going to half-ass the vacuuming, and it's not like anyone's using the baptismal anytime soon. I've been here six months, and not one baptism. No weddings, either. Just funerals."

"Don't talk like that. You'll turn things around. At least your sermon is done, right?"

Wrong, but it was close enough to done. After a week like this, Tommy could wing it.

"Are you feeling better about being there?" she asked.

"Sure. The guys I graduated with are all drowning in megachurch politics. The elders here don't micromanage, so I'm kind of my own boss. These old ladies are great cooks, and they keep bringing me dinner. This job might even look better on my resume when we get married and I have to leave."

"What, you don't think there are psychologist jobs in Flatland? You can't be the only one going crazy up there."

"I'd be fine staying in town, but I don't want to be the pastor here until I die. There are plenty of other churches with a bit more promise." Tommy flushed the toilet he'd been cleaning. "Right now I'm just glad you're awake. This old place is starting to creep me out."

Izzy laughed. "Scaredy cat!"

"I'm serious. I keep hearing voices. From the noise the air conditioner makes. Is that weird?"

"That's not weird at all. There's even a word for it: Pareidolia. You're just finding something familiar in something random. It's the same thing that makes you see faces in the texture on a wall."

"I used to do that when I was a kid. There was a face on the wall right by my bed, and I stared at it until I fell asleep."

"Aw. I did the same thing."

Neither spoke for several seconds.

Tommy broke the silence. "I think we're having a moment here."

"Annnd you ruined it."

They laughed. "Tell you what," he said, "I'm glad there's a reason I keep hearing things. I was starting to think ghosts were whispering to me."

"You don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"They don't fit into my systematic theology. But if one starts talking to me, I'll entertain the possibility. Still, it's not like anyone has ever died here. Edna is such a gossip, I'm sure I'd have heard about it by now."

Izzy was silent.

"Izzy? Still there?"

"Think about it. Maybe no one's died there, but there have been plenty of dead people in that church."

"What are you talking about?"

"Funerals, Tommy. Think how many funerals there must have been."

He hadn't even considered that. He'd performed four funerals in the six months he'd been there.

"This place has been here since 1923. They've probably held hundreds of funerals here. Maybe a thousand or more. I never thought about it before, but a church probably sees more dead people than anything outside of a hospital or a funeral home."

"Maybe a coroner's office?"

"You've got me nervous. I don't even believe in ghosts, but you've got me nervous."

"Oh, come on. Ghosts don't even fit into your theology, remember?"

He chuckled. "Tonight they do, sweetie. The call will probably cut out when I get to the sanctuary, so don't freak out. I love you and all that jazz."

"Love you, too. Don't worry about me, tough guy. Just text me when you're done. I—"

The call ended. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. "No bars," he sighed. But he didn't mind the lack of reception in the sanctuary. At least he never worried about his phone going off during a sermon.

The echoing sanctuary didn't help his anxiety. Moonlight crept in through the stained glass, casting strange colors and shapes across the carpet, pews, and walls. He remembered the story of the donation from Mr. Jenkin's late wife. The church had been thrilled with her generosity until they found out the stipulation that it could only be spent on stained glass. They had the nicest stained glass in the city, and the smallest congregation to enjoy it.

"Lord Jesus Christ," he prayed, "Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner." He kept repeating the simple prayer, displacing his negative thoughts and anxiety. He knew how lucky he was to have his own congregation at such a young age. Everything would work out, one way or another.

He flipped on the lights and stared at the pews. Space was available for so many, but he knew he'd be lucky if fifty people showed up in the morning. If he could ever convince them to all sit up front, he could save a fortune on batteries for the wireless microphone.

A massive pulpit sat on the stage, but he never stood behind it when he preached. It felt too impersonal, so he opted for a simpler wood lectern. The baptismal rested behind the pulpit. The church came from a background of full-submersion baptism, so the baptismal could fit two or three adults. The water contained enough chlorine to keep it fresh, like a giant hot tub. But anyone who expected the water to be warm was in for a frigid surprise.

Tommy realized the sanctuary was freezing. He made a mental note to check the thermostat on his way out. His congregation might be old, but they weren't ready for cryogenics quite yet. The hum of the air conditioner was louder inside the large room, and he heard the murmuring voices again.

He pulled the vacuum cleaner out from its hiding place and stepped on the foot switch. Nothing happened. After fiddling with the button and the cord, he put it away. "Sorry, folks, looks like you're stuck with a week's worth of dust."

He shivered as he looked for the small pool skimmer Edna used to clean the baptismal. The more he searched, the colder it grew. It reached the point he could see his breath. A crack sounded above him. He looked up, and frost covered Mrs. Jenkin's stained glass windows. The humming of the air conditioner grew so loud he covered his ears to block out the droning voices. The sudden pain in his head pushed him down to his knees in front of the baptismal. His head swam as he fought to stay conscious.

The humming stopped.

He pulled his hands away from his ears to find them covered with blood. Red drops fell into the water, spiraling into roses. Gripping the edge of the baptismal, he pulled himself back up to his feet. Was the sound gone, or was he deaf?

Tommy turned around. Instead of empty seats, he stared out at a packed sanctuary. Grim faces filled every pew. No one moved. Their eyes held no emotion. Tommy's heart pounded as he fought against the panic in his chest. The room smelled of dirt and dead flowers.

He recognized a couple of faces he had recently buried. The previous pastor stared at him from the front row. The rest were strangers, but he knew who they were. Tommy stepped up behind the pulpit, but he was at a loss for words. There would be no winging it.

The congregation stood as one.

The next morning, Edna arrived early in case the young pastor needed any help getting the church ready. His car was in the parking lot, but he didn't answer her hello as she unlocked the door. She found him floating face down in the baptismal, blue and cold.

Despite his fiancée's protests, they held his funeral at the First Christian Church, his coffin only a few feet from where they found his body.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Ryan McSwain has published one horror novel, *Monsters All the Way Down*. Soon he'll kickstart his next novel about comic books, nostalgia, and the nature of reality. He stays home with his two kids, which is a far scarier experience than anything he's written. Free short stories in a variety of genres go out every month to his mailing list.

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

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“You’re the first person I’ve seen in here.”

The voice came out of the darkness followed by the speaker, a gaunt and hollow-eyed man whose features were etched with fear, just as I’m certain mine were.

“I don’t know how long I’ve been wandering about down here, but I haven’t seen another... soul.”

“Nor have I,” I replied, warily, keeping my distance.

I had been alone in here for so long that I was suspicious to see anyone.

“How did you get here?” he asked. His tone told me he shared my own suspicions, fears.

‘Here’ was a dark maze of passageways. I felt as if I had been wandering here for... days? Weeks? Longer? There was nothing but passageways through black rock. No rooms. No signs. Nothing but endless passageways.

“The last thing I remember...” I trailed off. I didn’t like to think back.

“Well?”

Deep breath. “The last thing I remember is driving along an icy road, losing traction and... and spinning off the road into a tree.”

“And, then you woke up here?”

I shrugged. “The next thing I knew, I found myself here. I don’t know how I got here. I don’t recall anything between the crash and finding myself here.”

That wasn’t entirely true.

“So, you think someone brought you here while you were unconscious?”

I shrugged. “Maybe...”

“I remember having a heart attack. Pain in my arm and chest. I couldn’t breathe. They loaded me into an ambulance, then I woke up here. Kidnapped.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think we’ve been kidnapped.”

“No? Then, how did we get here?”

That wasn’t a question I was keen to answer.

“Well?”

Another deep breath. “I remember something else...”

“What?”

I hated to dredge up those memories, especially in this dark and shadowy place.

“Well? Tell me!” He seized my arms and shook me, desperation in his eyes. “Tell me!”

“I remember lying in my car, after the crash, lying there, bleeding, everything growing dark. I... I think I died...”

“Died?”

Nodding, I said, “And, the last thing you recall is dying, too; your heart attack...”

“No...”

“Yes... I think we died and...”

“This is Heaven?” He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

I shrugged. “The afterlife, at least.” I sighed. “I don’t know. I’ve been wandering here for ages. I don’t know where we are or where we’re going or why.”

“Then, what do we do?”

Again, I shrugged. “Just keep walking, I guess.”

“To where?”

“To salvation? Damnation? Nowhere at all?”

With a sigh, he joined me and we set off down yet another dark and featureless tunnel, knowing not where we might end up, if anywhere. Just walking.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published in *Ill-considered Expeditions* (April Moon Books), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *History and Mystery, Oh My!* (Mystery & Horror LLC), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), and has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

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

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

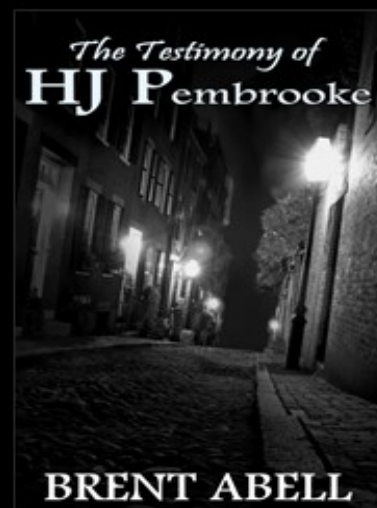
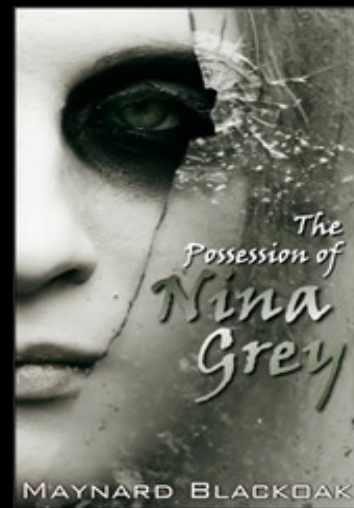
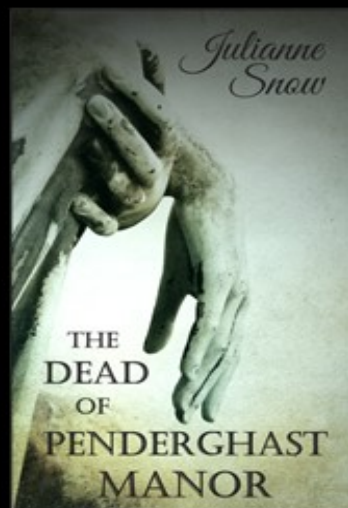
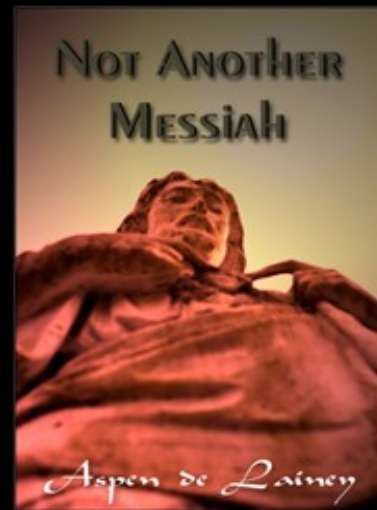
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The Out-Of-Place Place | *Joshua Skye*

As familiar as it all was, Little Balty didn't really understand all the hullabaloo going on around him. He liked that word, hullabaloo. His grandma used to say it lots. He sat quiet as a church mouse next to his mother in the courtroom, a perfectly behaved blond-haired, blue-eyed child. She was nervous about appearing before the judge, she always was, and Balty couldn't blame her. In his long, flowing black robe, the man sat at the front of the room perched like a bespectacled cartoon vulture on his polished pedestal, glowering with menacing glee at all those who stood awaiting his verdicts.

Most of the other frigidly, nervous people seemed to be there for drunken and disorderly antics, silly adult things done in the throes of inebriated stupors. His grandma used to say that lots, too, "You and your inebriated stupors." It was always while she was fighting with Mommy. Mommy was gone lots doing silly adult things with her silly adult friends. Balty didn't like very many of them. Actually, now that he thought about it, he didn't like any of them.

A bored teenage boy was on his other side holding papers in his lap. Balty was pretty sure it was the teenager's mother sitting at the end of the row. She looked very, very angry, her face as bright red as her hair. The row right in front of them was filled except for the two seats on either side of Patrolman Mackenzie Black. Mommy used to date him, but now she referred to him as the sheriff's lapdog, whatever that meant. Balty had never liked the guy, he was like the boogeyman in disguise. The boogeyman disguised as a police officer, Balty shuddered at the thought, the disturbing truth of it.

Perhaps Black seemed to feel the tingling sense of being watched, or thought about, or he was well aware of his ex-girlfriend's presence and merely wanted to glance back and check to see what she was doing. He had deep brown eyes fixed in a cold gaze and a pinched expression scowling back at the boy. Balty flinched and looked away from the menacing man in blue. The floor drew his attention, a dark wood panel construct waxed to a shining brilliance. There were small bits of trash there. He decided to practice his numbers and count them. He'd gotten to ten when his stomach growled and little currents of ache reached down into his legs.

The six-year-old felt the first sharp pains of a screaming bladder. He'd been uncomfortably full for a while, but held it and said nothing knowing full well his mother was already on edge. She could get meanie-bucket snappy at times. He dared look up. The policeman was facing the front of the courtroom, arms crossed at his barrel chest. Mommy was watching the proceedings with a furrowed brow, wide-eyed anxious. Deciding not to bother her with his small problem, as his teacher would call it, he stood and scooted out to the aisle making sure to excuse himself as he passed in front of the teenager and his angry mom.

Someone was getting indignant with the judge as Balty left the courtroom. The vulture man let out a kind of howl masquerading as words. The little boy was only too glad to be out of there. He felt a weight tumble away from him as he walked down the hallway. There was lots of tension back in there, fear too, he was sure. Fear like his fear of the dark and the thing in his closet and the other thing under his bed. Keeping his eyes up, he looked for any telltale signs of a boy's room. He could read 'men' easily enough, but most places were marked by the symbol of the male form, his personal preference. It was so much easier to spot.

The courthouse was busy like a beehive, his grandma would have said. So many people were there milling about, some almost aimlessly. The adults towered over him and powered by him without so much as a glance down. He didn't mind, he was used to it. Most adults ignored little kids, especially in adult places when they were doing adult things. There were lots of cops

ambling about, too. Some of them looked just as mean as Black. Balty avoided them as much as he could, but it was a courthouse after all, they were everywhere like demon bullies in the neighborhood. The boy wondered if they were just searching for a victim.

His tummy gurgled again and the pains from his bladder pulsed like lightning bolts down to his knees and up into his chest. He winced, let out a low groan, and put his hands on his stomach. Oh, he didn't have much longer, he could tell. A hiss slipped out from between his lips. He wouldn't be able to hold it if he couldn't find a place to relieve himself soon. There were beads of sweat on his brow and dampening his hair along the back of his neck, chilling his skin. The idea he might wet himself in public terrified him. It had happened before, he couldn't let it happen again. He hurried, his little legs working faster than any adult around him.

He wanted to ask someone. Surely, one of the adults would know where it was. "Excuse me," he said to a woman with a stern hairdo and grim expression. She ignored him. A cop was close behind her, he dared ask him. "Can you help me, please?" But he just kept going. A kindly looking gentleman was coming. Maybe he had kids of his own, he would help. "Sir, do you know where the restroom is?" Nope. The man paid him no mind. "Fudge," Balty squealed. His mother would spout a really naughty word when she was frustrated, but he wasn't supposed to use such language. He started to run, he didn't care if it wasn't the proper thing to do.

The bustling adults formed a kind of living labyrinth around him, something with a mind of its own. It would shift and sway as though on purpose to impede him. He moved in and out of their paths, but sometimes they'd be right in front of him anyway forcing him to dodge a collision. The pain in his tummy intensified. Sweat rolled down his temples. He was grunting like an anxious puppy as his gait turned into a sort of waddle. The pressure was getting too much, his bladder threatening to burst. He was definitely going to pee his pants. Oh, golly-gee Jesus, his grandma would have said. Mommy would be so mad at him. She'd scream. She might even hit him. The pee was doing more than threatening, it was traveling. Oh no. Oh, no. Oh, no! And then finally he saw it, the holy grail... the men's room.

He shoved hard on the door. It was so heavy and it squealed on its tired old hinges. The restroom was freezing cold, eerily dim, and one of the lights was flickering. There was an unclean smell, and his sneakers made strange chirping sounds as he shuffled across the tile floor. He didn't care. He had to go. Thankfully, there was no one else in there. He had his choice of stall. Dashing into the very first one, he undid his jeans, pushed them and underwear down around his ankles, and jumped up. He was peeing before his tushy had even settled on the cold plastic seat. Just in time. He sighed.

After he finished his business, he moved out of the stall. The lights above flickered like in the scary Halloween episodes of his favorite kids shows. It was intimidating, and he wanted out of there as fast as he could, but he had to wash his hands. Even if it didn't look or feel like they were dirty, it was the proper thing to do after using the bathroom. Grandma, Mommy, and all his teachers said so. He closed the door of the stall and turned to go to the sinks when... a towering shadow! Startled, he let out a scream muted into a pathetic whimper as he flinched away from the hulking figure standing just a few feet from him. Patrolman Black glared down at him, an unnerving half-grin on his boogeyman face.

Balty's heart was thump, thump, thumping in his chest very fast, a sensation that he could feel up into his throat. It was almost painful. Up at the towering man he stared, his fear worn clearly on his cherubic face, obvious in his trembles. He didn't know what to do. In school his teacher had told him that policemen were good guys, you could go to them for help. News

people even said so on television, but he knew this policeman, and he knew he wasn't a good guy.

"Hello Balty," the man said. His voice was smooth and venomous.

The boy couldn't bring himself to answer. His hands clapped together at his waist, his fingers fidgeting nervously. When the cop took a step toward him, he automatically took a step back. He didn't want to be anywhere near the man. He knew all too well how mean he could get, often at the drop of a hat. Stuttering, he managed to whimper, "Leave me alone."

The officer chuckled, a raspy guttural sound that echoed in the restroom. His eyes roamed the place, seemed as though he were assessing his surroundings, determining if there was anyone else he might have to contend with. When his gaze returned to the boy all amusement was gone. "How's your mother?"

Though the words in and of themselves weren't malicious, Balty understood the threat in the man's voice. He stammered, "You leave her alone, too."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of hurting her." The officer took two steps toward the boy.

Balty took two steps away.

"You, on the other hand, I have dreams of."

A chill ran up the child's spine, his shivers becoming exponentially more pronounced, his entire body quaking. What the man had said was creepy. Though Balty didn't have the vocabulary to describe it, he was well aware that the implication oozed with malicious intent. There was no way the man was talking about pleasant dreams. He was talking about nightmares, and his voice said quite clearly he liked them. Balty backed away from the patrolman until he was pressed into the ornately tiled wall. It was arctic, even through his clothes he could feel the icy chill of it.

Black took one slow, deliberate step forward, and then another, and then another. His hands moved away from his waist to wring menacingly before him. With every flicker of the room's lights, the gun in his holster glinted, freshly polished to a midnight shine. "Do you want to know what my dreams are about?"

Balty couldn't bring himself to speak, even in a stutter. He shook his head. The bad man was getting very close. Too close. "Go away, leave me alone."

"I dream about *eating you*." He was snarling. He was salivating.

A pitiful snivel oozed out of Balty as the officer loomed over him, right there. His hands separated and reached out. The fingertips of his right hand caressed the child's chubby little cheek, the digits of the other moved luridly through the boy's flaxen hair. The man's flesh was cold, as cold as the tile, and impossibly soft, squishy. The boy was reminded of what slugs felt like. As the cop's face leaned in, Balty wanted desperately to close his eyes, but he couldn't. Fear kept them open. He wished he was in bed and under his blankie, it would protect him from the boogeyman cop, but he wasn't in bed, and he didn't have his blankie.

What was Black going to do? Was he actually going to pick him up and take a big, bloody bite? Yes, he was. Of course, he was. There was no doubt in the little boy's mind. He was going to become a meal, a sickening snack for the man who used to beat his mommy. Black's mouth was opening... and opening... and opening even more. It was impossible the way it continued to widen, like some serpent unhinging its jaws to swallow a squished rat.

There was a fathomless darkness at the back of the man's tongue, a secret black inside Officer Black, a place that wasn't a place, an out-of-place place. It was cold in there, Balty knew. It was familiar, you see. Everything was, the courtroom, the vulture judge, his mommy's nervousness, the angry red headed lady, and Officer Black. It was all as familiar as the cold out-

of-place place at the back of the patrolman's throat. Balty had been in there before so many times he couldn't count. He'd also heard the first crunch all those times before as teeth sunk into him digging through his flesh all the way to the bone. Pain. Blood. Screaming. Gurgling. Then, as fast as lightning, he'd be sitting next to his mommy again as she waited for her judgment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Award-winning bestselling author Joshua Skye penned the novels *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed* and previous issues of *The Sirens Call* as well as other anthologies and periodicals.

Twitter: [@JoshuaSkye1](https://twitter.com/JoshuaSkye1)

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The Breezeway | *Amelia Gomez*

The lights flickered as William stood in the breezeway. The room was small. The familiar color of the powder blue walls made him feel uncomfortable. He knew he had been here before but he couldn't quite remember when. The white tiles underneath his bare feet were cold. His skin looked paler than the rich tan it used to be. The long, thick branch that curved from one wall to another gave him the feeling that he was outside, yet he knew that he wasn't. Those four walls seemed to hold him. They seemed to urge him to be still.

Where are my shoes?

The thought came to him as he eyed the room with a quick glance.

This room...

There were doors surrounding him, one centered on each of the four walls. The urge to leave was so strong, yet he couldn't decide which door would bring him the comfort he desired. He knew one of them had to be the exit but he felt uneasy looking at them. As though walking through the wrong one would leave him empty and dark inside.

He reached out for the red door and felt a surge of heat grab back at him. Not the warmth that he desperately longed for, but a heat that could scorch if he was to get too close.

Which door?

The smell of dinner came wafting into the room from underneath the pink door.

Rib-eye...

He heard the sound of faint music and children laughing in the background.

Dinner time...

He felt a hunger deep in his core but was quickly distracted by the sound of the bustling trees outside.

The wind must be blowing...

Through the small pane of glass, embedded in the green door, he could only see darkness.

Dinner time...

His thoughts were interrupted by a noise from behind the black door. It was as soft as a whisper. It called out to him, simply saying 'come'. Panic set in at the sound of this unfamiliar voice.

With a quick jerk he turned his head. Voices were growing louder coming from a room that must have been closer to the one that he was in.

The pink door...

He could hear them gathering around the dinner table, excited to eat.

Do they know I am here?

He yelled out but no one answered. He shouted but no one came. He banged on the door, soft at first and then harder and louder as he received no response. He was hungry and cold. He wanted to come in. To leave this space and to join the warmth that he could hear coming from inside. He could hear the chatter among them. His name was not mentioned in the conversation.

Why can't they hear me?

He searched for the doors.

Which one?

A shiver drew up his spine.

How did I get here?

Dishes clanked as water ran into the sink. He heard the young girls helping their mama clear the table. More laughter. The cupboard doors opened and closed. He banged harder. He

knew this was the way out. This would be the only door that would take him out of this dim cold space. He longed for the comfort inside.

How long have I been in this room?

He frantically looked for something that would remind him of why he was there.

This must be a dream

Wake up!

Nothing. He was still locked in this room between the kitchen and garage. He was still forced to live this nightmare.

How did I get here?

The sounds from the other room grew faint. No one heard his screams. No one heard him trying to get in. No one heard the gack that came from his throat as he struggled to breathe.

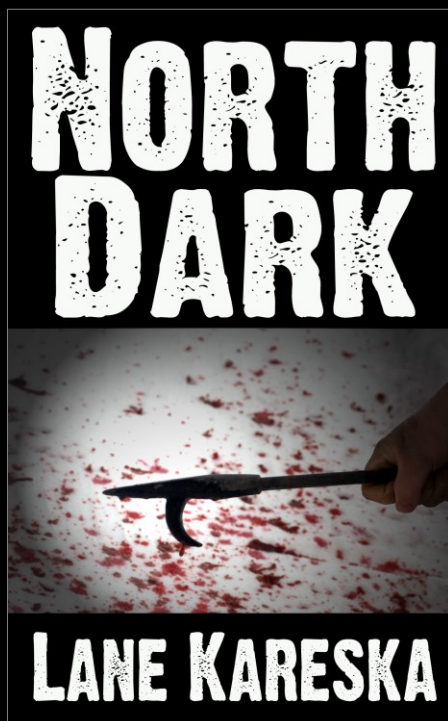
Breathe! Why can't I breathe?

The lights seemed to be fading. He could hardly see those powder blue walls. He didn't notice the doors that surround him. He couldn't feel the cold white tiles under his pale bare feet. Almost as if a movie were playing in his head, he remembered...

They had found him, neck stretched long, his bare feet dangling in the air. The rope that held him, tied to the branch that was nestled between two walls, was moving just a little as his feet swung effortlessly above a toppled stool.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Amelia Gomez was born in Wyoming, grew up in California, and currently lives in Northern Utah with her husband and the youngest of her five children. She attributes her love of reading from her mother and her passion for writing from her father who has always told her to “Write that down, it will make a great story someday.”

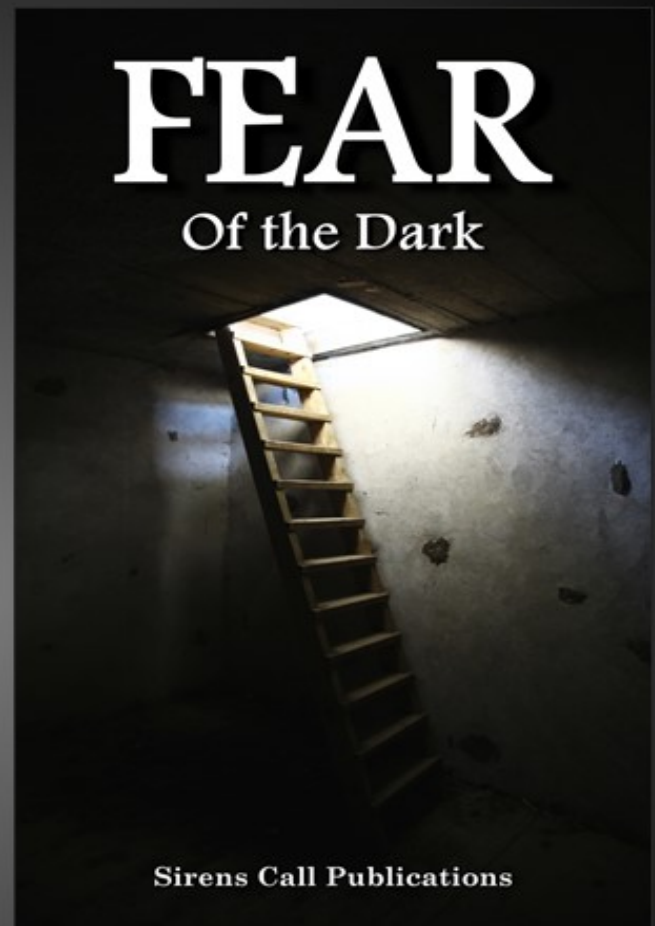
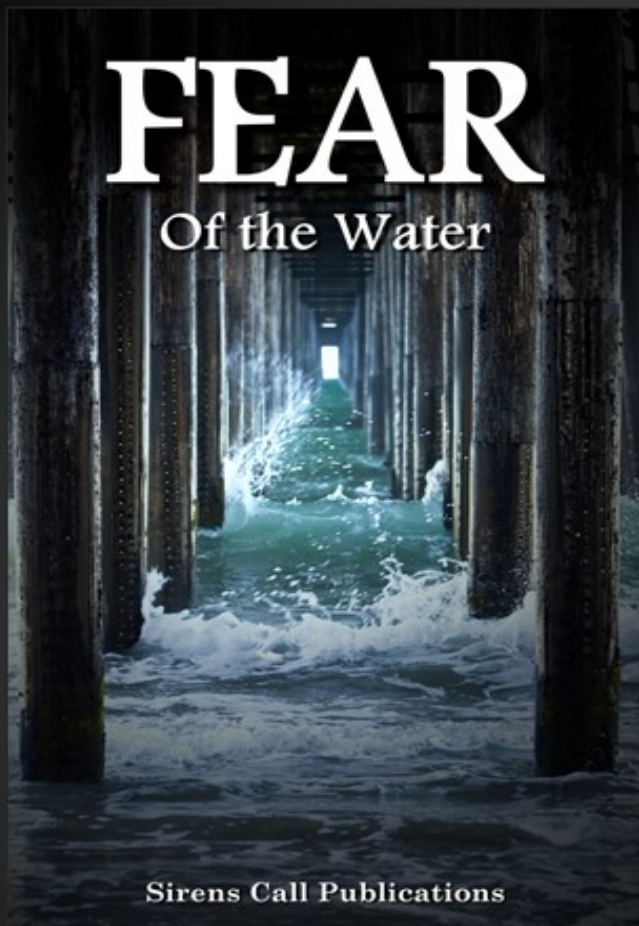
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Gliding silently through the air, I gaze down at the graveyard with a baleful glare. Spirits walk about their graves, conversing with each other, relaxing.

Enjoying their afterlife.

I haven't eaten in days and these cretins are living the high life in a Catholic cemetery, great stone angels standing high over graves, swords drawn out as if ready for battle. My slitted eyes can see the spirit of two young boys walking along the edges of the graveyard, looking through the foliage at the world outside their hallowed ground.

I swoop low and quiet over him, coiling into a tight cylinder so as to dive down into the bushes on the other side of the consecrated earth. Even here, I can feel the holy energy crackling against my frame. My tail coils and uncoils errantly, the stinger sliding in and out from the proximity to the holy ground. Looking through the brush, I catch sight of the young child.

He's no older than eight, translucent and giddy about... something. It looks like he and another child are looking at something outside the graveyard. Fluttering around the bush line, I see there's a koi pond.

Or more precisely, a koi pond with frogs croaking in the warm night air. My smile stretches across my ray-like body, the pale luminescence that my underside casts dimming as I slither along the ground to stay out of sight. I come close, listening to the words being exchanged between the two boys.

"...and I haven't played with a frog since I died, James. All I'm saying is I'll pop out and grab the frog and bring it back in here while you play scout for me. You make sure none of the adults see me leave, and if one looks this way you act like you're playing with rocks or something."

"David, we're not supposed to leave the graveyard for any reason," James, a lighter voice, reasoned with him.

Shut it, James, let David make his own decisions... I think bitterly.

"Look, all I want to do is travel eight feet outside and grab a frog. What could go wrong?"

"I don't know, but the rules are there for a reason. And I think we should follow them, David. If you sneak out, I'm going to tell on you!"

"James you little snitch! You'd go to Mom and tell her I snuck just eight feet out of the graveyard?" David sounded indignant, something I could relate to.

"If I have to, yes. We have these rules to keep us all safe from the monsters outside, and we all have to do our part in making sure that we're as safe as can be," James said.

"That's some bullcrap man, I'm my own boss and don't need anyone telling me what to do!" David exclaimed.

"That's what got you killed in the first place, that attitude right there!" James replied.

"I died of pneumonia you idiot, over a hundred years ago."

"Yeah, from playing out in the rain when you should have been inside!" James insisted, his voice growing louder.

That I didn't need. Closing my eyes I began letting out a soft crooning noise, barely above the sound of a whisper, but enough to calm their rising emotions.

Unrolling myself flat on the ground, I coil my tail into the underbrush and smile into the dirt. Due to being incorporeal, I can just rotate my eyes backward and be able to see David's spectral leg as he steps out of the protective wards of the Catholic cemetery, and onto my own

folds. He steps fully out, staring back at James, who pokes his head out while begging for David to stay inside.

A part of me toys with the idea of trying to ensnare both of them, but I disregard it quickly. The adult ghosts will come looking to see what's happening once I capture the child, some might even be tempted to try and help him. My stinger shivers in anticipation at the idea, curling like that of scorpions at the idea of fresh prey.

David steps off me and walks over to the koi pond, looking at the frog and marveling at its, I don't know, froggy nature. I slither up behind him quickly, lurching up and wrapping my flaps around the petulant boy quickly, before the shout from James can serve as any help to him. My tail curves up around my head and pierces the top of the ghostly child's skull, causing him to begin screaming in earnest now that he can feel actual pain.

I can hear other spirits rallying to James's panicked cry, so I quickly drain the ectoplasm from David through my tail, pumping the psychokinetic force through my body, boosting my own strength, allowing me to squeeze the boy even tighter, draining every last drop of ectoplasm from him like the last bit of toothpaste from a rolled up container. Letting him go I flap up into the trees, just as three ghosts, each bearing a spectral weapon, come rushing from the graveyard. David's shriveled form lies partially over the koi pond, his eyes vacant and his body emaciated. There is a chance I didn't get all of his ectoplasm, and that over the next fifty or so years he could make a recovery.

But I can feel his energies, his memories, pulsing through my spectral body. I cackle, flapping about in a circle as I feel myself grow a few inches larger all around, the pent up energy forcing my frame to swell. The ghosts look up at me, some crying out in shock and fear, others in anguish.

A spectral arrow flies past me, forcing me to look down at the ghostly archer with his longbow standing in the middle of the graveyard. With a wicked smile, I cackle once more before flapping away into the darkness of the night, leaving the poor spirits to try and look after their own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Nicholas Paschall is a graduate of The University of Texas at San Antonio with a Bachelors in History. He has been writing professionally for three years now and has been published in over twelve anthologies in print, and several dozen more online. His most recent publications are in Creepy Campfire Quarterly's inaugural magazine, Demonic Visions, and Shrieks and Shivers. He routinely digs through his own graveyard of stories to collect the freshest samples for his readers to digest, so enjoy! And as he likes to remind all who read his work, Sweet Dreams!"

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A Mother's Love | *T.M. Delaney*

Searing pain splits through my head, and a powerful force begins pulling at me like the gale-force winds in a tornado. The last image I see is of my fifteen-year-old daughter staring in wide-eyed terror at the knife-wielding intruder standing over my body before she turns and flees away from the basement. Then everything goes black around me.

Moments later, the darkness fades and I find myself in a grey void. A tall man wearing a black shroud and holding a clipboard stands in front of me. I feel the panic rise in me as I remember my last moments, the knife plunging through my skull. I am dead. Then I remember my children. I rush at the dark figure before me, grabbing the front of his shroud. "My children! Are they okay?"

"Ma'am, please," the man says, prying my hands loose and dropping his hood so that I can see his face properly.

The fact that he's wearing glasses temporarily stupefies me into silence. The grim reaper needs help with his vision?

"My name is Artimeus," he says, speaking with a bored voice. "You have recently died and crossed over. Now, if you will come with me," he gestures with his hand and points to a shining orb of light off in the distance.

"No, I need to know if my children are alright!" When he stays silent, I frantically turn around looking for them, and spot a shimmering oval just behind me. As I approach it, I see my daughter sprinting up the stairs of our house. "Beth!" I call, reaching for the oval, seemingly the rift that brought me to the afterlife.

As I touch it, though, a shock of pain shoots up through my arm, repelling me back. I clutch my arm and look into the rift again. Beth scoops her little brother up into her arms, placing a hand over his mouth as she ducks into her room and into her closet. Downstairs, the intruder begins searching for them.

"Ma'am, please, we need to get moving. We're already behind schedule. I have to process you." Artimeus tugs on my arm.

"My children are in trouble. They need help!" I pull from his grasp and point to the rift.

Artimeus sighs in exasperation and holds up his clipboard. "Look at all these names. You're not the only person I have to work with today, lady."

My eyes zero in on the clipboard and I try to snatch it from him. "Is that a list of all the people dying today? Can't you check it for my children?"

He pulls the clipboard back from my grasping hands. "It is a list, ma'am, but not of everyone who will die today. Just the people I'm scheduled to process. I'm not the only spirit guide, you know. There are hundreds of us." He gestures all around us, and I see what I hadn't noticed before: several rifts, all with clipboard-bearing people standing beside them.

As I watch, other souls tumble through their rifts, and they are collected by their guides. The routine, detached nature of it makes me feel ill. "Check your list," I demand, turning the rest of my attention on the events unfolding in my home.

Artimeus sighs and looks quickly through his list. "You're children are not listed here. There's no way for me to know if that means they won't die today or if they're just on someone else's list." He takes my arm again, more forcefully this time. "Now let's go."

"That isn't good enough!" I throw him off me again, and he tumbles back, staring at me in shock at my strength. But I turn away from him, back to the rift. My daughter is speaking to her little brother, a sweet boy who is only six-years-old. My eyes flood with tears as I listen.

“Here's my phone, Benny. You remember Mom telling you how to call 911?” She waits for his nod. “Okay, I need you to do that now, buddy. Tell them we need help and that there's a bad man in our house.”

“Where's Mommy?” he asks. I fight back a sob.

Beth's composed expression wavers for a moment, but she keeps her voice steady as she answers him. “She's downstairs. You need to make this call to help her.” She looks over her shoulder as though she heard a noise. On the other half of the portal window, I can see the intruder beginning to climb the stairs. “I'm going to go distract the bad man so that he doesn't find you. You just stay here and make that call, no matter what you hear, okay?”

Benny nods, and Beth quietly creeps out of the closet and shuts the door behind her. Then she slips into the hall, waits for the intruder to spot her, then darts into my room. He immediately thunders up the stairs in pursuit. Beth planned her route well, darting from my room into the bathroom, which connects to her brother's room, then out into the hall and down the stairs, leading the intruder on a chase through the house.

“This is highly irregular,” Artimeus snips from just behind me. I'd nearly forgotten he was there.

I whirl to face him. “Send me back,” I demand.

He gives me a shocked look. “Ma'am, you're dead. There is no going back.”

“I only need a minute!” I beg. “Please, I have to protect my children!”

“How can you protect them?” he asks sardonically. “You just took a knife to the head from that man if you've forgotten.” He cringes away from me and drops his snarky expression as I advance on him with rage in my eyes. “Uh, I'm sorry!” he stutters.

Frustrated, I dismiss him and turn back to the rift, only to realize with horror that Beth has been cornered in the den by the intruder. I shudder to think what he might do to her. “Beth!” I cry, banging my fists on the rift's surface, headless of the pain. “Beth, please, don't die!”

The intruder turns from Beth and spots Benny standing at the top of the stairs, looking terrified. With an evil grin, the intruder leaves Beth behind, instead now intent on killing Benny. Beth screams and sprints after the intruder, leaping onto his back halfway up the stairs, but he just swats her away as if she were nothing, sending her flying back from the stairs to sprawl, unmoving, in the entryway by the front door. Then he slowly continues stalking after Benny, who has shrunk back and is cowering at the end of the hall.

With a sob, I slowly sink to the floor, leaning heavily onto the rift. The pain radiating into me from the rift is nothing compared to the agony in my heart. I can't bear the thought of watching my children die right before my eyes. As I kneel there, I feel my hand slip forward slightly, and I see that it is partially through the rift. I pull back in shock, then press my hand to the rift again, watching as with a small amount of force, I push my whole arm in. I can make it through.

I back up a few paces and hear Artimeus chattering blandly that he's happy I've seen to reason. His chatter quickly turns to panicked shouts, though, as I charge at the rift and launch myself into it, screaming as the pain engulfs me. But I can tell I'm successfully passing through it.

Finally, the transition is complete, and I open my eyes to see I'm in the basement. My body lies in the center of the floor, a pool of blood surrounding my head. It's a strange experience, seeing my own body; it almost doesn't even look like me anymore. At that thought, I look down at myself, and realize that I also don't look the same anymore as I did in life. I wonder vaguely what that means my face looks like now.

Shaking off the distracting thoughts and remembering why I'm here, I propel myself upwards through the ceiling to the top of the stairs, manifesting myself before the intruder. I don't know what he sees, but it must be horrific because he reels back in terror.

"Stay away from my son!" I roar at him, advancing quickly.

He continues stumbling backwards, and then his foot slips on the top step, sending him crashing down the stairs and through the spires at the corner where the staircase abruptly turns to face the front door. He lands with a solid thud on the floor below.

I hurriedly close in to see if he's going to get up again. I find, though, that I need not worry. His head is twisted at such an angle it can only mean he's dead. I sob in relief, but I know I can't stay long. If I frightened a grown man so badly, I cannot allow my son to see me like this. Before I can figure out how to leave, though, I hear a small voice behind me.

"Mommy?"

I turn around and see Benny at the top of the stairs again, looking down at me in curiosity, not fear.

Because he seems to recognize me, I cautiously reply. "Yes, baby, it's me." Quietly, I climb the stairs and crouch at his level. "I'm sorry if I scared you."

"I'm not scared of you," he whispers. "You're my mommy."

My heart aches at his comment, and a terrible wave of grief overtakes me at the knowledge that I won't be able to stay with my children anymore. I wish so much that I could hold him, just hug him one last time, but I know from passing through the floor earlier that I have no physical form.

"I called 911, Mommy," he says proudly, breaking me from my thoughts. "I told them our address and everything just like you told me to."

I nod at him. "I saw that. You did such a good job! I'm so proud of you. And your sister," I say, remembering her brave attempts to protect her brother. "And I love you both so much. More than anything." My voice wavers as I start losing control.

"Are you okay, Mommy?" Benny asks, picking up on my sadness.

"Yeah, sweetie, I am. Now, I need you to go downstairs to your sister, okay?" I point to where she's still laying at the foot of the stairs. I can see from here that her chest is still rising and falling, so she isn't dead. "Go down there and hold her hand until the emergency people get here."

Benny starts to take a couple of steps down, but then looks to me again. "Are you coming?"

I shake my head. I can already feel the rift trying to drag me out again. "I have to go away for now, sweetie. You and your sister won't be able to see me for a long time. But I promise, I will see you again someday when I can." Beth starts stirring downstairs. "Quick now," I say, pointing again. "Go to Beth."

I allow the rift to pull me back, then, and watch Benny go to his sister who reaches out to him weakly with one arm. When I'm back in the void, I can see him talking to her and pointing to the stairs, and I know he's telling her about me. She just starts crying, and I can only hope that she knows what he's told her is real, that she knows I was there. In the distance I can hear sirens, and I finally turn my back to the portal, content that they are safe.

Artimeus is having a fit. "What were you *thinking*?!" he shrieks, clutching his head. "You can't go back. Ever. It's against all the rules!"

I wave him off. "Everything turned out fine."

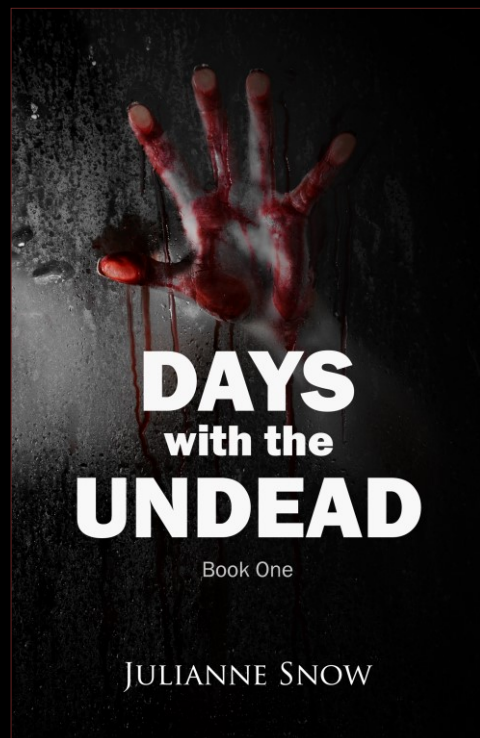
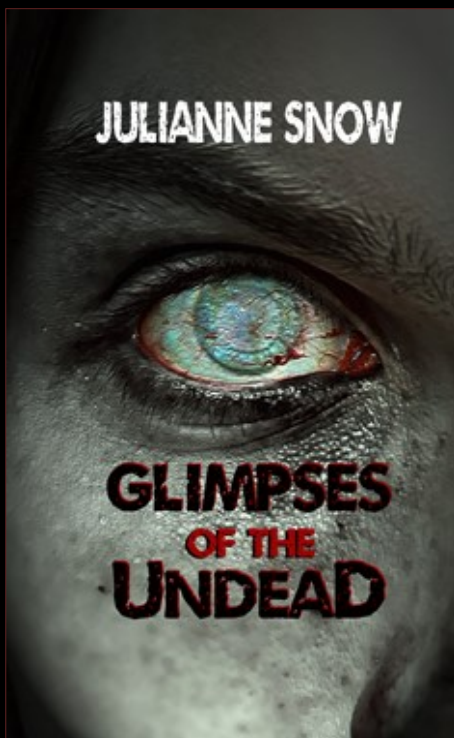
“Fine? Fine?!” he shrieks again. “You went back even though it's not allowed and you interfered in the lives of living humans, resulting in the death of a man who most likely wasn't scheduled to die today!” He lowers his voice dramatically. “There will be consequences.”

I say nothing and just follow him into the light. Consequences do not frighten me. They do not matter. A mother's only priority is to protect her children no matter the cost. I have done that. My children are safe, and that's all that matters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — T.M. Delaney holds a BA in English-writing. Her previous publications include the short story “Love Everlasting” published in the young adult paranormal horror anthology *Shadow Street* and a short story and three poems published in the student literary journal *Journey*. She works as a Managing Editor for a publisher of scientific journals in Kansas and lives with her cat Marty, her self-proclaimed creative “mews.”

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Absorb or Unravel | Shannyn Campbell

You need to listen to me, and you need to listen carefully. I know it's hard. I know you're confused and scared. That's okay. You should be scared. Everyone is scared of dying and that's *before* they die. Now that you're actually dead, you're going to find out it's a lot worse than you anticipated. I'm sorry about that. I know you were hoping for fluffy clouds and all your dead pets being happy to see you. But that doesn't matter now. What matters now is that you focus and you *listen*. You understand? I'm hoping you do. If you don't listen you're going to discover what 'A fate worse than death' means, first hand.

THEY'RE going to come for you soon.

You won't be able to see THEM or hear THEM until they're right on top of you. You may smell something coppery in the wind, or feel the air-pressure drop, like before a thunderstorm. That's the only warning you'll get. Even then it might be too late. If you sense anything abnormal, you run. That's rule one.

Rule two is *never stop running*.

Rule three is make a choice and stick with it. You've got two options. Absorb or Unravel.

I was never very good at science, so this is going to be hard to explain. Do you understand what 'The Conservation of Energy' is? It basically means that all the energy in the universe can't be created or destroyed. However, it can be changed from one form of energy into another. When a plant is hit by sunlight it will change the energy from the light into chemical energy. It can use the new energy to make itself grow.

Ghosts are just that. Blobs of energy in a new form.

And energy is just a fancy word for fuel.

Or food.

It's a cruel joke, honey, but here's the truth. The afterlife is basically one big version of Pac-Man.

Ghosts eat other ghosts. Well, not eat. Absorb is the word I used, and I'm sticking with it. It's like how a big raindrop will suck a smaller one into itself while running down a windscreen. That's what your existence is now. Being the big raindrop. As you wander you're going to find other dead people. Some of them will be more powerful than you, some less. If you think you can take them on, absorb them. No matter how much they fight. Or beg. Or scream. It won't be pretty. But it will get easier. That's not a good thing, and it's not a comfort. But I'm not here to comfort you.

We all start out like who we used to be, back when we were alive. We pretend we still have morals, or dignity, or mercy. But we all need fuel to keep on going or we... how should I put this... 'disintegrate' is probably the most accurate way I can describe it. Picture rolling a ball of yarn across the floor. It gets smaller and smaller leaving a trail of itself behind until, eventually, it comes apart. That's what ghosts do if they chose not to eat other ghosts.

Some people insist that's what they'll do. They proclaim loudly and honourably that they'll keep going until they run out of themselves, rather than devour another person's spirit to prolong their own existence. It's all very noble and high-minded.

You'll think you'll never do it. You'll pretend your above it.

I did.

But I got over it quickly. Once I saw what unravelling meant.

Unravelling is not pretty. You'll start by losing your memories. Then your personality will go, followed by your emotions and so on. Everything that made you *you* will fragment and fall

away. You don't get to choose the bits that remain. I once found a guy who had nothing left but his ability to turn right and the words to *Don't Stop Me Now*. He just kept spinning around and around in a circle insisting he was going to make a supersonic man out of me. The more of yourself you lose the harder it is to remember why you refuse to absorb someone else. Don't wait until you lose too much of yourself to change your mind. Get over your outmoded sense of morality and find the smallest weakest soul you can find. Then take them.

But first you have to stay out of the way. You're new. You're small. You're weak. Right now you are easy pickings for someone bigger.

THEY are the something bigger.

You're going to find out soon that the term 'You are what you eat' is horrifyingly literal here. The more people you absorb, the more like them you become. You'll have memories you've never experienced; feel emotions of people you don't know. You'll become less of a 'you' and more of a 'we'. THEY are what you end up like after absorbing thousands and thousands of souls over eons of existence. You ever read the Bible? You remember that demon that said 'We are Legion'? A legion is only a thousand souls. Child's play. I've seen THEYS that could make up a city back when they were alive.

THEY are old. THEY are vast. THEY are faster than you can ever anticipate. And THEY'LL find you. That's how you're probably going to end. That's how most people end. It's almost a guarantee. That's the reason THEY got so big. THEY are very good at this.

But first they have to catch you.

After this conversation, you're on your own. I've given you this head start already, and that's more than most people get. If I ever see you again, you are mine. You understand that. There will be no mercy. It's nothing personal. No one here can afford sentimentality. We've all got to eat.

You ready to run, little one?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Shannyn Campbell is an Australian writer, who has a Creative Arts degree from the University of Wollongong. No, that's not the one from the Monty Python sketch. When she's not writing (or pretending to write, while browsing the internet) she works in a group home for people with disabilities.

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



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An Exhale of Breath | *Shawn D. Standfast*

Darkness roams aimlessly shrouded in sorrow
Hallowed halls echo with every heartbeat
Sacred rhythms reverberating rejection
With hardwired thoughts yearning desolation

Exploring devotions with melodies of sadness
Tuneful songs resonating mournful doom
Cloistered chronicles unfold with apprehension
While shadows move with licentious abandon

Lying in supplication for demons unknown
Bathing in a stream of ever flowing time
Perceptions mirrored in moments of reflection
As Seeds of mercy are smothered in conception

Yesterday's tomorrows lost in an exhale of breath
Voices become silent freezing at lip's escape
Tears of Angels wash away fear and obligation
Holy water sacrosanct in memory of lamentation

Hope caged and brooding in twilight existence
Distorted souls carpet ever shifting skies
Lost forever between dreams and regret
Returning to the beginning in a circle of torment

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Shawn D. Standfast is a Canadian living in the United Kingdom. Shawn has a background in Archaeology and book selling. After a near 25 year dry spell he began writing poetry again in 2013. His interests include Silent Film, Louise Brooks, Old Time Radio and Books.

Twitter: [@BooksR4Life](https://twitter.com/BooksR4Life)
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Lost & Alone | *DJ Tyrer*

Darkness
Last memory strangely faded
Everything seems muted
Feeling dazed
Wanders aimlessly
Vague memories of family, friends
No-one to guide their way
No words of hope or comfort
No company
Lost

Deserted | *DJ Tyrer*

Endless dust desert
No sun shining in the sky
No smell on the breeze
Not a sound, only silence
Just keeps walking forever

At last, a figure
Dark, stark, still: a silhouette
Unmoving, waiting
Waiting for their arrival
Skull grins welcome and farewell

Waiting | *DJ Tyrer*

Waiting
Watching
Day after day
The same routine
Now tears are run dry
And numbness has set in
Always watching
Unseen
Unfelt
Unheard
Forced to observe
Unaging
Years roll by
Familiar grows strange
Strange grows stranger
Still they wait
Wishing for release

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been published in *Ill-considered Expeditions* (April Moon Books), *State of Horror: Illinois* (Charon Coin Press), *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *History and Mystery, Oh My!* (Mystery & Horror LLC), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press) and *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), and has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries).

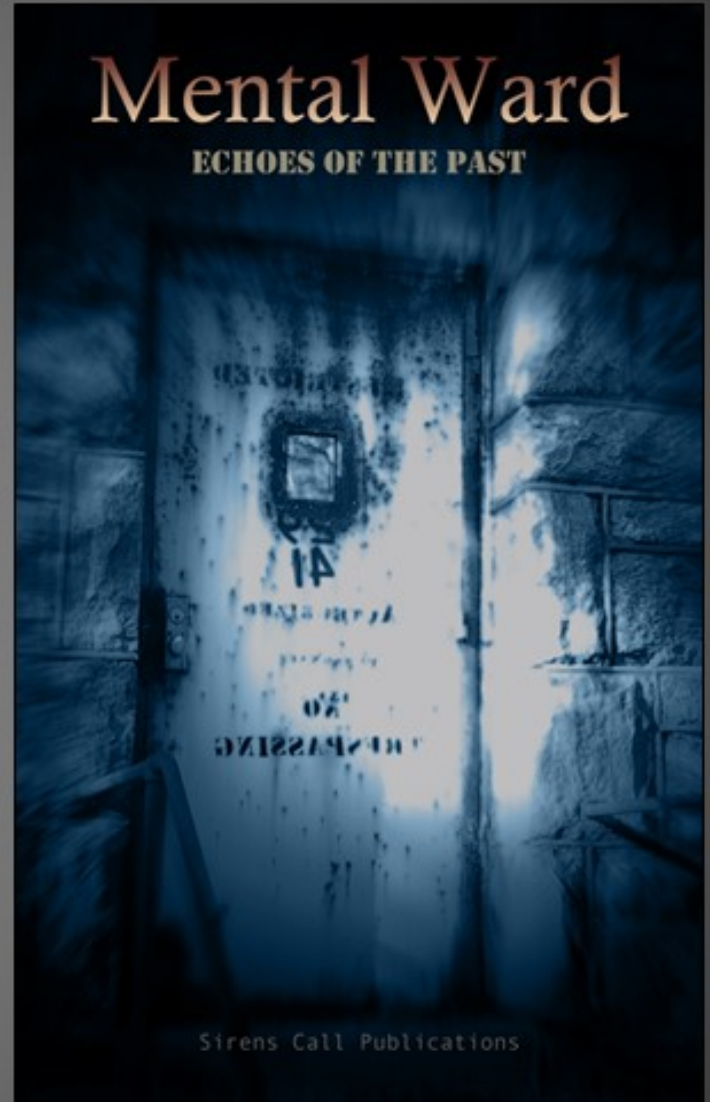
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Distorted Dreams | *Shawn D. Standfast*

Despair walks alone in pouring rain
Guided by distorted dreams and pain
Searching evermore in shadows
Thirsting for the blood of those lost

Spirits free to wander in twilight
Bodies shed in a forgotten blight
Husks ploughed deep into furrows
Cast aside to feed the dark abyss

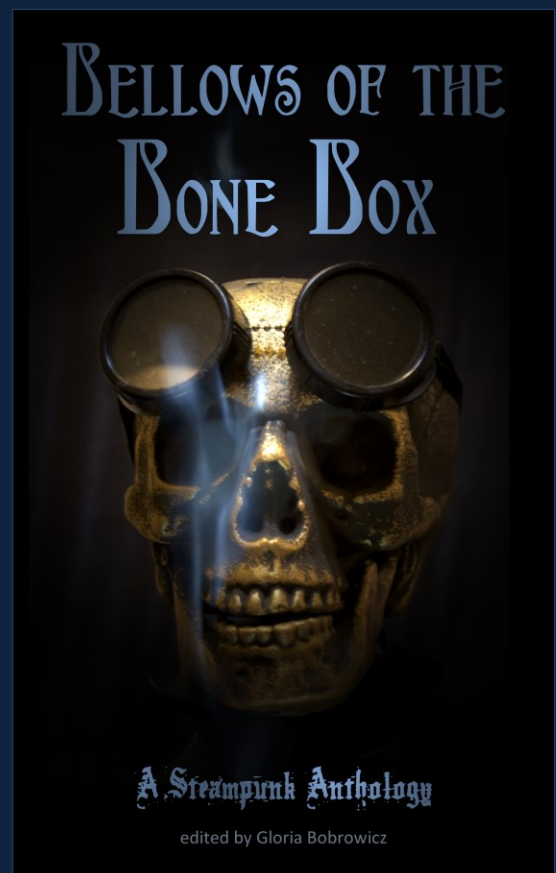
At Death's door souls mingle
Forsakened messengers linger
Harpies sing a mournful lament
While banshees remain silent

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Shawn D. Standfast is a Canadian living in the United Kingdom. Shawn has a background in Archaeology and book selling. After a near 25 year dry spell he began writing poetry again in 2013. His interests include Silent Film, Louise Brooks, Old Time Radio and Books.

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Sudden Death | DJ Tyrer

Accident
Unexpected
One moment
Walking
Talking
Brain doesn't even register it
Soul torn free
Just keeps on going
As if still alive
Thinking still alive
Takes time to realise
Something is wrong
So wrong
Nobody seems to see them
Nobody seems to hear them
Perhaps a dog or cat stares
They feel no breeze
Seem unable to touch
Memories hazy
A disjointed existence
Until
At last
The Collector comes for them

Question | DJ Tyrer

Lost soul in the void
Between worlds
Seeks solace in loved ones
Left behind
Séance
The medium calls to them
Relatives weep
Pose questions
Answers with a question of their own:
"Where am I?"

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The Curve | *Julianne Snow*

Around the curve, you'll find me. Wandering. Aimless. Waiting.

That curve was the death of me—well at least the speed of it was. A small calculation, then a recalculation, followed by the screech of rubber on slick asphalt, ending in the raucous disintegration of form as metal folded around the tree in the pantomime of a lover's embrace.

If you're lucky, you'll see me, my thumb extended to catch a ride, in the brazen glare of your headlights as you round the corner.

But fail to catch a glimpse of me, and you won't count yourself lucky at all...

My Stick | *Nina D'Arcangela*

You see that stick? The second one on the right... that's my stick; it's just before the curve. It's hard to see among all the other sticks, but that one's mine. I added the second reflector. I wouldn't want my husband to get lost when he came searching for it, when he brought flowers to kneel and cry before it – I wouldn't want him to have the excuse. It's where he pushed me from the speeding car in a drunken rage. One crack and my head split wide open against a tree. Yeah, I wouldn't want him to miss it...



“Carl? Are you awake?”

Bright fluorescent lights met his opening eyes. Squinting at their sterile glow, he tried to stop his head from spinning, tried to regain focus, but the dancing spots in the air would not relent. They twirled, full of life and color, appearing and disappearing in a nauseating performance.

A pallid face then hovered over him, its hard features unfamiliar.

“Where am I?”

“You’re in a hospital,” the stranger replied. “You were in an accident.”

“Who are you?” Carl asked.

“I’m Doctor Beherit. I’ve been treating you since you came in. You were in a coma.”

The word struck a chord in his spine, the icy notes travelling to the base of his skull, ringing inside like an orchestra. *Coma...* “How long?”

“It’s been a week.”

Relief came in waves, drowning out the insane music fear had played in his head. Years of his life had not been lost, and he could be thankful for that.

“Was it the train? Did it derail?”

“Yes. All things considered, you’re a lucky man.”

“I’m not feeling too lucky, Doc.”

“I’m sure you aren’t. But you’re here, and that’s what’s important.”

He supposed the doctor was right. He was alive after all. But he couldn’t help thinking of how many might have died. He considered asking, but thought better of it.

“Which hospital is this?”

“You’re in good old Sussenfolk.”

“Sussenfolk? I’ve never heard of it.”

Dr. Beherit smiled. “Of course not! Only people ever heard of Sussenfolk are Sussenfolk. You know,” he wiggled his eyebrows up and down, “the locals.”

Carl forced a laugh at the doctor’s humor. “I see. Small town, then?”

“Small enough. I think you’ll like it.”

“Well I won’t be staying. I was on my way to Albany.”

“Oh, but sir. I need to run some tests. You took a nasty bump to the head. You won’t be leaving today.”

Carl let out a deep sigh and began tapping his fingers on the bedside table. “I should at least call my family and let them know I’m ok.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but the phone lines are down. Train knocked them out.” He curled a fist and shot it horizontally through the air, imitating the train. “They should be up in the next day or so.”

“What about a cell phone?”

“Sorry, no towers here. The mountains block the signal.” The doctor lifted his palms and held them flat in the air. “Total dead zone. I know this is difficult, but you’ll be okay. Why don’t you take a walk? The air will do you good.”

“Okay, I think I will.”

Outside, the sky hung dull and overcast, the air cold and bitter, and the few trees which stood—devoid of leaves—were mere skeletons of their former selves. The neighborhood looked like the remnants of a city torn apart by war. Buildings appeared to be crumbling apart, giving

way to years of neglect. Trash scattered everywhere told him there were no proud homeowners for miles. *Must be a dead part of town*, Carl thought. *There aren't even any people around.*

The further he walked the more alien his surroundings became. Although he didn't see anyone else, there seemed to be an ominous presence, as if something watched from behind broken and boarded up windows.

Then he saw something move behind one of those windows—nothing more than a quick flicker of shadow, most likely conjured by his imagination. But still his heart raced.

He ran to the front door and knocked. He waited, listening to see if he could hear anyone inside. When he went to knock again the door squealed on its rusty hinges and swung open.

Carl called into the eerily silent house. "Hello?"

He stepped inside, determined to know if anyone was home. The house didn't look like anyone lived in it, although nothing around the town appeared to be in livable condition. He checked the entire first floor and found no one.

He made his way upstairs and started checking the bedrooms. After all, it was in one of the upstairs windows that he thought he saw movement. The first two rooms he checked were completely empty save for a leaky ceiling and a puddle on the floor.

When he opened the door to the third bedroom he was shocked to see a little girl's room. The walls were pink, and looked freshly painted. The furniture was white and shined with showroom cleanliness. The bed sheets featured polka dots, their color matching the rest of the room. He thought it very out of place. It was a normal room surrounded by abnormally poor conditions.

He heard a child's laughter behind him and turned to look, but saw no one in the hallway. When he turned back the beautiful room was gone. It looked like everything else. There was no furniture, no fresh paint, just bare, mildewed walls and a filthy carpet.

He thought maybe that bump on the head was more serious than the doctor thought. Anxious to get back to the hospital he quickened his pace. The neighborhood looked bad enough during the day, he was afraid of what it might be like when it got dark. Somehow he doubted it would be any different, considering the absence of people.

From the glow of light ahead he figured he must be close. He rounded the corner expecting to see the hospital, but instead there stood a convenience store with large windows all along the front. When he looked in, there didn't appear to be any shoppers and the parking lot stood as barren as a desert. But he did see a cashier. He felt so relieved to see another human being he almost started laughing and shouting out loud.

He stepped through the automatic sliding glass doors. The store was lit by halogen bulbs suspended from the ceiling. The aisles were long and narrow, and everything covered in a thick layer of dust. The cashier only stared emptily at him from dark, tired eyes. *Must be working long hours*, Carl thought.

There wasn't much on the shelves. More empty space than anything. There also didn't seem to be much order to where items were placed. Canned foods, kitchen utensils, rubber gloves, and a screwdriver were all thrown together on one shelf; a loaf of bread, shoe laces, and a bar of soap on another.

After looking around for a while he found a bottle of water and some crackers. He didn't trust the food but his throat felt dry and his stomach yearned for sustenance.

"Good evening," he said to the cashier as he rang up his items.

The cashier only made a grunting sound.

Carl thought he was rude but didn't want to start complaining. He just wanted to get back, eat, and rest. He left the store with his bag and continued in the direction of the hospital.

As the moon finally rose and the shroud of night came to cover the sky, the ominous feeling in Carl's gut grew stronger. He felt a presence watching him intently from darkened windows and alleys between buildings. An unexplainable dread came over him that whatever might be watching him was doing so with inhuman hunger. He could almost see shadows moving along the walls and inside the buildings but when he tried to look directly at them they disappeared.

He stopped when a shadowy form scuttled across the street ahead. It ran from right to left, into an alley between two apartment buildings. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead and trickled down the bridge of his nose. He pulled his bag of groceries close to himself, bringing his elbows in against his sides.

Inching his way forward at first, and then walking quickly, he broke into a sprint, hoping to evade whatever might be lurking in the dark. He didn't stop running until he reached the hospital and was safely in the lobby.

Nightmares plagued his sleep that night. He dreamed he ran through the streets with his bag of groceries, being chased by someone in the shadows. The bag ripped and his groceries spilled out onto the cracked pavement. As he tried to pick them up a large insect-like creature came upon him and bit into his abdomen with its giant pinchers, severing his body in half.

Carl awoke, cold and soaked with sweat. He tried to go back to sleep but sleep wouldn't come. The hard mattress of the hospital bed under his back, he lied and pondered the events since he'd come out of the coma. If only he'd been met there by a family member or someone he knew maybe things wouldn't seem so horrible. Loneliness had become his only companion in a dreary, disintegrating world.

Figuring it his best option, Carl decided to see the doctor as soon as he could the next morning.

In the cafeteria getting breakfast, Carl was appalled by the other patients. One was a woman whose arm had turned a slimy, green color, and looked more like a tentacle than an arm. Others had strange growths on the faces and bodies. One man even looked as though he had grown horns out of his head. Most of them had blank expressions of their faces, as though they weren't bothered by their deformities.

After what felt like hours--there was no clock in his room--a nurse finally came in. He demanded to see Dr. Beherit.

"I'll let him know you want to see him."

The nurse left him alone, and again he waited. His nerves crept up the walls, scratching and clawing their way to the ceiling. As they brought it down piece by piece a violent heat surged through his body and the room felt smaller--and smaller still. It took everything he had not to walk out and run as fast as his tired feet would take him.

"So what's the problem?" Beherit asked as he entered the room.

"I'm not sure," he answered. "I think I'm seeing things. I feel confused. Nothing seems right. I'm worried there might be something seriously wrong with me."

"Don't worry my friend." Beherit sounded excessively friendly. "All your tests came back with wonderful results. You couldn't be healthier! I know it's hard to cope but you'll be on your way home soon and you'll feel much better."

"I sure hope so."

"Don't worry, you will."

The doctor went to leave but Carl stopped him. “Doc...” He hesitated, afraid to ask the question. “What happened here? Why is everything so messed up?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” the doctor said, sounding concerned.

“Why are all the houses and buildings in town vacant and ruined? Why aren’t there any people around? It all feels so wrong.”

“It only feels wrong because you’re not from here and you were in a terrible accident. You’ll be fine, I’m sure of it. You just need some rest.”

“What’s with some of the people here? I was in the cafeteria this morning and some of them looked deformed.”

Just a nasty little virus going around. Don’t worry yourself too much.”

Carl was left alone with his frustration. He didn’t get any answers. He didn’t trust the doctor. There had to be something he wasn’t telling him.

That night he dreamt that a rough patch of skin on his back had turned into a large growth. When he tried to scratch the itch it burst open. Green, foul smelling puss poured from the disgusting mass. When he tried to stand he fell to the floor and saw that his legs had become octopus-like tentacles and they merely squirmed on the carpet when he tried to move. His hands then bloated, the skin tearing and falling from the bones, which were forming into what appeared to be bright red lobster claws. He tried to scream but all that came out were the strange clicking noises an insect makes on a hot summer night.

He woke from the nightmare, the dull light of an overcast morning filling the musty hospital room. He was glad to see daylight and the end to the night. He stretched, already feeling somewhat better.

The growth on his back had become a sickly appendage with a single finger-like claw where a hand would normally have been. He thought for a moment that he should be shocked and horrified, but the feeling left him just as quickly as it came. He finally felt normal.

He was home.

He was Sussenfolk.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lee Forman is an author and third generation horror fan residing in the Hudson Valley, NY. His work can be found in various horror magazines as well as in a Halloween anthology titled *A Shadow of Autumn*. He’s currently writing a web series titled *Silence in the Willow Field*.

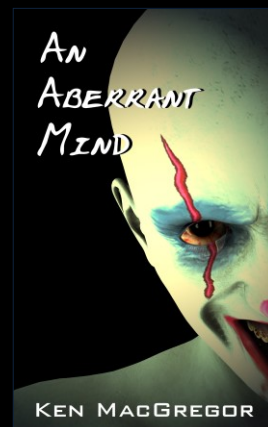
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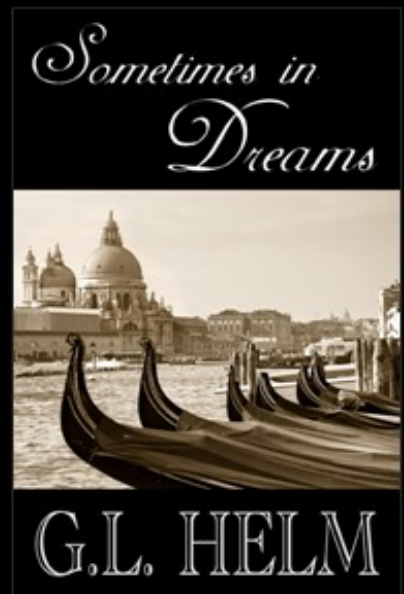
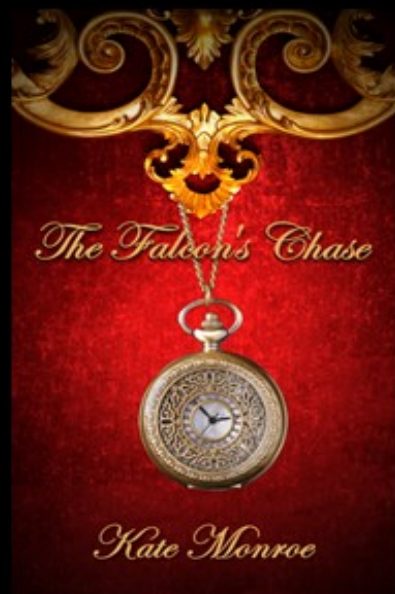
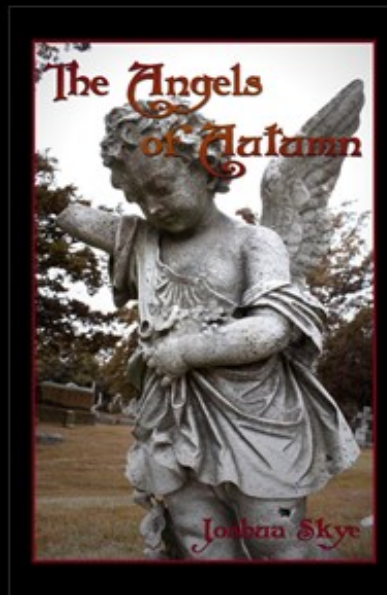
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Into The Blue | Jon Olson

"Hello there," a man's voice says.

I open my eyes and realize I'm standing on a pier. Snow lies in small, shoveled heaps along the edges and the sky is a cloudless grey. It looks cold yet I feel nothing.

"I bet you're wondering why you're naked."

Looking down I see that he is right but find no need to cover up. Turning to my right, I see him.

He's an older man with thin, white hair combed to the side. Thick rimmed glasses rest upon his nose magnifying his green eyes.

"My name's Horton," he says extending his hand. "It's nice to meet you, Herman Trotter."

"How do you know who I am?"

"There's no easy way to say it so I'll just come out with it. *You're dead.*"

I blink twice. "Dead?"

"Unfortunately. What's the last thing you remember?"

Thinking back, I easily find the memory. "I was filling my truck up with gas."

Horton nods and says, "While you were filling your truck, two rival gangs got into a shootout. A bullet ricocheted off of the pavement and penetrated your skull just behind your right ear. You were dead before you hit the ground."

I take the information in stride, somehow knowing that it to be true. Looking at the pier, snow and the sky nothing here seems alive, myself included.

"I'm surprised you haven't asked yet," Horton says.

"Asked what?"

"If you're in heaven or hell."

"I'm a... *was* an atheist. I'd never given much thought to where I would end up after I died."

Horton laughs and says, "Some atheists are like that. You may not believe in a god but you still have a soul and when your physical body expires, your soul has to go somewhere."

"Where exactly is that?"

He places his hand on my back between my shoulder blades and gently ushers me down the pier. "To the *Blue*."

For the first time since I arrived, I look out beyond the end of the pier.

It's unbelievable.

On first glance it looks like the ocean with waves rolling about, gently lapping against rocks along the shore. I then notice that it's navy blue in color with streaks of aqua green and black cutting through its jelly-like texture at various intervals. Beneath the surface, flashes of white flicker like lightning.

"What is it?" My voice is barely a whisper.

"That, my friend, is the resting place for mankind's atheist souls. Good or bad, they all come here in the end."

I have a strong urge to leap off of the pier into it.

"What's your role in this?" I ask.

"I'm the administrator. It's my job to keep track of who goes into the Blue."

"How do you do that?"

Horton reaches into his inner coat pocket, pulling out a folded paper and gold pen. "Whenever someone new arrives, they must sign this registration before they go in."

Although I don't want to, I pull my eyes away from the Blue and look at him. "Is that it?" Horton nods with a grin and says, "Alexander the Great asked me the same question before he went in and yes, that's it."

My eyes find their way back to the Blue while I reach out for the pen. Gripping it in my hand, I barely manage to scribble my name along the dotted line.

"Very good," Horton says. He folds the paper up and slides it back inside his coat. "Whenever you're ready, you may jump."

I'm already in the air falling towards the Blue before he gets the words out.

There is no splash.

The sensation of falling is instantly replaced by bliss. My eyes are open and while I don't see anyone, I connect with them; with everyone in the Blue. Time stands still as I fully accept the Blue's embrace.

Below me is a flash.

I don't think much of it until the searing pain hits me.

We all cry out without making a sound.

Another flash flickers below, but closer.

And I see it.

Swimming amidst the Blue is a translucent eel-like shape with a large mouth. It emits a flash each time its mouth opens exposing row upon row of teeth.

It's taking bites out of the Blue.

I begin swimming... struggling towards the surface. Finally breaking through, I cry out, "Horton!"

The old man is still standing on the pier and he looks down at me, puzzled.

"Why Mister Trotter," he says. "Whatever is the matter?"

"What the hell is in here with us?"

I briefly slip below the surface but rise up again.

"We call them the Translucies."

"They're eating us!"

Horton laughs and says, "Well of course they are. How else do you expect us to maintain the maximum number of souls allowed in the Blue at one time?"

He begins saying something else but I don't hear his words as I slip below the surface... down into the Blue.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jon Olson works full time as a Security Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L. Stanfield International Airport and is an author of horror and dark fiction. He is a proud member of Pen of the Damned and the Horror Writers Association (Affiliate Level). He resides in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his wife, daughter and three cats.

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

Blog: <http://www.jonolsonauthor.com>

Glass Shards | *Jae Malone*

My fingers twitched, but there was nothing to reach for. Silence, and the dark. There was nothing else.

Is this what oblivion felt like? This total lack of sensation? The air was tasteless, held interest only because I wasn't sure if I was breathing. And touch? Nothing to feel except for smooth walls that bulged outward as if they curved. Perfect. Not a single rough edge to give the wall any character. I'd pressed my shoulder against the wall 239 times since I first lost count, paced around the circle the cage offered until I couldn't move anymore. I slept.

But this nothing was better than the other, when cold light bled into the space and my senses exploded. The world jostled and pain ensnared me and then it threw me back into nothing.

How many more times until my mind shattered?

Would I even care?

Anything was better than this unstable concoction of dark and light, numb and pain. I wanted it to end.

I pressed my shoulder against the invisible barrier. 240. I walked until my legs gave out beneath me. I hit the floor with what should have been damaging force. No thump, no scrape of my shoulder as it slid down the wall.

Nothing.

Always nothing.

Not even pain in the endless black.

I threw my head back and screamed. The force of sound shoved through my vocal chords should have stripped them, should have burst through the emptiness like a striking missile, but I wasn't even granted a whisper.

Sobs wracked my chest. I pounded my sternum with numb hands, and felt nothing. I tipped over, back curved against the wall. I longed to be part of it. Did the walls feel? Would I? Perhaps I'd be able to sense another person walking along the wall for the 240th time. Maybe they would lose count and have to begin again. Maybe I could sense their vibrations and hear their thoughts or feel the pressure of their weight against me. But there wasn't anyone else outside my jail.

I was alone.

I opened my eyes to more darkness. Or did I? There was nothing but stygian pressure. The solid barrier pressed against my back. I guessed this because I leaned into the surface and didn't fall. I got to my feet and started 240... No—241.

I counted 337 steps, the best approximation for the circumference of the room, and I counted it 6 times.

Life burst into existence with the sudden presence of light. I flung an arm over my eyes at the sudden stab of pain as the light drilled into me. My skin tingled, burned from the return of temperature. First biting cold and then so hot the glass wavered. The room moved like a long-dead elevator shocked into life.

"Where are you going?"

Melanie's voice swept through me like a discordant note, sharp, stinging. More of me died.

I failed her. She died, and now where the fuck was I? Dead, I knew, just like Melanie, but I couldn't remember how I died or how I got to purgatory or why I was here. And she shouldn't be here, couldn't be here. Not if this was purgatory.

I dropped my arms, the light still piercing. I answered but my voice, coming from nowhere, answered for me.

“Work, honey. I’ll be late so don’t wait up, okay?”

The only real thing in this place was pain. It clung to my body until it held me trapped in a vise.

Not this. Please, not this. Not again. I can’t do it again.

“Hanging out at a bar with your friends is not work.” Accusation dripped from her voice like the water in the upstairs sink. I forgot to fix it again, or so she said, but I didn’t have the money for the new ring. I needed to get to the gig, and I needed it so desperately I ignored the dangerous look, the look that meant she was losing herself again.

“It’s a paying gig, Mel,” I said. I slipped into my jacket and walked to her.

She stood in the kitchen doorway with her arms crossed over her chest. Her hair hung in a knotted tangle about her face and she hadn’t changed her clothes in a few days.

Had I missed the signs? Or had I just ignored them? I’d been so worried about the little things - getting the rent paid, food, that damned sink - that I’d let things slip.

Or I’d just gotten tired of putting her back together.

I cringed away from myself, but I can’t retreat from my thoughts, can’t hide from them in a place of complete emptiness. Thoughts hunted with the mindless hunger of self-destruction.

“But you’ll come home?” She sounded so lost, as if that big personality couldn’t fit in the tiny little body she’d been given and it was slipping away from her. I knew it then. I know it now. And I didn’t do a fucking thing.

“Always.” I’d tipped her chin up so I could kiss the tip of her nose. I loved that nose. “I’ll take care of breakfast, baby. You try and get some rest.” I ignored the sour scent that rose from her clothes as I bent to cup her face between my hands. “Homemade kolaches. The donuts you like. Fresh squeezed orange juice.”

She smiled, and the frozen shards of green in her eyes thawed. “That sounds delicious.” But the shadows clung to her eyes, the shadows that never faded when reality hurt too much and she ruptured under the strain.

I held her tight against my body, and hummed a soft song. She giggled, and her shoulders hunched slightly at the brush of warm air across her ear before she relaxed into me. I had her then, held her together with my embrace. I waltzed her slowly around the worn-out kitchen until I pressed her gently into the counter. I lowered my lips but let her reach up to me before I kissed her, before I tried to chase away the stress and the pain and those damned shadows from her eyes.

“Try to get some rest, okay, baby? I’ll be home as soon as I can, and I promise to fix the sink tomorrow.”

Melanie’s smile lit the world. “You’d better.”

The lights flickered, and I glanced at the fixture above us. Glowing steady. Flick-flick-flick, and with each flick, the light dimmed a little more. The heat faded to cold.

And then to nothing.

“No.” I reached to draw Melanie against me. I wouldn’t let them take her this time, but she was already gone. I held only emptiness.

“Melanie?”

But she didn’t return. Something didn’t feel right. I looked down at my empty hands. Warmth and light faded. Cold set in, then burned, and then finally settled into a full body numbness that took over as my world plunged into darkness.

397.

It was only a matter of time before the world would fill with sensation again. I craved it like a junkie willing to do anything for my next little taste. I paced and paced until my legs gave out and then I crawled and when I couldn't crawl anymore, I drifted in the darkness, drifted in the numb, sensationless world of my little glass room.

Everything shifted.

The air warmed and the darkness became less solid. This fucking time, I was going to figure out what the hell was going on. Always Melanie, and then she was just gone. But why? And why the anesthetized world?

I had to save her this time.

I jerked awake to screaming. Melanie stood above me in the same dirty clothes. The knife clutched in her hand was new. Was that how she had done it? Had she slashed her wrists? Pills? I didn't remember.

Why didn't I remember?

"Stop, baby. Please. Come here." I reached for her hand but my fingers slid through her. She continued to scream. The knife in her hand trembled as she placed it against her forearm.

"No." I lunged for her. I had to get my hands on the knife. I wasn't going to let her kill herself. Not again. Not this time. Not with a knife or with a rope or however she did it.

I smashed into the wall. My nose crunched and blood dripped into my mouth.

The blood quenched a thirst I hadn't realized I had. The coppery taste flooded my senses, but I turned back to Melanie. She stood with her head down, the knife held loosely in one hand. No wounds. She hadn't hurt herself yet.

"Melanie?"

"Where are you going?"

I was at the door with no memory of how I got there. I shrugged into my jacket despite the confusion. Melanie lingered in the doorway to the kitchen. No knife. She stood there as she had so many times before.

"Work, honey," I said but I hadn't said it. My mouth hadn't moved. The replay was beginning again.

How can I stop it?

I followed through the motions. Reassured her. Kissed her. Danced with her. I held her tighter.

This time, she wasn't going to be taken away from me. This time, I was going to figure out what the hell was going on, what I was supposed to do.

Was I supposed to do anything at all?

"Try to get some rest, baby, okay?"

I grabbed my guitar and walked out the door. I don't know where I went, what I did, but I walked back through the door to the apartment. All the lights were off except for the one in the bathroom. Had she rested? Maybe she took a bath, put on clean clothes.

I sat my guitar by the door and took off my jacket before heading toward the bathroom. The gig went well. The take was larger than we planned so I might be able to take care of more than just the rent and the dripping of the sink. Maybe I could buy Melanie a little something special, let her know how much I loved her because sometimes she forgot, only for a little while, and she needed a small reminder.

“Mel...”

She turned from the shattered mirror with jagged shards clutched in her hands. Blood dotted her face and a large cut oozed on her temple. I rushed forward.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was so small, so lost, so hollow as if her soul had been sucked out of her body. “I didn’t mean to do it. I was just looking in the mirror and then...”

“It’s okay, baby.” I led her away from the glass and helped her sit on the edge of the tub. “Let’s get you cleaned up. That cut might need stitches.”

“No.”

“It can’t be left untreated.”

She shut down, hunched into herself and wouldn’t look at me. Pouting was fine. Pouting was better than raging, a sign the storm eased inside of her. If I led her gently, she’d be fine, and then I could convince her to go see the doctor again. She was probably off her meds.

She’d felt good, stable, decided she didn’t need them anymore. It would take months for her to stabilize again.

“The gig was good. How would you like to go to dinner at Caroline’s tomorrow night? You love her gumbo.” I cleaned the large cut. It wasn’t as deep as I’d feared. The face always bleeds so much. Medical glue would seal the cut, and she’d be fine.

Melanie stayed hunched as I finished tending her wounds. Her eyes seared my back as I put away the first aid kit and cleaned up the glass. She padded across the tile in her bare feet until she stood next to me. I lifted my arm and she slid underneath it, tucked herself against my side, rested her head against my chest.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know.” I brushed my lips across her temple.

Pain.

Warm light bled red. I couldn’t breathe past fluid-filled lungs. Then cold, then dark.

Then nothing.

I’d lost count again, but it didn’t matter. I wasn’t walking anymore. There was no use. Melanie was dead. I couldn’t remember how, but I knew she committed suicide and I hadn’t been there. I’d ignored the warning signs and thought, it’ll be okay. She’ll be fine if I can just get the bills paid, and then I can make sure.

And now I had to relive every minute of what happened. Real and imagined. I couldn’t save her then. I couldn’t save her now. The scene replayed as it desired, and I had no control.

No control over when it came. No control over how it went. No control of when it would release me into blissful nothing.

I don’t know how long I sat in the empty glass world, but the lights and heat came. I’d never looked up before. I’d hidden from what might be waiting. It could be Melanie. She could have trapped me and tormented me the way she was tormented, but I knew there was nothing.

I tipped my head back. Light. The ceiling was too high for me to reach. The walls were smooth glass and curved, like a ball. I couldn’t climb it and I couldn’t jump. I couldn’t reach whatever existed beyond my cell.

“Where are you going?”

“Nowhere, baby.” I opened my arms. “Come here. I’m not going anywhere.”

The apparition hesitated.

“Mel, come here.”

She turned toward me. Tangled hair and dirty clothes, but this time there was no knife, no means by which to kill herself again. Her hands were empty.

I smiled and held out my hand to her. She hesitated, but she always came. Whenever she unraveled, she became as skittish as a wild animal. If I was patient, she would come to me, but if I stalked her, she'd unravel faster.

Melanie took one step closer and then paused. "Jivin?"

"Yes, baby. I'm here."

No.

She wasn't going to be taken from me this time. I held my hand steady. It was never my guitar my hands longed for, but her, for that last touch we never got to share.

"Are you real?"

"I don't know," I said. "Are you?" Please, God. Please let her be real. Take anything. Take everything. Let it be her.

"I don't know." She shuffled forward and almost touched my hand. An inch, and I was afraid to close that distance. If she disappeared again, I'd break, as shattered as the mirror she'd used to cut up...

Oh. God.

My hand trembled and she stepped back. I snapped my fingers closed about her wrist. Solid. She didn't fade. "Not this time. You aren't leaving me this time."

"I never left, Jivin."

She shoved a glass shiv into my chest. "You did."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jae lives in Texas with a menagerie, including teenagers, dogs, cats, and Shatner the Turtle. She reviewed her BA in English from the University of Maryland University College and expects to be awarded her M.F.A. in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. In her free time, Jae enjoys reading, music, games of all kinds, and telling stories.

Facebook: [Jae L. Malone](#)



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It's Come for Me | Paul Edward Fitzgerald

It's come for me. I knew it would come for me again someday. And I should have been more prepared than I am now laying here in this bed, alone. I'm sick, you see. I've been sick for quite some time now. Sickly and alone; and that's why it's come for me.

It looms over me now like a black, translucent mist that rapes my very lungs when I try my damndest to inhale. And that's when I realize there is no air anymore; only *it* remains.

I'm not ready. I know I'm not and it does too. And I'm not going to simply let it take me without a fight. If it were to be that simple, I would have died long ago when it first came for me.

I first encountered it after my first heart attack. I told everyone about it. I told them how it was there, seeping through the walls about me and trying to swallow me whole. They all scoffed at me.

"It was just the drugs," they said. "Just a hallucination." And you know what? For a while I believed them.

I encountered it once more when the cancer came. And just as the cancer mutated the very cells within my body, this darkness mutated my quality of life and tried with all its wicked might to snuff the light within me out. But I didn't let it take me then and it won't take me now.

It's getting colder now. I can feel its icy breath upon my face and its chilling touch seeping its way up my every limb. I don't open my eyes for I dare not look up and see it, gazing at me and into my very soul.

My chest is heavy. It sits upon me, crushing the life out of me. The room is now spinning about me. Any light that was once around me is now engulfed in darkness. Its darkness has filled my world and there is nothing left.

I can feel a slight comfort and warmth now. It actually feels good. I am feeling sleepy and safe. Perhaps if I just fall asleep...

No.

No! I won't! This is just exactly what it wants me to feel! It wants to lull me into a false sense of comfort and release before it takes me to Hell with it. Well I'm not going. I'm not!

It is strong. Almost too strong! But I must push upward! I must get it off me and force its hideous blackness out of my lungs. I must do what my weak wife and pathetic son before me could not do. I must defeat it and have it leave empty handed and without my soul for its collection. And I will! This *thing* will leave with nothing tonight except another failed attempt at taking me.

I spring forth, feeling myself peel away from the bed beneath me. I can see now for the first time and I see the black and smoky being hovering everywhere about me.

"Get out! GET OUT! You cannot have me!"

The darkness... It's seeping out through the walls from once it came. The light is returning. I can see again.

It *failed*. My God, it came for me and it failed.

I can see the daylight now, shining through the old window into my bedroom. I feel strong enough to go and look out. In fact, I haven't felt so strong in quite some time. There is an ease to my movement and my elderly, tired bones don't seem to ache any longer. Could it be that my health is restored? Did defeating *it* restore me so?

Wait...

What's that?

I hear footsteps.

There are footsteps on the stairs.
It is back. I should have known it would return. This confrontation was too easily won. I merely won a battle and now it has returned for the war and to claim me.
But what is this?
A child?
“Who are you? What the hell are you doing in my house?”
Why does he just stare on at me? How did he even find his way into my house? He’s no more than an infant.
“Where is your mother? Answer me!”
He’s running away now, crying. And I can hear a woman’s voice as well. How did this woman and her son get into my house? What rights have they?
“How did you get in here?”
She is silent.
Well?
God damn it! What is she looking at? Can’t she hear me? Can’t she *see* me?
“Are you stupid? Why are you here? Why are you in my house?”
“Are you blind, woman? I’m right in front of you! Why are you telling him there’s no one here when here I stand before you, you bitch!”
What... What are these boxes doing here? They were not here last night...
“What the Hell is going on here? You answer me this minute!”
“Do you hear me? ANSWER ME! YOU BITCH, ANSWER ME!”
I smash the mirror. That seems to get the message across. They are leaving now it seems. She is running outside to comfort her squalling brat.
Why are they here? Why are these boxes here? This is my home.
My God... This is *its* doing. *It* did this to me, that dark angel.
Could it be? Am I...
No. No! It’s simply not possible. I cannot be *that*. If I was I wouldn’t be here now in my house, my home of 30 years just as I should be, would I? And this is just where I’m going to stay! *It* couldn’t take me from here and if it couldn’t, there isn’t any man that will.
I’m not ready. I’m not ready and I’m not going anywhere!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Paul Edward Fitzgerald has always had a passion for writing and has always had a flare for tales of the macabre and the darker side of human nature and the world around us. He has always felt the best stories are those that come from a place of truth and writes primarily in the realm of LGBT interest, horror, and suspense.

Twitter: [@paulewardfitz4](https://twitter.com/paulewardfitz4)
Facebook: [Paul Edward Fitzgerald](https://www.facebook.com/PaulEdwardFitzgerald)





End of the Ride | *Rivka Jacobs*

The BMX bike bounced and wobbled as it sped along the dirt path of the short-cut that ran beside a rusty, barbwire fence bordering Elm Park woods. Simon Gonzalez pumped the pedals with his new, blue, Converse All-Stars. He'd gotten so used to the four-mile ride by now he could make his way home without paying too much attention to his surroundings, unless something was different, something changed.

He braked and planted his shoes on either side. He walked the bicycle a few feet, stopped. He scanned the field on his left. The late afternoon sun had disappeared behind some grey clouds. A slithery, cold breeze made the October leaves chatter, then scatter in circles. Simon looked behind him, then towards the woods on his right; he saw what was different.

The entire wire part of the fence was down, along this section. There were only bleached, tilted, lonely posts standing between Elm Park and himself. "Cool," he said. He lifted the front 20-inch wheel and turned the bicycle towards the trees. He glanced up at the sky; it would only take a few minutes to do a little exploring. He pushed his bike up a slight embankment, then through a narrow patch of overgrown grass and weeds. Soon he was winding around thorny brush and crooked trunks.

Simon halted, his heart pumping. He hesitated, looking over his shoulder. The place smelled musty and sharp. He forced himself to move forward another few feet.

"Hey there! Hey, over here!" exploded so suddenly that Simon reflexively yelped something like "Hey!" in return. He froze.

"Hey, do I know you? Are you from my school? I know you, don't I?" It was the voice of a boy.

"Where... where are you?" Simon answered. "I can't see anyone."

"Over here. Just keep going straight. See? See those steel poles? That scaffolding?"

Simon slowly obeyed. "Who are you?" he asked. He squeezed the handlebars of his bicycle and came to a stop; he could see splotchy saplings poking up through the openings between the elevated cross-ties of bent and twisted tracks, tangled vines and brambles choking the remains of wooden trestles.

"Over here," the boy said again. He was standing about twenty-five feet away, under the towering serpentine curve of a long section of parallel rails, in the middle of a thicket of soaring, charred wood and metal supports. Withered, spotted brown leaves swirled up and flew against him as a gust rushed through. "Isn't this place the shit?"

"Who are you?" Simon asked again.

"I know you. You're Gonzalez. You go to Mechanicsburg Middle School; you're in the sixth grade with me. We're in the same phys ed class. Are you coming from school? Do you have any food with you? I'm so hungry."

Simon propped his bike against a gnarled oak. "Uh, yeah. In my backpack," he answered. He slipped the bag off his shoulders, hung it from one fist, and began walking towards the other boy. Tangles of nettles tried to grab at his legs. He paused as he recognized the narrow, pale face, blonde buzz-cut, the white, long-sleeved t-shirt, now torn and dirty. "You're Perry. Perry McNaughton," he said. "You went missing."

"Whadda ya got there? What kind of food?" Perry asked, bending over, his face a mask of pain.

"Well, come here and find out," Simon answered.

"I can't," Perry said. "Bring it here."

"What do you mean, you can't?" Simon felt queasy. It was definitely getting dark. The wind coiled and sprang making branches and hanging track-beds sway while rusted girders and struts creaked and groaned. "I think a storm is coming. We need to get out of here."

"I can't. Please, man, give me some food!" Perry pleaded.

Simon stayed where he was. He swung his pack by one strap, back and forth, then let it fly; it landed at Perry's feet.

The other boy moved so quickly it was frightening; he ripped open the zipper, threw books and a binder in different directions, then yanked up a couple of SuperV juice pouches. He yelled, "Awesome," as he pulled out a bag of Sun Chips. He punched a hole in the drink, ignoring the straw, and began squeezing and pouring it into his upturned mouth, his Adam's-apple bobbing up and down. When he was done, he started in on the chips, smashing them between his lips like he hadn't eaten in days.

Simon couldn't help himself; the surprise and disgust showed on his face.

Perry paused, coughed. He attempted to laugh, his cheeks and chin caked with crumbs. "I ran away from home, okay? Now I can't go back."

Simon shook his head. "No, you gotta go back. People are looking for you. It's going to rain, you can't stay here."

Perry abruptly put down the foil bag. "Hey, do you know where you are? Do you know what this place is? Come here, let me show you something."

Simon shook his head again. "Give me my backpack, okay?"

"But it's so cool. This once was an amusement park. Elm Park had some of the best roller coaster rides in the world. This here, was the Wild Mouse ride. That was in 1960 something. You ever been on a Crazy Mouse?"

Simon nodded. "Yeah, in Atlantic City. It sure as hell didn't look like this."

Perry's eyes brightened. "Not as scary as this one. This was the biggest, baddest 'Crazy Mouse' in the country. But something happened. My grandpa told me about it years ago. There was an explosion, a fire, in the middle of the ride. And the whole thing wouldn't stop, and the people kept going around those sharp curves and down those drops, faster and faster, while the flames got bigger and burned them alive. Eighteen people were burned to death, or jumped out and got killed. Most of them were kids, about our age." He quieted and stared at Simon. His eyes looked dark and sunken. "Don't you want to see where they died?"

Simon took a step backwards. "Just give me my book-bag, please. I want to go home. You can come with me, okay?"

Perry tilted his head sideways. "Aw, come one. Don't you want to see where they died? There's old cars, what's left of them when they melted. With flesh burned on; they couldn't scrape all of it off. I wanted to see for myself, so I cut the barbwire and snuck on the property. I sat in those old cars, and you know, I could feel..." He tapered off.

"You could feel what?" Simon asked, feeling impatient now, and afraid of what his mother was going to do to him when he got home after dinnertime, and without his school stuff.

"I felt it move. I mean, it was like the ride was new and I was moving higher and higher, and then I flipped around the first turn and then I was spinning, falling, rising... listen, can you hear it?" His head bent back and he circled in place.

Simon thought he did hear something, besides the rattling of dry leaves and the rumble of approaching rain. It sounded like a faint cranking noise. There was barely any light. He also turned in place, craning his neck as he peered upward. The stilts and cross beams and loops of

track seemed to glow. He faced forward once more and yelled, “Holy shit!” as Perry was now a few feet in front of him.

He reached for Simon, tried to lean towards him as far as he could. “Please, come with me. Sit down, see what it’s like. You’ve come this far. You’re chicken. You’re scared,” he wheedled. Then he lunged.

Simon jumped and fell on his rear. “What the hell is wrong with you?” he shouted. He scrambled up, just out of reach. “Give me my backpack!” he demanded.

“Please, Gonzalez, please, don’t leave me here! Please, take a seat, take a ride. They want you to take a ride. If you take a ride with me, they’ll let me go home...” And he was on his knees, then he was crawling, inching forward as if something had hold of him by the ankles. His fingers caught the edge of a shoe.

Simon lost his balance again. He kicked at Perry until he was free of the boy’s grip, then he shoved himself away, sliding himself backward for a moment before leaping to his feet. He ran for his bicycle. When he reached it, lightning flared, and he couldn’t help himself, he looked back. Was Perry McNaughton there, gleaming white in the flash, his mouth open in a silent scream of terror as he was whisked away in a flaming car, up and up and around the first curve? Simon dropped his bike, his legs shaking. He loped as fast as he could—stumbling and crashing into unseen things—trying to find the dirt-path shortcut that led to his home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Rivka grew up in South Florida and currently lives in West Virginia. In the 1980s she published stories in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the *Far Frontiers* anthologies, and the *Women of Darkness* anthology, and more recently has placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Riding Light Review*, and the anthology *Out of Phase*. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

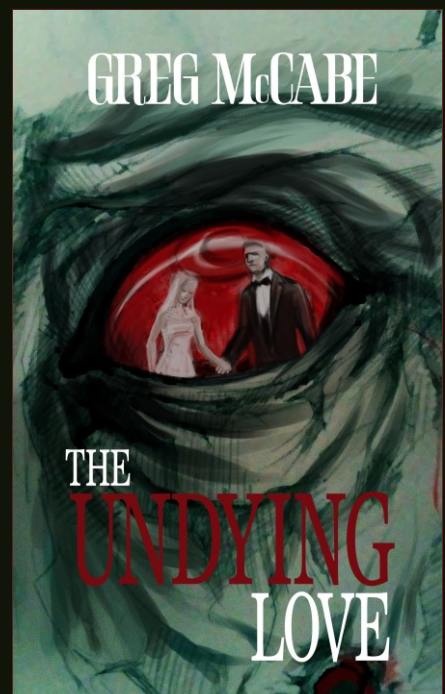
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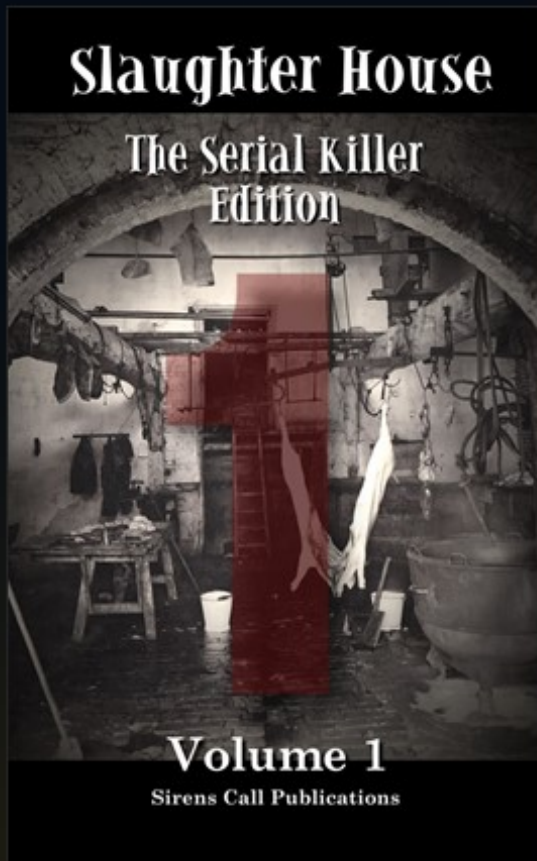
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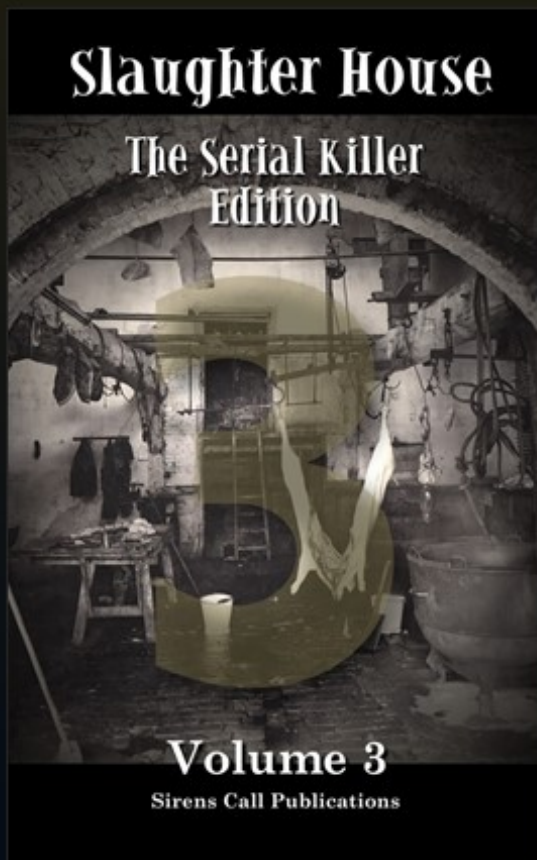
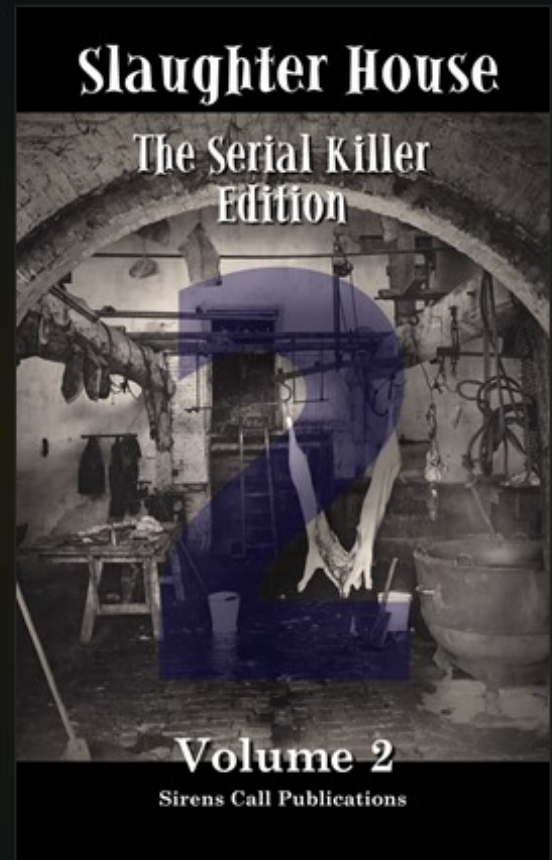
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The Whale | *Joe Young*

I have fished out my stream of consciousness, nothing left, not a minnow of a story, not even a sprat of suggestion, yet, as my deadline approaches, I need a whale.

Five thousand words in two days, I could do it, physically I have done more than that in an afternoon, and mentally I reel off stories as if my ocean was stocked to teeming. I could sit on Chapel Rock, gazing out at the apparently endless Atlantic, mesmerizing myself with the water. Pulling my creative shit together and getting some ozone up my nostrils, works better than a whole case of Red Bull. You might wonder what's holding me back, why I am not there right now, scribbling in a Moleskine notebook. I can't really face it anymore. I can't type a damned thing; all I can do is stare at the empty page, the cursor dancing in and out of sight, a vile mockery of my mental state. There was a time not so long ago when I made the cursor race across the page, leaving my created universes in its wake, there was a time... Last summer I blazed my trail bright, writing plenty, enough that my public was happy and my publisher happier. It was a good summer; the muse loved me and bestowed many gifts.

It was also the summer of Caroline Smith.

Maybe you've been to Perranporth, or at the very least you might have seen it on TV. It's in Cornwall and usually heavily featured on 'Seaside Rescue', mainly with surfers who get caught out by the undertow. Caroline Smith was an epic fail, she had climbed the rocks and taken a less than elegant dive. They say Caroline Smith climbed well, and her intention was to 'tombstone'. She'd done a successful first attempt and was going for a second one that her friends were going to YouTube later, but the footage they caught was of her slipping onto jagged rocks and cleaving her skull. Poor girl died on impact. Air-Ambulance flew out of Culdrose, too late of course for Caroline.

There's the usual inquest, and the usual verdict of misadventure. You can get 12,000 people sunning themselves there, and there's no shortage of folk who don't take any notice of the signs, flags and lifeguards. It's usually some guy who thinks safety rules are guidelines for the kids, and that he's too big a man to be caught by the undertow and stripped of his life.

Last September I had a project, some short for a magazine. Couple of thousand words on 'Pirate Legends of Cornwall', pretty standard fare, loads of local color for that one. I grabbed a Moleskine and a pen, then set out for Chapel Rock, it takes me ten minutes to walk there and climb the rock all the way, not a hard climb, but even if it was, I'd still have done it just to get my head on straight and let my muse take me. I sat scribbling notes about Jamaica Inn, it was around five a.m., enough light to see by and enough shadows to trick the eye (great for atmosphere), but the ghosts I saw that morning were not the bending of light or floating of shadows, they were the dead of the beach. I sat watching them for quite some time, not thinking to write down what I was looking at, in truth too scared to stop looking just in case they vanished by the time I looked back. I remember shuddering, my breath stuck in my chest, locked tight to the spot in frozen fear. I can feel it again now, I just looked behind myself to see if I am alone, which I know I am, but after what I experienced on the beach that morning I can't really be sure of anything anymore. This is my problem, my friends always think I am making this stuff up, that it's just another of my stories that I should write down and send off, but I can't do that. They have no idea what it was like. The ghosts came in from the sea, not in a mist like in horror films, but just as if they were normal people, except for the baby, that was just, well, I can't even find the right words for what that was. It washed up on the beach as if it was some sort of obscene screaming driftwood, all pale and bloated. I didn't spot it at first, too far away, but after the

ghosts left the water and kept walking I saw the baby being flipped and rolled, dragged and re-floated as the water lapped. I didn't know it was a baby at first, but it seemed as though the harder I looked at it, the clearer I could hear the poor thing crying. That broke me out of my fear, I stuffed my Moleskine in my pocket, dropping the pen but not sticking around to retrieve it as it bounced into the man-made swimming pool near the top of the rocks. I made my way to the edge of Chapel Rock so I could climb down and run like hell.

My descent halted.

On the rocks below, climbing up toward me was Caroline Smith.

I recognized her from all of the media coverage; she hadn't changed from being the pretty little teenager in the news. No damage, no phantom appearance. She looked like any normal kid, solid, tangible. I didn't know what I expected to see, but somehow that wasn't on the list. I stepped back, she advanced. I didn't know what the fuck to do next; she just kept on coming at me. I looked for another way down, they are all pretty dangerous at the best of times, and this wasn't one of them. The half-light made the ways treacherous, but I know Chapel Rock well enough to take a different exit. You are probably thinking that the other ghosts were climbing to me as well, blocking off my other escape routes, but that didn't happen. I don't know what would have happened if I had just stayed there with ghosts climbing the rocks to get at me. What would they do? I mean, it's not like they want revenge on me or anything, dragging me away into the ocean, making me wish I had learned to swim. What would I do? I'll never know that now, mainly because muse or no muse I'll never get back up on that fucking rock ever again, that's for sure.

I made it down. The ghosts ignored me, going about routines as if they were alive, some running along the beach, some talking, laughing, and some even sunbathing, no proper sun yet, but that didn't seem to bother them. One flipped a towel to lie on, no towel, not that I could see anyway, but the motions were there. It was as though these dead people were trapped in time, holding moments from before death and replaying their final happiness. The ghosts seemed to take me in as just another person on the beach. The baby was easier to see, I walked over toward it, poor little bastard's cries mingled with splutters as the ocean filled her lungs before rolling her over to once more get a breath. I reached down to scoop her up, lifted her a little, only to have her pour through my fingers and reintegrate in the water's edge. I looked around, called out for the child's mother. Stupid I know, but it was instinctive. Obviously her mom wasn't there, they hadn't died together. I knelt on the wet sand and kept trying to pick the baby up, but it was like sifting flour. I don't remember crying, but I know that I must have as my eyes were red and puffy; my nose had been running too. I was hoarse from shouting for the mother to come and help me, and then I shouted for anyone, just any of the ghosts to get the baby out of the water. No help came. I ran up to some of the ghosts, talked to them, but was ignored. I know it's not logical, that I was on the beach, trying to save the 'life' of a ghost, but can you honestly say you wouldn't do the same? You weren't there; you can't know what it's like to be in that position, even me explaining this to you isn't going to give you any more of a clue. You have no idea how frustrating it is to be unable to help end the suffering of a dead baby, to halt the screaming.

I must have been there a while as the sun came up, nothing else changed. The ghosts didn't fade away or retreat into the shadows or back into the Ocean. They just did the same stuff they did before. I saw a real living human, some woman walking a dog. On instinct I ran to her, she saw me running, I must have seemed pretty scary as she yelled at me to stay back and reeled her dog in closer, the dog barked and growled, savage protection in its eyes. I almost shouted, told the woman I needed help, but I couldn't tell her, I just couldn't say anything about the ghosts or

the baby. Nobody would have believed me. What if they did? They still wouldn't have been able to do anything about it; they'd have been just as helpless as I was. I gave her a 'never mind' shake of my head and ran back to Chapel Rock, passing ghosts on the way indistinguishable from normal people except by their actions, which were repetitive. A figure headed toward me, it was Caroline, she smiled and waved, I turned, half expecting to see her friends standing behind me, filming her on a cellphone. Nobody was there but the ghosts and more dog-walkers. Caroline kept waving. Caught up in a stupid moment I waved back. That was when she spoke.

I'll do my best to remember what was actually said, I think she started with something like... 'So you DO see me... I was starting to freak... My name's Caroline...'

I think I replied with 'Are you talking to me?' which is a bit "Taxi Driver" in retrospect. She confirmed she was and was upset when I turned my back on her on Chapel Rock. I asked her if she could help get the baby out of the water, but she couldn't. That was when I found out something I had never considered before. Caroline couldn't see all of the ghosts, but she was scared of most of the ones she saw. It seems like the dead are equally prone. She sat on the beach, patted the ground next to her, inviting me to sit and tell her more. Every so often I had to remind myself that I was actually having a conversation with a ghost, but in truth it didn't seem to matter. I didn't even get all self-conscious when the beach started filling up with tourists, ok, so they would see me sitting here fully-clothed, apparently talking to myself, but that's no big deal.

What else was weird was that I couldn't tell what time of day it was. Sort of as if there was no time anymore. When I looked at Caroline the sun was out, and when I looked toward the Atlantic it was dark and foreboding. Caroline was lovely, she seemed genuinely interested in me, dragging my history out of me so I spoke openly of my life and times, so deep into things that the ghosts were no longer of any importance, except for the baby of course. I could still hear the cries, and I wanted so badly to save the poor thing. Caroline noticed I was distracted, yet she was smiling. I felt sad about her, she must have really been loved when she was alive, I mean really loved, not the usual 'most popular girl in school' bullshit that the bereaved say about every dead girl who makes it onto the news.

To this day I can't be sure if she was an angel, all I know is that she was my angel.

She reached down to me; I took her hand without passing through it. I wanted to head for the baby, have another try, but Caroline told me I couldn't help the poor thing and that there was something important I had to do. 'Up there' she said as she pointed to the top of Chapel Rock, 'there's still time...'

I followed as she led me up the safest climb. 'You must go to the pool.' She said, loosening her grip on my hand to allow me to climb. I did as she said, not knowing why, assuming that I would find my inspiration there after all. What I found was a body, face down in the pool. I eased myself into the shallow end, taking care not to get out of my depth. I was out of reach of the body, just inches away, so I thrashed around, the ripples drawing the floating form closer until I got hold of a shoe and dragged the body to the edge of the pool. Adrenaline surged through me, using what little first-aid I knew to try and save a life. I succeeded. I grabbed at the side of the pool, spluttered water from my lungs, barking hacking breaths out as I swallowed the fresh morning air. I looked up and saw my angel, she knelt at my side, smiling. I looked around in the pool, the body had gone.

'I think you were lucky this time' Caroline said 'but you might want to learn to swim if you insist on sitting here in the dark'. She turned away and faded out of sight. I struggled out of the pool and collapsed across a flat section of rock, the next thing I remembered was the

thrupping of the helicopter blades as I was airlifted to Treliske hospital. A few days later and I was over the worst of it, so was allowed home. I don't go to sit on Chapel Rock anymore, not even in daylight, and if I am honest I don't go to the beach either. If it wasn't for Caroline Smith I would have died there. I have tried to find inspiration elsewhere, but my muse was always the Atlantic Ocean, so I don't write anymore. God knows I try, but I always just sit staring at the computer monitor, hoping for the whale of an idea. It never comes, even though my deadline does.

I keep my windows closed and wear headphones with a constant feed of much too loud music, but it's never enough. Sometimes I can still hear the Ocean waves crashing.

I always hear the baby.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Joe Young is a freelance writer and illustrator. His work can be seen in publications from Morpheus Tales, Wordland 2, Nat.Brut, Haunted Waters Press, Goblin Mire by David A. Riley, Parallel Universe Publications, and in the Journal of the British Fantasy Society. Joe loves his fiancée and his job and is always up for new challenges.

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In the Blink of a Wicked Eye

Timothy C. Hobbs

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

A misty forest scene with tall, slender trees and a body of water in the foreground reflecting the trees and the mist. The overall tone is sepia or golden-brown, creating a mysterious and atmospheric setting.

ONE BAD FUR DAY

K. Trap Jones

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

The full moon only compounded Luna's melancholy. The same nature of moon that had floated high above the night they met.

"Luna. What a beautiful name."

It didn't take them long to be a couple. They built a life of what dreams they could attain and the acceptance of what they couldn't.

A good life, a shared life. A childless one.

Retirement came easy for them. They had the company of each other. What more was needed? He had whispered the lines from her favorite poet. "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be."

That he should die from complications of a sore throat still seemed impossible to her.

How silly. Of all things. A strep infection. Endocarditis. Swift and unexpected.

She sometimes spent months without shedding a tear. But then a faint odor of his cologne would dance in the air. Perhaps from his clothes she never had the ability to remove from the closet or from an old pillow case she had failed to wash for some reason or another. Her sobs would go on for days then. What friends still called on her were asked to stay away for awhile. For just a little while.

Her days and nights of sorrow were spent tucked away in bed. At night she would stare out the bedroom window and pray for the moon to rise full and cold as if she considered it a companion for her grief.

And tonight, that moon joined her.

She greeted it with a coldness of her own. Sleep could not best her misery, and the full illumination outside the window wrapped around her loneliness with pallid wings.

It was the sound of soft tapping that drew her attention. She rose from her bed and stood near the window. The tiny body on the other side waltzed with the moon's reflection on the surface of the pane. She placed her fingers on the glass and felt the vibrating wings. The moth mapped her hand and seemed to crawl across her flesh even though there was a thin, solid space between them.

"My mother named me after you," she said. It was as if the insect heard her and increased its efforts to touch. She smiled softly and felt a brief reprieve from the ache in her heart.

"You certainly want in, little one. The moonlight has excited you." She unhooked the latch and raised the window. The moth fluttered in and passed over her. She closed the window and locked it and listened until daybreak as the insect gamboled across the walls of the room.

She slept until mid-afternoon.

She had no desire to, but she showered anyway, letting her long hair fall wet over her shoulders. She had forgotten about the moth until she spotted it sitting on the top of the bedroom curtain. It seemed dead in its stillness, but she knew differently. It only waited for the night and the pale glow of the moon.

She warmed some soup but had no appetite and stopped after a few spoonfuls. She sat around for awhile before going back to bed. She fell into a fitful slumber and was awakened by the sound of wings.

The moth bounced against the window. The moon had risen. She got out of bed and went to let the insect out. When she placed her fingers on the latch, the moth crawled from the window

to her hand. It sat there momentarily, its wings still. And then it started to crawl up her arm. She felt a strange aversion, a kind of repugnance at the sensation of the insect's prickly legs moving over her flesh. She raised a hand to brush the moth away, but then she stopped.

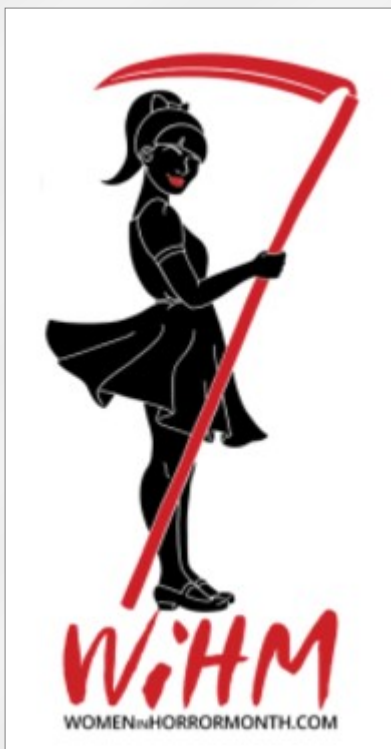
She lay on the bed and extended her arm. The revulsion left her and was replaced by a feeling of want, a desire to be swallowed. The moth crossed over her shoulder and made its way through her hair. It settled on her neck. Its wings flattened and trembled.

She felt she was falling from a high summit, her limbs heavy at first and then oddly weightless as if gravity no longer held her. The moth seemed to be growing. Its heavy body tugged and pulled at her throat. The soft smell of cologne hovered above her. The flesh of her body cooled and paled alabaster under the ashen glow of moonlight as the words "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be" were whispered in her ear.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Timothy C. Hobbs is a retired medical technologist living in Temple, Texas. He has published four novels, two novellas, and two short story collections. He has also published short stories and poems in several magazines and journals.

Twitter: [@TimothyHobbs8](https://twitter.com/TimothyHobbs8)

Website: [Timothy C. Hobbs](http://TimothyC.Hobbs)



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Theme: Things That Go Bump in the Night

Deadline: January 16, 2016

The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration of a twisted, gnarled tree in a misty forest. The tree's trunk and branches are dark and gnarled, with some sparse, brown, autumnal leaves clinging to them. At the base of the tree, several human skulls and bones are scattered on the ground, which is covered in fallen leaves. The background shows a misty forest with tall, thin trees and a bright light source filtering through the fog on the left side.

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Hello Mr. Reaper | *Anthony Avina*

Dying wasn't what scared Drew Glover. No, what scared Drew was what waited for him on the other side.

His name was Mr. Reaper. To human cultures throughout all of history, in one form or another, he was known as Death. The entity known as Mr. Reaper was a living, breathing, all-powerful entity that was the embodiment of evil and darkness throughout space and time. That was enough to scare the living shit out of any man, but that wasn't the only reason Drew was scared. You see, Drew and his wife Janet, the love of his life, had really pissed Mr. Reaper off.

For years, from the time Drew was a teenager, he had had a gift for seeing supernatural occurrences. He later learned only 1 in 1,000 people have the ability to actively see these beings without the entities revealing themselves. He had been frightened the first time he'd seen a demon walking through his home. He'd been terrified, and had run out of his home, until his father had come looking for him and dragged him back to that house. Soon after, his parents were murdered by the beast, and the authorities had spent years trying to pin the crimes on Drew, but the evidence suggested an animal attack, and therefore he'd been set free.

Since that night, he'd spent his whole life studying the occult, learning about the different dimensions, astral planes, alternate realities, demons, ghosts, and all sorts of monstrous creatures. Along his journey, he'd met another like him. Janet had been in a similar situation as a kid, but her parents had survived, and had helped shield her from the rest of the world while she took the time to learn and hone her ability to see the supernatural realm. She had met Drew while investigating a supposed haunting in Rhode Island, and the two had been inseparable since that case.

Janet and Drew had been in love and married for twenty years. They had battled all forms of evil in their line of work. They both traveled between worlds and realities. They had sacrificed a life as a normal couple and had given up on having children to focus on their work, and to save the lives of the innocent. This mission had taken them into direct conflict with their longtime enemy, Mr. Reaper.

Mr. Reaper had been a constant source of evil in Drew and Janet's lives. Case after case, they uncovered a connection to the entity. At first, they believed him to be a demon, or a human with an ability similar to theirs who used his gifts for evil. Yet as the years went on, and several fights and close calls with the creature later, they both learned his true purpose. He was Death incarnate, and he wanted to sow the seeds of chaos and destruction in order to fuel the darkness in the universe, and in turn increase his power. Yet Janet and Drew had foiled him time and time again, and this had led to a massive feud that had been fueled for decades.

So it was because of this that Drew feared dying. After all of their battles, and the close calls with death, Drew did not fear leaving the mortal coil. He knew that the battle would continue on another plane of existence, in one form or another. Yet he worried not only about himself, but about Janet, and what would happen to them when they were forced onto Mr. Reaper's playing field.

These were the thoughts as Drew watched Janet's life fade away, and Drew slowly began to follow her. They had been on their way back from a demonic possession case in Northern California, and were nearing their apartment in Rancho Cucamonga, CA after a long night of driving. As they had been rounding a corner, the tall, suave and demonic looking Mr. Reaper had appeared suddenly, causing Drew to swerve suddenly and overturn the car. As the car had begun to roll over along the highway, time had seemed to slow down. Drew could hear the piercing

scream of his wife as the metal and glass of the car caved in and shattered around them. He could feel shards of glass piercing his face and arms as he reached out for Janet. Worst of all, he could see the fiery smile of Mr. Reaper, as if he knew what was to come.

As his heart began to slow, Drew held onto the now lifeless hand of his wife, clinging to the memory of her embrace, her warmth and her love as he prepared for the coming battle. Taking one final glance at his love, Drew found his vision fading, and as darkness engulfed him, Drew left his body behind, and seemed to float through a sea of nothingness.

When Drew opened his eyes once more, he found himself standing in a dark, ominous room. He was shackled and chained to a desk, and Janet was herself shackled to the table across from him.

"Jan? Where are we?" Drew asked.

"The void, babe. We're in his domain," Janet replied grimly, smiling as if to reassure him or maybe herself, but both of them knowing the situation they were in.

"It was only a matter of time, Drew," a voice drawled in an imitation southern accent. Drew turned in his chair, and saw Mr. Reaper enter the room without doors or windows. He glided through the space, smiling in his three-piece suit and slicked back hair.

"Hello, Mr. Reaper," Drew said through gritted teeth.

"Hi there, my old enemy. I told you this day would come, but you two meddlesome charlatans insisted on fighting the good fight. Now you're in my domain."

"You know you're beef is with me, Death. Let Janet go and you can do anything you want to me."

"Why would I do that? I have both of you right where I want you, and you and I both know she played an equal part in your plans to stop me time and time again. She's going to suffer just as much as you are."

"We're warning you Mr. Reaper, we won't go down quietly," Janet said calmly, acknowledging the fearful reality of their situation but refusing to give into it.

"You're warning me? Oh my dear, I think the first lesson is ready to be taught," Mr. Reaper exclaimed. He produced a long scythe, his signature weapon of choice, and raised it high above him, ready to strike at Janet.

"Hey, you phony piece of shit! You want to prove me right about the dishonorable coward that you are? Then go ahead and do what you're about to do. Otherwise prove me wrong and face me like a true force of evil that you've always claimed to be. You know honestly, I've always thought this whole Grim Reaper act was a total mind-fuck you used against your victims. I think you're just a demon on the low rung of the ladder who wanted to make a name for themselves, and so you stole this identity from the real reaper."

"How dare you, you ignorant bastard!" Mr. Reaper spat with venomous hatred. He turned on Drew, and raised the weapon high above his head, ready to lash out with all his rage. Yet before he could, a look of surprise and shock overcame his face, and he dropped the scythe and went to his knees in pain. He turned his head, and saw Janet had freed herself, and had driven a golden blade into his back.

"Fool, I cannot be killed," Mr. Reaper spat.

"Yeah, we know that," Janet said simply, walking towards Drew and taking off his shackles.

"You see, we knew this day would come, and we came prepared. We got a special spell from some gypsy friends of ours from Romania, and we were able to imbue our souls with the

ability to draw weapons in the afterlife. Janet just used a weapon to paralyze you for five minutes.”

“What do you hope to accomplish with five minutes? This is my world. Nothing can kill me. I exist for all of eternity. You have nowhere to go or hide.”

“We’re not going to run or hide, and we’re not going to kill you. We’re not stupid. We know that you can’t be killed. Yet I know one thing that will banish you to the furthest reaches of the universe, which will give us a long time to plan and coordinate our next battle with you. Your scythe is ours now, and with it we banish you from our corner of the galaxy.”

“I’m coming back for you, you son of a bitch!” Mr. Reaper screamed in fury.

“And we’ll be waiting, you murderous motherfucker!” Janet spat, and having picked up the scythe, she swung it at Mr. Reaper, embedding it into his chest and watching as Death himself began to fold into his own body and disappear into a blinding light. Janet reached down and retrieved the scythe. Soon the room disappeared, and Janet and Drew found themselves back on Earth, looking over the car accident where their bodies lay. Still holding the scythe, Janet walked over and held Drew’s hand in her own.

“So, we have a while before he comes back. What do we do now?” Janet asked.

“Continue the job, just on another plane of existence. First thought, I’m going to do this,” Drew replied, and he pulled her close to himself and kissed her passionately on the lips. Soon the couple faded from the scene of the crash, using their new ethereal status to teleport to places unknown. Yet no matter where they were, they would be together, and they would be waiting for Mr. Reaper to return.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Author Anthony Avina has been an indie author for over five years. An avid fan of the horror genre and hungry to showcase the true nature of society, Mr. Avina has always written tales that not only entertain and scare, but also bring out true and heartfelt emotion. Anthony Avina lives in Southern California, and works as an indie author, journalist, and internet personality.

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

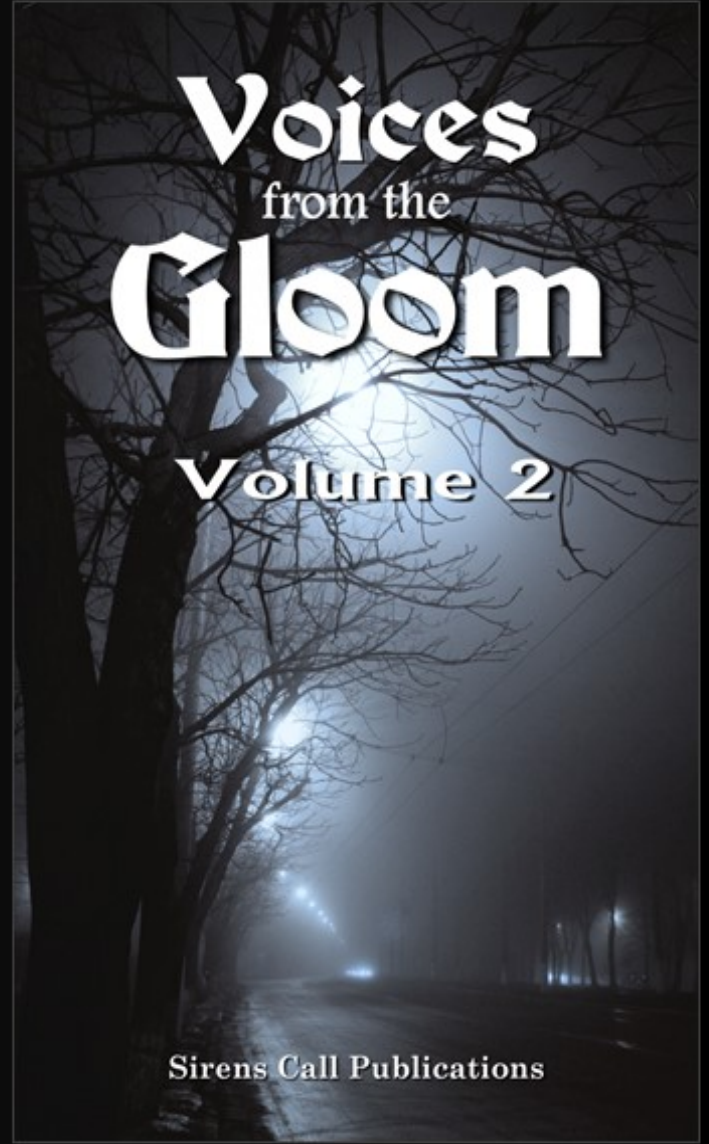
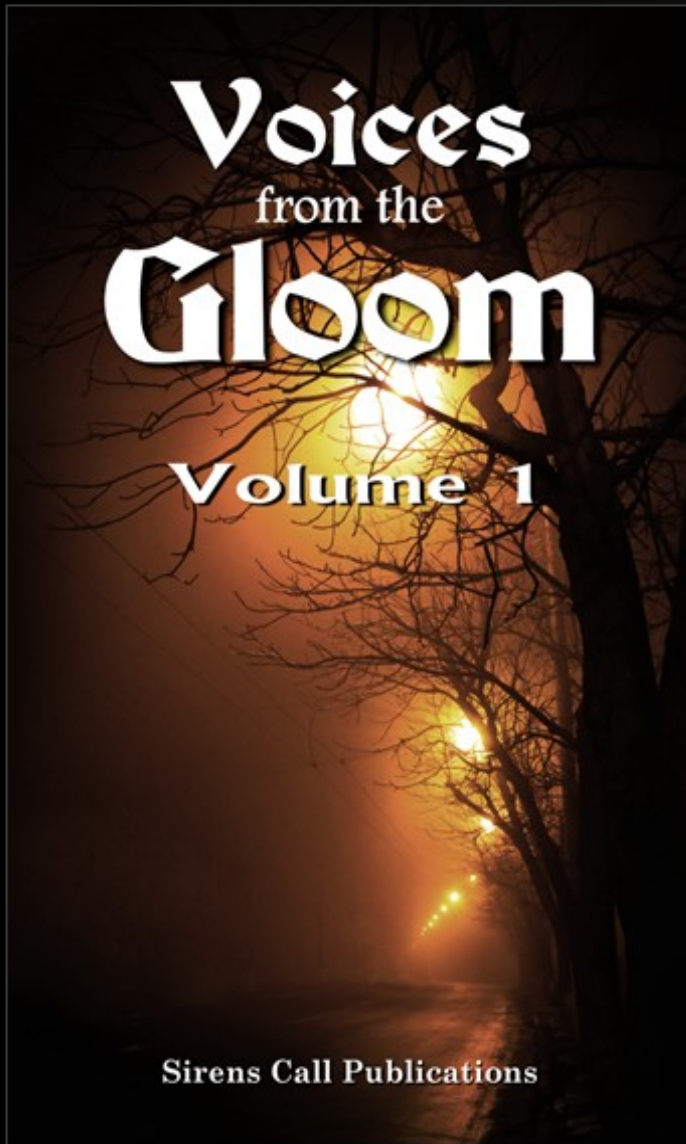
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Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

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stories...**



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My name's John O'Brien, or at least that's who I used to be before I froze to death in the alley behind Mother's diner in East Rome, New York. An arctic air mass came sweeping down into the Mohawk Valley from Canada one February night last year. I had propped myself up against the brick wall, trying my best to shield my face from the wind; but it was futile, and I never woke up in the morning.

Mildred found me while out having a smoke after the breakfast rush. She called the cops, but not before rifling through my knapsack and pocketing the gold crucifix my mother gave me in 1969. Mom had it blessed by the Pope, and it was the only possession that meant anything to me. I'm kinda glad someone ended up with it, even if Mildred swiped it from me post-mortem.

The Oneida County coroner ruled hypothermia as the cause of death and the police labeled me a John Doe, since I had no ID on me or next of kin. They buried me in an unmarked grave in a back corner of Rome Cemetery, and that's where I currently reside.

I don't mind so much, though. The leaves on the maple trees overlooking my plot are bursting into flaming orange, brown and burgundy colors now, and I get to watch the squirrels scurrying about in the fading afternoon light. The cross country team runs up here sometimes, and I can even hear the public address speaker at the Rome Free Academy football stadium on Friday nights, when the Black Knights play at home. Last Saturday, I even saw a group of teenagers hurling acorns at one another and ducking behind the headstones for protection. Their shouts and yelps echoed throughout the cemetery, and my only regret was that I couldn't join in the fun. I can't wait for winter when they have snowball fights and go sledding on a steep hill behind the cemetery.

The funny part is I don't feel much different than when I was alive. Had I known this earlier, I might have given up a long time ago. You see I heard the temperature on the eve of my death was dropping; old Petey Ragonese warned me to find someplace to flop when I ran into him during lunch at the Rome Rescue Mission. So, yeah, I realized what would happen to me if I stayed outside, and I could have easily made it to the county shelter, where I would have gotten a hot meal and a cot with a blanket. But damn, my legs were heavy and numb, and I didn't feel like moving an inch, let alone walking six blocks to the shelter. And I figured with my luck, it would only be colder the next day. So I just cradled the bottle of whiskey, closed my eyes and awaited the inevitable.

Now I spend my days trying to occupy my mind and fill the empty hours. I haven't been given any sort of notice on what my final destination might be, so I'm just trying to live in the moment; or should I say go on being dead in the moment? I can't complain, though. It's really not that bad on this side, and at least I'm no longer cold.

Still, I really do wish someone, anyone—maybe even God Almighty or one of his messengers—would tell me what to do or where I'm supposed to go. I no longer have a body, but my brain still works. I am able to formulate thoughts and I spend most of my days contemplating my situation.

And all this thinking makes me wonder: Is this all there is? Isn't there anything else?

Is this heaven or hell, something in between, or just a continuation of what was considered the present?

"Enough already," a voice yells from some distance away. "You're not the only one here dipshit. You're disturbing our sleep."

"Excuse me," I say, or rather I think and the words are somehow communicated to the

stranger. “Who are you? Where are you?”

“It matters little. We are all dirt now. Don’t expect answers. Don’t expect anything. Just rest.”

“I don’t get it. If nothing matters, then why can I still think? My mind is active. I may not be alive, but I am not fully gone.”

“That’s it. I’m done trying to talk sense to this fucking wino. Annette, get this guy to shut up already.”

“Just because I’m your wife Fred doesn’t mean you can tell me what to do. You’re not the boss anymore. And what am I supposed to say anyway? He doesn’t understand yet.”

“Look I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean to upset anyone. I just want some answers. Aren’t I entitled to some answers?”

“What’s your name friend?” another voice asks.

“John.”

“Well I am James and I will do my best to give you some semblance of an explanation. But it may not help you. I have been here since 1856, and I am still waiting for my fate to be decided. No one has told me anything. But I pray each day the Lord will come again so I may rise with him. Do you believe in Jesus John?”

“I guess so, sort of.”

“He is the only way.”

“Jesus Christ,” the voice known as Fred says. “It’s too fucking late for conversion.”

“It is never too late,” James says. “I repeat John, it is never too late.”

“I am sorry for bothering all of you. I don’t know if it’s physically possible, but I am getting a headache now. I want to try to go back to sleep.”

“Now you’re talking some sense dipshit. Go to sleep John. It’s too late for anything else.”

“I suppose it is. I guess we just die and enter the void. I never wanted to believe that but it seems it is true.”

“You got it brother,” Fred says.

“Now I wish I would have done something more with my life, while I still had the chance.”

“That is something we all wish for John,” James says.

Blackness takes over the cemetery once again and I drift off. I am not fighting sleep now; I am not fighting anything. I submit to the slumber of death with the recognition that nothing else exists.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Francis DiClemente is a video producer and freelance writer who lives in Syracuse, New York. He is also the author of three poetry chapbooks.

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

Blog: <https://francisdiclemente.wordpress.com/>



Sirens Call Publications
PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION



Heaven or Hell | *Winnona Vincent*

The familiar sound of the old red Rooster's crow brought Rico's mind awake. He lay on the couch, not moving with his eyes closed. The banging of pots and pans in the kitchen along with the familiar humming of his grandmother, caused his eyes to open. The house smelled of fresh baked bread, spices and his grandmother.

"Rico, my darling. Get up I need you to milk the cow so we can have fresh milk for our breakfast." Anger and confusion welled up inside of Rico. He wanted to scream obscenities and tell her he was not her darling! He took a deep breath and tried to do this, but all that came out of his mouth was a gentle, "Yes, grandmother."

He rolled off the couch, stood up and realized he had those horrid clothes on again. The ones she bought him and expected him to wear! The blue jeans fit him without a belt. A short sleeved t-shirt, with a checkered shirt neatly tucked in. On his feet were a sturdy pair of work boots and if that was not bad enough, when he raised his hands to his head he realized he had a short boys' haircut.

To make matters worse and add to the anger and hatred that was starting to fester inside of him, his earring was gone. He now had a silver cross around his neck. "No! No! No!" he screamed. The humming stopped in the kitchen. "Rico is something wrong?" He took a deep breath.

Yes, there was something wrong. He was in this house. He was nineteen again. He remembered that on his last birthday he had turned thirty. How could this be happening? He knew he had burned this house to the ground. After he had killed her and every other living thing here! He started to tell her this, but all that came out of his mouth was, "No grandmother. I am going to milk the cow now." Then his feet carried him towards the door. With every muscle in his body fighting against it he opened the door and stepped outside. But outside was not as he remembered it.

The land stretched barren away from the house. Mist swirled and blocked large areas of the land. Piles of gray rocks were scattered over what he could see and trees that were twisted and dead dotted the landscape. The door shut behind him and as he took the first step away from the door his clothes disappeared. Then the horrible pain started. His skin felt as if it were burning away from his body. Looking down at his body he saw that his skin was melting and falling away in large patches. Screaming, he ran down the steps into the mist.

The mist wrapped around him and searing pain surged through the open holes in his skin. As he ran the mist seemed to fade. The pain suddenly stopped. A dirt road appeared in front of him. Turning to look back at the house Rico could only see the roof through the mist. He was not going back inside there! He would follow this road away. At least until he woke from this nightmare.

Turning back to the road he saw a group of humans coming towards him. All of them were naked. They had no hair and all of them were the color of the rocks and burnt trees. Their faces were twisted in anguish and pain. They seemed to be driven forward by some invisible force. As they came closer he could hear them moaning and crying out in pain. Then he saw them. The two things driving this group forward were not human. They had short squatty bodies covered in open sores. They had huge clawed hands and feet. Each carried a whip which they were using on the group. The things' faces were horrid. They had round heads with dark bulging eyes. Their mouths were in the form of a giant hawk's beak. Rico watched as one of them reached out and bit off a chunk of the flesh from the closest human.

A sharp sting across his buttocks sent Rico forward and as he turned around he was face to face with one of the creatures he had just been watching. It shrieked and pointed to the group. Rico shook his head and began running away from all of them down the path. The creature chased after him for a while, but soon gave up. He continued running until his lungs felt like they were on fire. Stopping to catch his breath he heard screaming and begging coming from somewhere close by.

Rico left the road and moved towards the sounds. He climbed up a pile of rocks and peeked over it. On the other side was a long pit. There must have been hundreds of humans in the pit. They seemed to be trying to get out, but could not. Rico watched the pathetic humans try to climb up the side of the pit. When they would get near the top a group of strange looking creatures would appear and using a spear, poke and prod them until they fell. The things with the spears would then jump up and down shrieking. This caused the ground to shake. Rico caught himself laughing. *Stupid fools*, he said to himself.

Climbing down and heading back to the road Rico began hearing a strange buzzing noise. By the time he was back on the road the sound had grown so loud that his ears began to ache. He could feel the sound in his teeth. Covering his ears with his hands he tried to move faster but realized that he could not. The gray dirt under his feet had become soft and sticky. He continued on and after a few minutes had to stop. The ground was so sticky he was trapped. He slowly started pulling himself out and moved back down the road. When he got to a place that he could walk again he got off the road and walked along beside it. He began passing a person here and there that was stuck fast in the road. All the time the terrible buzzing noise continued. Then he saw the cause of the noise.

Coming down the road was a swarm of black ants. It was the only thing he had seen since he stepped off the porch that was not gray! They moved at an incredible rate, covering everything in their path. As they swarmed over the humans trapped in the road they devoured everything but their bones. Rico continued on the side of the road. The human skeletons quivered and shook and began to grow their bodies back around them.

Rico walked for what seemed like miles. The road became solid again and he moved back on to it. On each side of the road were flat fields. At first he thought they were covered in boulders and mist. Then the objects began to take form. They had human shapes now so he stopped to watch.

At first the boulders seemed to change into human forms lying on the ground. Then they would begin to swell. They would swell until they resembled gray blobs. Some began to float up in the air, others remained on the ground. There was an ear piercing whistle then a group of enormous feet appeared and began stomping the gray blobs. At the same time the ones that had floated up into the sky were being attacked by giant gray fish with rows and rows of teeth. As they caught the floating forms they would hold them in their mouth and burst them into hundreds of pieces. When all the gray blobs had been destroyed the enormous feet and the fish disappeared and it started all over again. This is better than anything on television, Rico thought to himself.

Rico watched the drama unfold over and over again. Then from somewhere behind him a moaning voice got his attention.

"Help me please!" Rico turned around and watched a figure floating up and down extend its arms to him.

"Excuse me?" Rico spat out at the floating figure. "Why should I help you?" The figure shimmered and faded in and out before answering.

"Because I need help and you are there."

Rico burst out laughing. "What's in it for me?"

The figure seemed to think for a moment. It shimmered turning different shades of gray. Rico suddenly realized that this figure was different than all the other ones he had seen so far. This one had a flowing robe on, hair and a face he could see. As he stood there he saw other figures floating towards him.

The one he had been talking to finally answered. "If you help us cross through the barrier between this field and the road you stand on; we can continue on our journey. We are ready to move up or down depending on our fate. While you are obviously not one of us, you might improve your fate by showing us a random act of kindness."

"What makes you think I want to change anything. I am enjoying every minute of watching you poor lost souls suffer. For once in my life all I have to do is watch." Rico answered. Then he began to laugh. He had already figured out that he was in the first levels of purgatory. He did hope that he could remember how to dream about this again. He thought for a moment then reached down and picked up a stone from the road and hurled it at the floating figure's head. As the stone struck its head the figure shrieked and exploded. Rico continued walking down the road laughing.

Rico soon found himself at a spot where the road branched in four directions. He stood in the center of the road and thought. Choosing the right hand road, he started down it. There was an explosion, he felt a strong jolt through his body and was knocked backward on the dirt. Sitting up he took a moment to clear his head. Then getting up he started down the road in front of him. The same thing happened. Only this time the jolt and tingling pain running through his body lasted longer.

"Rico the only direction you are going is back to your grandmother's house and that is to your left." Turning around Rico saw a man dressed in a dark suit standing in the middle of the road. His skin color was pale but a normal human color. The man not only had hair under the fedora he wore but also had a small black mustache under his nose. He had on a red tie and carried a golden cane.

"Oh really!" snapped Rico, "Just who do you think you are?" The man stared at Rico and he felt a shiver go down his spine.

"I am the collector of souls and the record keeper."

Rico started to laugh and the reaper tapped his cane on the dirt. Rico's mouth disappeared.

"You will say nothing as I tell you of the judgement that has been passed on your evil, twisted lost soul!" Rico shook with hatred and anger.

"You will return to your grandmother's house where you will not be able to do anything but help her. You will be the most attentive good grandson to her that anyone could ever be. You already got a sample earlier of how this will happen. When you leave the house without her you will enter into the upper level of Purgatory as you have done today. When you leave with her everything will be as it used to be. This will continue on for eternity without a chance of redemption or a change in the judgment.

Your grandmother took you when your mother died in childbirth. She showed you nothing but love and kindness. She cared for you, raised you to be a good person. She always made sure you had everything you needed. But all you gave back to her was hatred. She never gave up on you and always forgave any evil thing you did. Even when you killed her she forgave you.

When she stood before her judgement, she was asked what time in her life she would like to relive in eternity. She picked the time you found yourself in. She was granted it. When I heard your judgement I did not understand at first, but then I realized that not even the very bottom

level of hell could be as fitting a punishment than this. While your grandmother is spending her eternity in her idea of heaven, you are spending yours in your own version of hell.” He tapped the cane on the dirt road again.

Rico was walking through the door of his grandmother’s house carrying the bucket of fresh milk. His grandmother turned around as he entered the kitchen. “Oh good, Rico I was beginning to worry about you. Sit it on the sink and come eat. She smiled and the love shown in her eyes. Rico was racked with hatred and resentment. He could not control his body or his mouth. He smiled at his grandmother, walked over and sat down. “Thank you grandmother.” Is all he could say.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Winnona grew up in the Los Angeles area and moved to Northern California in the 70’s. She became interested in writing before she graduated from High School. Winnona recently completed the NaNoWriMo, the write a book in a month challenge. She currently enjoys writing short stories for publication. Horror and Fantasy stories are two of her favorite types of writing.

Wordpress: <http://adragonsdreamblog.wordpress.com>



www.SirensCallPublications.com

Nina ~ @Sotet_Angyal

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A sepia-toned photograph of a person wearing a dark coat and a fedora-style hat, sitting on a white wooden chair at a desk. The person is facing away from the camera, looking out a large, multi-paned window. The room has aged, textured walls and a decorative border above the window. To the left, a portion of a bed with a metal headboard is visible. To the right, a wooden chair with a white cloth draped over it is partially seen. The overall mood is contemplative and nostalgic.

Nora's Wish

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An Interview with Author Joshua Skye

Sirens Call Publications recently released *Cradle* by Joshua Skye, the pseudo-sequel to *The Angels of Autumn*. As we like to do with all of our authors, we sat down with Joshua and asked him a few questions about his book and writing. Read along to find out what interesting things Joshua has up his sleeves!

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Joshua; why don't you take a few moments to introduce yourself.



Joshua Skye: My name is Josh, I'm closing in on 19 years with my partner Ray. We have an eleven year old son named Syrian, who is whips smart. We share our lives with two dogs, and a chinchilla. I have a love of 80s horror movies and their soundtracks, which I collect on vinyl.

SCP: What made you decide to become a writer?

Joshua: I've always wanted to be a writer, specifically an author of speculative fiction though I've dabbled in pretty much every genre. I find the creative process to be challenging, frustrating, infuriating, thrilling, and rewarding often all at the same time. Being an artist of any kind is an emotional roller coaster with more downs than ups, but it's those highs that make it all worthwhile. Those highs can be addicting.

SCP: What is *Cradle* about?

Joshua: First and foremost, *Cradle* is an unapologetic horror story, a ghost story, but in no way a conventional outing. It's about loss, depression, abuse swirling like a night time fog amidst a tale of evil supernatural hungers.

SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *Cradle* before they read it?

Joshua: I'd like readers in general to know that writing isn't just a hobby, it's also work. A lot of hard work goes into the process of creating the story, the world in which it's set, and especially the characters. The job doesn't stop when the final draft is done, in the editing process alone you can find a handful of people (or more) putting in the hours and exertion to bring the story in its best form to them. I've spent years writing a single book and sometimes there's a year that goes into the editing process as well. I want them to know I love what I do, but I also want them to realize that a lot of time and effort goes into bringing them the story. There are times when I feel that people don't understand that.

SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantser?

Joshua: Both, actually. There are times I'll sit down, having had a particularly vivid dream or daytime fantasy, and write out a detailed outline. I always seem to deviate from that though. Other times I'll just start writing and let the story unfold in this kind of weirdly organic way. In the end, there's always planning, I find, that must be done even if it's well into writing the second or third draft in order for the story to be cohesive.

SCP: If you could cast the movie of your book, who would you choose to play your main characters?

Joshua:

Radley: James Franco

Scotty: Corey Fogelmanis

Margaret: Heather Langenkamp

Kincaid: Chad Allen (also with *Angels of Autumn*)

Preacher: Anthony Hopkins

SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?

Joshua: Getting the word out about my books and finding my audience is a challenge. I think this is probably difficult for any writer. It can be astronomically frustrating. It's an overly flooded marketplace, extremely competitive. But being social is a big challenge for me. With the ease of connection these days thanks to social media, some people automatically assume a friendship with you and want to hang out. I very rarely want to go out these days. It's nothing personal, I just wanna stay home with my shadows. I'm pretty much a recluse, very introverted, and I suffer from depression and want to be left alone a lot. People don't understand that, not even those closest to you, and can take it the wrong way.

SCP: In your opinion, what sets *Cradle* apart from other books of the same genre?

Joshua: I think I have a distinctive voice, *Cradle* presents unique characters in an idiosyncratic horror story. My loyal readers will find it to definitely be all my own, and hopefully new readers will find the journey a worthwhile excursion into the genre and seek out my other books like *The Angels of Autumn*.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently, that you'd like to mention?

Joshua: I've recently read the Sookie Stackhouse novels, *Fountain Society* by Wes Craven, and I finally got my grubby little paws on a first edition hardcover of Stephen King's *It*, which I'm currently reading. My next read will be *Wet Screams* by Daniel W. Kelly.

SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?

Joshua: Shirley MacLaine, Stephen King, Whitley Strieber, Clive Barker, Anne Rice, James St.

James, Michael Moore, and of course The Brothers Grimm. I read a lot of horror, new age, spiritual memoirs, biographies, political and conspiracy exposés. My favorite books are *Out on a Limb* by Shirley MacLaine, *The Shining* by Stephen King, *Party Monster* by James St. James, and *Weaveworld* by Clive Barker.

SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?

Joshua: These are not easy questions to answer. Certainly getting published is a success in and of itself, and difficult enough on its own. Beyond that it gets more and more difficult. I've won awards for my work, I've been included in Book of the Month clubs, and I've had two bestsellers. All of these things are undeniable successes, but I still feel I have milestones to reach. I think I'm waiting for my breakthrough moment.

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?

Joshua: Write. Write. Write. Never stop writing, it hones your skills. And never give up. I truly believe there is an audience for everything, no matter how obscure.

SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?

Joshua: It's a horror story and they should feel the myriad of emotions such a tale evokes, excitement, dread, fear, revulsion, shock, and even despair. And, hopefully, above all a need to share the experience with their friends.

Thank you Joshua for taking the time to answer our questions. If you're looking to learn a little more about Cradle, here's the information you've been waiting for...

In the deepest vale of Crepuscule's Cradle, in the cul-de-sac at the end of Direful Hollow Road, is a once grand Folk-Victorian home known as The Habersham House. It's a place haunted by far more than rot and neglect - evil dwells here, an evil that craves children.

Eight-year-old Scott Michaels-Greene has a fascination for tales of the strange and unusual, especially local folklore. His favorite story is the one about Habersham House; a ruined old place where many curious children have disappeared.

Hours away from Crepuscule's Cradle, in Philadelphia, author Radley Barrette has just lost



the love of his life to a random act of violence. Amongst his endowments from Danny's estate is an old house in the backwoods of Pennsylvania, Habersham House. Though grief stricken at leaving behind the only home he and Danny had ever known, he knows he cannot remain in the city. Besides, the isolation may be just what he needs to clear his mind of the writer's block he's suffering from.

Crepuscle's Cradle is not as he imagined. The locals are inhospitable. The skeletal forest surrounding it is as unwelcoming as the town. And the house itself – there is something menacing, something angry inhabiting it with him, and it's hungry. Radley's world slowly begins to unravel; the fringes of his reality begin to fray. In the midst of his breakdown, a local boy with an unhealthy fascination for Habersham House begins sneaking around and the evil residing within has taken notice.

Blending fantasy with horror, Crepuscle's Cradle is the darkest of fairy tales. The morbidity of classic folklore and contemporary style weaves a web of slowly encroaching unease. Radley Barrette' winter bound home is more than a haunted house, and Crepuscle's Cradle is more than a mere horror tale. It's a bedtime story that will pull you into its icy embrace, lull you into a disquiet state, and leave you shivering in the dark.

***Cradle* is available online at:**

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An Excerpt from *Cradle* by Joshua Skye...

Prologue

Phillip Kingsley was a trapper by trade and he knew that cavernous Allegheny valley like the backs of his weathered old hands. He'd been born down in the depths of it, the child of a preacher and a travelin' man's daughter. Their affair had ruined them in the eyes of the small, tight-knit community they lived in. His papa's abandonment of the Pentecost in favor of mama's more nature-bound convictions marked them as unwanted outsiders. So before their inevitable expulsion they'd exiled themselves to the deepest hollow of the vale where all others feared to walk.

Theirs was Crepuscule's Cradle. It was a moniker his mama had given it early on because of the muted gloom that it rested in. In the warmer months the canopy of the verdant emerald treetops filtered the sunlight to little more than a shadowy breath. When the gray of winter came, the dell was nothing but a hoary dream even on the clearest of days. It was forever dark there, forever bathed in twilight. When the sun went down it was a pitch-black portentous pit that everyone else dreaded.

Kingsley had learned the lay of the land by lantern light trailing after his papa in the pensive hours when there was little distinction between night and day. They roamed the banks of the babbling waterways, climbed the edges of all the trickling tributaries, and often drank from the sweet cascades that gurgled from the ground. They studied the lean of the trees, the way some matured at odd angles as they reached for the hidden heavens. They acquainted themselves with the mossy boulders that jutted from the soil. And they discerned the bow of every cave's sweltering vestibule.

They knew where herbs flourished, where edible mushrooms thrived, where every berry patch prospered, and where vines bloomed with bulbous grapes. They knew where the deer drank their fill, beaver built their dams, and wild turkeys wandered. Everything they needed for their estranged existence was all right there, awaiting them in their precious little valley.

From mama he'd been educated on the many uses of the healing power of certain herbs. She showed him how to hold them, to thank them for their sacrifice, and to reverence them as one should every living thing. She hugged the trees, caressed the ground, whispered to rocks, and laughed with ferns. The rushing water of the Allegheny was her friend. And she told her son the secrets of its curing influences.

She told her boy about the spirits in the earth, the salamanders of the fire, the fairies in the air, the nymphs of the rivers, and the horned creators. The Goddess and the God walked there in the forest on cloven hooves and danced with the command of nature. Mama could call them with chants and fire and aromatics. He'd seen them himself peeking out from behind the bough of trees, smiling and joyous. He'd heard their sweet, nighttime songs and always they'd brought him comfort. Until now.

He knew they were there, the Horned Ones, following him in the deep shadows. Beyond the cool cling of a leisurely eddying mist he could physically feel their mystical presence. Through the chorus of crickets he could hear their whispers and pleas, the occasional snap of a trodden twig and the low crunch of a trampled leaf. He welcomed them. He needed them on his nocturnal passage, perhaps more than he ever had, for he was angry and afraid as he had never been before.

In one hand he held a rusted old lantern and in the other he clung to his papa's brass Griswold & Gunnison .36 revolver. It was a beautiful vestige of the terrible war that had divided the nation. It had two bullets left.

Kingsley had heard about the ills plaguing the community from which his parents had fled. A ghastly fever had spread among the residents. It had started with the children. They'd screamed and cried, and there was nothing that would alleviate their suffering. Trailing the fever was a bout of boils and rashes that swept the children away to their deaths. Then the adults started to get it. It wasn't long after the community preacher fell ill that he suddenly remembered the witch who had seduced his predecessor and whisked him away to the shadow territories.

Kingsley and his parents heeded the warnings of the Horned Ones and they were cautious. They kept to themselves more than ever, stayed to the dark of the forest. But the vengeful vigilantes had come like monsters in the night, a gaggle of them with torches and bibles and

weaponry. They'd caught the heathen family unaware and before Phillip Kingsley had even wiped the sleep from his eyes his parents were murdered in their own bed and their home set ablaze. Kingsley had barely escaped. With a pocketful of bullets and his father's pistol, he had taken most of the murderous horde out right there in the flickering light of the fire they'd started.

But one had gotten away, the new preacher, *the accuser*. He'd run headlong into the dark forest. He was a blathering, terrified thing, recklessly stomping about in a vain attempt at escape. The delirious holy man was so ignorant that Kingsley was certain he didn't know he was going in the opposite direction of his village and ever deeper into the murky world of Crepuscule's Cradle.

Kingsley paused a moment by the bend of a willow that his mother had often visited. She was there now; he could feel her in the sweet caress of the breeze. She, along with the Horned Ones, implored him to abandon his pursuit of retribution. They beseeched him to forgive but he wouldn't listen to their appeals. Though he deeply respected the spirits, Kingsley was adamant that the cleric pay for what he'd done. It was beneath contempt. It was cruel. It was worthy of vengeance. And vengeance is what he would have.

As he stepped down into the cold rush of the Allegheny he could hear its enticing, murmuring song that, like the other spirits gathering about him, begged for him to cease his pursuit. His old eyes welled with tears and they spilled down his leathery face. He was an old man and his parents had been even older. They hadn't deserved to be slaughtered in their own home. He reminded the phantoms that had he not narrowly escaped the roaring flames, he too would be dead. He would be dead because of hate and ignorance, paranoia and fear. The sympathetic specters did not desert him.

From up ahead came the sounds of the foolish murderer tromping awkwardly through the forest. Kingsley hurried across the rivulet and scrambled up the embankment on the other side. It was there he felt the touch of his papa, just a gentle hand on his shoulder tugging ever so slightly as if to pull him back, to bring him to a standstill, to give him pause. Indeed, he did. He closed his eyes and saw a vision of his papa there in the dark. There was a smile on the man's pinched, wrinkled old face. It, like the low voices of the others, entreated him to stop.

Kingsley sucked back a flooding torrent of guilt and opened his eyes. The image of his papa was gone, but the feel of him wasn't. He could even smell the faint fume of his father's pipe. He'd so loved the aroma that he'd taken up smoking himself. His papa had made him a pipe from the limb of an old fallen Oak tree. He'd carved the chamber of it in the likeness of the Horned Mother, the shank and the stem into a knot of twisting branches reaching out from her tangling hair. It had been a thing of pure beauty. He'd loved it, but it was gone now, consumed by the wicked blaze.

An owl screeched from the depths of the forest. The howl of a wolf echoed through the trees. A swarm of gossamer fairies illuminated the very air around him. They whispered sweet things, promised better times ahead, and danced in seductive flights to sway him in their favor, but their antics could not alleviate the horror and anguish he felt. His misery was too great. He swiped them away and their light faded into the ether.

A crashing sound told him that his hunt would soon be over. The murderous preacher had fallen just further up ahead. Kingsley's heart thundered with a melancholic anticipation. He quickened his pace, hurried through the maze of trees. He didn't so much need the glimmer of his lantern, he knew these woods, but he used the light to look for the killer and it wasn't long before he came across him.

The cleric lay face down in a thick patch of furrowing fronds. He was gasping for breath. He was trembling uncontrollably. He was whimpering. Kingsley found none of it deterring, none of it in the least bit worthy of forgiveness. He imagined that had this wretched man found his parents in the same pitiable position he would not have hesitated to do to them exactly what he intended to do. So Kingsley raised the beautiful, old Griswold & Gunnison and aimed it at the back of the preacher's head. The man squirmed, groped uselessly at the flora around him.

Kingsley pulled the hammer back, found a comfort in the clicking sounds, an ease in the cool sensation of the metal. He took a deep breath, held it, and...

Just then, with one sudden push, the preacher turned himself over.

Kingsley looked down at the man. Spasms wreaked the cleric's exhausted body. His eyes were round and tremulous. His mouth hung pathetically agape. He was sweating profusely, wheezing to catch his breath. Through his gasping, he begged for mercy, begged for what Kingsley was sure he'd never even contemplated giving anyone else. He even clasped his hands together as if in prayer.

The spirits cried out to the grieving son even louder. Their petitions rose in a wondrous cacophony throughout the valley, a discord like melody, voices like a rainstorm. His mother caressed his cheek. His father draped an affectionate arm over his shoulders. The Horned Ones snuggled close and the fairies danced in gleaming radiance. Their appeals rose into a song that said *enough is enough*. It was a bold declaration he could not, in good conscious, ignore. It pulled at his heart, a heart already broken, and before he even realized what he was doing he was lowering the weapon and closing his eyes. There in the darkness stood his parents in loving embrace. They smiled at him. They said adoring things. They reached out to him.

A scuffling sound. A violent tug!

He opened his eyes and was immediately confronted by the terrible, twisted, vindictive visage of the preacher. The man had jumped to his feet, taken the weapon and aimed it at Kingsley's thundering heart. The spirits were shocked into utter silence; indeed the very crickets went quiet. The shadowy forest was hushed and still. The cleric said a horrible thing, something vulgar and malicious.

There was a whisper in Kingsley's ear, just a tiny little voice telling him to close his eyes, everything would be alright. The tremendous fear in him wouldn't let him. All he could do was stare at the cleric and wait for the click of the trigger and the shatter of the world. But the Horned Ones were still with him and they took him into their arms. In that moment he felt warmth. He felt love. He felt all of his fear, anguish, and sadness melt away. He was completely, incredibly at peace.

Kingsley watched the cleric grin maniacally as he pushed the barrel of the gun into his chest. He waited to be whisked into the arms of his parents and the true company of the spirits. Oh, how it was something he'd waited his whole life for. But just when he was sure that the world would splinter, he watched in muted shock as the forest itself reached out and took hold of the deceitful preacher.

The cleric shrieked as he was entangled in shadowy tendrils and hoisted into the air. He writhed there for a moment, his entire body wriggling, before he was wrenched backwards vanishing into the dark depths of Crepuscule's Cradle.

Kingsley fell to his knees and sat there for a very long time. He listened to the sounds of his parents and the other phantoms until their spectral voices faded away. In the silent gloom of the forest he wished for them to return to him. They did not, but he took great comfort in knowing that one day they would. One day he would be with them, forever bathed in twilight...

Cradle



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Anthony Avina
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MontiLee Stormer
DJ Tyrer
Winnona Vincent
Joe Young

Featured Photographer

Nina D'Arcangela

Featured Author

Joshua Skye

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