

December 2016 issue #30

Death in All
Its Glory!

Poetry, Short Stories, & Flash Fiction; Words that Celebrate Death!

Artwork & featured interview with Illustrator, Joshua James

Featuring an interview with Jessica B. Bell, author of the short story collection, "Viscera"

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Cut | Simon Lee-Price

Her daughter's new boyfriend was a foreigner and she didn't like the sound of him, especially his name, Johannes, which she thought was too long and fancy for a decent man.

"Really, Mum, you're a complete xenophobe. But if it bothers you that much just call him John."

- "Your trouble is you always rush into relationships."
- "And you always see the worst in people."
- "I just don't want you getting hurt again."
- "Don't worry. I won't. Not after Ted."
- "I've told you never to say that name in my house."
- "Why not, Mum?" She grinned cheekily. "Ted is a nice short English name. Just the kind you like."

When her daughter revealed what John or Johannes did for a living, she warmed to him a little.

- "What? He's a doctor?"
- "Yes, Mum, a doctor."
- "Are you sure?"
- "Of course I'm bloody sure! He wears green scrubs with his name badge pinned on the chest and all the nurses call him Doctor."
 - "Why didn't you tell me right away he was a doctor?"
 - "Because I knew exactly how you'd react."
 - "What's that supposed to mean?"
- "The way you'd change your tune about him once you found out he earns good money. You're not only a xenophobe, you're a snob as well."

She invited her daughter and Johannes for dinner. He arrived with a bouquet of flowers, chocolates and two bottles of expensive French wine. She tried hard to pronounce his name, but kept forgetting to make the J sound like a Y.

"Call me John," he said, flashing a set of gleaming white teeth, "or just Jack."

He praised her cooking and entertained them with stories. His sense of humor was very British and he spoke with such a faint trace of accent she almost forgot he was foreign. Yet something about him still troubled her. Maybe it was the fact he was ten years older than her daughter? Maybe it was his shiny bronze tan and the way he kept the top of his shirt unbuttoned? Perhaps he was just *too* charming. Too smoothly shaven. What if he's one of these playboys, she asked herself, and using my daughter for a fling? Yes, a Jack the lad!

When she was next with her daughter she asked about his family.

"So, has he introduced you to them?"

"Not yet."

- "Hmm."
- "Most of them live abroad."
- "What do his parents do?"
- "They own some land in Germany. I think he's descended from aristocrats."
- "What about his friends? Have you met any of them? And what does he do when he's not at work?"
- "Is this the inquisition or something? I thought you liked him now? You seemed to get on well together."
- "I'm just interested. That's all. He must have some hobbies or people he knows. He can't always be busy at the hospital."
 - "I know he likes to paint when he gets time."
 - "He"s an artist as well?"
- "I suppose he is. I've seen some of his pictures. They're quite good actually. But not really my cup of tea. The style's a bit drab and depressing—but don't you dare tell him I said that."

- "Schnitzler," she repeated with difficulty, watching him sharpening the carving knife over the kitchen sink. "Did I pronounce it right?"
- "Not bad at all." He inspected the blade in the light of the window. "But I bet you can't guess what it means?"
- She grinned. Maybe she could. "Has it got something to do with food—that Vienna pork chop thing covered in bread crumbs?"
- "You mean a Wiener Schnitzel. But they don't use pork chops for those." He ran a fingertip lightly along the edge of the blade. "They use pork cutlets. However, you're halfway right. The surname Schnitzler actually translates as cutter. My ancestors were craftsmen who worked with wood. They carved everything from the elaborate scrolling you can see in baroque churches to those gigantic ship figureheads."
- She learned many other interesting facts about him during that surprise visit, when he'd stayed half the day and helped her with all kinds of odd jobs around the house. So why did she still mistrust him?
- "I think he's been married before," she said to her daughter. "And he's keeping it a secret from you. He probably has children back in Germany. Have you ever considered he may still be married? That he might be committing adultery with you?"
 - "Mother."
 - "I'm just saying."
 - "And he always says such nice things about you."
 - "Men are men and always will be. You need to get wise to their ways."
 - "You can talk."
 - "What's that supposed to mean?"
 - "Dad wasn't exactly Mr Perfect, now, was he?"

She stopped getting visits from her daughter and although they spoke weekly on the phone she began to feel lonely and guilty. Was she was just an old xenophobe after all? *If only I could speak to some of his colleagues*, she thought, *or just see this man at work in the hospital, maybe then I could accept him.*

The next few times she was out shopping, she made a detour past the front of the hospital, walking slowly and glancing across at the entranceway, as if she might suddenly see him there. Then one afternoon, on impulse, she went inside and stood before the reception counter. Hot with embarrassment, she said she had an appointment to see Doctor Schnitzler but had forgotten to bring the letter with her.

The receptionist searched the computer, trying various spellings, but could not find a Doctor Schnitzler.

"That's not to say he doesn't work here," she said. "It just means his name is not on our appointments system. Are you sure you've remembered the name correctly?"

"Yes, it's Schnitzler, Johannes Schnitzler."

"My supervisor will be back in five minutes. She might be able to help. You can take a seat over there."

All the while she waited, she was tempted to creep away and catch the bus home. She felt deeply ashamed of her own behavior. But there was something uncanny about this Johannes man and his name not being on the system gave her yet another reason to mistrust him.

The receptionist waved for her to return to the counter and passed her on to her supervisor.

"This Doctor Schnitzler," the supervisor said guardedly, "is his name Jack by any chance?"

"Why? Have you found him?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe."

"How can you say you're not sure? Either he works here or he doesn't work here."

"What is this man to you anyway? I know you don't really have a medical appointment with him."

She decided to make a full confession and told the woman about her daughter's relationship. The supervisor leaned closer across the desk and spoke in a lowered voice.

"You must keep what I'm going to tell you confidential. If it gets passed around it could undermine people's confidence in this hospital."

She gave her word.

"There was a Jack with a German-sounding surname on these premises about six months ago. Only he wasn't employed by the hospital and he wasn't a doctor—at least not a real doctor. He was dressed up as a surgeon, complete with mask, and found wandering around the maternity wing with a set of scalpels. A porter confronted him. He got away in the struggle but the porter did manage to pull off his fake ID badge. It was very realistic. Would have fooled almost anybody."

"Were the police called?" Her thoughts were racing in multiple directions, all of them terrifying.

"They came and they filed a report. They said if this man had actually interfered with a patient it would have been a serious crime but just a one-off act of impersonating a surgeon did not warrant a criminal investigation. They had nothing to go on anyway. The name on the badge was an alias. And the porter could not give a good description of the man because of the surgical mask. Look, I can't be sure this impersonator and your daughter's boyfriend are the same man. But it wouldn't do any harm to go and speak to the police. The main station's only five minutes away."

"Jack Aufreißer," said the detective, I remember that incident well." He opened the door into his cramped office, lifted a stack of papers off a swivel chair and invited her to sit down. He stood over by the window, an arm resting on top of a filing cabinet. "Do you have information about this individual? Or maybe you know his real name?"

"I know a Johannes Schnitzler. He's my daughter's boyfriend and he told her he works as a doctor at the hospital. But he's not on their system. I'm really worried for her. You've got to stop him."

"We can't turn up at a man's home and arrest him just because he's got a foreign name." He glanced beneath the half-raised blinds down at the street. "At least not these days we can't."

"But he's a liar and a cheat."

"That doesn't necessarily make him a criminal. And besides, we need evidence or witnesses. Not hearsay. Have you actually seen this man wearing his green coat in the hospital and pretending to be a doctor?"

She shook her head. "So what can I do?"

"Talk to your daughter."

"I've already tried—for months. She's madly in love with him."

"I understand," he said, nodding sympathetically. He moved away from the window and sat down on the edge of the desk. "In my experience aliases are seldom chosen at random. There's often a message in them or they make a statement about the person's character. The word *Aufreißer* means pick-up artist or ladies man in German. The charmer your daughter's got involved with seems to match that profile. A connection? Who knows? I'll tell you what I'll do. Give me your daughter's number and I'll get one of our female constables to talk with her."

Later that evening she got a call herself from the detective.

"Is your daughter at her flat?"

"She should be."

"Have you spoken to her at all since you left the station?"

"No. Why? What's wrong?"

"When was the last time you spoke to her?"

"Saturday, I think."

"Try to call her now. If she answers don't mention you have been to the police and don't start a discussion about her boyfriend. Keep it brief. Call me back right away, whether you get through or not."

A minute later she was talking to the inspector again, but now she was on her feet, pacing back and forth across the living room. "It's switched off. Has something happened to her? Just tell me what's going on."

"Stay at home," he said. "I'm on my way."

He arrived in no time at all, as if he'd been calling from just down the road.

"Tell me you've found my daughter," she said, as she let him in the front door.

"I've got a team of officers looking for her right now. As soon as she switches on her phone, they'll locate her." He went into the living room with her. "I need more information about this Schnitzler."

"I told you all I know at the station." She slumped onto the couch. "What's the point anyway? Everything that came out of his mouth was a lie."

"Do you have any pictures of him?"

She shook her head and bit on her nails.

"Is this him?" He held out his phone so she could see the screen.

She picked up her reading glasses from the coffee table and put them on. She could barely distinguish a grainy black-and-white image of a man's face. "I can't really tell. Who is it supposed to be?"

"Hans Schnitt, or that's what he called himself. The picture's a still from a surveillance video. We questioned him years ago during a raid on a massage parlor that was fronting for a brothel. He was just a client, as far as we could establish, so we let him go. But when we started interviewing the women we got a different picture of him. He was a nasty piece of work."

"I don't understand. What's the connection between this man and my daughter's boyfriend?"

"It's all in the name. Hans is a short form of Johannes, and *Schnitt* is the German word for cut, the root word in Schnitzler." He slid the phone back inside his coat pocket. "Did your daughter's boyfriend ever reveal an unusual interest in knives?"

She started to cry.

"We'll find your daughter," he said.

He walked away from the house buttoning up his coat to the collar. It was dark and a fog was rising but he saw things clearly now. Only would they reach her daughter in time? Those German names were clever, yes, very clever—in their own way similar to the scores of taunting letters and postcards the last time around. And that pretence of being a painter and of noble descent was a nice touch—this thing had done its research and was familiar with the mountain of biographies about itself.

The first of its reincarnations was John Taylor, a chatty and ingratiating taxi driver. Taylor had come forward during a murder investigation to say he'd given the victim a ride in his cab on

the night she disappeared and took an unhealthy interest in the case. He also revealed he knew many more details about the state of the corpse than were ever released to the press. By the time they discovered the set of butcher's knives in the boot of his car he had vanished without trace. John Taylor reappeared months later as Johan Schneider. *Schneider* being the German word for tailor or cutter. This time the murder victim was left exhibited—that was the only way to describe it—at the edge of an allotment where Schneider and a colleague were working as tree surgeons. Once again he slipped away before they could get their hands on him.

There were at least a dozen other aliases used—all variations of John and *schneiden*, *reißen* or *schlitzen* (cut, rip or slit)—that he'd managed to dig out in connection with unsuccessful investigations into savage and apparently motiveless murders across the city. Jack Aufreißer had been stopped just in time, but that alias was the best of the lot, darkly ingenious. *Aufreißer* meant philanderer, yes, but it had a literal meaning too—one who cuts or rips open.

His phone beeped. He pressed it to his ear.

- "Sir, you'd better come quickly."
- "You've found something?"
- "In the passage way at the back of the flat."
- "A body?"
- "What's left of one. There something written on the wall too. Looks like a name. A foreign name. I can't pronounce it."
 - "Take a photograph and send it to me."
 - He knew what it would say but he looked at the screen anyway.

Jack der Aufschlitzer was back.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Simon Lee-Price lives and writes in the UK. His work appears in the literary journals *Prole*, *Interpreter's House*, *Sein und Werden* and *The Ham* and in an anthology of speculative fiction, *Restless*, by Frith Books. He believes good writing is writing that leaves the reader changed in some way, however small. It need not shout to achieve this—sometimes whispering is best.

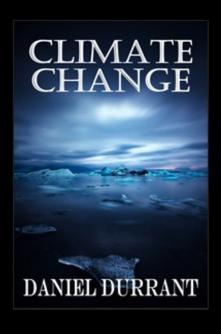
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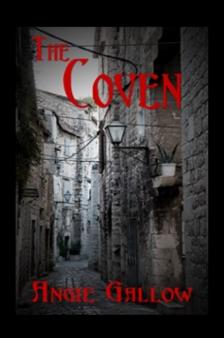
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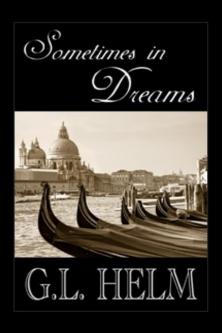












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Just a Nightmare | *Dagny Thomas*

Everybody sleepwalks when they are children, but you never stopped. Now you are seventeen, and suffer from multiple sleep disorders, such as insomnia, sleep apnea, and sleep paralysis.

Your parents first caught you sleepwalking when you were four, shortly after your tonsillectomy. The surgery went fine, but the anesthesia wore off a bit too soon; you were awake before the surgeons removed the intubation tube—a metal tube forcing your mouth open and sticking down your trachea. After that, every time you get a sore throat, you remember the sensation of being unable to move, tape over your eyes, with an instrument with knife-like sharpness sliding out of your throat.

You frequently wake up with aching muscles, bruises, and lacerations. Often times, the next morning, your parents tell you how they found you sleepwalking—climbing on bookshelves, ramming into walls, playing with the kitchen knives—and managed to safely navigate you back to bed. You can never recall those episodes, but you can recall nightmares of being buried alive, getting trapped in an endless maze, or suffocating on the surgical tube jammed down your windpipe—each time, mere moments away from death.

Afraid to sleep, you drag through the days with deep bags beneath your eyes, until your doctor prescribes you Ambien and encourages you to set a regular bedtime. He assures you that, despite the myth, if you die in a dream, you will not die in reality; you will just wake up. You remain terrified of what you might do while unconscious, but take the drug, and go to bed.

You dream of being strapped to a table, sightless, hooks prying open your mouth. The intubation tube snakes down your throat and into your windpipe, allowing the surgeons to cut out your walnut-sized tonsils. You gasp, completely immobilized. You scream as the metallic tube begins slowly, painfully, sliding out, slicing your trachea. Chest rising and falling rapidly, you involuntarily swallow, causing the edges to cut deeper into your throat. Heart desperately hammering against your ribs, you continue to cry out. The sound emerges as a choked wheeze, then a gurgle as blood pours over your lips. As the surgeons finally remove the instrument, all you can taste is that tangy, salty, bitter mixture of metal and blood.

The following morning, your parents find you sprawled on the kitchen floor, skin deathly white in contrast to the crimson pool in which you lie, eyes closed, mouth open wide, with a steak knife jammed down your throat.

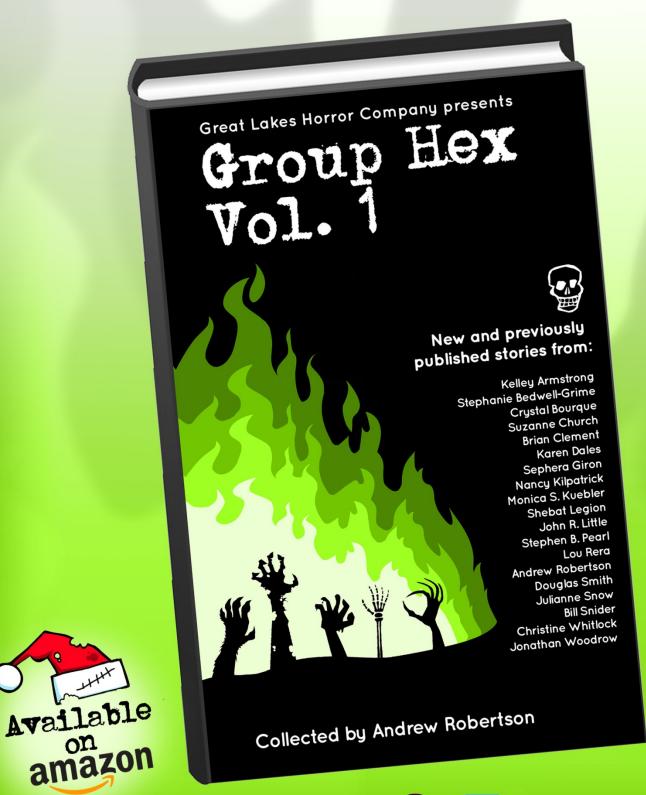
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dagny Thomas, originally from Seattle, WA, is an author of six self-published books. Currently a sophomore at the University of Hawaii, she is majoring in psychology, with a minor in English. Having been writing and storytelling for as long as she can remember, Dagny hopes to make a living out of her passion.

Facebook: <u>Dagny Thomas</u>

Blog: https://cerebralpoetssociety.wordpress.com/

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Sundowning | *Andrew Robertson*

The log in the fireplace is near gone, now just a shadow that pops and crackles with orange veins crawling across the pitch. Zena sits in her favorite chair, unsure of how long she's been asleep. Must be a few hours at least. The room is quite dark, so it's definitely after six, Canadian winters being what they are. Cold, dark and spiteful, especially for old folks. She's not cold though, and despite the fire being so close, not warm either.

The wind outside drives hard bits of snow at the glass of the windows, an irregular staccato interrupting the silence of the winter night. She reaches for the book in her lap but it's not there. Must have fallen on the floor while she snoozed. She looks down and doesn't see it on the floor so shakes out the blanket on her lap but all that falls out is an empty teacup. It lands on the floor but doesn't make a sound, and it doesn't break although a tiny cloud of dust seems to have floated out of it. Maybe she had just dreamt that she was reading. *It's awful to grow old*, she thinks, reaching for the teacup.

The doorbell rings, giving Zena a fright. The teacup will have to wait.

"Frank?" She hollers, but he doesn't respond. Must be upstairs.

Using both hands, she pushes her stiff body up out of the chair and begins the stroll to her door that seems further away every day that passes. When did she last have a visitor? Last week? Last month?

She glances at the hall clock. 7:35pm. Later than she thought. Taking a look at herself in the hallway mirror, she smoothes her hair down. *I'm as pale as a ghost*.

Putting her hand on the knob, she expects it to be cold, but it's not. The door opens, and her granddaughter, Ariel, stands outside. Snow twirls around her crown of red hair, but not a strand moves. She's beautiful, as always.

"Oh it's you my dear," says Zena, the fatigue long in her voice. "I haven't seen you in bloody ages. You never come visit me!" She chastises her granddaughter but they both know it's a routine they've gone through for years since Ariel left for college. It just seems to be such a long time since anyone had last visited, but Zena had been having trouble pulling those memories out of the fog that was once her brain. Maybe it wasn't so long. Age. The great fuck off.

"Nana, you know that's not true."

"You know you're long overdue for a visit! Well come in, it looks as cold as a witches tit out there." Nana opens the door wide and stands aside. "I was just reading by the fire. I can put on another log."

Ariel gives her grandmother an odd look and then walks in to the living room.

When did she take off her boots and coat? Zena wonders, trailing after her in a shuffle.

"Your grandfather is upstairs, probably having a nap."

Ariel sits down on the well-worn rose velvet couch and pats the spot beside her for Nana to sit down. Once Zena is sitting, Ariel takes her hand.

"You know he's not upstairs Nana. Do you remember when I came yesterday?"

Zena feels an odd pressure in her head, a confusion that pulls gray spots into the corners of her vision. She remembers blinking as a child and following an odd thread floating across her eye. Now the threads push against the surface, a mass of tangles. Eventually a lady gets too old to pull them apart and just waits for the prognosis, she thinks.

"You were not here yesterday!" She snaps at Ariel, and pulls her hand back, feeling guilt and triumph at once. Mostly guilt.

"Yes I was Nana. I've been coming here every day for a month. And now it's time for you to go. Do you not remember what happened? You remembered near the end of our visit yesterday, but wouldn't come with me. You're going to have to...or they will come instead." Her voice trails off with equal measures of fear and sadness so close to the surface that Zena feels the emotions put their fingers into her own heart.

"I'm old, but I'm not stupid," she says curtly. "You were not here yesterday. I would remember that. I have just been in that chair reading for the past few days. And who is this they? Are you putting me in a home?"

"I would never do that Nana. And where is the book you were reading?" Ariel queries.

The pressure enters Zena's head again. Where was the damn book? She couldn't remember where she had left it but that meant nothing, did it?

"Where is your grandfather? He will sort this out. I heard him upstairs only today."

Ariel purses her lips, considering her words. She pushes her long red hair behind her ear and looks at the patch on the couch were the under padding is almost showing through.

"That wasn't Granddad. Did you see anyone come into the house?"

"No. There's been no one here but us."

"But there were people in the house, you just couldn't see them. Nana, do you remember when Granddad Frank was ill?

"Of course I do," Zena replied, straining to pull a memory of who was in the house earlier, and to pull Frank from the fog, finding one of him in a bed, but not a hospital bed and not at home. It was that awful place he had to go to because of that damn dementia. He would get so mad at night, throwing things, yelling and cursing. A tear welled in Zena's eye. She didn't want to remember him like that. The memory left a lump of coal in her throat. "I hated that time. There was nothing I could do."

"But you did do something Nana, and that's why I'm here now. Because we have to go."

The fog began to lift, with memories presenting themselves like the odd distortions of heat coming off a road in the desert. She could almost remember them but not quite. And Ariel... something had happened to her too.

"You will have to forgive me, I don't remember as well as I used to," Zena says apologetically. "I can't say I'm certain about what happened. Are you telling me he's not here?"

"Nana, Granddad is gone. You helped release him from that horrible state he was in. He begged you one day, when he was lucid, to make it stop. And then you... well, you tried to follow him but ended up stuck here."

Zena felt a warm rush as the images came to the surface. She had taken him from the long-term care facility, back to the living room here where they sat by the roaring fire, and they each had tea full of powder and pills. Each had put the other's pills in because... well surely the Lord would see that a mercy killing wasn't as bad as suicide.

A choke escaped from Zena's mouth.

"He's dead. My Frank is dead. And I didn't get to go with him. I must have done it wrong."

"You didn't Nana," Ariel says. "That's why I'm here. You need to leave this place. I won't be able to come back again. They will come for you instead."

"What do you mean they? Who?"

"Nana, you haven't realized that you've passed yet. You have been here for weeks, and I've come every day to get you, but this is the most you've ever remembered about what happened without getting angry with me and asking me to leave. I have been sent to take you home. They will come and steal your soul."

Zena felt the full weight of what Ariel was saying and the fog cleared entirely. She had raised Ariel here, in the house after her mother left, that ungrateful little bitch. Ariel had grown into a fine young woman, living in residence at the fancy college nearby. She started missing classes after becoming sick, just before Frank had to go to the long-term care home. Zena didn't know what to do, and was determined that they would both get better, but it didn't matter a fig. Ariel had died in a horrible, white hospital bed with the smell of bleach coming off the sheets a day before Frank begged to be released, and Zena, not wanting to be alone, decided it was her time as well.

"I remember all of it." Tears fell from her face full of relief and anger. "What happens if they come, these people you are speaking of? How can they steal my soul?"

"They are the damned. They get all the souls that don't know where to go, or can't remember that they've died. I was given a fortnight to get you, but they won't be held off any longer. You know it's time to go, Nana," she says, walking out of the living room and opening the front door. "You won't need your coat."

"Will I get to see Frank again?" Zena asks, voice shaking like a child that's been scolded.

"I'm not sure, Nana," Ariel sighs with remorse and sadness. "We will have to find him and it won't be easy. We have a long journey to where we need to go and he is many, many days ahead of us."

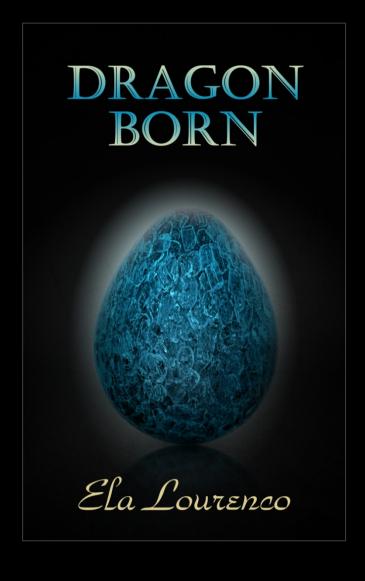
The snow falls outside in complete silence. The boughs of trees, lashed by the winds make no clatter at all as their icy bones crash together. In fact, the whole world is silent, but the stars are almost piercing in their brightness. The stars are coming closer, ready to fall out of the sky toward them.

"I'm not ready Ariel. I always thought we would have more time together," Zena almost whispers, taking Ariel's hand and facing the door.

"Me too," Ariel replies as the two women step out into the night, with all the lights of the universe slowly coming down to meet them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Andrew Robertson is an award-winning writer who has been published in *Group Hex Vol. 1*, *Deadman's Tome*, *Undertow*, *Feeling Better Yet?* and *katalogue*. He is the founder and co- host of The Great Lakes Horror Company podcast on iTunes, official podcast to Library of the Damned.

Twitter: <u>@AndrewAwesome76</u>

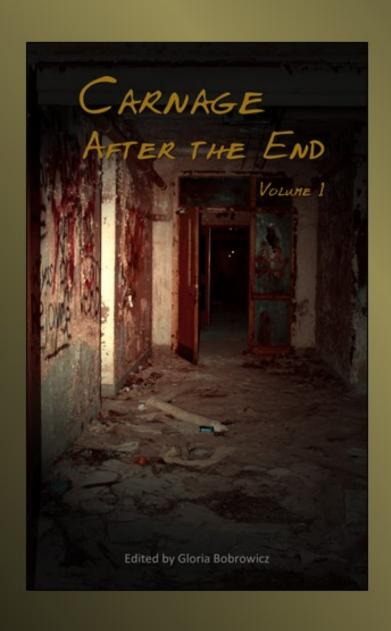


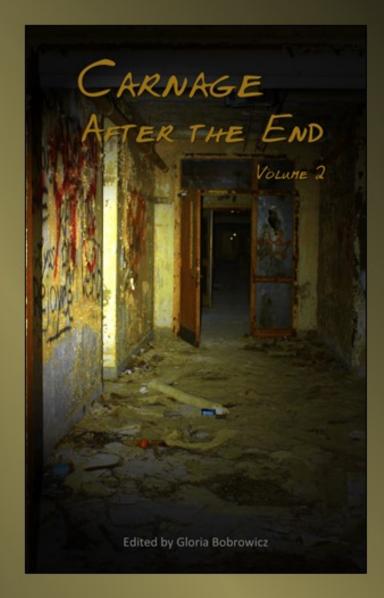
Dragon Born

Ela Lourenco

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





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Meat Beach | Guy Cheston

We arrived at Meat Beach with plenty of time to play around in the wind and light rain. We planned on getting back to our second floor apartment, which was well in-land, before the hurricane made landfall.

It was Lacy's idea. She wanted to go out to the shoreline but wouldn't tell me why. I figured she wanted to see how bad the surf was as the storm came in. That was another thing about Will. The damn storm moved slowly. Caused a lot of flooding.

The drive already had my adrenaline spiking. Wind gusts weren't quite tropical storm force yet, but they were getting there as I pulled us into the parking lot and took the parking space in front of the concession stand. There was nobody else around.

Part of the reason my nerves were frazzled was because the two of us had been sipping vodka and rum all day. Not guzzling, just sipping from those little bottles you can buy at the liquor store checkout counter. They're easy to hide in the deep pockets of cargo shorts, and we kept a huge stash in the glove compartment.

Lacy hadn't been a drinker until she met me, and I wondered if she would do something this crazy if she wasn't so lit. I know my dumb ass went along with whatever she wanted, no matter the cost.

I'm not proud of driving drunk in the middle of an approaching hurricane, but hey, we made it to the beach alive.

Thanks to the booze and all the anxious excitement from the imminent storm, we were more than a little horny. We got out of the truck without saying a word, knowing full well what the both of us needed. The light rain sunk into our clothes as I took her by the arm and led her up the wooden walkway to the picnic area. There were a dozen or so tables there and beyond them, the beach. The wind had knocked over some of the umbrellas that had been secured into their bases atop the tables.

I took Lacy over to one that still had a cover on it to give us what shelter we could from the rain. I plopped her tight little ass on the edge and she strapped her legs around my waist. Strands of her wet black hair hung in front of her face, made her look exotic and decadent. Her dark eyes glinted with eagerness and she had a smirk on her pouty lips.

She wasn't wearing a bra and I massaged her nipple through her dress between my thumb and forefinger. She let out a moan and I pulled her toward me by pressing her heels into the backs of my upper thighs. I just wanted to make out a little bit before going onto the beach. Lacy had other ideas. I grabbed her hair and used it to tug her head back, then traced a pattern up her neck with my tongue. Her flesh tasted of summer honey.

"Here, Niles," she whispered into my ear, then nibbled on my neck.

"A picnic table?"

"Why not?"

Her breath smelled faintly of rum and her tongue tasted like the butterscotch mint she had just thrown into her mouth.

What the hell, I figured, and why not indeed.

I pulled down my shorts and boxers, dick so hard it could impale a cinder block. I looped my middle finger through the crotch of her panties and yanked them to the side, then slid myself in her and went at it, thrusting away on a picnic table where families eat burgers and hotdogs and sip soda and talk about whatever it is families talk about. Lacy clamped a hand on the edge of the table and groped her breast with the other, dreamily gazing up at the sky and arching her back as she licked her lips.

A couple of people appeared in of the corner of my eye, veering clear of us as they walked out onto the sand. I didn't care and Lacy didn't notice.

It didn't last long but it was heavy, fevered.

Unforgettable.

"I want to feel the sand in between my toes, come on," Lacy said after we finished.

I followed as she took my hand and led us onto the shore. We couldn't see the ocean, but we could hear it some twenty feet away, a violent sound of surf crashing against shoreline. We kicked off our sandals and walked on the beach for several minutes, holding hands, until she turned and kissed me. The smell of her perfume, her breath, the smell of the ocean air, her taste, all of it a mesmerizing concoction I wanted to last forever.

"Do you ever feel like it's all just a dream? Life, us?" Lacy asked.

"All the time."

"Let's go into the water."

I grabbed her arm, said, "Wait, wait. You see those waves? I don't know."

She took a step back, pulled down the spaghetti straps of her dress and let it fall to her feet then slid her thumbs into the waistband of her panties and eased them off.

I looked around and the only people I could see were the couple that walked by us when we had been going at it on the picnic table. They had their backs to us and were walking in the opposite direction, far away.

What the hell else was I supposed to do? She was like a mirage, the midnight glimmer of a perfect dream.

"It's going to be so cold," I said.

"Don't care. Only going knee deep anyway."

We waded out until the water was at our knees. She put her arms around my neck dragged me down to where we were sitting in the knee-deep surf, buoyed by an onslaught of waves. She straddled me again, pressed her taut nipples against my chest.

She dug her nails into my back and I squeezed her breast so hard she yelped, looked into my eyes, then smiled. I muttered an apology but it was silenced by the wind and rain and surf.

I can still hear her breathing in my ear, can still smell the shampoo in her hair, can still feel the warmth between her legs, and can still see the black webbed hands that shot out of the water and wrapped around her face and dragged her away into the dark below.

I spent hours in the ocean, shouting her name and crying and disbelieving what I'd seen. I dove beneath the surface where she'd disappeared and felt around, brushing my hands against

sea-shells and seaweed, desperate to find her. She was gone. I stayed in the water until the surf got so bad I had to get out of there. Thankfully, Will only skimmed the shoreline, its eye missing the southeast coast of Florida. It's what kept the storm surge manageable.

I took shelter in a lifeguard tower, damn sturdy structures. Why had they taken her and not me too? After the storm passed, I looked around for Lacy's dress and underwear but couldn't find anything. Even her sandals were missing. They should have been next to where my shorts were laying, but no. I put them back on then slept in the guard tower all day.

I awoke during the night. Midnight maybe. I'm not sure. When I tried to check the time on my watch I found it wasn't there.

I walked along the beach where we had been before she'd been snatched away. After standing there a few moments, rubbing my arms from the cold, a figure came out of the water.

Her.

Impossible.

She came out of the ocean straight to me, naked and shivering, arms crossed over her shoulders. I thought I had to be hallucinating, but then she spoke.

"You came," Lacy said.

"Is this real?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Lacy pulled me in close and pressed her lips to mine. She smelled and tasted just as she did last night, of lavender shampoo and butterscotch and wine. "I begged them to let me return for you."

"Who's them?" I asked.

"Shhhh," she said. "I want to remember what it was like before they took me."

We walked for what seemed like an hour, saying little. It was all so surreal to me; her, the ocean air, the sound of the waves, the sand on my feet, and the loneliness of an empty beach.

"I'm sorry, Lacy. I'm just not understanding any of this," I said.

"I've made them very happy, so they've rewarded me."

"Made them happy? How?"

She wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"They take the women because they need them... they come every time there's a hurricane. They need the women to, you know, breed," Lacy said.

Oh God.

"Let's just get out of here, Lacy, my truck's right over there," I said, nodding to the parking lot.

"No, no. It doesn't work like that. It just doesn't. Trust me. But they're happy with me, because I've promised to make many more of them, so they've granted me this night." She cupped her hands to my face. "What do you see when you look at me?"

"I see the woman of my dreams," I said, and meant it.

Lacy smiled that sweet playful smile, then said, "Make love to me here. I want to remember what you feel like, alive, inside me." Lacy kissed me again. Then she pulled down my shorts.

I laid her down in the sand and rested the back of her head in my hands while I dug my toes into the wet sand. My jolting climax burned so much I could have been shooting lava. I

opened my eyes to see her beautiful face, only to see a bloated, pallid corpse moaning and saying my name. The nose was gone. Instead, there were just tiny slits where thick green mucus uncontrollably gushed. Instead of ears, there were gills, things that looked like they'd been carved out of a reef and attached to a dead face. The eyes were closed, still in ecstasy as I felt a contraction around my shriveling penis. The mouth, though, was open. There were only a few teeth, and all of them were black with bits of seaweed and moss dangling and rattling around in its gaping maw as it exhaled. Its tongue came out to lick its fat, amphibious-looking lips, a tongue that squirmed and gyrated and flapped around like an eel. Strands of moss and seaweed rested atop a nearly translucent skull.

And the stench, putrid and maggoty, nauseating.

"Jesus!" I shouted, half curse and half prayer. I pulled myself out of it, stood up, stumbled backward and landed butt-first in the wet sand, staring at the gelatinous form and vomiting on my lap. Startled that I jerked away so fast, it opened its eyes.

They were Lacy's eyes, but it wasn't her. No way could it be her.

I jumped up and pelted down the beach, stupefied with fear. I was maybe twenty feet away when I heard it crying. It was the sobbing that made me stop and turn. What I'd just copulated with wasn't Lacy, but it had her eyes and it had her voice when it cried. Its webbed hands were buried into its face, its body glistening with a slithery griminess that reminded me of a salamander. Then, it called my name again.

"Niles, oh God I'm so sorry. I tried to keep you from seeing. I'm sorry."

Lacy stood, hunched over like a Neanderthal as she swam into the water.

Speechless, I just watched. Once she was waist-deep, she turned to me and said, "I wasn't going to tell you this, but they'll allow you to come too if you want. I'm going to be so lonely, Niles, oh God I'm going to be so lonely without you. They'll wait until sunrise, then I'll be gone with them forever. I can't ask you to come, but if you want to be with me, just walk into the ocean and keep going, they'll find you."

"Lacy," I began, but she vanished into the black surf.

I savored what was left of the last night of my humanity, watching the tip of the sun peak out above the horizon. Every part of my human nature cried out in self-preservation, screaming at me not to do it. But something else, some other part of my being that transcended flesh, tugged at me to go to her. She needed me, and it didn't matter if death transformed her into a morbid seabeast.

If you love a person enough, you'll do what you must, even if it means sinking into the blackest depths of the ocean. And as the hands broke the surface of the water and dragged me farther out to sea, I'd never felt more alive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Guy Cheston lives with his family in Virginia. A writer with a day job, he pursues the craft at night after his family has settled in. When he's not reading or writing, he's trying not to be so addicted to Star Wars Galaxy of Heroes on his iPhone. Guy is a supporting member of the Horror Writers Association and a fan of online writing workshops.

Twitter: @guycheston

Gotta Catch 'Em All | G. H. Finn

Cape Wrath. The most remote point in mainland Britain. To get there, Clive had driven to Northern Scotland, inflated a dingy, rowed across the Kyles of Durness, then hiked twelve-miles to Cape Wrath Lighthouse.

He'd travelled all this way because of a tip-off, in a direct message via an invitation-only *Pokémon-Go on-line* forum. Letting him into the secret...

"Go to Cape Wrath at midnight, at full-moon, and you can catch *Articuno*, a 'legendary' *Pokémon*..."

No one in the world had caught Articuno yet.

Players weren't even sure Articuno was in the game...

But Clive had faith.

A true believer, he devoutly made an epic pilgrimage to the furthest, remotest location, praying he'd be first to catch the rarest Pokémon of all...

Arriving, he was shocked that he wasn't alone. Other players were there too. Brian, Olivia, Mohamed, May-Lin and Sid.

Wolfgang and his children, Connor and Susi, came as a group.

Although disappointed not to be the only one to catch Articuno, Clive didn't really mind. He'd still be one of the first, and might make some friends. He was a bit lonely. Most of the gamers on the forum were.

At midnight, dark clouds cleared, revealing the pale moon.

Wolfgang raised his voice and addressed the gathered players.

"You've been brought here under false pretences. There's no Articuno here."

Connor added, "No Pokémon at all."

"What?" exclaimed Clive, disbelievingly. "There's nothing to catch?"

"I wouldn't say that..." replied Susi.

She, her brother and father began to change.

Fur grew, jaws elongated, claws and teeth lengthened. Wolfgang howled, "Let the hunt begin!"

The players screamed – panicking, running, sobbing.

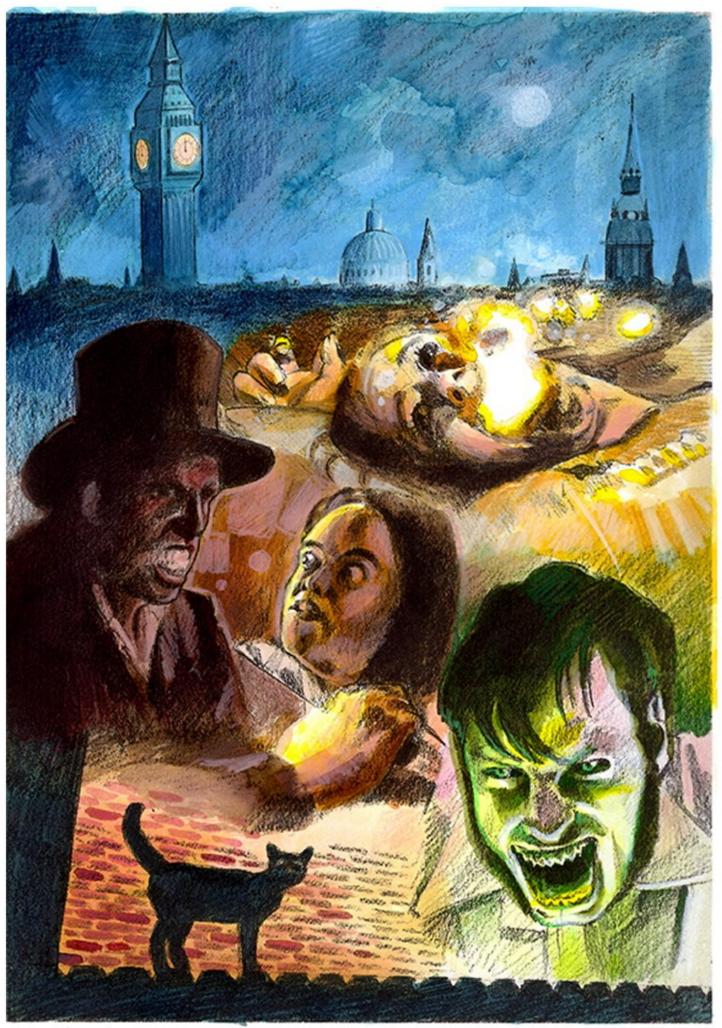
Connor turned to his already blood-covered sister and grinned wolfishly as she chewed on Clive's arm, reminding her, "Don't eat that now! Don't forget..."

"Yes, I know," Susi replied,

"We've gotta catch 'em all."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: G. H. Finn keeps his real identity secret, possibly in the hope of one day being mistaken for a superhero. G. H. Finn has written a wide range of fiction and especially enjoys mixing genres, including mystery, horror, steampunk, sword-and-sorcery, dark comedy, fantasy, detective, crime, dieselpunk, weird, supernatural, sword-and-planet, speculative, folkloric, Cthulhu mythos, sci-fi, spy-fi, crime and urban fantasy.

Twitter: <u>@GanferHaarFinn</u>
Website: <u>http://ghfinn.orkneymagic.com/</u>



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Fire! | Anders M. Svenning

Throughout my studies in the cosmological components of our world, I, Theodore Taylor, have come to notice a peculiar setting, in which the five elements—fire, earth, air, water, and consciousness—come together and dictate the mortality of our Earthly bodies. In people, a single element reigns supreme, and differs from person to person. The theory of this cosmological placement has been symbolized by the pentagram, where, in its five points, has symbolized the five elements. The flow of the cosmic elements through the central nodes of the human body do render one talented in their respective behaviors; and I do think it customary to state not all are talented in the ways of the supernatural. What met my eyes, on that rainy night, so many nights ago, could only be set into motion by those portentously affiliated with the supernatural, as not my eyes nor my mind ever thought of such things as plausible. Maintaining faithful to the fact that human beings are grounded on the Earthly level of existence cannot be sustained, as the storm that presided that night was something of a lower cosmic force. Whether upper or lower, as the case may be, the occurrence took me by innocuously foretelling zeal, which has become an obsession. Nights, now, I look into the flames of a candle, musing on what really sustains the fire, and what really composes the light, which we all know and take for granted. That it is something far beyond the human mind's capacity to understand I assuredly think is so; and as surely as Prometheus stole the element from God, I do think of the element of fire such that it, perhaps, is something secret, and should not have been taken to the Mortals. For the Mortals are now under the influence of something so malevolent and sardonic that their Fates are surely sealed, locked up in that box above the clouds, or, perhaps, deep within Earth, so that none can escape absolute pain upon leaving the Earth. I am sure, now, after seeing that man perish by means of that sinister element, the epitome of all elements will be experienced, felt, and recognized upon our inevitable death. Being such that fire, in its dormant states, such as flickering on the wick of a candle or in the safe rotunda of a pit of fire, cannot and will not change my mind that fire is the element which makes us fear. Fire is the element which makes us paranoid, delusional, and that fire is the element which the humble servant of Hades, Death, uses upon collecting the Souls of the damned. Therein do I find myself horrified, as I have witnessed the apex of that element; and do find myself assuredly under the influence of that element, who wholesomely controls Mortals at will. Take from this what you will, but by the end of this tale, the listener, whoever they may be, may rest assured that *Fire* breathes in their lungs, and that *Fire* is the sole perpetrator of all hate, anguish, and adversity experienced by any and all. Fire, as peaceful and enlightening as it may seem, is in fact murderous, vengeful, and wicked into its very physiology; this is so much the case that I, upon this warning, feel the licking of the flames of Hades in my chest, and the uneasy fumes filtering into my skull.

Nights ago did I see a man burn to death before me? It was no natural fire; and could only be brought about by the entities that control that element, that is to say practitioners of the occult. This man was my brother; and as I stood above his ashes I thought upon the world what travesty this was, what kind of man could do this to a boy of twenty years of age? It was not a spontaneous occurrence, however, and many events led up to his eventual combustion.

Nights prior the terminal incident I was skirting along the bounds of sleep, half conscious and half in dream state when I heard from the conjoining room cackles, which came from my brother; and I was awoken by the sheer vivaciousness and rambunctiousness of this cackling that I rose and went to his door and knocked. The scent of fire was omnipresent outside that doorway, and he refused to answer. I merely heard, every thirty seconds or so, another volatile cackle and the eruption of flames. The roaring of the element beyond that doorway was unmistakable; and I thought of he who lay beyond that doorway an arsonist, letting forth flame spitting rending throughout the apartment, by means of some juvenile prank. This, of course, was farthest from the truth; and as I crept back into my quarters heard the shrieking of the poor boy, a sound painful as the Earth-shattering throat could unfold. I slept not that night; and when I rose the following morning, at twilight, I ventured into the living area to find my brother perched upon a chair, sipping a cup of coffee, with bright red burn marks on his arms and neck. I questioned him on the matter; and yet he denied any sort of usage of fire the preceding night, and presently left me alone in the living area to mull over my thoughts and observations of the preceding night and the morning. He had fallen into the camaraderie, and invited into the apartment on one event, a man adorned with black raiment, a bald man, with a head pale as a moon in full. The man, I saw at a glance, had nails longer than a big cat's and eyes emblazoned with fury. Briefly I acknowledged the man; and before long he took his leave of our apartment, leaving my brother, reclusive, in his sleeping quarters. The man I never once more saw, until the evening of my brother's immolation. My brother returned home late in the evening, with bandages on his arms and neck, and a grin on his face that told not of the impending doom, in which he would find himself in less than forty-eight hours.

The time of pacifism had elapsed discord taking its place. Eleven o'clock P.M. commenced, two days prior the relaying of this tale, and the man, with hooded raiment entered the apartment, with notable fervor. He stormed into my brother's locale and quickly began spitting words, which sounded hoarse and distended. He spoke:

"Dare you use the power of Baël for selfish reasons? You have damaged your body with his Spirit, and you have shamed the order of Psilolexia! You are no longer a Brother! I will burn for this, you blasted boy. Learn! Learn your place here, tonight, as you are no longer admitted in this Kingdom!"

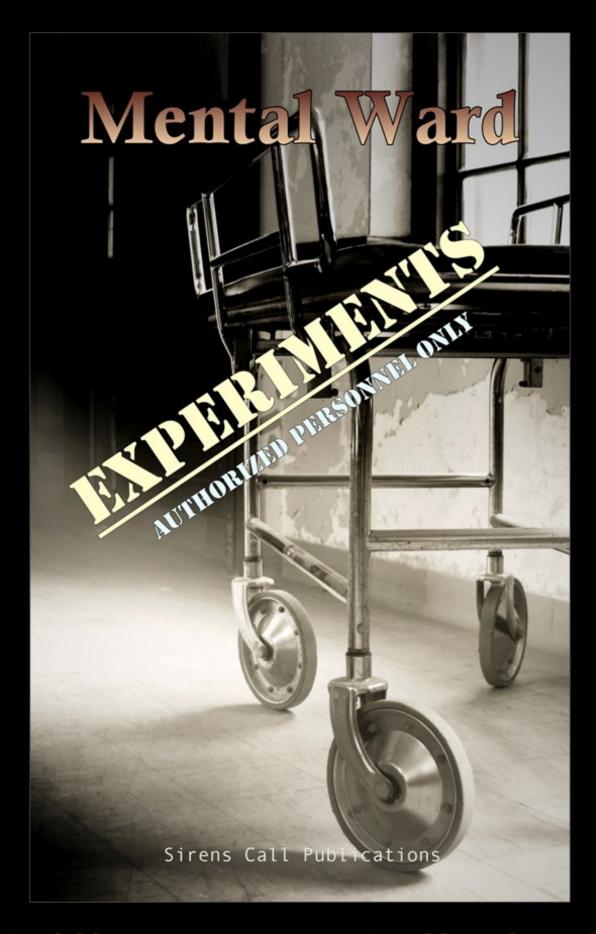
The man, I heard, stormed from the room, slamming shut each door as he exited the vicinity. I ventured out into the common area, and was met by my brother, who in one hour would fall victim to that element, which was so wholesomely revered. He cooed me, and reassured me all was well, and that the man in black raiment would never once more appear. I retired; and before long I was awoken by the shrieking gasps of a man having begun to smolder. Once more, I exited my room, and the harrowing sight before me had extended into the reaches of my heart; so much so that before throwing a blanket over the boy, let out a shriek of my own. The blanket was bitterly burnt through; and from the open mouth of the boy came balls of orange and black fire, which gravitated towards two spikes on my brother's head. They accumulated there, and traveled down his face toward his throat. His face was terribly burned; and he threw me aside and ran outdoors into the cold rain. I followed; and upon seeing his entire body, his throat spitting forth embers of distinct red color, his arms waving, leaving behind them tracers of

light and smoke, burning, I, with my own eyes, felt the welling of those infernal embers within me. That is was like osmosis of flames is not far from the truth; for as I watched my brother burn my eyes felt emblazoned with hate and vehemence, as if something daemonic was attempting to escape from them. The thermogenisis lasted thirty seconds before the boy was utterly covered in flames. I was unable to watch, and closed my eyes. Opening them once more, I saw the heavy, cold, suburban rains could do nothing against the conflagration. Wooded areas surrounding instilled only further dreadfulness; and, finally, a waxing upstate New York moon split the storming clouds in two. Two more minutes passed by with excruciating cries of pain and stunning visuals. He, by the third minute of the inferno, was breaking up, like the Tectonic plates of Earth. He slowly discontinued living, and fell into clumps of ash and residue. The rain thickened up the remains of my brother, and I had not a single bit of flesh to redeem. His body was entirely burned; and that, in its finality, was the moment I knew mortality was assuredly human kind's Fate, and that no man living, occultist or regular denizen, could penetrate the realm of immortality. It seemed too evident, so evident in fact that I only retreated back into my apartment, and decided to file a document with the morgue the following morning. I, morosely inept and incapacitated, slept in tossing rhythms the entire night. While I was fearful of the events that had taken place, I was not as mystified as the following morning, following a strange sequence of dreams, in which I was swimming in water, water so vast that it took my eye in full, and so that I saw nothing other than water, water everywhere; and what shook me the most was that I had awoken drenched in sweat—moisture—so that I thought my Fate, my end would be nothing apart from the Deathly element of water. I escaped my sleepy prison and went into the shower, where I enveloped myself in the element. I know not if that is my Fate—death by water—but, if it is, I know now that the phantasmal swooning of water cannot be contended with, as that expanse, in which I found myself, curiously while dreaming, was only the beginning of my Earthly transience. I redoubled my efforts, in Spirituality, hoping that God existed, and that there may be a benevolent protector of our realm, as what I saw that night preceding was only of the daemonic and of the hellish dominion of the Devil.

Now, I speak, for there seems to be no other escape. When I sleep, I dream of water. When I wake, I wake in cold sweats; and when I shower I feel fear pulling at my ribcage, like it was a chewing toy; and when I write, as I've stated, I feel the power of that element, which took my brother... *Fire!* Not for any reason, but for a reason I have not yet actualized, I find myself more and more yearning for the knowledge of that element. The mystification that connected my brother and that element was apparent, to say the least; and, as I believe in pedigree, there must be some inherent talents in me. I will not pursue the origin of such myths, nor will I pursue the art of fire bending; and yet, implored do I feel to look into the burning candle—if only to find a shred of humanity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Anders M. Svenning has had short stories published in *Forge Journal*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *The J.J. Outré Review*, *The Kentucky Review*, and many more; he has a forthcoming horror collection, entitled *Nonpareil* (Tule Fog Press), which should be released December 2016.

Facebook: Anders M Svenning



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

What She Needs | Livingston Edwards

Thomas Curtis stared at the photograph of his dead wife.

"You hated this picture," he told her. He looked at Eleanor sprawled on the sand, her long, curly brown hair thrown into the air by the sea breeze. With the sun blazing over her right shoulder, Eleanor's green eyes squinted into the camera. Thomas ran his finger across her crooked smile, adding, "Said you hated how your hair looked. No matter how many times I told you it looked good, you told me to stop lying. Yeah, well, I was never lying. Never."

He brought the photograph close, pressed his lips against hers, and dropped it. Eleanor's picture fell into the well and landed into the still black surface. The stench of spoiled water filled the morning air and he stepped back. Throat burning, Thomas leaned on the edge of the well. Cobblestones stabbed into his palms. Hot tears rolled down his face, splattering his hands.

"Please, Eleanor," he said, voice cracking. "Please come back. I can't...I just can't do this without you. Not anymore, God no."

Thomas slipped a hand into his sweater pocket and curled his fingers around a band of cold metal. He felt the chips and nicks in Eleanor's wedding ring. Six diamonds flashed in the soft light as he dropped it into the well. The ring splashed into the water beside Eleanor's picture.

"Please..." he whispered to the empty, silent air. He lifted a boot onto the jagged surface. "Just come back to me."

"She's been waiting for you to come here," said a voice behind him and Thomas shouted and fell off the ledge, stumbling. A pale boy stood behind him wearing a tight black suit, his hair white and cut short. Empty black eyes stared at Thomas.

"What?"

"Eleanor," said the boy and his black lips curled into a smirk. "She's waited quite a while for you to get here. You should hear the way she goes on and on about you. It's actually quite sweet, if a bit irritating if I say so myself."

"...Who are you?"

"Better question is what am I?"

The boy looked down, knelt, and, with slender, alabaster fingers, picked up a dead leaf. Spinning it, the boy straightened and kissed the leaf, and it turned an emerald color.

Thomas collapsed.

"Let's not keep your Eleanor waiting," interrupted the boy and Thomas looked up, his eyes red and swollen, his fists shaking. The boy spun the leaf between his fingers. "Her, you, and I all want the same thing: life. Precious, fragile, delicious life. I'm just not picky."

The splash of water shattered the silence and Thomas looked up, mouth falling open. On hands and knees, he crawled to the well as the splashes grew louder and looked over. Heart hammering, he stared at the slender silhouette shifting in the blackness. A pair of green eyes brightened out of the shadows. He spun back around, breathless, adding, "Is that...?"

"In the flesh," said the boy.

Thomas spun back to the well and the figure climbing towards him. Long hair, familiar, brown, and curly, dangled down the figure's shoulders.

"Thomas?"

He froze, recognizing the soft drawl to her voice.

"Oh God," he whispered as a hand rose out of the blackness. He saw slender fingers grip the wall, nails digging into the stone. He saw the ring with six diamonds affixed to the top band flash on her finger. He looked closer. Sunlight struck her face. He screamed.

The smile faded off Eleanor's face and the teeth, rotted and blackened, vanished and the blistered lips thinned.

"Thomas, what is it?" she asked and he looked at the fissure in her right cheek, the bone and reddish tendons underneath stretching with every word. She stopped climbed and her lovely hair spilled off her cracked shoulder. The top of her skull gleamed brown in the light. The stench of rotting flesh and buried soil filled his nose.

"What did you do?" he shouted at the boy.

"I granted your wish."

"That's not Eleanor!"

"Not yet."

"Thomas?" called out Eleanor, her voice echoing from inside the well. "Are you still there?"

"What are you talking about?" he shouted at the boy.

"Thomas, help me!"

The boy gestured at the well and Thomas turned slowly. He stared down at his beloved wife clutching onto the wall, one hand lifted towards him. He watched the sinews of her fingers stretch. Her green eyes looked up at him.

"Thomas?" she asked and he looked at the tears filling her eyes.

Thomas remained still.

"Life," he told the boy, "that's what you want?"

"Don't worry about me," said the boy. "For now, focus on what she needs."

Thomas closed his eyes, reached down, and took her hand in his.

Thomas awoke to the sound of Eleanor sobbing in the kitchen. He rolled out of bed, the floorboards cold and stinging under his bare feet, and walked into the hallway. Yellow light shot across the linoleum floor, reflecting off the streaks and splatters of blood.

His stomach twisted as he crept through the sticky redness.

"Eleanor?" he called out, her sobbing louder as he reached the kitchen. He recognized the dead man on the countertop first, his shirt ripped open and bone and muscle exposed. A rope of intestine dangled down the man's chest. Thomas hesitated, tasting the bitterness of vomit, until he heard her voice.

"I can't do this anymore," she whispered and he hurried around the countertop and found her on her knees, nude, head bowed, the rest of the intestine in her lap. She looked up and he stared at her face, at the reforming nose, the fissure in her cheek now a slit, her lips pink, whole, and bloody. He stared at her green eyes filling with tears. Her lovely brown hair dangled over her slender, intact shoulder.

Thomas knelt beside his wife.

"Don't say that," he told her. "You're almost there."

"No!" she screamed. She pushed him away, smearing blood across his shirt. "You don't know what it's like, Thomas! To be this monster, not sure if you're dead or alive, or somewhere in the fucking middle!"

"No, no, you're alive! You're alive, you can feel and laugh and—"

"I'm a fucking monster," shouted Eleanor, slapping the intestine off her lap, "because regular people don't have to eat other people! I can't go long without a fucking bite and then I can't stop! I'm eating human beings and you think this is being alive? I mean, why the hell did you bring me back, huh, you bastard? Why couldn't you just let me rest in peace?"

Silence filled the kitchen.

"Because I couldn't live without you," said Thomas quietly. Tears rolled down his face. He took his hands off her shoulders and laid his head against the cupboard behind him. "Truth is, I went to that well to be with you."

"...What?"

Thomas nodded.

"Then something amazing happened and you came back," he said, breathless. "But don't do this. Don't leave me again, please. Look, look, I know this is really bad. But you're not alone, I'm here and I won't leave. Look, I'll get more people, as many as you need until you're whole again. Until you smile again. Just don't leave again, Eleanor..."

Trembling, she wiped her tears away with the back of a bloodstained forearm and slid her other hand towards him. Thomas wrapped his hand around hers, tightening, their wedding rings clinking in the silence.

"As many as I need?" said Eleanor quietly and Thomas squeezed her hand.

"As many as you need," he told her.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A lifelong Los Angeles native, Livingston Edwards was born with an insatiable desire to tell stories. If there's a rare moment he's actually not writing, then he's certainly writing in his head. Taking inspiration from the horrors of emotions, he delights in frightening his readers—but just enough to keep turning the page.

Facebook: Livingston Edwards

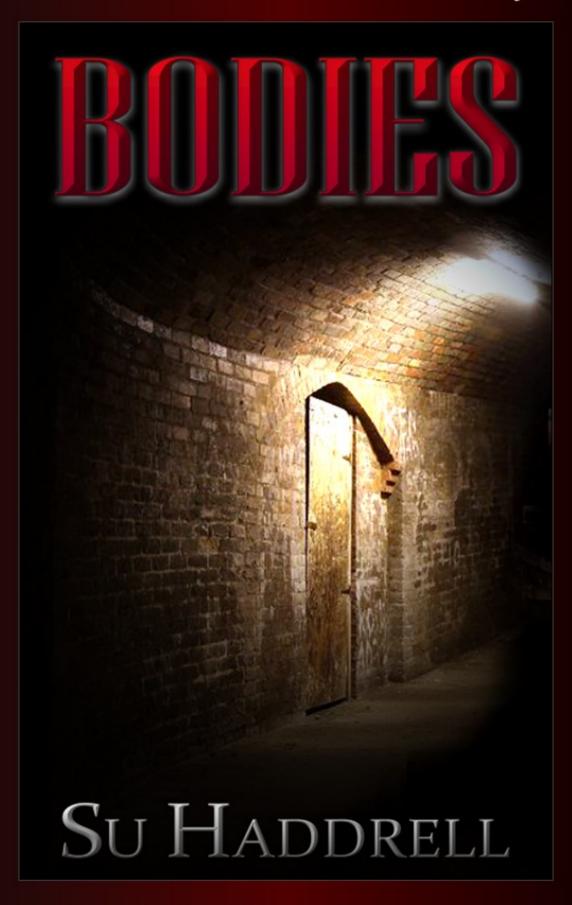


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The Tomb Wife | Scarlett R. Algee

Remière is dead.

The boy who had come to the mouth of the catacombs would have fled at the sight of my face, had he not been tasked with his message. Now I prowl the foggy churchyard of Saint Vincent of the Shroud, waiting for the one who will come to fetch me, gathering dew on my feet. My dress is grey velvet—a mourning shade, and one unsoiled by the grave—but living among the dead, I had forgotten shoes. Remière would have laughed at that, as he laughed at so many other things.

Now there isn't anyone here to laugh. I walk among the graves and mouth the names on the stones, mouth the words that come to me, work life back into my rusty voice. I speak my name, *Delphine*, *Delphine*, but get no answer.

I'm a ghoul, after all. No one comes to speak with me.

There is a stranger at the grave of Marie-France Remière, a resting place I know not only for its occupant but also for the statue that stands guard over it, a weeping Madonna that had once adorned Remière's back garden: Our Lady of Sorrows.

Madame Remière had been delicious.

He, this stranger, has brought nothing to her grave but himself; no flowers, no trinkets. He wears a brown tweed suit and a long black coat against the damp, and his hat shadows much of his face, but when the limp wet leaves squelch under my feet, he turns to me a smile half-hidden under his bushy white moustache, and says, "Delphine."

I stop in place. Is he the one sent to wait for me? "You...know me."

"Remière spoke of you often." He doesn't notice the grating squeak of my voice, or he pretends for politeness. "He was young when you met, yes? Just starting as the town butcher, making ends meet by robbing graves for a doctor's studies." He steps away from the grave and toward me, hand extended. "I'm Auguste Cardin. I was the doctor."

I've never heard this name; Remière never spoke it. To him there was always just 'the doctor'. I stare at his hand, the smooth palm and neat, short nails, for a full three seconds before I remember to touch it with my own. He smells of cologne and carbolic soap, and the pink of life is in his cheeks. My own fingernails are long and cracked, with burial earth beneath them. "Why are you here?"

Dr Cardin releases my hand. "Remière has left you a gift. It was his dying wish that I find you." He touches my uncovered hair and takes my chin in his hand, staring at my face. "He was right. You're beautiful."

I am thin, barefoot, ashen-skinned and yellow-eyed. I am not beautiful. I say nothing.

Twenty years have passed since I last saw Remière, and since I last dared creep from the burying grounds to his back garden, when the Madonna still stood sentinel there. This man Cardin could buy his transport to any destination in this city, but no driver in France would take

a fare from my hand. We walk.

I fidget on Cardin's arm. The sun hasn't yet broken the fog, and the cobblestone streets are smudges of soft tan and grey. "When did Remière... die?" I'm an eater of the dead, yet the word sticks in my throat. Remière of the broad shoulders and big, brash laugh and curiously gentle hands, now still and empty and cold as clay. I can't picture it. "Tell me."

Cardin makes a rumbling thoughtful noise. "Six hours ago. The city clock had just rung two bells. His heart had been failing for some time, and I'd been treating him with morphia." He catches my hand awkwardly and squeezes. "It was quite painless, Delphine, I promise you."

That's no comfort to me. "I don't understand," I murmur at last. "I thought I was only a curiosity to him. A... novelty."

"You were more than that to Remière." Cardin sighs. "Much more."

"I'm not even human," I protest. The streets are empty, yet I feel watched from every angle. "What could he possibly have given me?"

"What he felt you most deserved." The doctor shifts his grip to my elbow, and guides me down the Rue Montaigne. Remière's house is at the end, blue slate and polished glass. "His heart."

The thin young woman who meets us at the door, garbed head to toe in black, has Remière's black hair and his high forehead, but her eyes are pale and cold instead of brown and sparkling, and her mouth is a tight downward line. I know she's Remière's daughter, named Marie, and she doesn't offer her hand. "Dr Cardin. I see you've brought the beast."

I flinch from Cardin, and Marie's lips twist up mockingly. I stare into her eyes, seeing myself, seeing my pointed teeth and the forward thrust of my jaw, and I want to hate this girl; I want to say, your mother died bearing you, and before you there were five stillborn sons, each wrapped by his midwife in a bloody sheet and buried in the garden beneath that statue of the Virgin; but it wasn't Our Lady of Sorrows who bore the meat away, and your father called it the best end he could have wanted for them.

I find my voice. "Marie. My name is Delphine."

She steps back from me, wide-eyed. "Jesu, it speaks! Cardin, what have you brought into my house?"

"I'm just following your father's wishes, Marie," he answers. "You know the terms."

"Yes. I know." Marie spits at me and wipes her mouth. "My mother suffered and died to give my father even one child, and he loved a monster. A *monster*." She shakes her forefinger, its nail red-lacquered, in my face. "And my father died still so besotted with you that I can't even inherit properly until you've eaten his heart!"

His heart. So that's what Cardin had meant. I turn away from her, stumbling. "I shouldn't be here—"

"Delphine." Cardin takes me by the shoulders and shakes me, but gently. "No. You must. You must. It's what he wanted." He puts his face close to mine and whispers, "Even if it benefits Marie."

"She takes what she came for." Even without seeing her face, I can hear Marie's teeth scrape together. "Just that, and not a fiber more. I hold you responsible, Cardin."

"Of course you do." He puts an arm around my shoulders and guides me past her, toward a staircase. "Come, Delphine. Remière is waiting."

Remière's house is neither large nor particularly imposing; the walls are dark, the carpet stained, the furniture worn in a way that suggests comfort. The gas lamps glow inside globes of amber glass and cast flickering shadows. I spot a shawl thrown over a chair, and a bouquet of dried flowers lies in the fireplace atop a mound of ashes, but I see nothing I can call decoration. He was a butcher, after all, and a widower, and would have been practical.

I wonder if it looked different when his wife was alive.

"You must forgive Marie," Cardin tells me at the top of the stairs. "She's young. She's only just found out."

I stare down the narrow hallway. "But I am a monster."

He leads me to the room at the end of the hall and opens the door. I stand in the doorway while Cardin lights the lamps. This is Remière's bedroom, as plain as the rest of the house; the bed is large and roughly fashioned, and I deliberately keep my gaze down, away from the large familiar shape beneath the pulled-up sheet. A red-upholstered chair is drawn up to the bedside, the only bright color I've seen, and a black leather bag sits on its seat. Cardin takes up the bag and occupies the chair. "My surgical tools," he says apologetically. "Marie must have a glimpse before I make the repairs."

I skirt the bed carefully. The faintest odor of beginning decay rises to meet me, making my palate tingle and my stomach knot. I haven't eaten in days. "If I eat him when he's buried," I say slowly, "will she know?"

I look up, but Cardin's attention is on a threadbare patch in the rug. "He'll be cremated tomorrow." He meets my gaze and gives me the barest of smiles. "Remière never expressed his wishes for the rest of his body."

Just his heart. I study Remière's form beneath its covering, and draw back the sheet. The whisper of death, of *food*, intensifies, and my mouth waters.

He had startled me, that first night, breaking into the crypt in which I was feeding. He'd startled me the next night by coming back to look for me, and the next, until I'd realized that I was his focus, and his tomb-defiling work had become an afterthought. Remière had been a skilled butcher even then, fifty years ago, carving the choicest meat for me from his prizes when he'd been no older than Marie.

I should tell her we made love for the first time in an empty grave.

Remière's curly hair is silver now instead of black, and his beard is almost white, and the lines on his face are deep; but his brows have kept their color, and his shoulders have kept their breadth. I climb onto the bed, pulling my skirts up over my thighs as I settle myself on his hips and rest my hands on his shoulders. Even his death pallor makes my skin look grey. I kiss his forehead, his eyebrows, his mouth, and I realize I haven't forgotten how to weep.

"Do you know"—Cardin's voice jerks me upright—"he had names for you. His tomb wife, his corpse bride, Delphine des Goules." He's twirling a scalpel in his fingers, studying the gleam of the lamplight on the blade. "Shall I help you?"

"No," I say, and I open Remière's skin with my nails.

I shove my fingers through the flesh between his fourth and fifth ribs, a skill I'd learned young, and pry them apart, the bones cracking as they loosen. I worm my hand into the gap and curl my fingers around Remière's heart, still faintly warm, and pull it free, holding it in my hands, taking in the maze of arteries and the padding of visceral fat.

Then I honor his wish, and my hunger.

"He should have been yours." That's all Cardin says, afterward, as he wipes my mouth and my hands, as he twists Remière's wedding ring from his finger and presses it into my palm. I hide it in my bodice and keep silent. He leads me back down the stairs as I suck away the blood still edging my nails. "Delphine, if you need anything—"

"No." I want no more promises to devour; I've had enough. "Thank you. No. Let me go."

Marie is sunk into a chair beside the cold fireplace. She springs up as Cardin leads me to the door. "I suppose it's done?"

"It's done," Cardin answers. "I'll show you."

"Fair enough." The girl glides up to me with her hands on her hips, looking me over. Abruptly she grabs my hair and wrenches my head back, and sweetly says into my ear, "If I see you again, beast, I'll have you hunted down and burned."

"Marie!" Cardin shouts. She lets me go; I snarl at her; Cardin comes between us and backs me out into the street.

"No, Delphine." We stand on the pavement and he rubs the back of my neck. "No. Go back to where you belong. Remember Remière. Forget his daughter."

He makes it sound simple, but I know it's not. "You asked me to forgive her."

"Yes. Will you try?"

"I'll try," I answer, "but someday she'll die, and I'm patient." Forgiveness, like love, is almost nothing to me. I still have Remière's flavor on my tongue and behind my teeth, salty and beefy and copper-sweet; I draw his ring from my bodice and slip it over my right thumb, bending my hand into a fist. I look up at Cardin and for the first time in two decades, I feel myself smiling. "Perhaps she'll even taste like her father."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Scarlett R. Algee's work has appeared in several places, including *Sanitarium Magazine*, *Mantid Magazine*, and the recent anthologies *Zen of the Dead* and *The Haunting of Lake Manor Hotel*. When not reading, writing, or making steampunk jewelry, she lives in the wilds of Tennessee.

Twitter: <u>@scarlettralgee</u>
Facebook: <u>Scarlett R. Algee</u>



Tea | Reuben Wade

Its whispered recognition, of the fire I lit, is all the sound there was at first. But even this diminutive churning in the metallic belly of that tormented vessel had the power to disturb me. I anticipated the unrelenting scream soon to rise, raw and painful, tuned intentionally by its maker, to be a strident treble.

It's a smart invention, the whistle on the teakettle. It won't let you sleep, while the water boils away leaving the kettle to melt and fume. If not for that whistle, you could die. No one can listen to that sound and rest. You've got to rise from your sleep to silence that screaming kettle!

I killed the gas and the cry of the teakettle trailed off. Nothing remained then of that alarm but a soft, unwitting gurgle and an invisible cloud of saturated air.

Your house is safe and you've got your tea. It's because of that whistle on the teakettle, you get to saunter back to the couch, cup in hand, go back to your book, put your feet up on the coffee table, relax your mind; relax and reflect... Did you sit down with a cup of tea thinking you could live without her?

I killed the gas and the cry of the teakettle trailed off...an unwitting gurgle... pondering an invisible cloud of saturated air... I've already had my tea! Bearing mute witness, my unused mug refutes this conclusion... Perhaps when I dosed off, I dreamed of tea.

Can you recognize a relived moment? Isn't the moment relived indistinguishable from the moment lived.

I'd responded too urgently to the kettle's wail this time, skidded and nearly fallen, before I could extinguish the flame. This difference alerted me, unsettled me.

You think—it's just me now, only me, slouching on the couch with a book and a cup of tea, a twisted and drying bag of broken leaves laid aside.

Coveted sleep, rent by the crescendo, my heart raced to match the frequency of the alarm... and it broke... it broke, because of the memories.

Back in the kitchen you curse the teakettle, then, remind yourself, you'd forgotten you lit the flame and might have been waked by fire too hot to extinguish, and smoke, so thick your escape could not be found.

In the silence I asked myself, What about my tea? Why don't I remember even one sweet sip? My favorite cup emblazoned with the shield of my alma mater was still there in the cupboard. The tea too... I pondered the paradox; I must have dropped off and imagined I had tea...

You dream too much.

Your scream or mine, I couldn't tell... No! Not either. It was the kettle again, yet again... and over again I heard your scream. I'd acted in haste, lost control, lost my grip. I was going down, the teakettle still shrieking—and me too—suffering the agony of eviscerating regret. I wanted to extinguish the fire but I'd skidded past the edge, into a fault that opened in my kitchen floor. The momentum of my unreasoned response launched me, and the gravity of my action accelerated me in a downward slide into darkness so terrifying...

... You close your eyes tightly to keep it out. The scream recedes but trails you, on a journey for which you didn't plan—are not prepared.

At the bottom of a very steep bank of pale yellow-orange sand and river rounded gravel; my feet rest upon a hard pack that is the bottom of a nearly dry lake. It's hot, the sun high and bright; there is no shade. The sky is a dome of thin red haze and the top of the surrounding bank is a far-off edge of the unknown. This is a deep, deep hole: unnatural, uninhabited.

Do you remember this?

...I was just a kid, who had watched from a high perch in a tree on the edge of what remained of glorious woods, huge dump-trucks trundling down here, to the bottom of this quarry, lining up to be loaded by a monstrous excavator. I couldn't wait to grow up, to enter a world full of big enterprise that I was sure would make life grand.

The forest once had interested you more than the trucks.

I schemed to make my descent on their sabbath, avoiding those who could advise against my plan. Just a few steps beyond the edge of the woods, a few more past the hole in the fence, and one more at the end of childhood. Back then—attracted by what lay at the bottom, I started down that steep bank.

It looked easy to you. A careful step taken sideways, a following foot placed on the slope.

Then the sand and gravel started to move beneath my planted feet. In a shrug my view dropped below the edge. I was down and sliding, sand and gravel moving all around me, some passing, racing me to the bottom. And the echoes of that million mad collisions made it seem as if all the rugged rocks and all the little pebbles, in this excavated auditorium, were laughing out loud, at me, as I went down choking, coughing on a cloud of dust that rose and followed me. That puff of airborne dirt hovered above my head in the still air. The vultures must have seen it and marked its progress, as the latest victim of curiosity descended.

For the first time back then, you wondered if your slide would ever end.

At the bottom, dirt piled around me until its new angle of repose reduced my form to a living bust of some hoary, demon child. Last, I remember, the dust settled and re-inhabited the interstitial spaces from which it had risen. The taunting laughter from the gallery of littoral spectators subsided to giggles then snickers and finally whispers until all held their breath. Silence portended; what? I waited... unable to make a move to help myself.

Have I ever moved from this pile of instability that carried me to the bottom? Did I really grow up? Was I on the debate team? Did I go to state college? Did I marry and divorce and marry again and did I start a business and lose it and cry? Did I get a lousy job and get fired for nothing and start drinking and get sober and try to pick myself up. And then did I fall in love with a pretty actress and find happiness and then did she... did she tire of me?

Did you... find her out... and then did you...

And then, did I sit down with a cup of tea thinking I could live without her?

It's hot! The vessel begins again to moan. More powerful now; I feel its throb. Out in the distance across the hard, desolate bottom of my pit, the edge of the water is receding as that

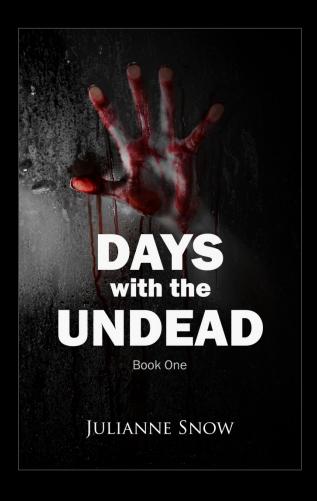
moan becomes a wail. Can I hope? Is there anyone to find me? Help me! The lake is nearly dry. I want to rest but I lit the fire and now I can't stop that scream...

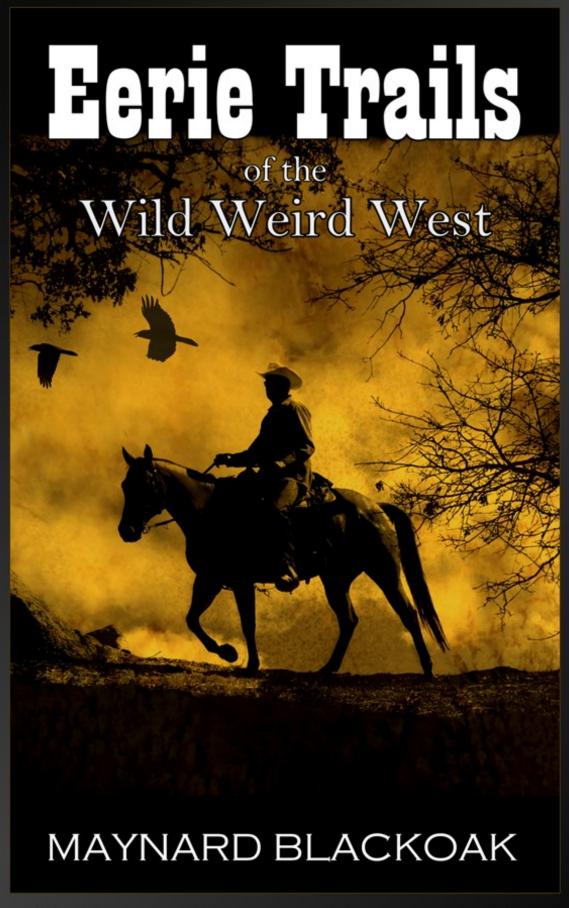
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A civil engineer and writer, Reuben has lived in Philadelphia since 1998. In 2012 his play *Paint the American Eagle*, based on Charles Dickens' *American Notes*, was part of the Philadelphia Free Library *Year of Dickens*. Independent of his own work, Reuben is honored to chair the Board of Directors, Theatre Exile, a 501(c)(3) corporation, designated best theater company, *Philadelphia Magazine* in 2016.

Facebook: Reuben Wade

Days with the Undead: Book One Julianne Snow

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The Cowboy Rides Away | Maynard Blackoak

The sun was close to bringing the day to an end. A sudden burst of energy surged through Jake as he laid in bed. It was the first time in quite a while he had felt the strength to get out of bed since his illness had waylaid him. Having always been an active sort, staying down had not sit well with him. There were things needing done around the ranch, and he was certain were not being done with him lying in bed.

Cautiously, he rolled one leg out of bed, soon followed by the other. Within moments, he was standing on his feet. Looking past his shaky legs to his sock covered feet he shook his head. Boots. He felt naked without them. Ignoring his instructions, his wife must have removed them during one of his many periods of sleep.

He ambled to the closet and selected his riding boots. As he was bent over, pulling on the last one, he felt a dizzying sensation. "Guess I was a might premature about gettin' out of bed."

Jake looked at the stage standing before him. One of his favorite performers, Hank Williams, stood on it singing, *Your Cheating Heart*. He stood mesmerized, lost in the music. As the song drew to an end, he began clapping in appreciation. After several moments, something seemed odd. He could not put a finger on it, but something was off. Then it struck him. He seemed to be the only one clapping.

Looking around, he realized he was the only one in attendance. He pondered the situation while Hank moved on to another song. By the time the second song had ended, it struck him. I have to be dreaming. Cause ain't no way ol' Hank would be playin' to an audience of one. There should be thousands here.

After *performing* a few more songs, the legendary country singer finished his show with *Hey Good Lookin* and gave a little bow. Walking away, he and the stage began to fade into a wispy mist, giving way to a shadowy path lined with gnarled, dead trees, illuminated by a pale glow in the sky. Beady, yellow eyes dotted the twisted limbs, casting an eerie pall of impending peril.

Setting his eyes on what lie behind him, Jake saw only a black nothingness. If he were to progress in his dream, he would have to walk the path set before him. With a slight shrug and a wry grin, he set his boots walking down the path with spurs jingling.

Bats the size of condors rustled their wings, shrieked, and flew into the ominously glowing sky. They gathered into a large group, and hovered above him for several seconds before darting towards him in a menacing wave. Their yellow eyes glowered with evil, and their long white fangs glistened with ravenous hunger.

Jake reached for the nickel-plated Colt 45s holstered on his hips. With patient aim, he waited until the monstrous bats came within range. His first shots ripped through the leader of the wave and the bat flanking it, also taking out the two behind them. All four exploded, sending a shower of bloody pieces raining down.

His second round of shots took out five more. Still, the giant bats came at him. Firing at a furious pace, he failed to keep a few from getting through to him. They clawed his face, and bit into his arms and neck. Continuing to fire his pistols with his right, he fought off the attackers with his left.

Bloodied but undeterred, Jake gunned down the last of the swarm. Calmly wiping off bits and pieces of bat from his face and brow, he scanned the path. Only when the way seemed clear of further danger, did he holster his weapons. *Take that, you goll-derned sons of bitches. Y'all came after the wrong old cowpoke.*

Stepping through the gory pieces of dead bats, he came to the end of the path. Upon reaching it, he discovered another stage much like the first. On it, front and center was Patsy Cline belting out *Crazy*.

Once again, he was the only one in attendance. Listening to her melodic voice, he pondered his dream and its meaning. Hank and Patsy were two of his favorites. Both were long departed from the world. Was his illness more than he believed, or was he walking through a simple dream that held no meaning? By the time she had finished her set, he had yet to come upon an answer.

Just as had happened with Hank, the stage and singer vanished, giving way to another treacherous path. This time the way led through a corral of cattle, but not just ordinary cattle. These were large, fire-breathing bulls with shiny steel horns and black iron hooves. In their eyes danced the flames of Hell. Their putrid breath reeked of sulfur and death.

Looking at the holstered pistols, Jake knew they would be of little use against the fearsome herd. The only thing he had that would be useful was his lasso. However, he could only rope one of the devil bulls with it, leaving twelve more with which he would have to deal.

Reaching for the gate, he set his sights upon the herd. His eyes quickly seized upon the largest and most aggressive of the lot. If I can rope and subdue that critter, I ain't gonna have no trouble getting through the others.

Cautiously, he slipped into the corral. He adjusted his loop as he stalked the giant bull. With the beast squarely in his sights, he spun the lasso and let it fly. It came to rest around the mighty bull's thick neck. Jake quickly tightened his grip and pulled hard on the rope. The terrible creature snorted with anger, and began spinning and bucking wildly.

Digging his boot heels into the dirt, he tried to hold his ground. Nevertheless, the enraged bull proved too strong. It flung him around the corral like a ragdoll, impaling him several times on the steel horns of the other bulls. Battered, and bleeding from his side and legs, the intrepid cowboy maintained his grip on the lasso. He even managed to somehow inch closer to the terrible beast.

The stench from the awful beast's vile breath turned his stomach, as Jake moved within an arm's length of the bull. If he was going to make his move, he realized it needed to happen quickly before it became aware of his close proximity. Releasing the lasso, he sprang at the creature.

Hooking an arm around its horns, and grabbing its lower jaw, he twisted its mighty head with all his strength. The bull was too strong, though. It flipped him high into the air. He came to rest on its head with one of its shiny horns jutting out his side. With another mighty heave of its head, he was sent tumbling into the air again. This time, he landed squarely on the beast's back.

Though bludgeoned, bleeding, and riddled with pain, there was no quit in Jake. His feet sloshed in his boots from all the blood running down his legs. His clothes were soaked with blood and tattered, yet he remained undaunted. He twisted one hand in the rope still encircling the bull's neck. The other he grabbed ahold of a bloody horn, dug his spurs deep into the beast's hide and held on for what he knew would be the ride of his life.

The mighty bull did not disappoint. It jumped high and rolled violently. Nonetheless, Jake remained solidly planted on its back. It boiled with rage, bounding even higher into the air. Still, the valiant cowboy held onto his ride. In a final attempt to separate itself from its determined rider, it thundered across the corral, slamming into each one of the other bulls in the pen.

Taking note he was nearing the end of the corral, he prepared for another risky maneuver. It had to be timed perfectly or he would find himself in a deadly predicament. With sweat breaking on his brow, he waited until the massive creature was up against the corral fence. As it gave one more colossal heave, he let go of the rope and horn. The force propelled him from the bull's back, sending him hurtling head over heels to the other side of the corral.

Lying on the ground, attempting to catch his breath after hitting the ground hard, Jake wondered what more his dream would require of him. Taking a quick glance behind, he noticed the corral and all its occupants had vanished, replaced by dark nothingness. Slowly and gingerly, he climbed to his feet. Casting his eyes off into the distance, he scanned an endless prairie of rolling grasses.

Brushing the dirt from his pants and shirt, he noticed all his wounds and pains had disappeared. What's more, his clothes were no longer blood soaked and tattered. I guess even the bad shit in a dream goes away fast. Still, I sure hope this here dream ain't got nothin' more comin' my way. This ol' cowboy's had enough battles for one dream. He mused to himself with a chuckle.

Just then, his eyes glimpsed a horse and rider approaching at great speed. Shaking his head, Jake prepared for another ordeal. If his dream held another test for him, he was determined to meet head on.

The horse slowed as it neared him. Upon its back was a familiar figure. A broad smile crossed his lips, recognizing the rider, Chris Ledoux.

"You comin' to sing for me, Chris?" Jake inquired through a pleased expression.

"Not right now, Jake. Maybe later. Right now, I come for you, partner."

A bewildered look fell over Jake's face. "You know me?"

"Not really, but I've been expectin' you."

Jake opened his mouth to question Chris further. However, he was quickly interrupted. "All your questions will be answered once we get back to camp. So saddle up, Cowboy. There's cattle that need drivin' and daylight's wastin'."

A beautiful paint with a black saddle trimmed in silver appeared from behind Chris' mount. Jake climbed up on its back, and took its reins. Before riding off, Jake turned to Chris. "Is this a dream or am I dead?"

Chris removed his black hat, and laughed. "This ain't no dream, partner. As long as there's cattle needin' moved, we cain't ever die."

Tears flooded the eyes of those surrounding Jake as they witnessed his final breath. Though his wife and daughters felt a deep sadness at his passing, something inside gave them a sense of relief. His suffering had at long last come to an end. Looking at his face, they were taken aback by the big Texas grin sprawled across his face.

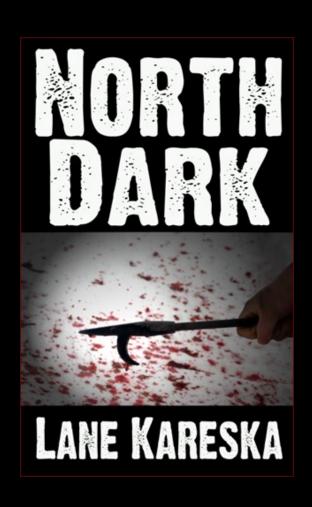
His wife broke out a tearful smile. "Cancer might've beaten your body, darlin'... But it sure as hell couldn't beat that cowboy spirit."

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

Twitter: <u>@maynardblackoak</u>
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Mr. Leslie | Dimitar Fabijanic

They have sent me to inquire for Mr. Leslie, the ever so kind and balding Mr. Leslie that lived in the decayed suburbs all his life, away from the little forgotten city equally decayed, and away from all the noise and squabble of those few that remained its full-time occupants. They have sent me for this kind man, but not to inquire for his well-being, but to retrieve his words written on a few sheets of paper because he was obliged to write them, to document his unusual and strange experiences concerning something as well unusual and strange.

It happened that Mr. Leslie was left jobless in his old age, and like every living thing he needed sustenance. He responded to our advertisement placed in one of the local newspapers that was about a new product our company was preparing to issue. So the day came when Mr. Leslie signed all the necessary papers and contracts and handed them in one of the many temporary booths we established, above which was placed our untested product's motto: 'Help us Develop'.

While the rain outside assumed the color of the gray clouds and the asphalt was constantly rinsed by the unending rain, Mr. Leslie sat on a simple chair in a dingy room. A canvas was in front of him while a projector behind him; then suddenly its light issued forth and on the canvas was shown a symbol which Mr. Leslie had to stare at. To call it staring would be misleading, for he only needed to glimpse at the symbol. From that day on the life of Mr. Leslie was changed rapidly and unexpectedly—at least *unexpectedly* for him.

Now I cannot claim in the fullest what was going on in that company during those periods many years back; but those symbols, copied from an old manuscript excavated by Professor O. H. in some deserted ruins far away from civilized geographies, did *things* to those who applied for the supposed product that needed 'development', or as he termed it in a simple word: *adjustment*. 'We must let a more broad universe to help us adjust', he once said, 'we are too limited to this world of change only, too limited!'

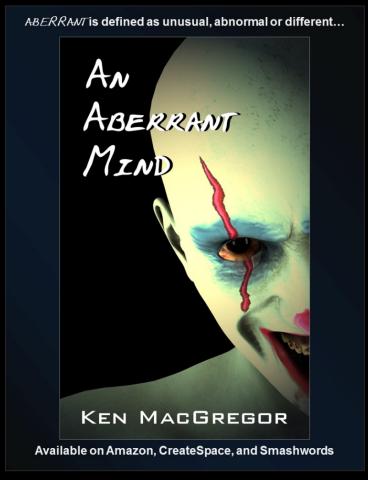
Of the events that transpired I now know only too well, for I was unfortunate enough to accidentally glimpse one of those symbols when I was sent to retrieve Mr. Leslie's *dream journals*, unfortunate enough to be curious of what was maniacally carved on his desk and hastily drawn on every page of those *nightmares* he was obliged to document. Beside those symbols his dream journals were suffused with the phrase 'They swirl and swirl, here and there, until they are everywhere'. I didn't find Mr. Leslie, but only a lump of deformed flesh still pulsating near his desk, and from it few traces that lead elsewhere in the house in which a strange odor pervaded throughout. Many are those that now populate countless pits with their dust in order for something else to crawl upon this earth!

I sometimes recall the Professor's little speech he once gave us with an almost sickening glee on his wrinkled face. 'We adorn ourselves with supposed facts, we domesticize them and feed them, we keep them close to our view of the universe. But out in the world there are hints of unfathomable vastness yet undiscovered, a vastness that leads to a greater one that drips with insanity. Wherever you turn your eyes they would unconditionally soak this insanity, thus inviting things your mind and body doesn't welcome'.

For many years now my dreams are nightmares from which I somehow manage to wake up before I am caught by their blurred shapes that swirl endlessly into empty space; shapes that promise a new existence yet dissolve yours in a merciless and endless process of recycled forms and shapes. I believe it is not long before my body and mind yield to these shapes, not long before I too become a deformed lump of flesh—in order for something else to crawl upon this earth—pulsating to rhythms of a vastness yet undiscovered.

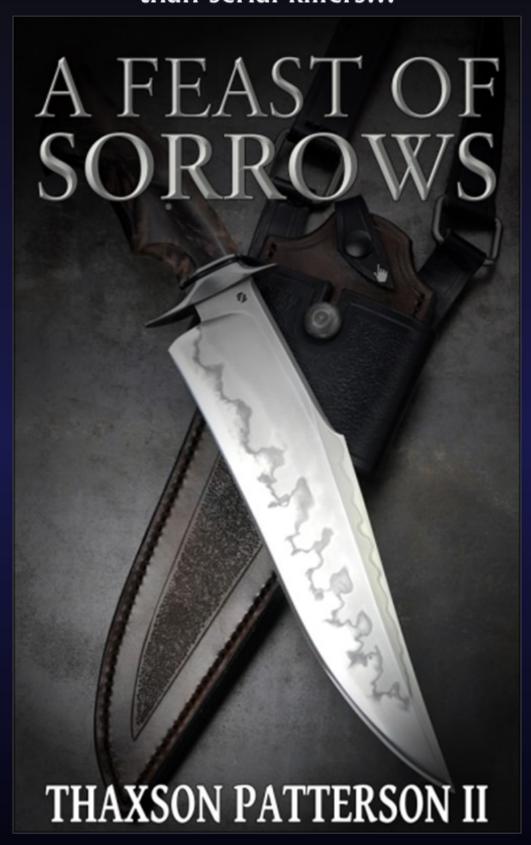
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dimitar Fabijanic was born in Skopje, Macedonia, on the 24th of October 1987. He holds a bachelor degree in Geography but is currently unemployed. For quite some time, he indulges in the words of Gogol, Maupassant, Lovecraft, Poe, Bierce, Ligotti, Ramsey Campbell and many more pertaining to the weird and the macabre.





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Scythe | *Alex Woolf*

"I can't do this anymore," said Azlea, her cocobolo eyes not quite meeting mine. We were in bed, lying next to each other on twisted sheets that smelled saltily of sweat and sex. Afternoon sun, pale as ash, dappled the soft skin of her back as she sat up and reached for her bra.

"You can't... do this," I echoed dumbly.

"It's not right," she sighed, pulling on her briefs. "You're twenty years older than me for God's sake. I should be with someone my own age."

There. The casual punch in the guts. Only a pretty girl barely out of her twenties could be so callous, so inhuman.

"You love me," I reminded her. "And you said age was never an issue."

"Maybe I thought that once, but I was wrong. It is an issue, Jim. I'm sorry." She smoothed her skirt over her hips, fiddled with her hair in the wardrobe mirror, flicked some lint from her jacket sleeve.

"Please, love, let's talk about this." The whimper in my voice nauseated me, but I couldn't help myself. "I know I wasn't very good just now. I wasn't very attentive to your needs. It's only because I'm tired. I've been busy in the workshop. Let's try again, *please*?"

Pathetic.

Her hand was on the door when she turned.

"I'm sorry, Jim. It was fun, but now I must get on with the rest of my life. And so must you."

Later that afternoon, downstairs in the workshop, I was sharpening Mr. Henderson's axe. I moved the blade slowly from side to side on the grinder, keeping the pressure even across the entirety of the edge, aiming for a bevel of twenty-five degrees. The machine whined as it spun. Sparks from the axe blade glittered, like the sequins on Azlea's dress that night we danced at the Palais.

I released the pedal. The grinder stopped. I plunged the axe into a trough of water and watched the steam clouds rise. Raising my visor, I wiped sweat from my brow. Despite the heat, I shivered. She was gone. Really. Gone.

Why was I even doing this? Why keep going? What was the point? And why keep on sharpening it? Because this was all I had now, this workshop. The daily grind. This was all I had before she came, and I was content back then, wasn't I? Yeah. Content. But also dead inside. I just didn't know it then.

I dried the axe on an old cloth and checked its sharpness, tipping it back and forth under the lamp, looking for the 'candle'—the fine white line running along the cutting edge. If you saw it, the blade was still blunt.

Outside, the street was strangely quiet. I couldn't hear a single car.

No candle in sight. The axe was sharp. Mr. Henderson would be pleased. And if he wasn't, what did I care? There is no objective measure of sharpness, Mr. Henderson. You can't tell me what's sharp and what's not. It's a little like pain, sir. When your heart is broken, no one other than yourself can possibly know how that feels.

She'd made age an issue. Age. The elephant in the room of our relationship, which I'd tried for so long to ignore, as I put on the moisturizer and carefully combed my hair forwards each morning. You're twenty years older than me, for God's sake. Those were her words. I should be with someone my own age.

My God!

The mirror hadn't exactly been lying to me in recent years, but it hadn't been entirely truthful either. A wrinkling around the eyes, a thinning of the hair, a thickening at the waist. I'd noticed all these developments and examined them daily with faux objectivity, but always from a perspective that flattered me. Azlea, though, she saw me as I was—naked and middle-aged in the pallid, washed-out light of early afternoon. And with a few choice words, sharper than anything I ever ground or honed in my workshop, she cut me and left me bleeding on the sheets.

Clip clop!

Horse hooves echoed on the tarmac outside. That was unusual—a horse on the high street. I looked up. Through the window I saw a man on horseback trotting along the empty road. He wore a long black cloak with a hood covering his head. His horse was pale, and the closer he came the more uneasy I felt. Perhaps it was the pale horse. Pale green.

The rider stopped outside my door, as I suspected he might. He dismounted and tethered his horse to a bike rack. Then, disdaining the bell, he knocked. Three hard raps. I put down Mr. Henderson's axe and went to open the door. The man who stood before me was tall, his shrouded head angled downwards. I couldn't see his face within the shadow of that long, deep hood, but I sensed his stare nonetheless. In his hand he carried a scythe—an old-fashioned reaping tool with a long, curved blade like the vicious beak of a wading bird. His hand was bony almost to the point of being mere bones.

There was a heavy odor about him, a reek of dust that made me think of old courtrooms, of fate handed down from on high. From somewhere close by came a dry, funereal thudding. It was, I soon realized, my own heart.

"How can I help you?" I asked.

Silence.

I looked up and down the street and wondered again where all the cars and people were.

"You sharpen blades?" enquired a deep voice.

I jerked my attention back to the hood. The voice seemed to carry a slight echo as if coming to me from within a cave of rock, not fabric.

"Y-Yes, I do, sir."

He thrust his scythe towards me. "I'd be most obliged," he reverberated.

I took the implement from him and scrutinized its arched, steel blade. My practiced eye could see at once that it was old and worn, and hadn't seen a grinder or whetstone in a very long time.

"What sort of edge do you favor?" I asked him.

I sensed puzzlement in the ensuing silence, so I explained. "Any cutting edge consists of two flat surfaces meeting at an angle. A narrow angle will give you more cutting power, but it'll be weak—it won't last. A wider angle will give you durability, but will require greater effort in the cutting. Sharpening is always a compromise. You can never have both. What I'm asking is,

which is more important to you: cutting power or durability? You can give it to me as a percentage, if you like."

"Sharpen it!" he said.

I nodded and questioned him no further, sensing his disinterest in such technicalities. I invited him in and offered him a chair and a coffee—both of which he declined—while I went to work on the scythe.

Very soon I was preoccupied with the task—my body, anyway, my hands and fingers going through their well-oiled motions. My mind, however, remained racked with bitterness and sorrow, unable to move beyond Azlea and her terrible parting words. Perhaps this helped color my thoughts about the scythe. Sometimes, as I work on a blade, I get a feeling for its history. This one, I sensed, had a long and violent past. Maybe not recently, but there had been times in years gone by when this scythe, and its owner, had been extremely busy, and not with wheat or corn. As I ground the long, curved blade, I was reminded of the samurai definition of sharpness. A Japanese warrior judged a sword by how many bodies it could slice through with one swing.

The customer, meanwhile, stood near my bench, a watching shadow, casting his heavy, judgmental silence over my workshop. Who was this character? I feared him, yet found his presence strangely comforting. The timing of his arrival could not have been better. At any other moment in my life, I would not have dared invite such a menacing entity across my threshold. But this afternoon, his demeanor entirely suited my mood.

"What do you do?" I asked him. "For a living, I mean."

By now I had stopped with the grinder and the only sound in the workshop was the swish-swish of the blade on the whetstone.

"I gather souls," he replied.

"Ah," I nodded, assuming this to be some obscure niche of the shoe trade. "And what do you do with the soles once you've gathered them?"

"I escort them on their journey into the afterlife."

"I see."

Swish. Swish-swish.

At length, I ceased honing, and examined the edge by tipping it back and forth beneath the lamp. There was no candle. I'd deliberately erred on the side of cutting power. It was very, very sharp—but it wouldn't last. He'd have to pay another visit to a sharpener soon. A different sharpener. This, I'd already decided, would be my last job.

I presented the reaper with his tool.

He examined it, and appeared satisfied. "How much?" he asked.

"I don't want your money," I replied.

Again, there was bafflement in his silence.

"I must pay you," he finally said.

"Yes. But not with money."

"How then?"

"Bump me up your list."

"What?"

"Gather me in early."

"That's not how it works, I-"

"Listen," I said to him. "I've had it with life. I have nothing to live for. *Nothing!* Now please bump me up your list."

The reaper sighed, a sound not unlike the night wind rattling through ancient bones. He put down his scythe and reached into the folds of his cloak, pulling out a large and weighty-looking tome, which he slammed down on my workbench. The tome's leather bindings were worn black by time—made from the hide, I would not be surprised, of an animal that had voyaged with Noah. The book creaked as he opened it. There was a fluttering of yellowed pages, each one filled to the margins with tiny lettering the color of dried blood. He settled at a place about halfway through the book. An ossified finger traced its way down the list, coming to rest at a small gap within the dense mass of writing.

"I can fit you in tomorrow morning," the reaper intoned.

"Thank you," I breathed.

Tomorrow morning, this agony would end.

"Will it hurt? Much?"

The scythe's blade glinted keenly as he picked it up once more.

"It will be quick," he promised

I saw him to the door, and lingered there as he climbed astride his horse.

"Until tomorrow morning then," I said.

The reaper gave a slight nod and departed, *clip-clop*, down the empty high street. He turned a corner and disappeared from view, and soon enough the street began to fill once more with earthly traffic.

That night, after a simple supper of bread, cheese and wine, I took myself to bed. The ache remained as I lay down on the sheets that still carried her scent, but there was a sweetness to the pain like the cry of the mistle thrush at the close of day. The lights were dimming, the tide going out on a warm, dark sea. And the blade, when it came, would be sharp...

The following morning, I awoke to the sound of the doorbell, pressed remorselessly as if being leaned on.

He was here!

A hard lump of air forced its way down my throat.

Reality.

I was about to die.

I must be calm. Like a samurai. Dignity was all I had left.

Rising, I put on my dressing-gown and went to answer the intercom.

"Hello."

The ringing finally stopped.

"Jim?"

Azlea.

What was *she* doing here?

I buzzed her in, then opened the front door of my flat, listening for her footsteps on the stairs.

She must have forgotten something. Well, I would be dignified. No more desperation now. Let her remember me strong and happy.

But my assumptions about the purpose of her visit were wrong. I could see that as soon as she reached the top of the stairs. Her cheeks were bright with tears as she came running down the corridor, throwing her arms around me and holding me tight. "Oh, Jim, I'm so sorry for what I said yesterday. I don't know what I was thinking. I love you my darling. I want us to be together forever!"

This couldn't be. I was still in bed, dreaming.

But she felt real. I could smell her perfume, and see the metallic dust under my fingernails—the kind of detail never found in dreams. A spasm of joy shook me. My face creased into a smile. Wrinkles around my eyes. Who cared? She loved me again!

"What about the age thing?"

"Fuck that!" she laughed as she dragged me to the bedroom, pulling off my dressing-gown, tearing a button on her blouse in her eagerness. *Take me!* her eyes said. We didn't even make it to the bed. Carpet fabric burned my backside. Azlea was astride me. The morning sun, pale as lime, dappled her soft skin as she arched her back.

Pale that light was. Pale green.

And then I saw him, a tall, dark presence near the doorway, scythe in hand.

"No," I mouthed at him. "I've changed my mind."

But the reaper shook his head. In his other hand he carried a large hourglass with beautiful rosewood spindles. The last grains of sand were spilling into the lower globe.

"No!" I begged. "You don't understand! That was yesterday. Things have changed. Look, I'll pay you. Anything! Just..."

His shadow spread like an inky pool through the bedroom.

I held onto her with all my strength.

"Azlea!"

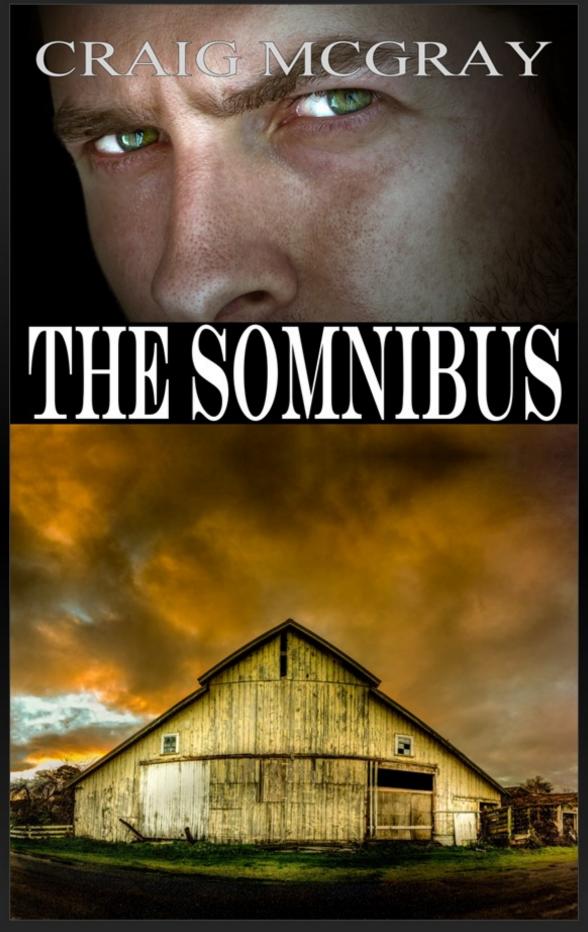
"What is it, my darling?" Her voice fainter now.

"I love you."

The scythe swept downwards. And the blade, when it cut, was exquisitely sharp.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Alex Woolf is the author of some 20 commercially published novels and chapter books aimed at young and adult readers. They include *Soul Shadows*, a horror novel about cannibalistic shadows, shortlisted for the 2014 Red Book Award. Alex tries his best to ignore death—much like he does the creature living in his attic—and hopes that way never to meet it.

Twitter: <u>@RealAlexWoolf</u>
Website: <u>alexwoolf.co.uk</u>



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

The Bone Lord | DJ Tyrer

Steven had found the Bone Book in an ossuary, a receptacle for bones, hidden beneath the mortal remains of some nameless unfortunate. The Bone Book wasn't its title, of course, it was just what he had dubbed it; rather than the skin binding beloved of horror writers, it was bound with a lattice of split bones like a cage holding the loose leaves within. I couldn't read Latin, but Steven could and he painstakingly spent weeks translating it. Patience was something that we shared: it had taken us years of research to locate the Bone Book itself, tracing it through enigmatic references in various occult tomes.

Steve was excited when he called me to say that he was done. Throwing patience aside, I rushed over to read his translation. After all the effort we had put into it, we had the secrets of the Bone Book in our hands; the truth about the Ghouls that dwelt in hidden crypts, the significance of the symbol of the winged hound and the reason why certain corpses do not decay were all explained within its fragile pages.

But, the most fascinating of the secrets that the Bone Book contained, the one that had driven us to search for the volume all these years, was that of the Bone Lord, its calling and its command. The Bone Lord was an entity, if that was the right term, merely hinted at in other books of occult lore, something so hideous that even the Mad Arab and the cryptic Silander had shied away from describing. Nowhere else could we discover the information that was contained herein. But, at last, we had it.

We arranged to attempt the ritual of summoning the next night—it had to be at midnight—and see if it really could work. I hardly dared hope it would, so many occult rituals were hokum created by the deranged, delusional and dodgy. Yet, there were those that were efficacious. I just hoped that we had discovered one of the latter and not a bogus attempt to mislead the credulous or desperate.

Midnight couldn't come soon enough and we arrived at the Church well before in order to have time to prepare: the ritual had to be held on consecrated ground with the correct preparations at the appointed time or it would not work. If it worked at all.

We had broken into the Church and the crypt beneath it in order to hold the ritual out of sight, taking the bones from the tombs to lay out the ritual patterns as prescribed in the Bone Book. Leg bones demarcated the shape of a five-pointed star within a circle comprised of ribs to form a pentagram with a skull placed at its center.

"As I understand it," said Steven, looking over his translated notes one last time as we awaited the midnight hour, "when the Bone Lord manifests, it will animate these bones into a host form."

Finally, the appointed hour arrived and we lit the candles placed at each point of the star and began the Latin chant that would summon the entity forth into our world. As the chant climaxed, a faint bluish glow surrounded the skull only to fade as we spoke the final word.

"I don't understand," I said as I stared at the still-inanimate bones.

"It should—arrgh!" Steven suddenly doubled in pain.

"Steven?"

He didn't reply, just shrieked in agony. As I watched, his flesh seemed to writhe as if worms were moving about beneath his skin. Then, in a shower of blood and entrails, his bones burst forth as if they had clawed their way out of his body to take on a life of their own, the eyes plopping out from their sockets to be replaced with balls of green flame: the Bone Lord had manifested in a most spectacular fashion.

This was not what we'd expected. I tried to recall the words of command and stuttered what I hoped were the right ones. They seemed to have no effect as it reached out for me with bloody finger bones.

Panicking, I turned to run, feeling those bony fingers touch my shoulder for the briefest of seconds, sending a searing pain through the left side of my body.

Somehow, I managed to hurl myself across the crypt to the stairs and pull myself up them, not daring to glance back to see if the horror followed me. Across the chill floor of the church I dragged myself, my left arm and leg stiffly useless, out into the dark churchyard to the gate where I finally collapsed into blessed unconsciousness.

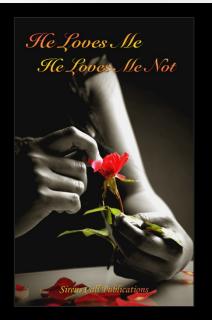
I awoke to find myself in a hospital bed with a policeman sitting in a chair beside my bed waiting to question me about the disturbed bones and spilled blood of the crypt. I maintained my silence, an act more convincing because the left side of my body remained paralyzed. The doctors said I must have had a stroke, causing memory loss, although they couldn't explain the peculiar rigidity of my limbs, as if my bones had somehow fused.

They couldn't say if or when I would be healed, but I'm a patient man. I can wait...

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

Twitter: <u>@djtyrer</u>

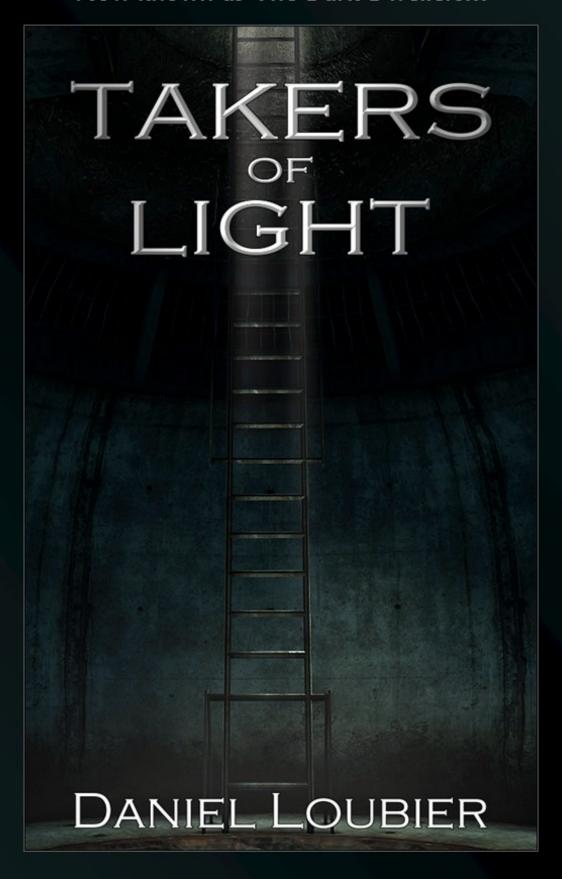
Blog: http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/



He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, iTunes, and Kobo Driven underground by those of the light...

Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for Purchase or Borrow!

Powerless | Kevin Holton

Michael died a few weeks ago. It was peaceful. He passed in his sleep, his heart finally giving out. Everyone knew he was sick; me, I could tell he was going to die. It's why I spent more time with him that day, curled up by his side, trying to get other people to appreciate his last day too. Of course, I couldn't *say* anything—who would've believed it if I had?—so in the end, I was the only one to really give him a fond farewell.

Jasmine didn't take it so well.

"What?" she snarled, glaring at me. "What are you staring at, huh?"

There was a knife in her hand. I'm not an idiot. I didn't walk closer, though all I wanted to do was comfort her. Instead, I stayed back, quiet, ready to run if she came at me. I was always her baby, 'Mommy's Special Girl,' but now, I was the enemy.

Not her fault, really. She'd tried so hard to care for Michael at the end. All the bills added loads of stress to the already-tense situation of him dying, not to mention that she was never the most stable woman around. I saw her taking pills every morning when she thought I wasn't looking, had overheard whispered conversations about her seeing a doctor to increase her dosage, but she always had an excuse. "Those shrinks don't want to help me, they want me sick so they can make money." "The pills make me feel horrible already, why would I make it worse?" "I'm not really sick, I'm just weird. Being weird isn't a crime, is it?"

No one ever explained to me what her illness was, or how it started, but seeing her growling at me through clenched teeth, knife gripped so tightly that the lines on her knuckles disappeared into white flesh, gave me a pretty good idea. She pointed the blade at me and said something, but it was a half-screech of gibberish, with a few words that might've been 'better off dead' thrown in there.

I trembled, crouching, drawing away as far as I could without letting her out of my sight. With no one else around, who was going to keep an eye on her?

Turns out, I wasn't much help anyway. She raised the weapon, stuck out her left wrist, and brought it down hard, slicing right through the thin, pale skin. Her fingers spasmed and I swear I could hear the tendons snap, could hear her ligaments severed, and I don't care if you don't believe me. My hearing's always been far better than most people's, able to hear mice scurrying in the walls when Jasmine couldn't even clearly hear Mike talking in the next room.

A spurt of red painted the floor. "Is this what you want?" she screamed. "Huh? Is this what you want, to see Mommy bleed? You want Mommy to die?"

No! I wanted to shout, but all I could do was shake. I wanted to run, sprint out of that room, out the front door, down the street, run until there was nowhere left to go, or maybe hide in a trashcan, or under a car, where she wouldn't look if she decided to chase me. She was weak and slow from not eating, always said the food was spoiled, or tasted dirty, or, on really bad days, had been poisoned. I could easily escape.

That's the problem with love. You don't want to escape, and you don't want to watch, but what else can you do?

Sirens wailed in the distance, making my ears perk up. They were still a good distance off, but if there was a chance, any chance at all, that they were coming toward us, there was a little hope for Jasmine. Didn't know where that would leave me, but I'd been on my own before. Orphaned and abandoned, left for dead as a newborn until someone found me, and eventually I got adopted. This was my new home. It was supposed to be a calm, safe place.

Jasmine gouged at her wrist again, sobbing now, crying despite the rage twisting her face, which was almost as red as the floor. For now. She was bleeding bad, and the sirens were getting closer, but now there were three, four, five lines in her arm. I looked toward the window, hoping someone was on their way to help, when she screamed, "Look at me! Look at what you made me do, all because you're so *selfish*, always sitting there, plotting against me. I bet you wanted Mike to die, just so I'd be miserable, didn't you?"

They'd been a great couple, when she was well. My only family. My only friends. Why would I have ever wanted either of them to suffer? It's not like I managed to mention this. When I tried to speak, all that came out was a weak whine, a meaningless cry, a pathetic mewling that didn't convey one percent of what I'd tried to.

There was a screech of tires outside. I'd been so distracted I hadn't heard them turn onto our street. On the front lawn, heavy footsteps ran up to the door, while a strong voice said, "Ma'am, stay back."

I recognized another voice: Jasmine's sister, Miriam. She'd come to help too! My heart raced. There might be a chance after all.

"What did you do?" Jasmine growled at me, pointing the blade my way. "What did you do?"

The door opened and a man called out, saying he was coming in, that he was armed, and when he got to us, he only gave me a brief glance before pointing something at her. I recognized it from all of Mike's cop shows. He had a gun, and was yelling for her to drop the knife, and when she didn't, when she started toward him, there was a loud bang and her shoulder exploded in red.

The sound filled every corner of the house, and it was all too much for me. I ran outside, not caring who was around or what they might do to me. Between Jasmine hurting herself and that horrible, incredible bang from the gun, I couldn't stay there a moment longer.

He'd left the front door open and I dashed outside, running hard, fast, blind, not paying attention to anyone until I recognized Miriam's voice, calling out to Jasmine, asking what the officers had done to her sister. I slowed just enough to look around, then angled toward her. She was in tears, but had enough presence of mind to look down and see me.

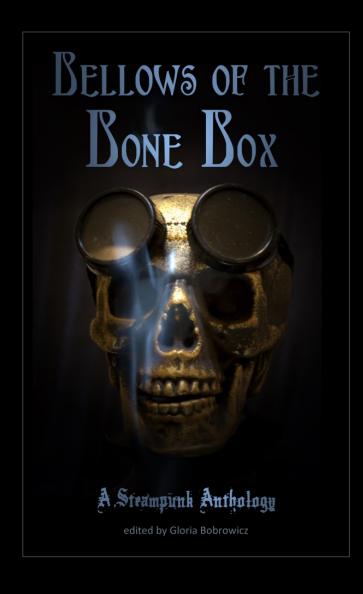
All I'd wanted to do was comfort and calm Jasmine, but now I was the one who needed help. The officer kept saying she needed to keep back, then there was a crackle and someone else said the 'suspect' was 'deceased.' Miriam wailed and sank to her knees, her face in her hands. I pressed myself against Miriam's legs until she scooped me up, tears running down her face. I was too numb to do anything but lay helpless in her arms.

Eventually, when it became clear that the police weren't going to let her closer, when Jasmine was dead and there was nothing anyone could do, she shakily addressed me. Holding me tight in her arms, she snuggled her face against mine. "I'm so sorry you had to be there, Whiskers."

I meowed pitifully against her chest. What else could I have done?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kevin Holton's work has been published with companies like Crystal Lake Publishing, James Ward Kirk Fiction, and Thunderdome Press. He is a full-time student and North American Representative with Game Time Reviews. When not working, he is a health enthusiast, voice actor, and amateur Batman.

Twitter: <u>@KevinJLHolton</u>
Website: <u>www.KevinHolton.com</u>



Bellows of the Bone Box

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

Synergy | Dave Dormer

Again, Malcolm warned his two sons, "Be careful. Those rocks are wet and slippery!"

His five-year-old son, Michael, searched the underbrush alongside the riverbank for broken branches, toads, or anything that crawled; while his eight-year-old, Randy, gathered anything that would float. Malcolm moved behind Randy, and watched him place a fistful of last year's fallen leaves into the gently moving cold water. Randy rested on the heels of his rubber boots atop glistening rocks at the water's edge and toyed with the swirling makeshift watercraft.

His father spoke again, "Keep away from the edge."

Malcolm had decided to give his wife a break from the kids that afternoon. He brought them to the roadside nature park: a park he'd passed by many times on his way to work but had never had the time to explore. Today was a good a day as any to enjoy the serenity of springtime outdoors.

White water cascaded off the twenty-foot high precipice in front of them; the gentle spray against their skin a bitter reminder that winter had barely loosened its grip. Where Malcolm and Randy stood, water collected calmly in a bay. It pooled almost as still as glass, but only feet away the current raged past on its downward journey to the next serrated tier of waterfall. Spanning nearly the width of the river at the tier's summit was an uprooted tree that seemed a welcome natural safety net. Malcolm shuffled nervously behind Randy and could feel a strange undulating energy sapping strength from his arms and legs. He turned to check on Michael's proximity to the riverbank.

Michael was safe—Randy was gone.

In seconds, Randy was floundering helplessly thirty-feet downstream. Malcolm caught sight of his oldest son, face-down and flailing wildly, his spring jacket spread out like a bat's wings in the frigid torrent.

He looked again to the shore, to Michael, "Don't Move!"

Malcolm leaped from the bank into the river while scrutinizing his youngest son—hoping he would obey him and not make this worse. Malcolm's back slammed against boulders on entry. He clenched his teeth and tried to ignore the burning pain emanating from his lower spine. It was as if hot liquid leaked down his legs.

Randy circled, lifeless within an eddy, while Malcolm's legs trudged forward through waist-high, numbing water. Again, he looked to the bank for his youngest son, who now stood with tears streaming down his ruby cheeks, "Stay there!"

Malcolm's eyes widened—every muscle tensed. He thought he'd reached the height of fear and panic known only to survivors of hurricanes, and then he saw a faint beam of light enter the water, filtered by the trees. Then he saw only swirling water.

Randy spun and tossed helplessly through the lit shaft, his drenched body no longer numbed by the icy water of the river, but enveloped in warm energy. Time slowed to a crawl. Instinctively, he gasped for air within the tube of liquid as he plummeted. He soon discovered that he needed none. He tried to scream for his father as he fell, but no sound escaped his lips. The tube or tunnel he was falling through was a wash of light and electrical energy that crackled and hissed around him. Then suddenly, in a ninety-degree turn that should have broken his body, he was launched sideways into a darkened tunnel. Craning his neck to look behind him, Randy saw that the beam of light he'd just escaped continued deep into the earth. He couldn't tell if its source came from above or below. Then the light was gone as he was propelled like a luge rider through the winding, twisting tube, and somehow he knew he was deep within the earth's crust. Where or when the ride would end, he had no idea.

Two weeks passed and Malcolm wasn't any closer to finding his son. Police combed the park, divers scoured the river, and eventually all of them gave up the thorough search except for Malcolm and his wife, Laura, who hadn't slept in days. She hardly spoke to him anymore and when she did, blame seethed in every word. With a home heavy from loss, friends and family stopped visiting. Any condolence they could offer felt hollow and degrading. Laura's grandfather, Mervin, hadn't abandoned Malcolm. He waited until one afternoon when his granddaughter and her youngest were out pinning missing-person posters with Randy's picture on hydro poles and message boards around town before stopping by the house for coffee.

"I know this may seem...unorthodox, but there may be another possibility. If you'll just bear with me?" Mervin handed Malcolm a book, about the size of a journal and sat down. He watched Malcolm's already troubled features screw up with confusion.

"Dowsing?" Malcolm's shoulders slumped, "What the hell does this have to do with anything?"

With a coffee mug cradled in his hand, Mervin spent the next couple of hours telling tales of his talent for witching wells as a younger man. He passed Malcolm his treasured forked willow branch and explained how farmers sought after him for his gift of finding water, among other items, and he tried to justify his gift with theories about Earth's ley lines, energy fields, and power centers. He continued by revealing theories about ley line in-shoots and outshoots, and how cosmic solar energy entered the earth, usually through springs, to unite with its own energy. Mervin offered that these sites, often referred to as power centers, might be an avenue for him to follow. When Mervin finished, Malcolm's head was spinning. He was ready to confide in tarot card readers or voodoo practitioners if it would help find his son.

Propelled upward by unseen energy, Randy instinctively clawed and dog paddled his way through another lighted chute as if he were trying to surface from a backyard pool. He shook his head frantically to be free of the water. All he wanted was to take a deep breath but he hadn't yet reached the surface and, as he neared, he could see the river had sent him to an unfamiliar destination. Confused, with heart pounding in his chest, he broke the surface and hoisted himself up to peer over the block-and-mortared ring that surrounded him, while smoke filled the wood-framed building he found himself in.

A wave of heat singed his face and shook him from paralysis.

It felt like only minutes had passed with him rocketing through meandering tubes, but somehow he knew he was a long way from home. He wondered if this was all a horrible nightmare. Or had he already died? Flames licked the wooden walls that imprisoned him and he could hear screams coming from somewhere outside. Gravity returned instantly to his body as he battled to pull his limbs out of the well. His weary legs kicked free from his rubber boots and he knocked over a heavy bucket that teetered on the ledge as he straddled the short wall. Old wooden benches lined up neatly facing him and sat empty as he plunked himself down on the dirty stone floor. With his back against the rough wall of the well, he looked over his shoulder and over the wall to see an altar and crucifix towering behind him in the center of the building.

Daylight poured in through gaps in the rough lumber walls and he could see no other way out that the raging fire would allow. Two forms in tattered cloaks of burlap or rough wool lay unmoving on the floor while fire danced up the walls. Tears rolled down Randy's cheeks as he moved cautiously to the nearest gap in the wall and peered out, lips sucking in cool, clean air. Grass greener than he'd ever seen blanketed a hillside dotted with bodies and gravestones. Men and women screamed as strange, enormous soldiers chased and hacked at them with spears, swords, and axes. Sheep bleated and scurried. Women and children scrambled for refuge in a stone tower nearby. Randy looked on helplessly as they frantically climbed a rickety ladder trying to reach what looked like the only entrance to the tower, twenty feet above its base. Armored soldiers wearing helms led horses laden with sacks down the hill, funneling toward a long wooden boat that lingered in the bay. Randy hadn't seen another boat like it; it had strange wooden coils at its stem and stern.

Waves of heat singed Randy's back as he watched trapped and helpless. Searing pain was sudden proof that he was neither dreaming nor already dead. The crackling blaze and collapsing timbers around him quickly drowned out any screams from the wounded and dying outside. With one last gulp of cool air from the crack in the wall, he ran to the center of the church and dove headlong into the well. Again, it accepted his body's energy and pulled him down willingly.

The air was cool and the waves rolled Randy like a rag doll onto the jagged reef. It was daytime, wherever he was, but heavy fog shrouded any sunlight. He listened to the waves lapping against rock as he fought to catch his breath. Faintly, he could make out a strange whistle in the distance. The cool water soothed his raw, reddened skin and he gulped down mouthfuls of lake water to quench his parched throat. A strange light pulsed against the wall of fog from above and turned his grumbling stomach. He looked up to find the source. He lay at the foot of a lighthouse, one like he'd seen in textbooks, on a jagged reef no bigger than a playground.

He cried for help. Again, he heard a whistle.

He cradled his head in his hands, sobbing. How would he find his way home from here? Wherever here was, all he could see was a giant rock with a tower on it and never-ending fog. He knew his dad would be looking for him. He just wanted to go home, and sleep in his own bed tonight.

Knowing he would surely freeze unless he found shelter, Randy scrambled along the reef

trying to find a way into the tower with the pulsating light. He rounded the base to the highest point of rock where he found a weather-beaten wooden ladder leaning and already lashed to the concrete platform above. He climbed the ladder, at least four times his height, with quickly numbing fingers, and reached a smooth platform that ringed the tower's base. Metal rods stuck out of the platform like fingers along its edge with rings attached to their tips. Thick rope weaved through those rings, which he grabbed to pull himself up.

He cried out again.

He looked up the dizzying hundred-foot tower. He circled the platform and could see windows sporadically placed along its length. The pulsing light from its top made him queasy. A long, rusty metal crane, bolted to the platform, extended out, with its cable and hook swinging gently in the wind. Finally, he found the door and it was massive—at least twice his own height. It took all his strength to push it open, and when he stepped inside the fog escorted him in. A body, sprawled at the foot of a spiraling staircase, was there to greet him.

Again, he heard a whistle and it was close.

He rushed to the body; a man dressed in strange woolen clothes, knelt beside him and nudged his shoulder. He didn't move. An odd hat lay near the man's bloodied head and it bore the same emblem as the lapels on his blue coat. The man's right leg lay twisted unnaturally beneath him. Trembling, Randy stepped around the still bleeding man on the concrete floor and climbed the impossibly narrow and steep stairs. Someone else had to be here. Someone else would help.

Winded, he reached the lantern room. Immediately he crouched on the floor of the allglass, circular room. Petrified, he refused to stand, and nervously crawled a circuit around a cylinder in the room's center that pulsed the blinding, sickening light that curdled his stomach. Fog surrounded him, but he could see another light pierce the mist. Then a horn blasted.

Then the tower trembled.

Scraping metal screeched and groaned, echoing throughout the hollow tower. Then all went silent. Randy pressed his face against the cool glass as if it would somehow help clear away the fog. A gargantuan white ship, the biggest he'd ever seen—except in the movie Titanic, lurched sideways on the rocks. A massive stack towered in its center and people scrambled in chaos across the ship's deck. Boats slowly lowered from the ghostly ship's side full of screaming passengers. Randy raced down the stairs, his knuckles white as he gripped the rail despite his panic. He peeked out each window calling out and waving to the people in the water as though they could hear and see him. He scrambled out the still open door to the platform and stood at the top of the ladder still waving his arms and hollering.

The chill in the air worsened as he stood sentry on the platform watching the ghostly, wet passengers clamber up the ladder, each one dressed in fancy clothes like actors in old movies. Most passed him by too emotional to notice, but the ones who did cast curious glares at him and his odd wardrobe of blue jeans, t-shirt, and blue *Hot Wheels* jacket.

"It's not Halloween—are you going to a costume party?" He asked one woman in a frilly gown that reached her ankles. He tried not to stare at her once fancy hair now draped across her

face like a soaking wet mop.

"In a manner of speaking, young man. We were on our way to Chicago's World's Fair."

A smile spread on his lips. He had never been so happy to see another person, "I'm looking for my little brother and my dad. Could you help me find them?"

"Of course, just stay close to me."

Randy didn't leave the woman's side. At least a hundred passengers filled the lighthouse that night, and by lunchtime the following day, and responding to an S.O.S sent by the ship's Captain, a passing freighter rescued everyone. After the lighthouse-keeper's body had been hauled aboard, Randy and the woman climbed to safety.

After Laura's grandfather left, Malcolm studied the handbook given to him, as well as scouring the web for any information he could find about ley lines and cosmic energies. It was all bullshit, he decided. He read about yin and yang; how energies would fuse, seeking synergy.

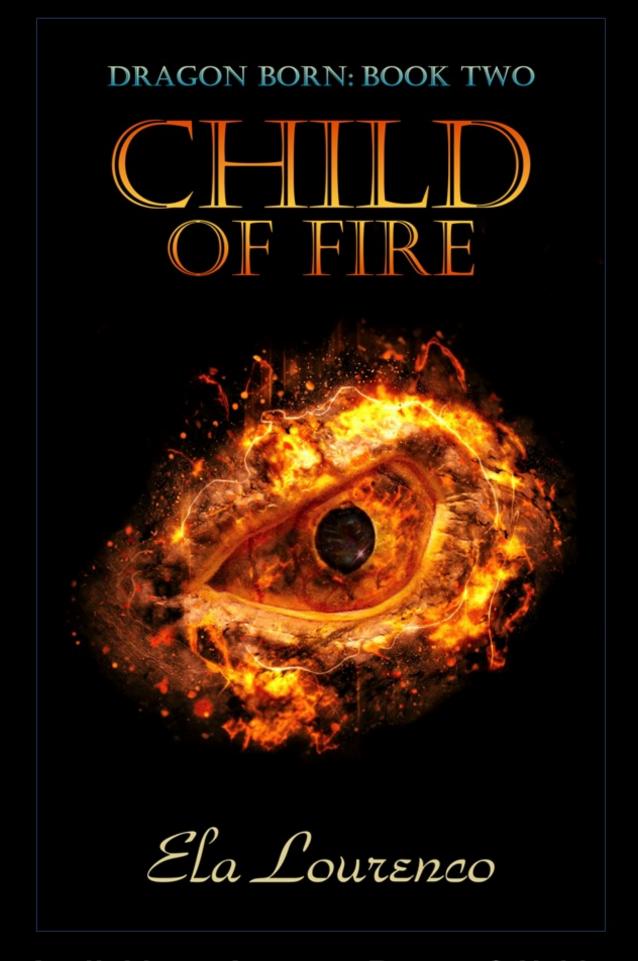
Enraged and helpless, he returned to the park to continue his search through darkened eyes from lack of sleep. From what he'd read, it confused him that the divers couldn't find anything—any trace of his son.

With the forked willow Mervin had lent him, he strolled along the riverbank looking for the easiest route in. He hobbled in, favoring his right leg—from what the doctor had told him he had obviously slipped a disk in his back. He waddled straight for the swirling eddy, though the fallen tree across the river reduced his unease. He held the forked branch in front of him, spread the two limbs apart gently and asked, "Is my son close." He looked over his shoulder to the riverbank, feeling like a fool, and waded cautiously toward the swirling water. As he neared, the branch vibrated in answer to his question. Suddenly, his arms wrenched downward and his jaw tightened. He asked, "Is my son down here?" The branch ripped free from his grip and disappeared into the torrent. "Son of a bitch!" Tired of playing these games he just wanted his son back. He stirred his hands in the water, trying to recover Mervin's branch, when a wave of energy blanketed Malcolm as if he were suddenly drenched in syrup. Before he could draw another breath he was pulled headlong into the eddy and, unlike his son, no light guided him through the tunnel.

The following day after a police cruiser happened by the peaceful park and saw the lonely car in the lot, another search for a missing-person had begun...

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

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



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A Stolen Heart | R. J. Meldrum

The police weren't interested, nor was the municipality. We dared not contact the media for fear of being swamped by kooks. In desperation, we contacted the local university. A Professor and a research student poked around for a couple of days, measuring and taking samples. The data was normal and they soon lost interest. The Professor said it must be some sort of unique, unexplainable, localized phenomenon. That, remarked Sarah within earshot of the departing university team, was already bloody obvious.

And so, we were left with our own unique, unexplainable, localized phenomenon. The pond in the paddock next to the house was frozen. In August.

Sarah and I stood at the edge of the pond, gazing down at the frozen water. There wasn't anything to say. We'd moved to the farm a month ago, it had been my uncle's. Unknown to me, he'd left it to me in his will. Sarah and I had decided to move in, rather than sell it. Urban living didn't suit us and the opportunity to move to a hundred-acre farm appealed to us both. We packed up our belongings and headed to the country, excited about our new rural life. It was perfect until last week, when we noticed the pond had frozen.

I glanced back at the house. It was constructed from the local stone and was impressively solid. The thick walls and slate roof could easily withstand the cold winters and strong winds that were typical of the region. My uncle, a confirmed bachelor, had raised sheep here for decades; they were the only animals that thrived on these desolate moors.

I saw Daisy standing at her bedroom window, her face serious. She was a very serious child, despite being only four. We hadn't let her near the pond, ignoring her pleas to go skating. The university team had tested it and confirmed the ice was composed of water and nothing else, but we both felt uneasy about letting our daughter close to it. Water shouldn't freeze when the air temperature is twenty degrees Celsius.

I glanced up again at the house. Daisy was gone from her window.

"Better go and check on her," said Sarah.

I found her in the cellar. It wasn't a livable space; it was dirty, cramped and damp, still full of my uncle's junk. She knew she wasn't allowed in there and normally she would never have dared enter, but we'd both noticed she'd been acting strangely since the pond froze. She was standing in the far corner with her back to me. As I stepped onto the dirt floor, I felt a sudden, unseen presence. I'm not a particularly imaginative person, but I knew that this was supernatural. There was nothing to see, but I had the sensation of being surrounded by a malevolent force. It swirled around me. I was suddenly aware I couldn't move; the presence had incapacitated me, somehow stopping my muscles from moving. I felt a growing tightness in my chest, it was getting hard to breath.

Daisy spoke without looking around.

"Don't. He's my daddy. He's not that other man, the one you're afraid of."

My muscles were suddenly released. I felt the presence step back from me. I rushed forward and grabbed Daisy, but she was unperturbed. Before I could ask her what the hell just happened, she looked at me.

"You need to open the wall, daddy. She wants you to."

"Who?"

"Her. The girl who speaks to me. The girl who froze the pond."

She pointed at the wall.

"There."

I did as my daughter asked. The bricks were old, crumbling. I removed two of them easily enough and discovered a battered metal box. I took it out of the wall and opened it with a sense of dread. It contained a tiny dried, shriveled, burgundy object and a sealed envelope. We immediately called the authorities.

Forensic examination identified the object as a human heart, belonging to a child of around ten years old. The letter, written by my uncle, told the story of what had happened. He had taken a child and drowned her in the pond. There was no emotion in the words he had written, he gave no explanation for his deed. Excavations in our cellar found the rest of her remains. She was identified as Maggie MacPherson, a local girl who disappeared in 1966. My uncle had lived in that house for fifty years, with the body of a child interred in the cellar and her heart in a box. I couldn't even start to guess what had been wrong with him. I wondered why he'd left the house to me.

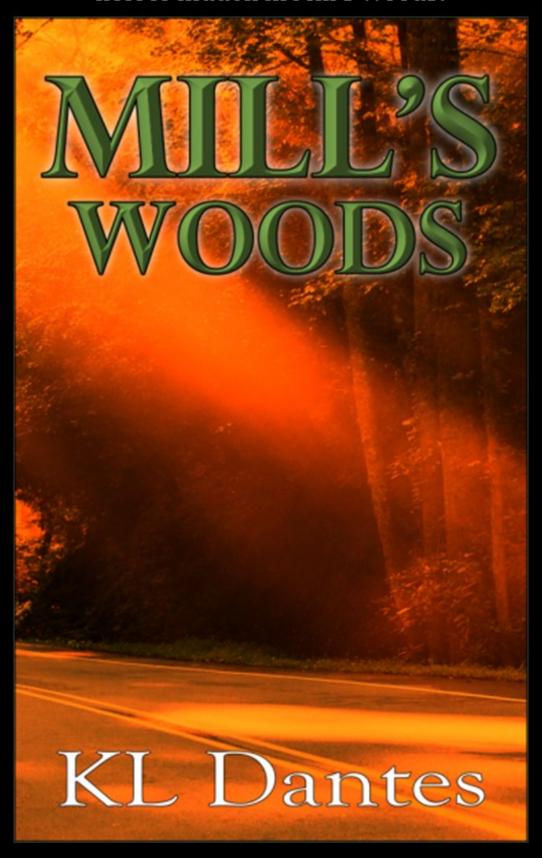
Sarah and I spent many hours discussing what had happened. The only reasonable explanation was that we had been visited by the spirit of the dead child. It was possible Daisy's presence in that lonely, cold house had woken Maggie from her restless slumber. Maggie must have thought my uncle had taken another victim, that he was about to kill again. She had frozen the pond so he couldn't drown Daisy.

On the day that Maggie's remains were removed from the cellar, we stood next to the hearse and paid our respects as the tiny coffin was loaded. I placed my hand onto the wood and silently thanked her for protecting my daughter. The pond thawed the same day.

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

Facebook: Richard Meldrum

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



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The Burden | J. C. Michael

I felt another thud on my chest and that was it, I was on the ground. The cold, damp, grass chilled me through my suit, and then everything went dark. The weight on my arms, legs, face, and chest, increased in almost rhythmic increments, and then stopped. I could hear voices, shouts getting closer. They didn't know that they were responsible. Didn't realize that once I'd been taken away they would finish the job, and with it finish me. I tried to shout out, but all I got was a clogging mouthful of dirt. The taste of soil assaulted my tongue even though I knew there was nothing there but air. It made no sense, but that didn't make it any less real.

There had been dirty looks aplenty at the funeral. Muttering old women eyeing me with contempt as if I, and not the cancerous product of a forty a day habit, had been the architect of my mother's demise. To be a bearer alongside my pious brother had made matters worse. The good son who had been by his mother's side throughout her illness on the right, the black sheep, the one who put career first and family second, on the left. The congregation only saw that which was right in front of them, just as they had for the past year. No matter that it had been my hard work that paid for the single room at the private hospice. Her friends didn't see the invoices, they only saw my saintly brother sitting next to the bed bought of my hard graft. It wouldn't have been so bad if my own mother had accepted the sacrifices I had made for her, yet she was as blind to the truth as the rest of them. My brother gave her the time he had plenty of to give. I gave her the fruits of my labors which left me with nothing at the end of the month. Nothing but a series of bills and financial headaches. She'd drained me of the security I'd worked so hard for, and then cursed me at the very end.

'I've been such a burden on you Gerry,' she'd croaked, 'now it's his turn.'

Her last words were accompanied by a piercing glare directed straight at me. The glare I'd been subjected to throughout my childhood when blame wasn't a matter of truth, but a case of something which was mine and mine alone. My faultless little brother was to blame for nothing, I shouldered it all and suffered the beatings to go with it. He could have cut my damn throat and it would have been my own fault for running it along the blade of the knife.

Of course, I'd grown thick skinned. I hated her for making her final earthly utterance a criticism of me, but the hate was nothing new. It was an emotion I'd carried for a long time. What I didn't realize was that somehow, and God, or the Devil, only knows how, was that with those words she condemned me to my own fate.

Carrying the coffin had only been the start of it. My shoulder had ached after placing the casket down at the front of the church, and I wasn't surprised that the pain hadn't eased by the time two out of tune hymns and a eulogy which, to me, seemed only accurate in regards to name, and date of birth, had passed. What was surprising however, was the fact that the pain was no different when the box was hoisted once more to my shoulder for the long walk out into the graveyard. It was like I had never put the coffin down, as if the burden on my shoulder was now something permanent. Ha, if that had been the extent of her damnation it would have been

sufficient, a daily cross to bear to remind me of her, but no, mother never went in for half measures.

The weight had remained on my shoulder even as we lowered the box down into the earth, so much so that it was all I could do to avoid toppling into the hole after her. We could have shared that hole for all eternity. I don't know which of us would have been the most pissed off about that. With her six foot down we filed by one by one, I went first, then Gerry, and then the procession of mourners made up of rarely seen relatives, friends, and acquaintances. As each person went by they threw a handful of soil upon the mahogany lid and that was when it hit me, literally. With each handful I could feel the pitter patter of the soil on the front of my shirt, as if I was down there with her, lain across the top of her coffin and staring up at the cloudy sky.

I tried to put the feeling down to stress, a nervous reaction to the strain of maintaining the charade of grief when inside I was glad she was dead. The bitch had been a thorn in my side since the day she delivered me to the world. But I wasn't getting off that easily. Throughout the wake in the hall by the church I could feel the pressure on my shoulder, and then I felt the first thud on my chest. I put it down to indigestion, a half digested sausage roll swimming in a pool of stomach acid and whisky repeating on me, but then came another, and another. I went outside for some air and that's when I saw them, the gravediggers filling the hole.

I tried to yell, and tasted soil. I started to walk toward them, thud, began to jog, thud, started to run, thud, thud. There was grit in my eyes. I was being buried alive under shovels full of nothing. Panic was gripping me but it was getting harder to run as the weight built up. I felt another thud on my chest and that was it, I was down on the ground.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: J. C. Michael is an English author of horror and dark fiction. His début novel, *Discoredia*, was published in 2013 and since then he has seen a number of his stories published in various anthologies, including *Reasons to Kill* in the Amazon best-seller *Suspended in Dusk*. He has also been a featured author in the *Double Barrel Horror* series from Pint Bottle Press

Twitter: <u>@jcdiscoredia</u>
Amazon: <u>JC Michael</u>



Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

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

Reaper | Nicholas Paschall

The room was as dark as the coals held in the burlap sack next to the pot-bellied stove. This didn't bother Richard, as he'd long ago become inured to the cold, the dark, and the grim. Sitting on the couch with his legs crossed, he stared with silver eyes as he took in the room. It had a fireplace devoid of ash, pristine in nature as the old woman who lived here preferred her stove over the raging fire one could create with logs.

Probably too old to get firewood anyway... Richard mused, bringing up a cup of coffee to his lips.

He set the cup down on a saucer, the long wooden table sitting in front of the plush couch a fine piece of craftsmanship that, when Richard pulled back the strands of time, learned the woman's husband Michael made it over the course of a month from a hewn section of Oak. A carpenter by trade, he'd worked for fifty years in a small shop attached to the house, creating tools and toys alike for the people of the village.

Now the village had grown into a town, going from a few hundred to a few thousand. The thick rug rolled out in front of the fireplace was clearly imported. Nobody in this distant locale would have the wherewithal to weave a Persian rug. Plucking the thin strands that hummed before him, Richard smiled as he saw how it was a gift from the woman's daughter, who'd moved back to the town after a bitter divorce in the big city.

Austin, eh? Richard hummed, strumming the strings to wash the memory back into the ethereal. Odd name for a girl... wonder what my mark's name is?

Whipping his hand in front of himself, space and time rippled as shadowy images danced about in front of him. He smiled when he spied one of the wavering images to be that of a stooped old woman. Plunging his hand into the scene, he set it into motion.

Unlike other angels, Reapers couldn't truly peer through time. Sure, he could pull up events that had happened, but the fate of man was a fickle one and being able to peer into the future may tip God's hand, so to speak, prompting a Reaper to do something untoward. Holding his arm into the event in the past, Richard smiled as it slowly animated, watery sounds coming to life as the voices of two women rose within his ears.

"Ma, I don't know what to do with him!" A young woman, one that Richard couldn't see, said. "He's just so aggressive, I mean he actually hit me before we left the city!"

"I've told you what you should do," the old woman said as she used a small scoop to shovel coals into the stove. Her voice, while watered down, was firm and absolute. "Abuse is abuse, no matter how you look at it. If I see him sniffing around here like I have in the past, or he brings any trouble with him, I'll shoot him dead with your father's old gun, I will!"

Richard smiled. I like this gal... not one to take any crap from your son-in-law! Reminds me of myself back when I was alive!

Reapers merely appeared in locations, no knowledge of what they'd been doing before they appeared. All they knew was that they were there to usher the soon-to-be-deceased to their final

destination. The fact that Richard was sitting in the dark living room of some ancient crone of a woman meant little to him.

This was what he did.

"Really wish the event would happen so I can move on... she's probably going to shuffle in here and fall or something. I bet I'll be forced to watch her die over the course of the next day and a half!" Richard chuckled, picking up the cup once more. Someone had left it here, and he didn't mind finishing it off.

Looking around the room, Richard's eyes widened as he witnessed a hulking figure step out of the kitchen, a creak of wood being the only mark that he was here.

Uh-Oh... looks like the husband found the wife... maybe I'm here to reap him? Richard drummed his fingers on his leg, waiting for whatever event that was destined to happen to occur. The veritable giant was at least six and a half feet tall, and as he stepped closer Richard could see he was wearing a sleeveless muscle shirt, his arms covered in bold tattoos. He had a septum piercing, and his head was shaved.

God, he looks insane! Richard thought. This is going to get messy... whatever, at least this will mark another one for my books.

The man walked across the room, pausing at the stove. He knelt and opened the narrow gate, before shoveling in some coal. Richard watched as the man slowly lit the charcoal stove, holding his hands before the fire to ward away what Richard assumed to be the cold. Shaking his head, Richard noted another presence in the room. The man turned, rising to his feet to walk over to the table, scooping up a magazine before plopping down on the couch next to Richard.

Richard heaved a sigh of relief... Thank God I put down the coffee before he noticed anything...

Another creak followed by the flickering light coming from a lamp revealed the old woman, dressed in a bathrobe with hands on her hips. She was scowling at the man, who gave her a spare glance of indifference.

"What are you doing up?" The man asked, reaching for the coffee cup.

"Heard you sneaking around in here... I don't know why you came back, you know I'm going to call the police." The old woman said.

"I said I was sorry!" The man growled before taking a long sip of the coffee. Setting the coffee back down on the table, he leaned back on the sofa. "I won't do it again. I just want to see her."

"She's not here," the old woman smirked. "She went out for a drink with a man we met at the grocery store. *He* seemed nice."

"You old bitch, you let her go out with someone?" The man exclaimed, rising to his feet, hands balled into fists. "How's the marriage going to work if she goes around sleeping with other men?"

"You stupid pig, the marriage is already over. She left after the last beating. He was a bad influence." The old woman said, pulling a flip phone from her bathrobe. "Now just wait right there, I have to call the police."

The man sneered. "You think I'm going to just let you call the cops on me?"

"No," the woman replied. "Once a beater, always a beater. But I don't think you'll do anything to me this time. I know about your history with drugs. Hell, I can see the needle marks on your arms!"

The man growled, but the old woman continued. "I know you've used tonight. She cried to me about how you couldn't go more than a few hours without a hit."

"That's none of your goddamn business you old bitch!" The man growled, stepping around the table to walk toward her.

She stopped him cold in his tracks as she lifted another hand from her robe pocket, revealing a snub-nosed pistol. The man looked at the gun with a mixture of curiosity and amusement. "Where'd you get that?"

"Found it in her room. She told me she took it away from you when she was unpacking," the old woman said. She kept her gaze on him as she pressed a button on her phone, her arm steady as she held the gun.

"You gonna call the police to what, come and get me for doing drugs?" The man sneered. "She'll bail me out just like all the other times. Hell, the family lawyer will get me off with a slap on the wrist."

"Hello?" The old woman said into the phone. "I need help. I found my grandson in the living room, and he's not breathing. Yes, my address is one one nine Pinebrrok Lane. Please hurry!"

Richard raised an eyebrow at that, but the man just tilted his head to the side. "So what now Grandma, you going to make me shoot more dope to get me to drop? I ran out when I shot up in the kitchen so you're out of luck!"

"Not really. I crushed up all my painkillers and muscle relaxers into a fine powder and put them in the coffee pot. Your mother always has one ready for you because of your sweet tooth. Five spoons of sugar can chase away the bitter flavor of my pills."

The man gazed at her a moment before lunging at her. He fell short, dropping to the floor at her feet, forcing her to back up. He was gasping, coughing as his legs twitched.

She stood over him, voice as cold and even as ice. "You're a worm Austin. You've always been a useless junkie. You beat your mother when she tried to get you into rehab. Your father kept trying to get you to stop, but your Kim just couldn't stand to see you go through that. You're the reason her marriage failed, and I want you to know that your ass of a father was wrong. Junkies like you don't change, they just stop when they find something new to get hooked on."

"Y-you b-b-itch..." Austin moaned, reaching out an arm as foam flowed past his lips.

"Just die already, and save everyone the trouble of worrying about you," the grandmother said, turning to walk back into the darkened hallway.

Richard whistled low. "More like me than I thought... whatever, a death is a death. Ready to move on Austin?"

Austin turned his head slowly, dropping it to the ground as he began to shake. He was staring right into Richard's eyes. Richard stood up, dusting off his slacks. Folding his arms behind his back, he walked over to the body as it thrashed about in death throes.

When he finally went still, Richard heard it. The telltale call for all Reapers coming to a death like this.

```
Tha-Thump!
Tha-Thump!
Tha-Thump!
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Austin's heartbeat. Shaking off the numbing feeling spreading through his limbs, Richard tried to ignore the way his body reacted to Austin's death. Like all Reapers, he felt what the dying were feeling to better allocate them to their respective place in the afterlife. This was the only perk of the job, as Richard finally got to feel something; the numbness that normally claimed his body was now replaced with the flood of chemicals slowing Austin's heart down. Richard reveled in the ecstasy of it all as Austin struggled against it. With a final spasm, Austin fell limp, the sound of his heartbeat growing weaker and weaker by the second until finally, the room was silent.

And just like that, Richard felt the feelings of life flow out of him. *Guess he's ready...* Richard thought. *Wonder where this one is going...*

Reaching down to Austin's back, Richard gave it a hard poke, causing the spirit to jerk free from the body. A free-floating orb of blazing blue and black energy, it bore only pitiless eyes that gleamed with malice.

"Great..." Richard said, running a hand through his hair. "A poltergeist. This was a waste of time..."

The orb growled, heatless flames rising from the sphere until the room was bathed in it's unnatural aura.

"Well listen here Austin," Richard started, gathering the angry spirit's attention. "I'm here to show you your way after death. You, however, died angry and alone. You chose to stick to this world like flies on roadkill, so you get three basic rules."

The eyes of the orb glared at Richard, but he pressed on. "One, you can't kill anyone. Two, you must remain within one-hundred and eight feet of where you died. Three, and this is the key one, you can't move on until someone figures out how you died."

Austin's spirit flared its flames, rage rolling off him in waves. Richard watched with a bored gaze. "Now I'm only telling you these rules as they are *hard* rules. They can't be bent, or circumvented. You are now stuck here with those three rules governing your existence. The rest of your afterlife is up to you. I wish you the best of luck, though I know you won't have any. Poltergeists never do."

And with that Richard turned, the world blurring around him as he was slowly transported to the next death he had to bear witness to. The swirl of colors and lighting would have been disorienting if Richard hadn't been doing this for so long.

Five-hundred and eighty-one souls before I get to rest... Richard mused, pondering his own status as a wandering Reaper. He knew the grandmother would one day join the illustrious ranks of the supernatural bureaucrats like himself.

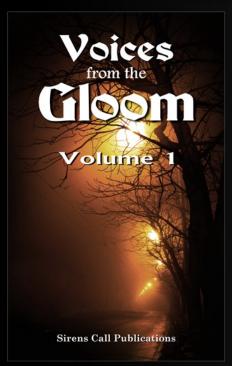
All murderers did. If you killed someone in cold blood, you got one-thousand deaths you had to gather, or in this case, inform of their status.

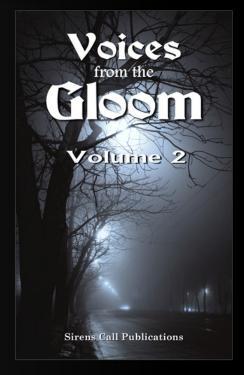
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nicholas Paschall graduated from the University of Texas at San Antonio with a degree in History. As an avid researcher, he comes up with topics for stories all the time. He is married with a few pets and is a horror author by trade. Between writing and researching for his next novel, he Nicholas enjoys tea and light reading.

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The Box | *Mark Steinwachs*

The buzzing invades your brain. Why is the alarm clock going off? You begin to open your eyes and realize it's not the alarm clock, but the doorbell. Who the hell is at my door at—rolling over, the clock finishes your thought by flashing 3:30 a.m.

You slide out of bed. As your feet touch the floor, the buzzing stops. You get up anyway and walk through the empty house to the front door to see if someone is there. There's no one on the porch when you look out the peephole. You unlock the door, opening it a crack. On the ground in front of you is a small cardboard box. Stepping over it, you look around the front yard and glance up and down the street. Everything is quiet. You scoop the package up and walk into the house, kicking the door shut behind you.

Something solid moves inside the box as you walk to the couch and set it on the coffee table. It's perfectly square, a foot tall all around, and meticulously taped closed. You pick it up again. Whatever is inside shifts slightly, like there's not quite enough packing material holding it in place. Turning the box on all sides, you see no markings of any kind.

You set the box down, not sure which side is up.

Well, the box will be there in the morning.

Getting up from the couch, you head to your bedroom for a couple more hours of sleep. But it doesn't come. Lying there with your eyes closed, the image of the box fills your thoughts. Your eyes open, and once again, you turn to the clock.

3:50 a.m.

This is ridiculous. It's a box. And it's probably not even meant for me.

At this point there's no falling asleep, so you get out of bed and return to the couch. You slide forward to the edge of the seat and lean over the box, your fingers reach for the tape. Using your fingernail, you pry up a tiny corner and then pull it back. The tape comes off without effort and the two flaps open slightly.

You start to open it further to look inside, but instead, stop, and set it down on the table. Your left hand holds the box as you cautiously reach in with your right. Your fingers grip the edges of something solid. There's no packing material and whatever it is, is almost the exact size of the box. The cardboard bulges out and the back of your fingers scrape the inside of the box as you pull the contents free.

It's a jet black leather-bound book and it feels light in your hands. Upon closer inspection, you realize it's more than a book. There's a latch, not holding the book itself closed, but a box held within it. There are only a couple of pages, then the box. Your eyes move back to the cover where you see your name etched in gold letters.

As your finger traces the letters, the hair on your arms stand up. Opening the book to the first page you begin to read.

Your time on Earth is about to end; there is nothing you can do to stop it.

At 4:10 a.m. you will perish. This is the only definite you have left in the last few minutes of life.

You instinctively look up at the clock.

3:56 a.m.

Then to the book.

You have two choices. You can choose not to open the box. If you do that, you will be trapped for eternity in an abyss, unable to escape, in which your body will slowly waste away until you no longer have the strength to move. Your mind, however, will be intact so you will experience emptiness forever.

Turning the page, your hands tremble, and you continue on.

Your second choice is to open the box. In it you will find your afterlife. If you were a good person, then it will be everything you could ever want. If you were not a good person, then it will be filled with every fear you ever had.

The choice is yours, as was the life you led.

You turn the last page to find the box, with your name engraved on it. You run your fingers around the edge of it, stopping at the clasp that holds it shut. You look around the room, looking for something or someone—anything—to appear and announce that this is all a joke. A really fucked-up joke. Your eyes move to the clock.

4:00 a.m.

You feel normal, but on edge.

This isn't real. There's no way this could be real, but...

You lean back on the couch, the book-box in your lap. Closing your eyes, you see flashes of your life's moments and fragments of memories. Some are good, some are bad; some last a split second, others linger.

The clarity of these memories fade as you drill down deeper in your mind. There are no longer images, but colors, soft hues that entwine with each other. When you focus on certain colors, your body feels lighter, while other colors make you feel heavier; meanwhile they all weave in and out amongst each other, mixing and blending, then splitting away, then coming together again.

You open your eyes as your body starts to quiver. The book-box shakes in your hands. You look up at the clock.

4:08 a.m.

You feel like you are moving in slow motion. Images begin to flood your mind, overloading your brain. You cry out in pain.

4:09 a.m.

Now your whole body is trembling. Your fingers go for the latch, but they slip off, your life crashing down around you.

You try again, this time your fingers grasp the latch. The box bursts open, releasing a brilliant flash of burning light as you take your last breath.

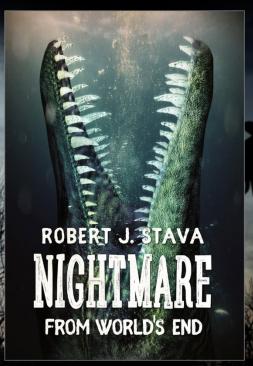
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Steinwachs is a roadie who retired to shop life and is now GM at Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Over a decade traveling in tour buses plus time as a United States Marine, and a rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique outlook in his storytelling. He writes in the wee hours of the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

Twitter: <u>@authorMarkStein</u>
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Thirty-Two | Diane Arrelle

Benjamin Cowlanski sat up in bed. One more hour to go and I'm home free, he thought and chuckled. Sixty little minutes then a life-time to fill!

He almost drooled thinking about all the things he wanted. He wanted to dance, he wanted to run, he wanted a good time with an easy woman. He wanted it all, and in one hour he'd have it.

But right now he had to settle for sitting in this bed with his daydreams. He watched his blood flow in a steady stream from the IV. He knew it was going on its daily purification loop: out of him, into the medical miracle laundromat, then back inside of him, nice and clean and toxin-free. He looked around the glass room, as germ free as any place could be, and smiled. "I'm the one to beat that old witch," he shouted, feeling invincible for the first time in his adult life.

He sat on the bed, smiling at the machines that had protected him from death for the last 365 days. There were monitors for every bodily function and equipment to exercise his muscles as he relaxed in bed. He hadn't walked or eaten a real meal in a year and his body was the healthiest it had ever been, his arms, legs and chest built up with firm muscle. There was no fat, no waste. He was at his prime. "Just wait till the ladies see me now, no more skinny, flabby, Benji. Today I'm Ben: superstud, superman, superhero!

He laughed. For the first time in years, he could honestly laugh at life. He had beaten fate and he was going to spend a lifetime doing everything he had missed out on. Since he'd been eighteen he'd been obsessed with gathering money. He needed to be wealthy, his life had depended on hard cold cash. Whoever said money couldn't buy you happiness was wrong, money bought him this life-saving setup.

He thought about all the male members of the Cowlanski clan, every single one of them knocked dead in their thirty-second year.

Well, in just a few short minutes he'd be thirty-three. The old gypsy curse laid against his great, great, great, great-great-grandfather almost three hundred years ago promised that all Cowlanski males would die tragically during their thirty-second year. That old bitch devastated his lineage just because an ancestor got a little randy and screwed the woman's daughter.

Talk about carrying a grudge too far, Ben mused. "Well, I won, the curse is over!" he announced in a loud voice, just to practice speaking. After a year of solitude, buried in this fully automated subterranean vault where cell phones couldn't work, he planned to do a lot of talking too. "First thing, I have to go see Mom at the nursing home, then Amy."

He thought about his sole surviving parent who had spent the last five years comatose after a series of strokes. She was a tragic woman, widowed young, went back to work as soon as her youngest child, had gone to school. With five children to care for she had literally worked her life away. And poor, poor Amy, his sister, oldest of the five, had to stand by and watch the family deteriorate as his three brothers died on time in awful accidents. Jeremy suffocated in a

mudslide, Alex was sleeping when a traffic helicopter crashed into his bedroom and poor allergy-ridden Jason was done in by a swarm of vicious hornets.

The clock started chiming. It was 12:47 in the afternoon, he knew the time he'd been born. Mom always loved to tell how he'd come out so fast, he'd only taken up Papa's lunch hour.

Now he stared at the buzzing time piece and sighed with relief. For all his self-assuredness, he had been scared that something, somehow, would go wrong. He'd tried to cover every contingency, he had his own power supply and the best, most foolproof equipment money could buy. Even this extra insulated, extra fortified bomb shelter the army had buried in the Rockies had been perfect and available at a price.

Impatiently, he stared at the clock waiting for someone to come release him. He'd never been able to wait calmly for anything and now was no different. "I've been thirty-three for ten minutes, where is a doctor already?" he muttered in annoyance.

Suddenly, he heard noises off in the distance, and then he wasn't alone anymore. A tall, thin woman with a long hook nose and pinched cheeks approached him, "Mr. Cowlanski, I'm Doctor Ross."

Ben couldn't control the lecherous smile that spread across his face. Homely or not, Dr. Ross was the first woman he'd seen in a year. "Boy, Doctor! Am I ever glad to see you!"

The doctor blushed and brushed at her short straight hair."I've come to check on your setup here, Mr. Cowlanski. Your sister wants you to read this text immediately," she said holding out a smart phone.

"Look Doc, don't bother checking the setup, just undo me fast. I can't stand this anymore."

"What about the message, she left a voice mail as well." she asked. "Your sister gave instructions that you listen to it now."

"Look, I'll do it when I'm ready. Time to get this machine out of me and me out of it. After all, I'm still paying the bills here."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Cowlanski." She got busy unhooking him, disconnecting wires and withdrawing IVs.

When she finished, he stood on strong but unsteady legs. "Feels funny to walk again," he said taking a few steps toward her. Then, before she could react, he grabbed her and planted a kiss on her unresisting lips. "Thanks Doc, I needed that!"

Dressing quickly, he grabbed the phone and said, "I've got to get outside and smell the air. I'll listen to it in the car. Bye, Doc."

Outside, the day was bright, sunny, and smelled like spring. Off to the west he noticed dark thunderheads. "Even a good storm is welcome," he said to himself as he got into his car and revved it. A year of disuse blew out the exhaust system and he was off.

"Oh yeah, Amy's message!" Driving over the mountain roads, he didn't bother with the hands free headset, but held the phone to his ear enjoying going through the motions.

Amy's voice greeted him. "Ben, I'm glad you are listening. Do not, I repeat, do not leave the shelter."

He slowed down and thumbed the volume up to be heard over the approaching storm. The message continued. "Mom died. I just went through her papers and Ben, don't panic, but Ben, she... she lied about your age to get you into school early. You are really just thirty-two now, not thirty-three. Doctor Ross will make sure everything is still running right. Glad I caught you in time, see you next year!"

Ben hit the brakes and swerved to a stop. The road up ahead was all hairpin curves and sheer drops. The sky opened up and the rain poured down. Immediately visibility was totally obscured. Pebbles and stones slid down the mountain wall on his right and pelted his car.

He sat holding the steering wheel in a white knuckled grip, knowing his impatience was going to cost him too big this time. Taking a deep breath and hunching his shoulders with a resigned shrug, he grinned at the irony of it all and floored it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Diane Arrelle, the pen name of Dina Leacock, has sold more than 200 short stories and two books including *Just A Drop In The Cup*, a collection of short-short stories. She recently retired from being director of a municipal senior citizen center and resides with her husband, her son and her cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

Twitter: <u>@dinaleacock</u>
Facebook: <u>Diane Arrelle</u>

The Woman Who Loved a Tree | Louise M. Hart

Mrs. Grey mopped her brow and replaced her dry hand on her ample hip. Watching removal men maneuver furniture proved an exhausting business. Her husband rolled up his shirt sleeves, but, also stood back. The removal men sweated and whistled, presumably anxious to receive the disproportionate fee Mrs. and Mr. Grey had offered.

The eldest removal man smelled of stale nicotine and rotting flesh. He dropped his fetid essence all over the Grey's elegant new residence. Mrs. Grey stood as far away from him as she could and fantasized about the dinner parties they would hold, when they were established in the neighborhood. "The mortgage on this house will be setting you back a bit, eh love?" He said.

Mrs. Grey scoffed, she could not comprehend why the working class did not realize that it was inappropriate to mention money at such moments. Opening the patio doors, she stepped onto the garden terrace and inhaled the unsullied spring air. "Hello," a voice gasped, from across the garden. Mrs. Grey looked about her, but could see no one. She stood on her tip toes and glimpsed across the hedge into her neighbor's garden, but saw no one there, either. The tree at the end of her garden looked on.

The married couple spent the first few days in their new home rearranging furniture and trinkets until they were satisfied that the house satisfactorily befitted their style and social status.

Aesthetics were everything. But, when she had completed her tasks, Mrs. Grey felt unusually restless.

"I think I feel a new novel coming on." She informed her husband, on the day the first daffodil of the year appeared in the garden.

"Itchy fingers, dear?" He smiled, peering above his morning newspaper. But, her mind, not her fingers needed scratching.

Mrs. Grey was a moderately successful romantic fiction author. She churned out books at factory speed and lived off the spoils, without a thought for the characters she had left behind. Venturing into her new office, she stared at her compliant laptop and emptied her mind. The harder she clung to the detritus of her ideas, the faster it spilled.

She blamed the office. Although she had always dismissed the notion of feng shui alongside all other New Age and supernatural nonsense, she began to think there might be some truth in it, after all. For, the office radiated an aura that opposed and crushed every creative desire and instinct her being usually nurtured. She felt constricted, like a caged beast cut off from its true nature. Mrs. Grey grabbed her laptop and walked outside.

The garden sparkled, the gentle midday sun summoning her to sit beneath its golden crown and finger her laptop. She tapped the laptop's keys and regained herself, a self at one with her surroundings and complete. She thought the tree at the end of the garden looked particularly majestic. "You're so beautiful," she whispered, smiling like a young girl who had experienced the first throb of sex between her legs.

After a successful afternoon writing, Mrs. Grey and her husband decided to enjoy an evening coffee in the garden. But, as they reclined in their expensive wooden garden chairs, they could hear laughter and detect general signs of degradation emanating from the neighboring garden. Destroying the soothing ambience was the unmistakeable smell of marijuana. "Someone is smoking cannabis." Said Mrs Grey startled that anyone living in such an exclusive residential area would partake of a spliff.

"Smoked it once," said Mr. Grey, "I remember eating a lot of chocolate and falling asleep." Horrified, Mrs Grey peeped into the next garden. There, she saw two figures, both female but formed so differently that they might have been contrasting genders. The shorter one was a young rugby playing ruffian of a woman, the taller woman an elegant, willowy representative of her kind. The tall one grabbed the other woman, leading her across the garden. Observing the action from the other side of the hedge, Mrs. Grey's eyes widened with repulsive passion. The women clasped one another greedily, kissing and pulling at the other's flesh, like animals, on the point of mounting.

Mrs. Grey could not take her eyes off the lovers, her stomach churned with excitement and disgust. But, suddenly aware they were being watched, the women separated. The tall one glared at her through a gap in the hedge. Her eyes met Mrs. Grey's. Mrs. Grey gasped and recoiled in a pique of embarrassment. Never had she seen a more handsome creature. Turning towards her husband, she heard the women giggling out of sight. She retreated to the house, her cheeks pink with desire and denial.

Overnight, Mrs. Grey received many visitations. Phantoms of the heart and soul led her through the strange and confusing realm between sleep and wakefulness. Her body gyrated, like a serpent trapped by the demands of its own flesh. A vagina opened before her closed eyes and pleaded to be entered. She reached for it, but it disappeared, like her clitoris between her mind's closed legs.

Nightmares gifted her near death experiences in which she witnessed her brain being eaten, like a rare and delicious delicacy. A chainsaw vibrated two inches above her head that looked like a giant dildo adorning slashing teeth. It demanded sex and blood. Immobilised, only her conscience could hear her screams. Her mouth remained as closed as her mind.

She opened her eyes and standing at the foot of her bed, her beautiful, lesbian neighbor roused her back to reality. She was as naked as an untamed Neanderthal woman. The upper half of her body was remarkably female. Topping her cupcake pert breasts were plump, ripe nipples that seemed to spread across her flesh, like cherries, yearning to be tongued. But beneath her waist, the creature displayed a phallus, as fine as that of the most arresting stallion.

The creature opened her mouth, but the only voice Mrs. Grey heard emanated from beyond the bedroom window. It was the tree, calling from the garden. She needed her as essentially as Mother Earth, so Mrs. Grey rushed towards her. Her nightdress billowed behind her. Her bare feet did not even feel the cold and unwelcoming ground across which they swept. She threw her body against the tree's powerful trunk, wrapping her entire torso around its wooden pulse.

Mrs. Grey's desires entered the tree from the behind and below, seeping through every pore of her consciousness into its masculine frame. She licked the bark until sap appeared and filled her with oral pleasure. Satiated but exhausted, she eventually collapsed on the ground beneath the tree and fell into a contented, post-coital sleep.

The following morning Mr. Grey awakened and was surprised to see his wife still asleep beside him. She was usually an early riser and had almost invariably showered and eaten breakfast before his head left the pillow. He gently placed a hand on her shoulder and asked her if she was alright. With a start, she opened her eyes and stared beyond her husband's anxious face towards the window.

"I feel shagged out." She iterated.

"...an unusual turn of phrase... from you, dear." He replied, looking puzzled. Her face looked ashen and her nightdress sweat soaked, clinging to her flesh and revealing a hint of her button-like nipples, still erect with arousal. She launched her body from the bed and disappeared downstairs, as though anxious to do something or see someone. Mr. Grey remained puzzled.

Mrs. Grey swallowed her breakfast and rushed upstairs to dress. Increasingly concerned, Mr. Grey noticed that she had not showered. He attended to every hirsute inch of his manly form and departed for a business meeting in London.

She placed a chair beneath the tree's burly branches and pressed her back into the trunk. Flesh against bark, Mrs. Grey felt cocooned against reality's elements and intemperate weather. Her laptop lay on her knees. She used it as only a true writer could.

The tree narrated words, which flew from her receptive fingers, like fruity sweet kisses of inspiration. Mrs. Grey conceived a protagonist unlike any she had ever created. A male voice and first person narrator, who unveiled his evil deeds in layers of purple prose. Sebastian Centurion prowled the suburban underground in search of females of every form, his vampiric teeth simultaneously pleasuring necks and cunts. Mrs. Grey wrote until she ached and when she had finished, her gentle kisses gratified the tree.

When her husband returned home, he found Mrs. Grey sitting beneath the tree consuming wine directly from a bottle. "You haven't been drunk since 1993," he said. He returned to the house and made a drink of camomile tea.

Every night the tree beckoned Mrs. Grey and every night she yielded. In the morning her husband would rise first, gazing at his wife's haunted and twisted face with increased horror and frustration. She seemed oblivious both to her personal appearance and the conventions of everyday living. She did not shower or engage in her wifely duties, like cooking and housework. Rather, she spent her days in the garden, writing as though possessed by a peculiar and intangible will, emanating from beyond her being and consciousness.

Initially, Mr Grey tolerated the situation, but the morning she grabbed his flaccid cock and demanded fornication, he flew into a rage. They had always maintained an unspoken agreement to enjoy a non-sexual relationship. Their relationship involved the meeting of minds and not the trysts of body and fluids. He simply would not endure the demands of her unrestrained femininity.

"You haven't washed the dishes for five days," he shouted. She did not even look up from her laptop. "Is your novel more important than me?" She remained silent. Mr. Grey walked away, muttering. She felt the tree stir. Mrs. Grey plunged her finger nails into her left arm, penetrating her flesh until they had drawn blood and the urge to scream ceased.

After that night's love making session, the tree spoke to Mrs. Grey of dark and forbidden things pertaining to her husband that no respectable wife in her right mind could abide from the man who had sworn to love her. "Till death do us part." She whispered, hugging the tree.

"I'm married to a tree hugger," Mr. Grey snarled. It was 8 am and his wife clung to a tree, like a madwoman to her illusory sanity. He walked away from her, shaking his head. His dirty breakfast dish topped an unsanitary pile of crockery, as filthy and negligent as his wife. He banged the front door shut and stood in the drive, breathing deeply in an attempt to regain his composure.

Mrs. Grey ran into the house and peeped at him through lounge window. The lesbian from next door walked down her drive. Her husband smiled at the woman and summoned her. Mrs. Grey had no idea they had ever met, but it was clear to her they were well acquainted. They talked intensely, their heads close and their body language mutually receptive and friendly. The tree was right; her husband was a traitor, evil personified and probably unfaithful.

Fury guided her. She ran back to the tree and swore they would never part. Soon, Mr. Grey appeared. He looked down at her in the manner of a strict school mistress about to spank an

unruly student. "I have made a doctor's appointment for you, tomorrow." Mrs. Grey ignored her husband and listened to the tree.

"How do you know THAT woman?" She asked. Puzzled, Mr. Grey asked her to whom she referred. "The whore next door," She replied.

"She's a psychiatrist, "He smiled "...and much respected, by all accounts." The tree roared. Mrs. Grey stood up and walked into the house beside her husband. She spent the day washing dishes, cooking and performing other wifely duties. Mr. Grey listened to the radio, read the newspaper and ate his dinner. He retired to bed at 11 pm, leaving his wife to complete her evening chores.

When he had gone, Mrs. Grey looked through the patio doors at the tree. The tree called to her. "Kill, kill." She seized a chopping knife from a kitchen drawer and walked upstairs. Her face was set as emotionless as a mask, but her eyes screamed, like flesh in flames.

Mr. Grey lay in bed, seemingly sleeping as soundly and carefree as an infant. His wife thrust the knife towards his head, but before it met his brain, his body rose and he grabbed her arms, employing the full force of his masculine power and destructiveness. The knife fell to the ground, as redundant as its former beholder. Struggling with his wife's will and flailing limbs, Mr. Grey abandoned the bed. She was surprised to see that he was fully dressed.

He dragged her downstairs by the hair. Blood flowed down her face, sinking into her blouse and staining the carpet. She laughed, like a hyena before a mound of dead flesh, tears of pain burbling into her open mouth and muffling the noise. He then, clasped her torso in a grip that winded her and almost claimed her earthly life, pulling her into the garden, a carcass of womanly meat.

Standing beside the tree, he unfastened his trouser belt and strapped it around her neck. He dragged her to the tree. Mrs. Grey struggled, like an injured wild cat. He heaved her off the ground and tied her neck to the strongest branch.

Her final moments were the most blissful, her body and mind united in the sway of an orgasmic charge, in which truth and beauty were ultimately revealed to her. And all the time, the tree whispered, "Til death do us part."

The following morning, the handsome lesbian next door drew her bedroom curtains and looked across into her neighbor's garden. Hanging from a tree by the neck was her neighbor's dead body. Overnight, the tree had bloomed into full leaf.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Louise M. Hart is a British author and poet. She lives in the West Midlands. In 2013 her first novel, *The General Paralysis of Sanity* (Chipmunka publishing) was published and following it, her poetry collection, *A Life Reborn*. Louise lives to write and believes that writing provides a portal into a writer's soul.

Twitter: <u>@shunterthompson</u>

Blog: http://madscribedotme.wordpress.com



Poetry by Carl Wade Thompson

Passing

I watch clocks now, more than ever before. The second hand moves quick, accented by tempo wheezing. Close to the big hand, now, the big hand reaching midnight. The clock begins to chime, from a prince to a pumpkin shell. The Wheel wants to move on, spokes turning infinite circles. Must not, cannot, move on, I see my life drain like sand. Cannot let go of this husk, too many scars cover my back like stripes of a raccoon's tail. My sons hold my hand, their tears keep me breathing, focus on the laboring machine of a heart long past due the expiration date is rotten. Slipping into the ether, no feeling in my paws. Will is all I have left; I cannot let go now. The doctor checks my pulse, declared dead in an instant. My grip is iron, everlasting; Covered body wheeled away, I'm a shadow with no sun.

The Waking Game

The days are filled with chanting, Buddhist monks attend each night. Family-friends come and go, dressed in black and white. Body covered by a blanket, all that's seen is my right hand.

They all pray I go to heaven, a ghost, I'm not going anywhere. I watch my sons closely, see them play amongst the chairs. they chase each other back and forth, a dog walks in and sniffs the air. Mangy mutt looks straight at me, Cocks one ear, bares its fangs. Now I know I'm no longer human, the dead, he should be afraid. A passerby shoos the dog away, let's it go its way in peace. Troubled, I scream in anger, afraid of what I've become. Promise, promise to not forget. All that's left are my memories. They keep me going in this place, Not heaven or hell, just in-between. All that's left are those fragments, memories are all I have. But the impressions keep drifting, with no form, I am the mist. Just focus on the chanting, prayers to Buddha ramble on. My thoughts are so fleeting, Just my sons run towards the dawn.

The Guiding Thread

The day begins somber, funeral at its end.

My body burned to ashes, no soul left to give.

I watch as they walk, procession of the dead.

See them carry my portrait.

My sons hold their mother's hands.

The monks unroll the string, reciting sutras as they walk.

The thread that guides to heaven, I follow as I was taught.

My ghost moves slowly forward,

watching the death parade. My students pull my coffin those I helped in yesterdays. The white thread extends on, past the crematory site. Leading to a wooded path, I stop to watch the fire bright. The ashes dance in smoke, body burned to gray dust. There is nothing left of me here, a retainer beyond the grave. No longer human, never of this world again. Should follow the thread's path, move on to rest in peace. But there is no repose, no place for the damned. Stay behind, must remember, the man I was, not what I am.

All That Remains

The night of, night after not sure when anymore. Time is no longer certain. Here, I don't need clocks. The house feels gray; its colors creep into my soul. Sounds of weeping, the only silence I know. I watch my family always, those left to make sense of it. My sons cry for Daddy. Dead, no comfort can I give. My wife does her best, to hug and to hold. I can feel her love, but it can't touch my core. At night I roam the house, slink between cracks. There's no door I can't pass; walls have no meaning.

My sons sleep like dogs, uneasy beneath blankets. Tucking them in, I kiss them goodnight, slight breeze on their brows. Wife I see last, slight form under sheets. Calls for me in her sleep. All that remains is my name.

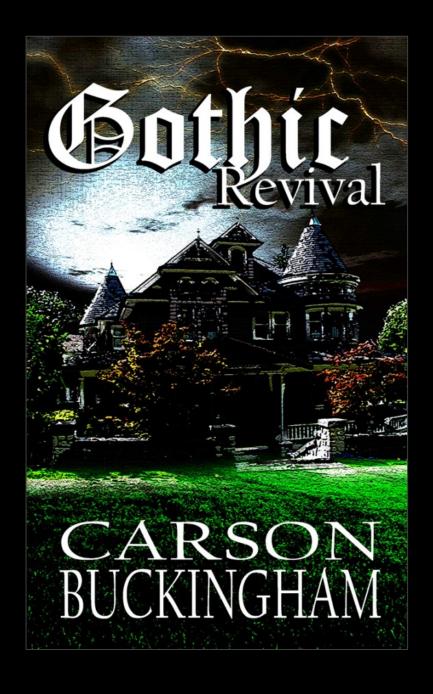
Rocking Chair

The nights are the hardest, loneliest time of day. The time when sons ask, "Why did Daddy go away?" I can only watch and listen, so close, yet so far. Just a faint apparition; lonely soul left to rot. I used to rock my oldest, Slowly, in my gliding chair. Now my son cries my name, wants Daddy to hold him near. We used to snuggle late, he'd hold my bull neck tight. Now, the only thing I give is to watch over him at twilight. But some nights he comes, carrying his old, tattered bear. Swiftly, he climbs the glider, lays down his sleepy head. As he drifts and listens, to Morpheus's singing song, I push the glider—all my might, a gentle wind in the calm. And for a few seconds, a brief moment in time, my son knows I'm there, that Daddy is all right. And so my son slumbers, just my little boy.

And for a while I forget, I'm dead and he's alive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Carl Wade Thompson is a poet and the graduate writing tutor at Texas Wesleyan University. His work has appeared in *The Mayo Review*, *The Concho River Review*, *The Blue Collar Review*, *The Eunoia Review*, *The Galway Review*, *Cenizo*, *Anak Sastra*, *Blue Minaret*, *Doll Hospital Literary Journal*, *Piker Press*, *Elegant Rage*, *The Enigmatist*, *Work Literary Magazine*, *One in Four*, and *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*.

Facebook: Carl W. Thompson



Gothic Revival Carson Buckingham

Available on Amazon, and Smashwords

Poetry by Austin Muratori

Death Is Coming Now

Death is coming now to take my soul away
To carry it to hell, smiling, while it lay.
Silence covers the tormented land
As my ruthless killer drags me by my hand.
Not a moment of regret is murmured along the way.

I try to scream for help, but with a mangled tongue there's not much I can say.

I tremble as I go for this is not my lucky day.

My eyes close tight as I prepare for my final breath because

Death is coming now.

All is finally calm as I rest under the cool sand,
Body melting sinking into the land.
Organs turn to dust as my bones begin to fray.
My soul catches a glimpse of the next victim and watches in dismay
Death is coming now.

Fear Within

The tainted air escapes my lungs forcing me to choke.

Life slips silently from my bones as wicked winds evoke.

The end is ever so clear with thick fog setting in.

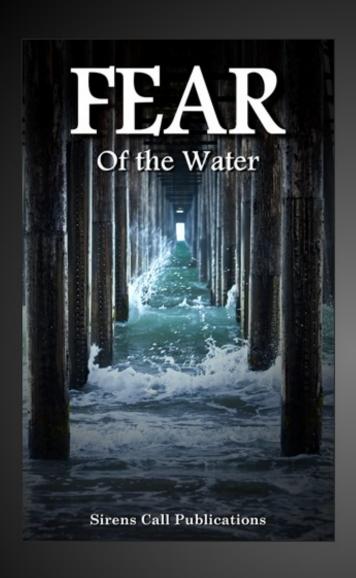
My soul separates from my body as does the fear within.

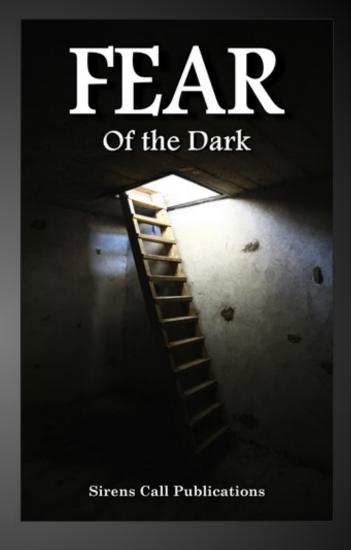
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Austin Muratori is a Writer, Filmmaker, Photographer, Musician and cancer survivor from a small town in Michigan. He is an avid reader who also happens to have an addiction to movies, Coca-Cola, the macabre, stories, art and all things dark. Austin has had works featured in *Sanitarium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

Twitter: @AustinMuratori

Website: www.austinmuratori.wordpress.com

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Poetry by DJ Tyrer

Forest Shadow

Hidden in forest shadow
Beyond golden daffodils
Something watching, waiting
Waiting just for you
It pounces
When you draw near
Swallows you down
In crimson chunks
Then retreats to wait
Hidden in forest shadow

Zed

Better dead than zed:
The slogan of those
Who want to die human
A quick gunshot
A knife or noose
Not the zombie's bite
While those who falter
Fear
Fight or flee
Until the inevitable occurs
And, too late, they wish for death
Only to shamble forth, instead

Reaperman

They know him as Mr. Reaper
Head of human resources
But out of sight
He dons his robe
Takes up his scythe
For the sake of tradition
Downsizing the permanent way
The dead wood
Making the company lean and fit
For a future only he can see

Dead Man Walking

You can't expect to survive With a rap-sheet miles long If your fellow crooks don't do you The system will suck you up Hollow you out Through a lifetime of appeals Until the lethal injection A fitting end Only there can be no end For one as steeped in sin as you Hell spits out your soul To resume residence In the shell it once called home To claw your way out of burial soil To resume your wanderings To recommence your crimes A dead man walking Adding more dead to your total

Dead of Winter

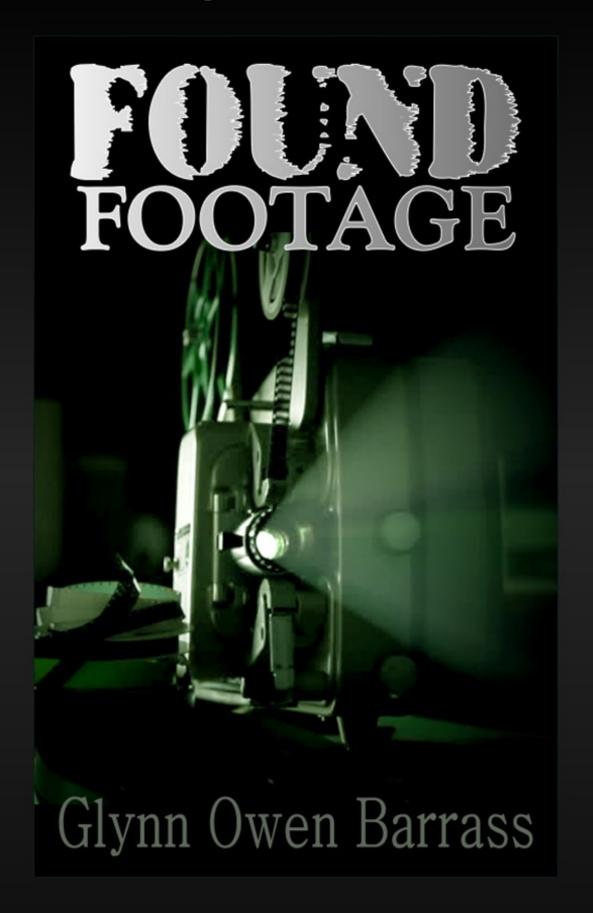
Snowfall white, so pure An unbroken sheet, smooth But beneath bare branches Something dark twitches, writhes A shadow against the snow An impure stain Reaching out, hungry, hate-filled Seeking the warmth of life To pull into itself, embrace Drain the warmth Never warm itself Never satisfied More and more it craves, insatiable Adding to the stain, the darkness A shadow upon the snow A dark soul in the winter wood A chill heart, still as ice

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

Twitter: <u>@dityrer</u>

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

Some things are better left unknown...



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Poetry by Stuart Conover

Scotty Awakens

Scotty came to in a panic.

Head throbbing as if he had been drinking all night.

Had he?

The last thing he remembered was being at the dig.

Groaning, he made his way to the washroom.

Water. He needed to hydrate.

Clear out the headache that was pounding his skull.

He poured a glass and downed it.

Pre-wincing, he turned on the lights.

What the Hell?

He was covered in blood.

Eyed flew wide he ran back into his hotel room.

He tripped on the mask.

Staring at it in his hands he remembered.

The mask had made him kill.

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

Twitter: <u>@StuartConover</u>

Homepage: http://www.stuartconover.com



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Poetry by Lance Oliver Keeble

The Reapers Parade

There is a show coming to town Everyone is wearing red They march our streets It's not all the way live but it's all the way dead

This is no circus
This is not a charade
This has all your family, all your friends
This is a Reapers parade

The Reapers Parade
The man on a pale horse
Ride he, Ride high
(Am I to go, would you like to die?)
This is the Reapers Parade
The Reapers Parade

There is a date being given
All the guests in black
They march to the big show
There isn't any pity when they execute an act

This is no celebration
This ain't no crusade
This has all your family, all your friends
It's the Reapers Parade

The Reapers Parade
The man on the pale horse
Ride he, Ride high
(Am I to go, would you like to die?)
This is the Reapers Parade
The Reapers Parade

This is no game
Death can't be played
It's claimed my family, my friends
It's the Reapers Parade

The Reaper took my Family The Reaper took my Family When does it end? When does it end? 23 black doves landed on me plaguing me with sadness I prayed for sunshine and the butterflies to free me Full of colors and hues, full of strength and reassurance Death stood before me his scythe splitting clouds into despair Not allowing me to see colors not even the grays

64 years she loved me I look up to her every day in prayer Above me they stare me down, from trees and rooftops They swarmed from his cold white hands like tumbling pigeons Shadowing and muddying the clear streams in my heart and mind 23 black doves mocking, torturing my sleep with songs of death

Pained, I wondered when do I wake? When do I finally rest?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lance Oliver Keeble, is a west coast author with blue collar experience & diverse exposure which shaped his style. A writer most his life, Lance is passionate for a variety of books, genres and authors including his 6th cousin 6 times removed, Edgar Allen Poe. Lance Oliver Keeble is a Best Book Awards Finalist in Horror Fiction for his thrilling, horror novel *Globes Disease*.

Facebook: <u>Author Lance Oliver Keeble</u> Website: <u>http://www.keebleink.com/</u>

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Poetry by Timothy A Wiseman

The Night I Greet

Once again the Night I greet,
In the darkness my fate I will meet.
Under the sacred stars I wait.
Long ago, I bid farewell to my mate.
The beasts fill the night with Nyx's song.
I know I will not have to wait for long
I cannot hide from my crime
I accept that to pay the penalty it is time.
Now the Furies circle round,
Towards my punishment now I am bound.

The Wolf and the Hood

Red the blood ran past the Wolf's jaw.

Entitled the girl had felt to ignore the law.

Down the forest path she had gone alone.

Running from sins for which she would not atone.

Into the Wolf's land she had went.

Desperate to finish the errand on which she was sent.

Ignored it for far too long she had during a tryst.

Night had fallen and brought the mist.

Gore covered her red cloak as into her the Wolf tore.

Had she listened to her mother, she would have been home long before.

Overcome her grandmother would be with fear.

Only the girl's lover would never shed a tear.

Death met the girl that night by the Wolf's claw.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Timothy A. Wiseman is an attorney and programmer in Las Vegas. Occasionally, he writes dark fiction late at night. He has a historian wife and three energetic children. He has fiction featured in *The Dead Walk Vol. 2*, and has drabbles published at *SpeckLit*. He has also published legal scholarship with the *Nevada Law Journal* and *I/S: A Journal of Law and Policy*.

Twitter: @TimothyAWiseman

Blog: https://historyandnow.com/author/timothyawiseman/

Poetry by Einsam Vuk

The Death

Cold and bitter.
Freezes your soul.
Paralyze your heart.
There is no reason.
Only is the course of life.
It is time to say goodbye.
The time to cross the line.
Traveling to a new world.
Flying to the Neverland.
Pale and dark.
Her presence causes terror.
However, we should not fear it.
Death is only a change
and after the change of life reborns.

One Last Farewell

I hear you in the dark. Midnight of the moonlight. The lonely ghost of the forest. The wolf who howls the pain. Like an illusion disappeared. Now, I only feel the essence. Blind and lost in a new world. Inside of my mind. The sunlight is far from my hands. Fall deeper into nightmares. Colder and dark heart. The lunatic evil who plays with the feelings of love. Show him your road, to the being hidden under his hood. There is no light, everything is black. A breeze, one last farewell.

Darkness Is My Name...

Look into my eyes.
Inside my mind.
Drain your essence.
Lost ghost of the past.
Biting hard and bleeding to death.
Solitary walker of the night.
Flying in the black sky.
Darkness is my name.
The kingdom of immortal.
Domination and damnation.
Smell the pale corpse.
Back to the life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Einsam Vuk is a spanish artist with different talents. He's a Musician, Model, Photographer and Writer. He's currently working on a lot of different projects to share with the world his passion and drive for his creations.

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



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www.behance.net/joshjamescreative

An Interview with Illustrator Joshua James

Throughout this issue of *The Sirens Call*, we're featuring artwork by Illustrator Joshua James so we decided to sit down with him and ask him a few questions about his work. Tune in to the following to see what transpired...

Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Joshua! Why don't you take a few moments to tell our readers about yourself?

Joshua James: Hello! My name is Josh James and I am an artist who runs his own business out of Dover, New Jersey, specifically dealing with comics and illustrated works. My specific interests are in Sci-Fi and Horror although I don't limit myself to just those genres when creating work for clients. I deal with all forms of commercial art based on the client's needs.

I am a recent graduate of the Joe Kubert School of comics and commercial art as well as a graduate of the Kansas City Art institute with a BFA in painting. I was the recipient of 2015 Dave Monahan Memorial Scholarship and upon graduation, I have been focusing on becoming a regularly published artist in the comic industry. I am currently a working as a penciller and inker for P.S. Magazine, a monthly publication supplied to the Army by Tell-a-graphics, also based out of Dover.

I've had a colorful art career up to now working as a traditional animator on advertising such as cereal commercials to conceptual design for collectibles and even some published comic work in the Chicago Reader.

I've been pursuing my art career for many years with a five year detour through the Navy a few years back. After I finished my tour, I decided to continue my art career with a focus on comics and comic-related pop culture art. After being accepted to the Joe Kubert School, which is the best school for comics in the country, I moved to New Jersey and focused my efforts there.

My hope is to break into comics in the near future and become a well-known published artist. In the mean time I continue to run Josh James Creative with enthusiasm and look forward to the challenges that lie ahead.

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

Joshua: As far as mediums go, I mostly work with acrylics, but have been revisiting oils. When I do large illustrations, sometimes I'll combine mediums including some airbrushing depending on if the work calls for it. Usually when I create a piece it begins with a pencil drawing that is then fleshed out tonally with sepia tone ink. After that, I begin the painting over the top with acrylics and/or oils. I also work digitally with Manga studio and Photoshop depending on the type of piece. I've also been wanting to do more with Copic markers. I use them now, but I would like to take it to a whole new level. I also enjoy doing some in depth Prisma color pieces.

SCP: What are some of your main influences?

Joshua: My main influences are varied depending on the type of work I'm doing, but off the top of my head would be Drew Struzan, Frank Frazetta, Alex Ross, John Singer Sargent, Ralph McQuarrie, Norman Rockwell and any of the Wyeth stuff for more painterly pieces. For comics I look at Mike Zeck, Greg Capullo, Andy, Adam and Joe Kubert, Simone Bianchi, Joe Mad, Lee Weeks, Mark Silvestri, Olivier Coipel, Tony Moore, Adam Hughes. I am also very influenced by traditional Disney artists such as Glen Keane and Andreas Dejas and all the 9 old men from the golden era of Disney Animation... There are so many artists I love... The list could take up a whole blog!

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

Joshua: I love collaborating with any artist who puts heart into their work. I suppose if I had to pick a well-known professional working today it would be any of the comics artist mentioned above!

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

Joshua: When it comes to art, creating something is very fluid and I've found that it's best to be kind of open-ended when it comes to what the final result might be rather than being rigid. I might have a solid idea in the layout and be very focused, but I find that during the process of solving problems in the piece, it can develop into something a little different. I've learned to allow for that by trusting myself and that the finished piece will be what it wants to be.

Obviously, there are varying degrees of this, depending on if it's a piece I did for myself or for a client, but most of the time I find if I don't try and strangle an idea it blossoms into a better piece. I think that the more experienced you become as an artist, the more you are able to hit the bull's-eye on that vision in your mind's eye... But if you continue to challenge yourself, which all artists should do I feel, it will always be somewhat elusive.

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

Joshua: Artist's block is a real thing and is a formidable obstacle. It happens to me in cycles and the main problem is motivation. Staying motivated to keep making new work and not get stuck in recent works is tough especially if they receive some sort of praise. I find myself wanting to stay in a particular place of comfort for too long. There is always that little voice in my psyche of self-doubt wondering if the next batch of stuff will be any good because making disappointing work is a catalyst to a creative block for sure. I find though once I recognize that I'm lingering too long I look for new inspiration or new projects. Something that is very important to combating artist block is having a community of working professionals around you to bounce off of. They all really help me feel challenged and motivated. The thing about making art is it does require a lot of attention, focus and problem solving so sometimes the thought of engaging in it can be daunting. It's one of those things where if I just sit down at the desk and get moving on a thing I get caught up in it!

SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?

Joshua: Finding inspiration for making new art is a variety of things. It could be a new comic I picked up, maybe it was a conversation I had with a peer or a new client, or sometimes it's just an experience I had in my personal life. For instance, watching one of the teachers at the Joe Kubert School, whose name is Todd Doney, paint an amazing portrait in under an hour inspired me endlessly. Or another example would be when I was showing my samples to Andy Kubert (DC, Batman: Dark Knight 3 artist) and he showed me a giant cover of Batman and Superman that he drew that Frank Miller had inked it was just like WOW... My eyes sort of bugged out... And we both geeked out over it... I think being in the presence of raw talent is really invigorating and to see what is possible is very powerful!

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

Joshua: My compositions are pretty much based on what I've been taught in art school. Things like the golden ratio and how to lead the eye around canvas. I initially learned a lot about composition though photography classes I had taken and how to crop and arrange things in front of the eye. When it comes to actual subject matter, I just sort of begin with a list of priorities in terms of what the story is and build off that. I think learning how to compose narrative art for comics really drove it home for me considering each panel is a little work of art of its own and then the over design of the page is very specifically calculated to function a certain way to get the reader to follow a story so I just apply that to everything I do. The JKS was very instrumental in teaching me these compositional techniques.

SCP: What is your favorite piece that you've created, and why is it particularly special? **Joshua:** My favorite piece is always the most recent honestly. I try not to get too attached to finished work. Yes, I am more proud of some pieces more than others but like I mentioned above, I try not to linger too long because it can cause a creative blockage if I get too attached and ego-oriented on one piece. It's funny how often the pieces I tend to over-embellish in my head aren't the ones people respond to... I'm too biased I guess.

SCP: What is your favorite piece of artwork created by another artist?

Joshua: Picking one piece is impossible, but there are a few I would encourage people to check out. Mike Zeck's "Captain America Annual No. 8", Alex Ross "Classic Universal Monsters", Ralph McQaurrie "Jabbas Palace", Drew Struzan "Blade Runner", Frank Frazetta "Death Dealer"... These are artist just wishing the world of pop culture commercial art I like, there are plenty others I love as well...Picasso, Caravaggio as well as others.

SCP: Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers?

Joshua: I have several pieces of my recent work showing at Satellite Comics in Chatham NJ beginning December 15th. My work can also be found at www.behance.net/joshjamescreative and at www.facebook.com/joshjamescreative. I am available for commissions at joshuajames@kubertschool.edu or via message on Facebook! Thanks for being interested and showing my work! If anyone has any further questions feel free to contact me at joshuajames@kubertschool.edu.

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



West and Maple | Jacob Mielke

It was 3:30 in the morning when I was ready to leave for work. I was clean, dressed, and fed. Dawn was still hours off. That morning, like every morning, I felt like I was the only man alive in the entire world.

I was one of the rare individuals who had the Period Circadian Clock 3 gene, a neat little genetic anomaly that allowed me to function normally on only two or three hours of sleep a night. That morning was unusual for me as I had slept for almost four and a half hours, something I hadn't done since I was a kid. Even stranger, I still felt tired, which almost never happened.

I figured maybe I was starting to get sick or something so I pushed my unusual sleep patterns out of mind and left for work.

I was employed at the Daniel Peterson Funeral Home, which was owned by my mother, Harriet Peterson. Daniel had been some distant cousin I'd never met. He died with no immediate family so mother got the place. She handled the paperwork and let me have my run of the business since I was actually a trained mortician, unlike her.

I enjoyed my job. I had always been fascinated by the deceased and the funeral home was my way of being close to them. I had no friends or family apart from mother. The dead were my companions.

The moment I stepped out of my house I could tell something was different. The air was completely still and all was silent. I heard no insects or frogs. Not even an owl hooting in the darkness. The world was as dead as my friends at the funeral home.

I sucked in a breath and my nose and mouth filled with the metallic tang of ozone. There had to be something in the air that I was subconsciously picking up on and causing my uneasiness. An excess of pollution, perhaps. Maybe it was even the reason I slept as long as I did and why I was still tired.

For the second time that night, I ignored my concerns. I got into my car and began the commute to the funeral home.

I've always liked driving. There's something hypnotic about focusing all of your attention on the road as you move through the world. All the worries of the living melt away and the road becomes your whole world.

I had hoped that driving would make me feel better but that morning my usual sense of relaxation and peace was absent. The uneasiness had refused to leave me and I was overly nervous as I drove. The sense that something was wrong only intensified when I realized I was the only one on the streets that morning. I pulled over to the side of the road and stared out the window. There wasn't a single other driver out there and that had never happened before in my memory. This was small city but there was always someone no matter how late at night or early in the morning.

Come on, Charlie, get a grip. You're being ridiculous.

I started the car and resumed driving. I wondered if the chicken I had the night before had spoiled. Something was wrong with me and food poisoning seemed as good an idea as any.

I was rounding the corner at West and Maple when suddenly my body went into panic mode. My heart raced a mile a minute and every muscle in my body was ready to fight or flee. I slammed on the brakes and came to a stop in the middle of the road. I sat with my forehead pressed to the wheel, gasping for breath for what seemed like hours. My limbs shook with adrenaline. Tears came to my eyes and soon I was sobbing.

No vehicles stopped behind me or passed me on the road while I cried in my car.

Eventually I regained some of my composure and resumed driving. I moved slowly, no more than twenty miles per hour, but no police officer stopped me for it. I saw no other cars the rest of the way and the funeral home parking lot was empty when I pulled in.

All of the negative feelings I'd been having that morning coalesced into dread as soon as I opened the door. Being a mortician, I had often thought about the supernatural and I never really bought into it. In all my years of working around the dead I never saw any evidence of spirits or an afterlife. In that moment however, I was certain that I was wrong to dismiss the possibility. I just *knew*, no matter how irrational my sureness, that there was something unnatural in the funeral parlor. More terrifyingly, I knew that it knew I was there.

It was waiting for me.

Enough already. What you're thinking is impossible. I don't know what's gotten into you but you have a job to do, remember?

I took a deep breath and held it, bracing myself for whatever might come. I willed my feet to move and stepped over the threshold. I shut and locked the door behind me. Nothing terrible happened. No monsters or ghosts jumped out at me. I slowly breathed out.

I was being ridiculous. The absence of other people on the way there had clearly spooked me. It was time to push all of that aside, put on my grown-up pants, and tend to my responsibilities.

But the dread refused to leave me.

I was still tired. Even through all of my fear, the weariness wouldn't go away. I was so tired.

There was a body in the preparation room. A woman, judging by the shape of the white cloth draped over her.

I was always notified when we got a new body but no one had said anything about this. One more unusual occurrence to add to an already bizarre day.

For the first time in my life I didn't want to go near the body. I was extremely rattled, my nerves frayed. The lack of any activity on the road had left me with a sense of isolation I couldn't shake. That body on my table didn't seem like a friend. For once, I wanted my next human interaction to be with someone living.

But I was a mortician, tasked with the enormous responsibility of bringing people to their final rest, and I had a job to do.

If the shape of the cloth was any indication, the body beneath was intact. That was good, it meant less time spent on reconstruction and preparing the body for display. I pulled off the cloth and immediately dropped it in shock.

I had seen bodies in all manner of condition. Once I had to prepare the remains of a man who had fallen into an industrial mixer. He wasn't even recognizable as human when he came to me. I'd also seen all manner of color in the deceased. They came to me with pale skin and green skin and black sludge that used to be skin. But never in all my years had I seen a corpse like this.

It was hard to even acknowledge that the woman on the table was a real corpse at all. She was white. Not pale like a recently deceased anemic, but completely devoid of color. Her hair was the same shade of white as the rest of her skin, as were her lips and nipples. If it weren't for the differences in texture between the various parts of her body, she might as well have been a single piece of the same material. Like a porcelain statue. I couldn't even begin to imagine the circumstances that led to her looking like this.

There was a soft crackling sound and a short black line appeared on her sternum. I reached out to touch it before I knew what I was doing.

Upon contact with my fingers the line immediately widened into a crack and spread to the rest of her body in a pattern not unlike that of a spiderweb. When the black cracks reached her eyelids, they completely shattered and collapsed in on themselves, leaving two jagged holes where her eyes should be.

I looked into the holes, stared at the inky darkness in there, and realized it was not empty. Something stared back at me, unseen. I could feel its presence.

Without a sound, the woman pulled herself up to a sitting position. As she did so, more cracks appeared near her joints. Her skin must have been too hard to conform to the motions. In some places, small pieces of it chipped off. She turned her head to stare directly at me and when I stared back into those eyeless voids, I remembered.

It was early in the morning. The sun had not yet come up and it was unusually cold; so cold that a layer of frost covered everything.

I was driving to the funeral home for my shift. It was going to be busy today. The colder than normal conditions had led to frequent patches of black ice all over the roads. There had already been multiple accidents and I knew we were getting at least three new bodies that day.

I was rounding the corner of West and Maple when my cell phone, which I had placed on the passenger seat, chimed. I looked down at it for only a moment to see who it was and when I looked back up, a young woman was caught in my headlights. Time seemed to slow infinitesimally in that moment. I looked at her and she looked at me. Both of us afraid, both of us understanding that there wasn't enough time to avoid the inevitable outcome of this encounter.

My car slammed into her and she flew forward through the passenger side of my windshield before I could hit the brakes. When I did stomp on the brake pedal, it was over a sheet of black ice and the car spun out of control, eventually crashing into the heavy brush on the side of the road.

There was no pain initially. I sat motionless, allowing my mouth and lungs to fill with blood while I thought about my mother. I wish I could have told her how grateful I was for all she'd done for me.

The branch that stabbed through the windshield and into my neck prevented me from turning my head too much but I managed to move just enough so I could roll my eyes to look at my unexpected passenger. Her torso was inside the car and her legs were splayed across the hood. Her head rested on the passenger seat, facing me. One of her eyes was completely red and leaking blood. The other stared directly into mine, unmoving, unblinking. She was the last in a long procession of dead people who had touched my life.

So young. I wondered who she was. What her plans for life were. Was she going to be somebody important? What a silly question. Of course she was.

And that was how I died, staring at the dead woman who entered my life less than a minute ago. I never even knew her name.

The porcelain woman tilted her head, sending more tiny cracks throughout her face and neck. She hadn't always been here. I remembered enough to know that. It used to be that every morning I'd wake up and drive to the funeral home. Every morning I relived the circumstances of my death. And then at some point, things changed. I couldn't say exactly when as my personal purgatory didn't seem to have a passage of time, but I remember at some point I stopped running into that young woman, stopped driving into the fallen tree by the side of the road, hidden by heavy brush.

I would drive to the funeral home, knowing each time something was wrong, that this wasn't the way things were supposed to go. And each time, she was waiting for me.

I looked at her. It wasn't really a 'her', whatever this thing was. It was simply wearing a porcelain shell, an imitation of the woman I'd killed. It was punishment, see? A reminder of what I'd done. And when the shell crumbled away, the darkness inside always said the same things.

It was your fault. Murderer. You should have been watching the road. You should have hit the brakes sooner. You should have should have SHOULD HAVE.

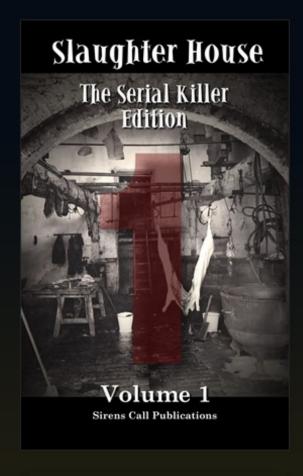
And it was right.

The porcelain nightmare held out its hand to me, like it did every time I went through this. It wanted to lead me out of this afterlife, and I understood that it wasn't to a better place. I knew I shouldn't take it. I knew I should stay there, in my eternal limbo. I couldn't even imagine my fate if I went with her.

But my God, I was tired! I looked at her hand and wondered what that cracked white skin would feel like. I was so very tired.

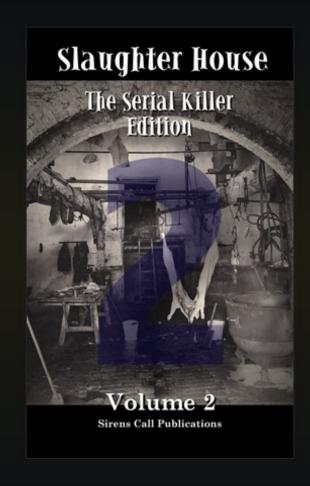
ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jacob Mielke is a writer of speculative and horror fiction. He has previously published poems and short stories in *The Sirens Call* and *Jitter*. When not writing, he passes the time by trying to shed his straitjacket and escape the asylum.

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Grow | Rivka Jacobs

Eve gazed at the little girl who stared at her from across the swollen stream.

The sky was moving, roiling and boiling in several shades of gray. The air was damp and cool and charged with electricity. White shreds of mist drifted amidst the branches of the taller oak trees.

Betty called from behind her, "Eve, come away. It's gonna rain again. Leave that child be."

Her eldest sister's words disappeared in a grumble of thunder as Eve stepped closer to the bank of the rushing current brown with mud and debris. The child across from her, across the noisy water, was pale and thin, barefoot, and dressed in a tattered and grimy pink pinafore. Her dark brown bangs and short-cropped hair were stringy and wet. She was dragging what appeared to be a limp baby-doll.

"She be about your age," came a voice right at her ear. Eve jumped, turned, and smacked her middle sister Nona on the arm all at the same time. "You don't scare me none," she said, trying to laugh. Both sisters now faced the waif on the other side of the stream.

The stranger made no sound. She stood staring back at them with huge brown eyes, her doll flopping like overcooked meat in the wet underbrush.

Betty, standing about thirty feet behind them, folded her arms in frustration. "Nona, not you too. It be time to go home We can't find any more *sang* today!" As she was getting tired of raising her voice from a distance, she too approached the bank of the surging stream. "That child ain't right, leave her be. You know what Mamma told us."

"She be my age," Eve protested. "I reckon only seven years or there abouts."

Just then a wind burst hit them, coming from the silent, strange girl's direction. All three sisters winced and held their noses while they unconsciously backed away. "Law, that be an evil stink," said Betty. "Come on, Sissy," she said to both girls, "it's gonna pour down rain." She corralled her sisters, one in each arm, and tried to shove them in the direction of home.

But the two resisted, pushing Betty away. Ten-year-old Nona suddenly pointed at the mute girl and said, "That ain't no doll. That be a dead baby she be carryin'."

Betty, fourteen and considered grown up and responsible for her siblings, made fists and stomped one foot in the mud. Her heavy brown shoe sank an inch deep. "Hang it, Nona, Eve, I said git outta here. Leave it be. We need to go home. Now."

Eve and Nona grabbed each other, their facial features contorted with disgust, saying, "Ewww, ewww, that be a dead baby."

Betty shook her head sharply but despite trying not to, peered again at the little girl, who still had not moved and continued to watch them from her position. Betty noted the way the doll dangled face-up, its mouth agape. She studied the way the girl's pallid hand clutched one of the doll's arms, stretching it unnaturally as if it had separated from its shoulder. Betty stepped so close to the water that the tips of her shoes became submerged; she narrowed her eyes in an effort to focus. She couldn't tell if the baby-doll's eyes were closed, or just gone. Two dark, tiny circles sat above a piece of a nose. Did that baby have stitches around its small purplish neck? It

was wearing a torn and stained blue jumper. Was there something moving on its blotchy skin? Betty shivered a spell of palsy that almost made her lose her balance; she flung out her arms reflexively and a sister grabbed each of her hands, pulling her back.

"We be leaving this place, Sissy, NOW!" Betty shouted, and she seized Eve's pigtails and Nona's ponytail and yanked so hard they screeched. "Move yourselves!" Betty commanded again.

Eve and Nona struggled with her for a moment, trying to untangle her fingers from their hair, but then Eve abruptly screamed, "She be movin' to us. The girl be movin'...!" At which point, both Eve and Nona turned and charged away from the flooded stream so fast that they dragged Betty after them.

Dreema Lilly moved her rocking chair back and forth slowly, with assurance. She smiled down at the three—Eve, Nona, and Betty—sitting in a semi-circle on the wood plank floor at her feet. The fireplace behind them was set with a few hickory logs that glowed with a low, blue-yellow flame. Rain roared against the shingles of the cabin roof, battered the window panes. The gusts of wind made shrieking sounds in the attic loft, the wood around them shifted and groaned. But in the great room where Dreema Lilly sat and rocked, there was warmth and a feeling of safety.

Eve sat Indian-style, her blue and white sailor-collar dress starched and clean, a large satin bow holding back her soft yellow hair. Nona sat with her knees drawn up under her chin, her arms wrapped around her shins. She wore a cream-colored lacy blouse, a white skirt, and a blue sash. Her brick-red hair was partially pulled back at the crown of her head, and flowed in shiny ripples down her back. Betty sat with her knees to the side, leaning on one arm. She wasn't yet in a corset, but had been given permission to wear a long skirt. Her blouse was very pretty, with lace panels and pintucks and a Peter Pan collar. She wore her black curly hair secured at the back of her neck with an embroidered ribbon.

Dreema herself wore a faded black-and-white checkered ankle-length dress with mutton sleeves and a slightly raised waist. A purple wool shawl was draped around her shoulders. Her gold-white hair was twisted into a bun. She was very pleased with her girls, this evening. Proud of herself, proud of them. They had come tumbling into the cabin hours before, wet through and through, shaking and talking all at once. "Mamma, what's it mean? Is she a haunt?" And, "Mamma, what does she want?" And, "Mamma, what took that baby?" She had helped them dry off, and told them, "Hush up, now. Time for your chores, for fixin' and workin'. Once we be done for the day, we can contemplate what troubles ya'll."

And here they were, seated at her feet, cleaned up and beautiful, as fine as any woman's daughters. Dreema nodded towards the wall of the great room to the right of the fireplace, where her herbs and plants were hanging to dry, or were stored in boxes and barrels. Bloodroot, sassafras, slippery elm, the bark of the wild plum, horseweed, and ginseng or as they called it, sang. "Ya'll were supposed to be sangin' in the woods, what happened? And don't everybody speak up at once—Betty, you tell it."

Betty straightened a little, said, "It was one of them cricks on the slope below us, it flooded, and Eve saw her first."

"Did ya'll cross the crick?" Dreema asked them sweetly but sternly.

"No, ma'am," they answered in unison.

"That's good, then. 'Cause that one you saw, that little girl, she been done by another not nearly as good as me."

Eve frowned. "But Mamma, why can't you take her in, why can't you adopt her, like you did us?"

Dreema leaned over and stroked Eve's silky hair. "Because, darlin', she ain't one of mine. She's a rotten one. You, and your sisters, I brought you back from a long, long journey. I brought ya'll back from a deep, dark, and cold place to be my girls, my daughters. There be no one else in all the Virginia mountains, in the entire east United States of America, who can do what I can do."

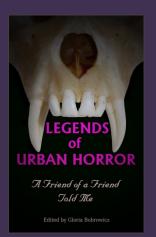
Nona gazed at the burning logs and flicking flames, and said wistfully, "I feel sorry for her, though, Mamma. I feel bad that I ran away."

"Well, don't, sweetheart, my little one..." Dreema stopped rocking and leaned over to stroke Nona's hands, fingering the almost imperceptible traces of tiny, evenly spaced scars that circled her wrists. She sat back up, patted her lap once, and said with a grin, "Now, who be wantin' a story before we're off t'bed. It'll be a hard day tomorrow, sangin' and digging and collectin' our May Apple and Wormwood. We gotta make up for what we lacked today. So it can't be a long story..."

The three girls squirmed in place, laughing and flouncing their skirts. "Yes, please, ma'am," Eve said, "Yes please, one o' your scary stories!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Rivka grew up in South Florida and currently lives in West Virginia. In the 1980s she published stories in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the *Far Frontiers* anthologies, and the *Women of Darkness* anthology, and more recently has placed stories with *The Give Anthology*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Riding Light Review*, *Fantastic Floridas*, and *The Sirens Call*, including the 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 Women in Horror issues. She has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and counseling, and a BSN.

Twitter: <u>@RivkaJacobs</u> Facebook: <u>Rivka Jacobs</u>



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

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Ghosts | SJ Garman

Commander Torrell could scarcely contain his excitement. At long last, the son of the Supreme Leader, Overlord Soritt Faress, was arriving today. Staff scurried, preparing for an honor that was rarely bestowed upon such a remote command post as Dareek. The news must be important if Faress was delivering it himself. A mixture of giddiness and fear filled him as he paced in his office. Torrell jumped when one of his soldiers knocked, announcing Faress was arriving.

The commander glided across the grounds and stood at attention with his troops as the Supreme Leader's son landed and exited his ship. Surrounded by his guards, Faress closely scrutinized the soldiers.

"Very impressive," complimented Overlord Faress as he finished the inspection, "Commander Torrell, you have done an exemplary job."

The troops stood taller with the praise.

"Would you like to get settled first?" suggested Torrell, hoping to impress the overlord with the lavishness of his quarters.

"No," replied Overlord Faress. "Tell me about the data you've collected about this planet."

"Very well. Follow me and I'll provide you with firsthand knowledge of the indigenous species of Dareek. Your guards will not be needed. The three dimensional beings are not a threat."

Faress followed Torrell as he approached a series of houses.

"As I highlighted in my report, there are two aquatic species that could be a challenge for us, but on land, these are the creatures we'll need to deal with. As you can see, these three dimensional beings have rudimentary technological skills and fairly low mental capabilities. During our surveillance of Dareek over the past 3,487 solar cycles, we've gathered considerable data regarding their capabilities and vulnerabilities."

"What's their life cycle?"

"It's relatively short, only seventy to eighty cycles," Torrell replied, "I've been stationed here for 2,563 cycles, and have watched several generations of these creatures and their behaviors. They're very aggressive and fearful, but through experimentation, we've found a way to control them through fear. Would you like a demonstration, Overlord Faress?"

"That sounds intriguing," replied Faress, watching the bipedal creatures moving around him, "Yes, Commander Torrell, show this to me."

"We've discovered some ways to elicit third dimensional properties," explained Torrell.

"You become three dimensional?" asked Faress in disgust.

"No, we just become visible to the creatures," responded Torrell. "They react fearfully to us, believing we are dead members of their species. They call us 'ghosts'."

The overlord shook his head, "They truly believe that?"

"Yes!" the commander laughed. "Let me show you."

Torrell approached a young female. As he concentrated, his form became a misty figure of an elderly man and began gliding toward her. The girl screamed and ran away. After she had fled, the commander returned to his regular form.

"Initially, we tried turning into the forms of insects and four legged beasts, but these creatures only responded to beings that looked similar to themselves. They also recount their experiences to each other, attempting to scare themselves with these tales."

"That's incredible!" commented Faress. "What else did you find?"

"We don't even have to change form to make them afraid. All we have to do is to walk through them."

"Can I try?"

"Go ahead," responded the commander. "Walk through that male creature over there and witness how he reacts."

Overlord Faress glided over to the man as he stood facing the road. Suddenly, the man began shaking uncontrollably and whimpered as he scurried away.

"That was fun!" he exclaimed, returning to Torrell. "What was that the term the creatures use when they see you?"

"They call us ghosts," exclaimed Torrell. "We've also been able to successfully move some three dimensional objects."

The commander concentrated on a pile of dried leaves, causing them to swirl into the form of a beast with two large arms reaching out to three commuters. Two of the people ran, but one man stayed on the sidewalk, ignoring the leaves.

"Once in a while, we encounter Dareek beings who are harder to convince," commented Torrell. "But I don't think it will ignore me for long."

The leaves fell straight to the ground at the male's feet. Then Torrell lifted a small flower pot off of the ground, guiding it through the air toward the man's head. The creature backed away from the pot as the object continued to follow him. The bipedal was looking to see if someone was playing a joke, but decided to run when Torrell threw the pot at his feet, breaking it into several pieces.

"The three dimensional creatures say the telekinetic events are caused by evil, invisible entities called poltergeists or demons."

"How long did it take to gain these skills?" asked Faress.

"Not long. All of my soldiers have been practicing over hundreds of solar cycles to become proficient in these activities. Try to lift the leaves. I'm sure you can move some of them."

Sure enough, Faress was able to elevate a handful of the dried leaves a foot off of the ground.

"I'm very impressed with this demonstration," said Overlord Faress, "I have decided to give authorization to proceed with the attack on Dareek."

"I am honored," replied Commander Torrell, bowing low.

"I forgot to ask. What are these creatures called?"

"Humans," responded Torrell.

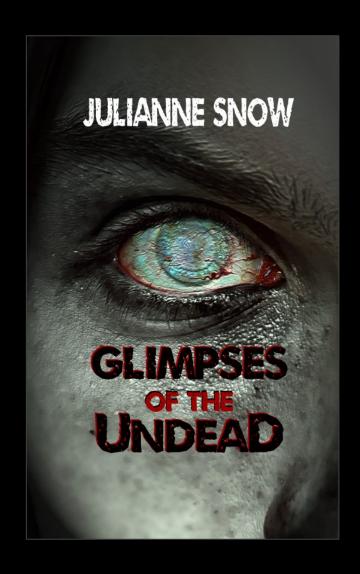
"Dareek has become vital for our war effort. I don't need to tell you that the success of this mission could lead to a significant promotion for you, Assistant Overlord Torrell. Proceed with wiping these three dimensional beings from existence."

A smile spread across Torrell's face. "We will show these creatures why they should fear ghosts."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Susan Garman is a mother of one and lives in Southwestern Wisconsin with her husband and a Labrador named Molly. She enjoys writing, reading, fishing, and enjoying the great outdoors.

Glimpses of the Undead Julianne Snow

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



The Penny Jar | Donna Cuttress

The skin of Jamie's heel ripped on the head of the nail which stuck up from the loose floorboard. The landlord was reticent to do any repairs in the apartment, so when she had finished swearing and the blood had ceased flowing, swabbed with an old sock, she grabbed one of her boots and began hammering at the loose nail with it. The force made the other end of the warped floorboard spring up. She dropped her boot and wondered if she had screwed up getting her deposit back for the apartment. Was a banana shaped floorboard classed as damage?

It was loose anyway she reasoned and she'd tell him that when he called, if he ever called. He only remembered his tenants when they did not pay their rent. She wedged her finger under the wood and lifted the floorboard, flipping it out, letting the rusted nail roll about the floor.

There it was, wedged in the narrow cavity. A large glass jar with a twist on lid, filled with something she couldn't quite see. Jamie reached in with both hands and gently lifted it out. A thick film of sooty dirt drifted to the floor as she straightened it. It was heavier than she thought it would be as its metallic contents slid to its base, rattling against the glass. They were coins. Copper coins. Pennies. She had found someone's penny jar.

Probably some kids left it, forgotten about it when they've moved.

She checked the gap under the floorboard again, in case there were any rolls of paper money or jewels but there was nothing but dirt instead of forgotten loot.

She held the jar before her, tilted it upside down then straightened it again, heads and tails toppling from one end to the other. The lid eased off and the pennies cascaded onto her bed. They stank! A rancid stench like stagnant water or rotted meat began to fill the room. She covered her mouth with her hand, coughing as the acrid smell hit her throat and dropped the jar. Jamie remembered how money could carry diseases, as it passed through copious hands every day. Something came back to her from her history lessons about coins soaking in saucers of vinegar during plagues to try and prevent further contamination.

She pulled the sleeve of her sweater over her hand and reached around the pile of pennies, trying not to touch them with her bare flesh, and pushed them back into the jar. It was then she heard the whispers.

The pennies seemed to be speaking. Mumbled prayers seemed to circle her, murmurs getting louder like a disturbed beehive. Then she thought she could hear crying, sobs coming from somewhere in the room. She checked around her as it grew louder, unable to see in the now darkening corners as the weeping carried on. The glass of the jar began to vibrate, it felt warm as if just freshly blown and still slightly liquid while slowly assuming its shape. She held it to her ear like a seashell. The crying was coming from within it. Jamie placed it on the floor and started to screw the lid back on, but instead she reached her hand inside, the penny jar had pulled her in. As soon as her fingertips touched the coins, the noise stopped and the stench evaporated.

The pennies felt sticky and greasy. She felt infested by something that was swiftly burrowing its way into her bones and pulled her hand free as though it had been burned. She pushed it under her armpit and began swearing again. She cried out in agony as her fingers ached with an overwhelming cold, yet she felt the skin blister with heat. She twisted the lid onto the jar with her free hand and decided to take a look at the damage to her fingers. Jamie slumped onto her bed, and breathing heavily she braced herself for the pain as she unraveled her fist. Her fingers looked fine, some mottled skin, and a cold feeling, but okay. She slowly turned over her

hand, exposing her palm. Between the red half-moons of where her nails had dug into her flesh were two copper coins.

I don't remember picking them up. They must have stuck to my skin.

The faces on the pennies were almost worn away, unidentifiable and masked by green mold. She turned them over. The dates also had long gone.

"Old pennies." she flipped them over in her palm, "Stinky old pennies."

Jamie went to put them back in the jar but they fell from her hand and rolled under the bed. She looked for them but they were gone, disappeared.

I'll search for them later, she thought as she placed the penny jar underneath the bed.

Jamie woke, but did not open her eyes. She tried to speak but stopped when she felt a rancid breath near her face. Someone spoke. A man,

"Has that one gone?"

A rough finger pulled her eyelid up, she felt the cold air on her eyeball. A greasy haired woman, puffy faced with small dark eyes stared at her.

"Hang on..."

The woman turned her ear to Jamie's mouth and paused. Jamie could feel strands of the woman's hair drape across her nose.

"No... she's gone. Thought she was still breathing but she's dead."

She dropped Jamie's eyelid. Jamie wanted to move but was frozen.

This is a dream right? A nightmare? I'm not dead. I'm not dead.

She could hear the woman moving about the room, something was being unscrewed.

"Better get her presentable."

Jamie felt her clothing being tugged at her neck, it was scratchy against her skin, and her hair was tucked behind her ears,

"Let's keep those eyes closed eh? They're still a bit ... drippy. Don't want to scare the family."

She felt something cool and metallic being rested gently on each of her eyelids. It was only then Jamie woke up, gasping for breath like her face had been held for too long under freezing cold water.

The penny jar had remained under the bed for next week, she couldn't look at it, the fear of that nightmare would always surface whenever she thought about it. She had to find those loose coins as well. She wanted them buried again beneath the floorboards, or in the garden, or thrown into the nearest river, anywhere so long as they were gone. Jamie searched for the coins under the bed, then the rest of the room, scouring everywhere that a pair of coins could hide, but they had gone.

Maybe I'd put them back in the jar? I must have. Maybe I dropped them in?

Jamie held the jar in front of her and examined the coins. The coppery patina had begun to turn green on all of them now. She wondered how many were in there, and stared at it like it was one of those guessing games at a summer fete. Guess the number of pennies in the jar without touching it or opening it. She placed it on the window ledge then climbed onto her bed, the mattress springs creaked beneath her.

"Pennies on eyes," she whispered over and over like a mantra before she fell asleep.

Jamie could not move her arms. She was restricted and her elbows kept banging on something. She wanted to sit up but her back wouldn't move, and her legs felt leaden as though still asleep. There were voices, men's voices. She wanted to scream but could not,

Someone's in the apartment! I'm being robbed!

The footsteps seemed heavier, like the robbers were wearing thick soled boots and each one slammed down on the wooden floor around her.

"Have the family been in to see her then?"

"Yes. Lid on... remember to nail it good this time, we don't want any more accidents do we?"

There was muted laughter, like they were trying not to be overheard.

"Oh well, time for you to go to meet your redeemer girl."

Jamie could hear something heavy being scraped along the floor. She could hear them breathing as they stood either side of her.

"Hang on!" one of them whispered "Check the door."

There were footsteps, a door opened and closed, then the footsteps returned.

"Perk of the job. One for me, one for you... Don't tell anyone."

Something was lifted from her face, she could smell that vinegary stench again. Then something was being placed over her, there was darkness, an engulfing blackness.

Open your eyes', she thought, 'Do it! Do it now!

And she did, just as the coffin lid was being slipped into place over her. She saw the shock on one of the men's faces. He was black suited, with a high stiff collar and his pock marked face grimaced in fear as she screamed. Jamie heard the sound of coins falling onto a bare floor and woke up face down on the carpet next to her bed. She stretched her arms outward, then tried to stand in the darkness of the bedroom but stumbled on her numb legs and fell heavily onto her back. Her chest heaved as she tried to bring her thumping heartbeat down to a normal level. The street lamp shone through the curtains, outlining the penny jar she had left on the window ledge. She whispered into the darkness,

"Tomorrow, you're going back under the floorboards!"

She lifted the nails using the blunt edge of a knife to get under them. The warped board moved as soon as one of the nails had been pulled. In the gap were the two escaped pennies.

They must have rolled in.

She lifted the penny jar and tried to open the lid but it wouldn't budge.

"Fucking things tightened in the sunlight!"

She squeezed at the swollen lid, trying to make it budge.

"Sod it!"

Jamie rested the jar back in its original place, leaving the loose pennies underneath it. She dropped the board over it and began hammering the nails back into place. Just for extra safety she placed a rug over it, and then jumped on it despite the pain in her foot, but stopped when she was sure she could hear the coins rattling beneath her.

Jamie woke, eyes open wide this time, although she felt something metallic slip onto her cheeks. She felt warm and tried to sit up to turn on the bedside lamp but banged her head against

something. Dazed, she tried to turn but found she could barely move. She tried to lift her hand to her face but instead felt slippery silk frills above her. She rubbed her fingers against it, then grabbed and pulled. The silk came away easily from the wooden lid of the coffin and fell across her face, Jamie felt it stick to her skin, wrapping around her. She raised her right knee as high as it could go and banged it hard against the lid. There was only a dull sound above her.

I'm having another dream. I must wake up! Maybe those men will come and remove the lid! I must wake up!

She began to scream, turning her body awkwardly from side to side. Uselessly panicking, trying to push against the lid, trying to be heard through the earth she suspected had been piled above her. Almost dislocating her arm she managed to touch her face and pulled the fallen silk from it.

"The pennies! I must find the pennies!"

She stretched her fingers around her face and shoulders, searching the small pillow her head rested upon. Jamie found one, and gripped its coolness in the sweaty bowl of her palm. Hopeful, she reached with her other arm, searching for the other coin. Her fingertips touched the metal which then slipped under the pillow, lost among the ruffles of the cotton shroud that she was swathed in. She searched the stiff material, dizzy as her oxygen disappeared. In the blackness she could touch the coin's edge. Trying not to push it away, her shaking hand began to maneuver it toward her face and push it onto her eyelid. She dropped the other penny into place on her other eye. Both were now covered.

I must fall asleep, I must...

There was no noise; the silence seemed to go on and on.

The organ music began, a loud thundering sound reverberated. The coffin moved, slowly at first, then there was a shudder as she felt herself stop.

"I've done it!" she screamed. "They're back! The pennies! I want to wake up now. I want to wake up NOW!"

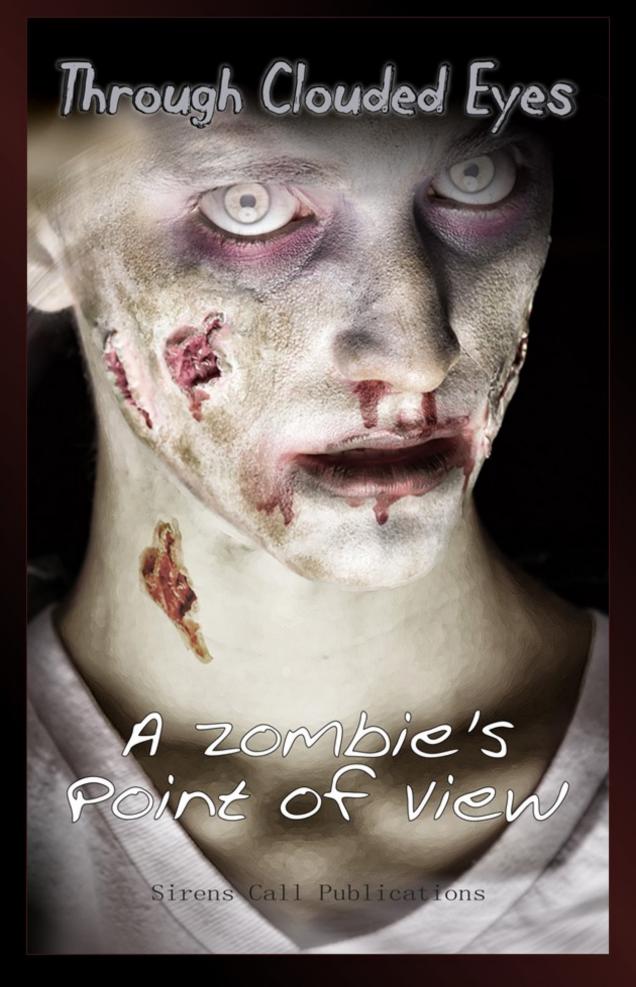
The coffin stopped with a gentle jerking movement. Her breath became frenzied as her screams ripped at the flesh of her throat,

"Help! Help me! I've got the coins! I've got the pennies! I'll return them to the jar!"

She continued to scream, but no one could hear her above the music. Or as the curtains closed on the presumed deceased and the coffin slowly descended into the depths of the warming crematorium.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Donna Cuttress is a short story writer from Liverpool in the U.K. She has had previous work published by Sirens Call Publications, Crooked Cat and in Firbolg Publishings' *The Rogues Gallery*. She has written for Solarwyrm Press' *Latchkey Tales* and her piece for The Patchwork Raven's *12 Days* artbook will be released in 2017.

Twitter: <u>@Hederah</u>
Blog: <u>donnacuttress.wordpress.com</u>



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, & Smashwords

Speed | Mark Cassell

I like to floor the accelerator on a straight, feel the speed pushing me into my seat. Only ever in the countryside though, and with no one else on the road. I'm not a boy-racer. Damn it, I'm a thirty-five year old man with a great family, a steady job and a promotion on the way; you know the type. It's just I enjoy the odd hit of speed. So on a straight, I open it up... then brake firmly towards the bend. Never *on* the bend. We've all seen bunches of flowers at the bole of a tree somewhere, with a rain-smudged picture of someone, often a teenager, pinned to the trunk. Sometimes police tape flaps in the wind, but always the bark has been stripped by the impact.

Wood versus metal. Physics versus flesh. Don't brake on a bend, kiddies.

Right now, sunlight flickers in my peripheral vision but not in that annoying way to make me angle the visor. I hope I don't get stuck behind anyone who'll deny me my fun, someone thoughtlessly turning my homebound stretch into a journey much slower because they don't appreciate the engine connected to their toes. Tarmac spears into the summer countryside and my playground spreads out. The road is mine. I thumb the front window buttons and the air rushes in. I've never been one for air-conditioning. The freshness fills me and I taste the sunshine, the foliage, the woodland.

The speedometer needle creeps up, hovering at 40 mph. I take a gradual bend at almost 50, and it straightens out. Clear ahead, open tarmac hemmed in by bushes, and the needle pushes 60. Engine revving, clean air howling. Now pushing 70...

80.

And then I brake. Hard.

Branches and leaves and hefty chunks of earth litter the tarmac. Beyond that, a fallen tree.

Tires rumble, the steering vibrates, and my knuckles whiten as I squint over them. The car jerks to a halt, my breath heavy. Seconds drag as I stare ahead.

I've no idea if those seconds turn to minutes...

My mouth is dry and I find it difficult to swallow. I want to say something, anything, but... but it's what is on the tree that has frozen me in my seat. Even my hands remain clamped to the steering wheel. They're now cold, clammy.

The felled oak is one of many, twisted and splintered and flattening the hedgerows either side of the road. Roots tangled in brambles and ivy and great upheavals of earth. In the midst of branches, a bloated creature straddles the great trunk. As grey and wrinkled as an elephant and equally as large, its immense torso glistens. Folded leathery wings hang down its flank to curl beside clawed feet. Bristles cover its bulk, and a collar of longer hair circles its neck, giving way to a horned head—six or is that seven horns? Each, chipped and gnarly, of differing lengths. Its lidless eyes, black, wide, piercing, gaze down a twisted snout and in its mouth, a branch dangles. Saliva drips from wet lips.

The fingers on my left hand peel from the steering wheel and drop to the gearstick. My jellied leg pushes downward, foot dumping the clutch pedal. Finally, the car crunches into reverse as my heartbeat crashes between my ears.

I watch the branch slip from the creature's mouth. Head thrown back, it bellows. Deep, throaty. Neck stretching, torso slimming, those great wings extend. They reach out, wider and wider.

My neck clicks as I whip my head round for a view behind me. I accelerate, hard, and the car shoots backwards. I steer one-handed down the lane. I hear rather than see the wings beating, sounding like a sledgehammer whacking a mattress. Over and over. Getting louder. Approaching...

Metal shrieks, glass implodes. Pain flares across my face and I look round into a shattered windscreen and bodywork buckled by yellow claws. The car is lifted up. Up. The engine revs; such a shrill sound and I spy the rev-counter blasting into the red. My arse comes off the seat, then harsh into the cushion again, shaken left and right, forward and back. Blue sky fills every window.

I fumble the seatbelt release and my shoulder smacks the door.

Up higher, blue sky, blinding sunshine, clouds, wings beating...

The patchwork of English countryside spreads out too far below. Cold air whistles all the while there's that continuous thump of immense wings. More tearing of metal, glass shattering. The windscreen breaks free and spins off. Higher we go. The car tilts.

I slam into the dashboard and slide over it. Metal and plastic tears my forearms, my palms. Heart in mouth, my ears roar from the wind, the fear, the madness. My fingers scrape and scratch as I slide out over the bonnet, blood smearing a handprint over the bodywork. The creature's body blocks out the sunshine, great wings punching the air. For a moment—only for a moment—my slippery fingers clutch the front grill, legs dangling. Far below, there's the country lane and those fallen trees.

Gravity.

I fall. Now weightless. A cold speed snatches the Earth closer.

My arms cartwheel and I'm aware that I scream the word "Fuck" louder than I've ever needed to; one dragged out expletive. The ground, this creature's *nest*, gets larger, closer.

Such speed.

Curled around one another are a pair of smaller creatures. *Marginally* smaller. Bald, skinny, evidently the offspring of the nightmare that now flies somewhere above me. Closer to Earth, I see their mouths agape, forked tongues whipping to and fro, flicking saliva.

Closer...

Something cracks. Loud. Pain explodes and white light blends with the raging agony. My body has landed half in, half out of one creature's mouth. The other grabs my useless legs. No more pain as I'm torn in two. Through the mad rush of white and black, of blurred and focused, there's a pressure on my head and upper-torso. The creature's jaws squeezing...

I see my intestines stretch in a dark red mess, and—

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mark Cassell lives in southeast England with his wife and a number of animals. He often dreams of dystopian futures, peculiar creatures, and flitting shadows. Primarily a horror writer, his steampunk, fantasy, and SF stories have featured in numerous anthologies and ezines. His best-selling debut novel, *The Shadow Fabric*, is followed by the collection, *Sinister Stitches*, and are both a fraction of an expanding mythos.

Twitter: <u>@Mark_Cassell</u>
Website: <u>www.theshadowfabric.co.uk</u>



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Disposable | MK Lee

You thought I was disposable.

Monday morning. The first full week after the Christmas and New Year break, you're late for work like every other driver out there, annoyed that other people might also have somewhere to go.

Me, also late for work, with probably the same Monday blues and concerns about the working day ahead as you do on this freezing, dark, dreary morning.

Your job, probably laden with responsibilities the same as mine.

Probably.

Such a dismissive word.

When you sped off early at the green light, you *probably* didn't spare a thought for any last straggling traffic crossing your path.

When you turned the corner too fast, despite the iciness of the road, you *probably* thought it was fine.

When your car collided with my bike and sent me into a spiral down into the ditch, you *probably* thought it was okay not to stop. Because as this area was classed as 'rural' and this lane 'country', there was no one around to see.

Probably, you thought I'd be okay. If you thought of me at all.

They found my bike in the ditch on the opposite side of the road.

The back wheel resembled a distorted over-sized twenty pence piece, and the frame of my beautiful silver Cannondale bike was scuffed, scarred and bent. You drove slowly and nudged it into the ditch, front wheel still spinning, and went on your way.

Let me tell you about that ditch.

It was steeper than it looked in passing, and owing to the torrential rain over the previous nights, there were a good few inches of cold, standing water waiting for me at the bottom. Not to mention a collection of broken bottles, discarded cigarette ends and various other forms of litter that had clearly been tossed from many a car window along the way.

If the ditch wasn't full of the detritus of lazy motorists and passersby, maybe I'd have had strength enough to keep my head raised above water, perhaps drag myself along, try to raise a call for help. If I hadn't landed face down and your car hadn't snapped my spine, perhaps I wouldn't have drowned.

Do you know how long it was before the hypothermia kicked in and took what little strength I had left? Do you know how long it takes to drown?

Not long.

Which is what you have left now. Not long.

For some reason, more than anything else, I am furious to find that the car in your driveway is the same shade of silver as my beautiful bike. This feels like a final insult in some way.

I see you. Feet up on the sofa, hands around a mug of coffee to warm fingers after a long,

cold day. It's still January after all. At least you are warm. At least you'll have that comfort when you die.

You sigh, yank your tie from your neck and carelessly discard it on the dining room table. You drain your coffee, set the mug down noisily and stand and stretch, before climbing the blue-carpeted stairs two at a time.

You start running a bath.

A quarter bottle of purple Radox goes in and thick, steamy bubbles form as you turn your back.

You don't notice me in the mirror.

I watch, complete voyeur, as you strip and throw your clothes haphazardly into the laundry basket with the same care and attention as you disposed of your tie. And of me.

You would never have been my type. Were I still alive.

You sigh as you lower yourself into the bath and close your eyes, sinking beneath the soothing warm water.

When you try to raise your head, you find that you can't. It is then that you open your eyes. It is then that you notice me.

This is *probably* going to be a painful death for you. I'm *probably* going to enjoy every moment I allow you to resurface and think you'll be okay, before plunging you back in. Mostly, I'm going to enjoy watching the helpless terror in your eyes.

And you thought I was disposable.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: MK has been writing short fiction and poetry for as long as they have been able to hold a pen—thankfully they can type better than they can write, otherwise you wouldn't be able to read a single word! Sci-fi, fantasy, dystopia; these are the genres MK likes best, although they are happy to give anything a go (or read).

Twitter: @MoorIlk

Blog: http://shortstoryshots.tumblr.com/



Cradle *Joshua Skye*

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

Last Halloween | Robert J. Stava

"Papá! Papá! It's almost time!" Lupe said, capering up the front sidewalk of the dilapidated brick Colonial they lived in.

His father, Ruiz, had helped set up the Halloween decorations the week before: ghosts, goblins, three painted Styrofoam tombstones and a life-sized skeleton hanging from the emaciated Ash tree out front.

"Coming Lupe... I'm coming" his father rumbled in his gravelly voice, pausing once to catch his breath and break into a phlegmy cough. He quickly tugged out his handkerchief to wipe up the bright spots of blood on his palm. Ruiz was feeling worse than he originally thought and increasingly at a loss what to do. Downsized with the economy, his current job as a day laborer didn't include health benefits. He'd walked out of the Open Door clinic after one look at the form and the dismissive face of the social worker shoving it at him.

It'll pass, he told himself for the umpteenth time, fishing out a cigarette from his breast pocket. It has to. With Célia gone it was now just the two of them. Someone in the community will see to my little Lupe, even if they don't care much for me. I was never blessed with Célia's social skills, and I guess I never really liked talking much. Maybe the couple upstairs could look after him when... no, I won't allow it. I cannot! This... must... pass!

He repeated that hollow mantra even as he lit up and broke out in a series of more coughs. These days the damned cigarettes tasted awful, but he still relished the tingling fuses of nicotine firing through his system.

It was the big night and already a few eager early birds had already rung their door earlier, mostly the younger parents with infants too impatient to deal with the village parade. Lupe, however, had been insistent on trick-or-treating only once it was dark. Six years old or not, he already had it in his stubborn head that every holiday had its rules and rituals, each to be strictly observed to the letter.

Last night they'd done the two pumpkins, his carved into a grinning goof and his son's into a screaming, scary monster. Ruiz was amazed at the breadth of his son's imagination and unquestioning power of his belief in the magic of the world. He radiated it like a religious fervor. Even the costume, which he'd saved up and bought from a local Halloween store was typically Lupe: a grinning, maniacal werewolf with clawed hands. And for reasons unknown, a flannel shirt.

Maybe he's like one of those Gringo musicians from Seattle, Ruiz thought. Maybe...

His chest was racked with yet another fit of coughs as he reached the top of the stairs. The porch was sagging, its white paint peeling in places, but it afforded a nice view of the street and it was perfect for summer evenings while enjoying a beer and a smoke.

Minutes earlier, Lupe had been all but exploding with excitement.

He'd talked about nothing but Halloween for weeks now, as if losing himself in every detail of the holiday would exorcise their current troubles.

"I'm going to get changed now! Light the pumpkins Papá!" Lupe's unusually serious features—courtesy of his late mother's—were as fervid as a kid's first real Christmas. His father ruffled his hair and kissed him on the head.

"Okey-doke, *el hijo*," he said, unlocking the front door and letting Lupe dash inside. "All will be well when you come out! And don't forget your magic pumpkin basket!"

He smiled as the outer screen door eased shut and bent to look after the pumpkins. They'd set them up with thick white candles earlier before going to the parade (Lupe had insisted on testing them to make sure they looked just right). As he bent and applied the match to the wicks, however, spots swam before his eyes and for one perilous second Ruiz thought he was going to pass out.

His lungs felt like they were on fire and a thin red line of drool escaped out of the side of his mouth, unnoticed.

"Joder!" He muttered, taking up a seat next to the pumpkins. I just need to rest a moment and I'll be fine...

He slumped slightly in the chair, eyelids growing heavy despite his jackhammering pulse. The cigarette continued to smolder between his fingers.

A minute later it dropped.

"Rarrrghhh!!!" Lupe said, pouncing out the door in his best imitation of an ambushing monster. The plastic trick-or-treat pumpkin slung under one arm lent it a comical aspect. Then the screen banged off his head as his costume caught and he cried out as he stumbled and fell.

"Ouch!"

He saw his father slumped in the lawn chair, the line of reddish drool now trailing down the seamed neck into the collar. Then he saw the burnt-out butt lying on the floor next to the chair leg.

For a moment, Lupe was seized in a frigid web of panic and terror. Panic that his father had abandoned him while he wasn't looking; terror that all the worst nightmares of Halloween (and perhaps life) were true. Even worse, the dreaded possibility that the gossamer fabric of magic he'd meticulously built up over minutes and hours and days could unravel in an instant. That it was all just like those television shows he watched: gone when the remote was turned off.

He refused to accept that when the morning brought with it the first day of November, this wonderful night with its mysterious cocoon of lurking spooks and hair-tingling scares would be gone. Forever.

"Papá?" he said quietly. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and began a hurried prayer to Saint Anne, whose church he attended every Sunday. He repeated it twice for good measure.

When he opened his eyes he was alarmed to see his father was slumped over even further. *No! Papá! You just fell asleep!* Then he gathered himself, drawing every ounce of force from his (not inconsiderable) will, and focusing it with an intensity that alarmed himself, began shaking his father again and again until...

"Eh? Uh?" His father wheezed, as if coming out of a deep, yet difficult slumber.

Lupe let out an oddly adult sigh of relief. It was okay! Papá is okay! He was just having one of his bad moments.

"Hurry! We have to start!" Lupe felt his enthusiasm flooding him again as he cajoled his father up into a standing position, using his sleeve to wiping the drool off his chin. It was already pressing 7p.m. and all through the Village of Wyvern Falls, Halloween was gathering momentum. In the upper neighborhood east of South Hudson where they lived, the streets were crawling with a rambling assortment of mostly home-made costumes, along with the predictable rash of Batmans, Spidermans, Cats and Ballerinas. This year even some Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles had put in appearances.

Lupe led his father (who now seemed to have more pep in his step than in weeks previous) up to Crichton Avenue where he knew the best houses would be. Especially that big old one owned by Mister Franks and his pretty friend, Miss Evershaw. Usually only the bigger kids had the courage to go there. The whole place looked like some sort of Universal Studios' Nightmare Attraction, especially with the half-unearthed coffin in the front yard, the cluster of Pumpkin-Rot scarecrows under the tree next to it and the wickedly scary witch climbing across the porch roof.

Lupe wasn't scared of it though—he loved it. Monsters and creatures of the night were savored delicacies for the insatiable appetite of his imagination. The more terrifying the better. Even if they did sometimes give him bad dreams. Ever since his mother had died he'd taken refuge in the world of frightening things, as if by embracing and even becoming them he might overcome his own deepest fears.

Because monsters aren't afraid, he told himself, charging up the sidewalk of the gothic-looking Victorian owned by the Delgado's. As he passed a trio of bumblebees, he jumped up and roared, causing the little girls to scream and break out in tears. The kid's parents scolded him and ushered them away toward the next house.

Pleased with himself, he marched defiantly up to the porch where the Delgado's grandfather was waiting and thrust out his bucket. "Trick-or-treat!"

The Frank's house on the next block was even better than the year before, though Lupe's father seemed more inclined to hang back on the sidewalk in the shadows under the great oak there. Lupe took his time, taking in and tallying with relish the terrifying array of figures, sculptures and props, with the 'chin up' air of a true connoisseur. A young Hispanic kid and his friend passed him coming down the steps, muttering, "That place gives me the creeps," from the side of his mouth like an actor in a classic B horror movie.

Mr. Franks was with his girlfriend Miss Evershaw on the front porch, dressed as a witch and warlock. Lupe thought she was the prettiest witch he'd ever seen, even with her green makeup and over-sized beak of a nose.

"Aye, a fine and frightening creature you may be," Mr. Franks said, with a leering eye and faux English accent, "and a bold one to be prowling the streets such as these..."

Lupe had to stifle a giggle.

"I think I know that giggle... is that a Little Lupe giggle?" Miss Evershaw asked.

A rapid nod.

She glanced behind him, "Where's your Dad?"

He pointed dutifully to the tree by the sidewalk.

"Hmm... okay," Miss Everhsaw answered, arching one (wicked) brow. "Here's a little extra for you, just don't tell him." She winked and tossed an extra handful into his bucket, which was still quite empty.

"And don't show your face," Mr. Franks chimed in, "A good werewolf never reveals his human identity, or it's *kapow* with a silver bullet!"

Lupe thought this was sound advice. With another quick nod he went marching down to the sidewalk, his back a little straighter, putting a little more werewolf-attitude into his step.

And so it went, with Lupe dragging his father up and down the streets until it was apparent it was getting quite late and the tricksters were thinning out. Lupe didn't want it to end—he wished he could trick-or-treat forever, a fearless creature tromping about in the safety of his alternate identity. For starters, he was really glad to see his father getting around so well. The last few weeks he had starting moving so slowly Lupe wasn't sure he could walk an entire block before the day ended. They'd just turned the corner onto Collingwood when past the house up on the left, Lupe saw a strange thing headed toward them from the cavernous darkness where the sloping street dead-ended into a copse of trees.

It was either something truly unworldly, or the most convincing prop he'd ever seen: a terrifying skull-faced creature with huge gossamer black wings floating down at them, its jaws yawning, each of its eye sockets a roiling abyss like the frozen, merciless reaches of deepest space.

Lupe screamed as the thing swooped down at them, the air temperature falling to the point where ice crystals formed around the mouth slot of his rubber mask. As if this apparition was sucking the very energy out of all existence.

"No!" he screamed, "Go away! You can't have him!"

Instinctively sensing this terrifying thing had come to claim his father, he spun around. Gripping his father's hand, he attempted to drag him back down the street where the lights and remaining trick-or-treaters had been.

The streets were suddenly vacant, however, as if by conspiracy. As Lupe yanked and pulled his father down the sidewalk the thing swooped even closer, blotting out the light as it expanded its terrible giant wings, threatening to envelope both of them in its embrace of death.

Lupe stumbled as his father stopped abruptly. He screamed and yanked, but his father shook his head *no*. The hand Lupe was holding now felt like cold wax and even in the eclipsing light Lupe could see his father's complexion had gone a ghastly white, eyes growing sunken and cheeks sagging, collapsing inward.

Helpless terror and sadness engulfing him, Lupe let go and staggered backward. Tears dampening the inside of his mask, which now seemed airless. Quietly, his father turned to face the creature, which screeched as it swept its wings in and enclosed him.

As Ruiz was swallowed into the blackness his son let out an anguished sob and fell to the ground, cracking his head.

Then he too knew the blackness.

"Jesus Christ!" a man's voice said.

Then: "Hey kid? Are you okay?"

Lupe snapped his head up, the wolf-mask flopping back off his head. There was a throbbing pain near his temple.

For a moment, he thought the man speaking was his father, then as he blinked he saw it was Ricardo, the young Portuguese man who had recently taken the apartment upstairs. His girlfriend Camilla was standing next to the open door of his electric blue Mustang parked by the curb, looking on in horror.

"Stay there," Riccardo said to her, holding up his hand. He turned back to Lupe, trying not to look at the father sitting dead in his chair next to them, with his waxy pallor and half-open eyes staring at some point fixed in eternity. It looked like the boy had tripped getting out the door and knocked himself out. But that didn't make any sense, he thought. It seemed impossible no one had seen and said anything. An unconscious boy sprawled next to a clearly dead man on a front porch? Sure, it was Halloween but... why was there a plastic pumpkin full of candy toppled over? And why were there melting ice-crystals on its rim?

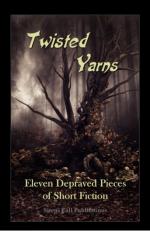
Lupe said nothing as he solemnly grabbed Ricardo's wrist and twisted it to see the watch. Tears sprung in fresh rivulets down his cheeks. The watch face said 12:01.

Halloween was past.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Robert J. Stava is an author living in the Hudson River Valley, not far, apparently, from the village of Wyvern Falls where so many of his horror stories are set. His fourth novel, *Nightmare from World's End*, was recently published by Severed Press. His short stories have appeared in various anthologies including the recently released *Cranial Leakage Vol II* from Grinning Skull Press.

Blog: <u>www.wyvernfalls.com</u> Facebook: <u>Wyvern Falls</u>







The Manipulator | Zack Kullis

Nothingness, absolute and pure, was broken by a suggestion.

Rise

Slumber, torn asunder.

Twinges of tissue and cognition, and then he WAS.

Tired. So tired... Confusion and disorientation numbed his mind like cotton wrapped hands. Thoughts felt like a jumble of dusty moths bumped plaintively against a dim light bulb. He couldn't grasp where he was—what he was doing. His limbs felt stiff and unused.

The stony grip of anxiety seized his mind and burned in his lungs. A deep breath was impossible. Thin air pulled slowly through his nose, bringing with it the smell of fresh clothing and an acrid smell that reminded him of a dissected frog. His anxiety doubled when he realized his mouth wouldn't open. A hand finally responded to his slow mind. It moved sluggishly, fumbled around haphazardly until it found his lips. Glue. Somebody had glued his lips shut while he slept. Anger and the inability to get a full breath drove his fingers to tear at his lips with a horrible frenzy.

Dry tissue tore without pain or blood. Thin air cascaded over his teeth and dry tongue. His lungs responded mechanically, filling, expelling. Fingers that slowly gained dexterity and feeling touched what should have been painful tears in his lips. He was grateful it didn't hurt and started to relax slightly.

Another strange sensation penetrated the musky fog of his lethargic mind. His eyes felt like they had something in them. The total absence of light wouldn't let him see what he was doing, so his hands touched their way past his torn lips, his cold nose, and found his eyes. Tufts of cotton had been stuffed between his eyelids and his eyes. 'What the hell,' he tried to scream, but it came out in a hoarse growl. "Wwuu du hehh!"

His hand shot out in an effort to throw away the cotton when it struck something solid. The loud 'thunk' reverberated around him as if he were in a closed space. The frantic movement of the severely claustrophobic possessed him as his legs kicked and struck out all around him. A cacophony of quick echoes filled the tight space. His fists pummeled the surface above him, to the side, underneath, and beyond his head. Wordless screams bounced off the smooth walls.

Animalistic fury filled his mind and fueled his raging muscles. His hand shot out in front of him, and struck the surface above his face. The welcome sound of a loud crack met his ears. Lungs pulled at the failing air in massive gulps, like a doomed fish flopping on the shore. A primal scream erupted from his bloodless lips as he struck out violently against his prison.

"Unnghh!" he screamed between breaths. The sounds of his attack morphed from groans and creaks to the splintering of broken wood. A fist erupted through the fissure; his dry flesh scratched, torn and shredded against the sharp edges of his prison. Small pieces of something cold fell onto his face. His hand and fingers vaguely recognized the material as he started to pull

his hand back inside and tear at the prison. Realization of what was falling on him came along with the avalanche of freshly dug dirt.

Adrenaline, or its mystical counterpart, burst through his system. *Damn this place* he thought as he struggled against the wood and dirt. *Damn whoever put me here* he thought as he finally got to his knees. The weight of loose dirt above him pressed down on his shoulders and head. Arms tried to push through the soil and pull him up. Hands searched frantically for leverage, for anything. Nothing.

There was no point. Dirt pressed against his eyes, stuck against the dry orbs, preventing him from the tender mercy of a blink. Not even a blink. Small bits of soil worked into his nose. The smell of loam and old decay filled him. Gagged him. He thrashed his head. How long since he took a breath? Fighting to keep his mouth closed was in vain. The muscles in his jaw worked against him. *Don't open* he screamed in his head.

His head thrashed wildly when his mouth opened. Dirt, a few rocks, and who knows what else poured in. His movements slowed against his will. Hands stopped grasping. Arms stopped reaching. He was dead—or would be. The cold hand of eternity gripped him tightly. He would pass, and be finished with his awful fate. Soon. Please.

There was nothing. His mind still worked, toiled against being stuck in this cold between. Then there was something. From above. A presence. It waited, knowingly. It beckoned. Then it spoke in his head.

"Rise..."

Can't move, he thought in reply. Can't breathe.

Dark laughter filled his head. It remained silent long enough that he decided he had gone mad. Yes he thought. I'm mad. The voice filled his head again.

"Mad like the Arab with his Kitab al-Azif? No. Forget who you were, that which **was** is no more. Stop struggling for air. You no longer need it. Rise!"

It seemed too much, but he couldn't deny the voice. It knew. The voice was more than suggestive. It carried with it an air of command that left no room for questions or derision. As a marionette moves at the behest of the manipulator, so too was he compelled to move. He pushed deeper into the earthen barrier, inched upwards, and endured the agony of his impossible climb. He fought against the spasms of his lungs craving oxygen they no longer needed as he heeded the call.

Fingers clawed through dirt and grasped at moist air. Forearms broke through soon after, quickly pulling his head past charnel soil. His eyes worked to blink away the earthen mess they had gathered. He hung his head forward, disgorging a voluminous pile of graveyard dirt that had filled his mouth and esophagus. Once the dirt was gone, he pulled in air. Not for a breath, no, he cried out with a nightmarish mix of relief and malice.

He lifted his head up to find the voice. The manipulator. His eyes absorbed the tenebrous night with preternatural ability. A huge moon hung far overhead, shedding its gossamer rays over a small clearing. Spanish moss clung tenaciously to an old Cypress tree.

"Here," rasped a gravelly voice. The voice spoke in his head as it sounded in his dirt-filled ears. He turned his head and saw the Manipulator standing underneath the Cypress tree. It was too dark under the ancient tree to see the owner of the voice, but he could see a figure of absolute darkness and haunting shape beneath the heavy limbs.

"You are reborn, freed from death's hold through this necrotic birth. I have not given you life, but something utterly different and blasphemous. You have breached this unhallowed soil which is your second womb. You enter this world bloodless, severed from humanity and unbound by all law but mine."

The Manipulator raised an arm, cloaked in dominion and despair. A withered hand moved in lesser shades of dark and prompted the reborn man to finish rising. Enthralled by his master, he pressed his now powerful hands against the ground he had crawled from. He pushed, struggled, and cried out with the effort. At long last he dragged himself from the loose soil and ambled towards the Manipulator with manic obsession. The filthy clothes, clean when the man had been buried two days ago, dropped clumps of dirt and soil as he made his way to the stygian shadow under the Cypress tree.

He stood under the tree and shook with necrotic joy. Eyes bright with malicious zeal looked excitedly at the being that had given him all. "Come," said the Manipulator. "You and I have work to do."

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

Twitter: <u>@ZKullis</u>

Blog: https://zkullis.wordpress.com/



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The Men's Room | John Grover

It was just nearing the point of dusk when I pulled into the gas station with its mini-mart glaring at me. The lights of the small convenience store danced and popped, as if inviting me to join the knee slapping good ol' fun of some traveling circus or country ho-down.

Talk about marketing—signs cluttered the windows with items that they swore you couldn't live without, as if your life depends on getting the Super-Size slushy or that multicolored collection of lighters. Yes sir, you just gotta have a dozen tiny lighters floating around your car, as if your car doesn't have a lighter of its own.

The store tried so hard to cash in on the desperate needs of travelers and lost vacationers, who really only wanted gas, directions or to use the frigging bathroom.

The third reason was why I pulled in. Man, did I have to drain the bladder in a bad way. I thought I was never going to find a place to go; not that I couldn't pull over on the side of the road and do the deed but, I always felt weird doing that. It would be my luck that I would be standing there with it in my hand and a bus full of nuns would breakdown right in front of me.

There were only two times in my life when I took a leak on the side of the road and you'd better believe it was necessary. Well, this would have been the third time if it wasn't for the bright lights giving me the clearance to enter and relieve myself. It was about time too I hadn't seen a gas station in about an hour.

That's the last time I accept that one for the road crap from Lenny before leaving his apartment and it's without a doubt the last time I listen to him about a short cut. "Take route 106," he said. "You'll be home in no time." Yeah right.

There was nothing on this damn road but cow country and cranberry bogs... boring. Why did he have to move out to the boonies any way and why did I offer to help him move?

Pulling into an empty space, I steadied the car as it rumbled to a stop. Popping the keys into my pocket, I walked towards the store. My pace increased with every step, and I felt the dull throbbing assaulting me to no end, the pressure beginning to build.

The store was pretty empty. There was one elderly man glancing at some ice cream in the back and a young girl behind the counter. She had short dark hair and brown eyes to match, her face seemed warm and friendly as she looked up to greet me.

"Hi there," I said. "Could I have the key to the men's room?"

"Sure," she smiled, her voice soft and sweet. Reaching underneath the counter she pulled out a thin block of wood with a small gunmetal colored key dangling from it.

"You have to go around back for the public bathroom," she informed me. "The one in here is for employees only."

I scooped the keys from the counter in front of her and turned to leave. "Thanks!" I said in haste, I was sort of in a hurry.

The old man in the back was whispering something to himself, but it was inaudible.

It had grown much colder and even a bit darker as I worked my way around the side of the building. This place was so deserted and the road was empty and quiet... dead quiet.

Pressing the key into the doorknob, I was finally able to open the heavy door, nearly hurling myself into the darkened room. My bladder was screaming now.

Flipping the light switch I glanced up at the naked light bulbs all in a row, spanning the ceiling. The last one flickered sporadically.

The room was huge for a quick stop public bathroom. There were four urinals and four stalls and about six sinks filling the opposite wall.

It was then that the stench hit me, so foul and putrid that I almost upchucked my dinner.

Well, beggars can't be choosers. I walked over to the urinals and noticed that two were out of order—how nice. The other two were so revolting and repulsive that I didn't want to even go near them. I decided a stall would be better.

I ventured courageously to the last one and slipped in casually. Yes, I was a big man having to use the stall. The light flickered above and behind me as I stood over the toilet, my shadow gyrating oddly on the tiled floor below me.

There was a loud crash that caught me off guard, followed by the roaring of angry voices—My innards froze and nothing would come out. My jaw dropped as I couldn't believe that a loud noise had scared me out of the relief that I so desperately needed right now.

An angry male voice was in the bathroom now and I heard footsteps muddling about. Something had told me to lay low and the next thing I knew, I was perched on the toilet—my feet drawn up off the floor so that I would not be noticed.

How did they get in? Had I forgotten to shut the door? I thought these bathrooms locked automatically?

"You were supposed to do it!" The man was outraged, the fury in his voice exuded a heat that was frightening.

I wasn't really sure why I was hiding myself, a part of me was truly nervous but the other part just wanted to hear what the fight was all about.

Sniveling filled the bathroom, someone was sobbing. The sound of it was low and hushed.

"Did you think you would get away with it?" the angry man continued his assault. "It was her turn to die and you just let her go. You are a traitor. The Master is quite angry with you. Actually, he's quite pissed off!"

"Please no more," the sobbing voice begged. "I can't do this anymore. I don't want to hurt anymore people."

"The Master demands it. You pathetic shit, what a weak soul you have!"

"Just let me go. I wanna leave the fold, please just let me leave."

"You can't be serious? Let you go? You can't even be allowed to exist. Your eyes have seen too much, traitor. You could harm us and pollute our numbers. You can never be allowed to leave. Your life is ours. You'll just have to take that teenager's place that you let get away..."

My legs trembled as I tried to hold them steady. My eyes studied the grit in the tiles of the floor until settling on the two pairs of legs before me. The legs were clad in black, like some sort of linen and wore black shoes with thick lug soles.

God help me, something awful was going down here—and it scared the shit out of me.

I could barely hold my screams back as my lips shivered and my heart thumped relentlessly in my ears. Why did I have to be here now? Couldn't they have waited five more minutes? My legs grew tired and heavy; beginning to tingle but I dare not stretch, hell, I dare not even breathe.

A horrible sound reverberated around me then, it was gasping. The sobbing had transformed into gasps. Gasp-gasp—I could actually feel my own air being cut off from my body.

Shraaakkk, craaackkk, rip-tear-these next sounds terrified me.

I heard terrible tearing sounds and some gurgling and with a dull thud, a man tumbled to the floor; his face and arm landing right in front of my stall.

I could see his face.

His eyes stared into mine.

His eyes still moved, shifting from side to side, his lips squirmed slightly; a thick coat of red covering them. I watched a stream of crimson roll across the floor and into my stall, just barely touching the toilet that I cringed on.

His right cheek bore a tattoo of black tears that began right underneath his eye. His dirty blonde hair was shaved almost to the skin of his head. His eyes, I watched them go still now, were a vivid blue.

A sigh escaped the angry man, whose legs I could still view from underneath my stall—please don't check the stalls—please don't check the stalls.

I could hear the sounds of chains rattling and the grinding of leather. The sound of metallic things clanking against one another echoed in the room. The light above me flickered wildly, casting the blood that now pooled on the floor in a strange shade of black and maroon. It didn't even look like real blood.

God, I hope he can't see my shadow.

Still watching, frozen with shock and utter fear, I saw the pair of legs bend at the knees. The lifeless body before me wriggled a bit as I heard sloshing sounds and some cutting.

"Ah," the angry man said, his voice calmer now. "You taste sweet man. The Master will be so pleased with this. I guess you have done something good after all, but I will get all the credit you faithless worm."

The light above me went out altogether. The sound of dripping water filled my ears, it was frigging deafening. A new odor began overtaking the natural stench of the bathroom. I looked down again, the corpse was still staring at me.

I felt something warm and wet.

Oh God, I just pissed my pants. More chains jingled as footsteps thudded across the floor. I watched the black clad legs stand in front of the sinks and listened to the water rushing. The bastard was cleaning up.

Tears streamed down my face as I prayed silently. Please just go, please don't check the stalls. Oh God, let him just leave.

His loud steps came again and I watched the legs go to the door through the crack of my

stall. They paused. Not a sound was escaping me. I was sure of it. I held my breath, remained still and if I could slow my heart down right now, I sure as hell would.

For what seemed like an eternity I waited, my every perception twisted, my every sense overwhelmed with nightmarish images. Finally the legs vanished from sight as I listened to the door shut ominously behind him.

For a few more minutes I waited and then with as much courage as I could humanly muster, I crawled off the toilet. My legs cramped and sore, tormented with aching pain. Slowly, I eased the stall door open.

He lay there on his belly, face turned to my stall. He was soaking in a massive puddle of his own blood. God, I could see part of his belly sticking out from underneath his plain dark black clothing. A couple of his fingers were missing.

Gingerly, I stepped over him and caught my reflection in the sink mirrors. I looked like hell, all color had drained from my face.

In a panic I threw myself out of the bathroom, leaving the key on the ground outside the door. My car sat waiting for me just as I had left it, how lovely it was to see it.

Bed, bed sounded like the best thing in the world right now.

Trying to stay out of hysterical mode, I fumbled for my car keys and finally managed to get myself in. The car roared to a start and as I attempted to switch gear—the arm slid around my neck.

"You have seen too much," the angry man whispered into my ear. "I'm sorry, those eyes are going to have to come out, the Master demands it."

The entire world went black.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: John Grover is a horror and dark fantasy author residing in Boston, Massachusetts. He has been published both online and print in such markets as *Flesh and Blood* magazine, *Morpheus Tales*, *The Willows*, *Wrong World*, *Silver Blade*, *Screaming Dreams*, *Best New Zombie Tales* by Books of the Dead Press, the *Northern Haunts* anthology by Shroud Publishing, and the *Zombology* series by Library of the Living Dead Press. John is a member of the New England Horror Writers association and the author of several collections and chapbooks, more info on these works can be found on my website www.shadowtales.com.

Website: www.shadowtales.com
Facebook: John Grover, Dark Fiction Author



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The Last Tango | Robert A. Read

I stand, waiting, gazing across a surreal world etched in silver and gray. Ragged clouds, like tattered funerary shrouds, partially obscure the visage of Selene, our moon goddess. Her light reflects a shimmering translucence on the rippled, mirror surface of the lake before which I stand. Pale fronds of mist roll across the water, beckoning to the trees of birch and willow to join them in gavotte among the wavelets that kiss the shingled beach. Only the plaintive hoot of an owl, a single mournful cry, disturbs the placid serenity and intensifies the loneliness I feel in my sojourn of solitude. Will this night, at last, bring solace to my torment?

I think back to an evening of long ago, a pavement café beside the bank of the River Seine where I first saw Catalina. I had set up my easel and paints to capture on canvas the carnelian and flame-orange Parisian sunset of early summer. Fewer auto-mobiles wheezed leaded vapors into the atmosphere above the streets of Paris during the early decades of the twentieth century, and sunsets were spectacular.

She sat with a group of students from Madame Bellvedier's Finishing School for Genteel Young Ladies—the academy situated a short distance south of the Basilica of the Sacré Cœur. Her appearance seemed far removed from the fairer cast of her more lascivious companions who incited the café artists to distraction. Five of my fellows moved among the tables on that sultry evening. I raised my hand in greeting to one, a Pablo Picasso, who recently moved into the studio adjoining mine at Bateau-Lavoir.

Many of the poorer tyros learning their craft in pigment and charcoal frequented the bars and bistros on the bank of the Seine. They sought to sell their talent in exchange for a meal by offering to sketch or paint the portraits of the patrons. The young, giggling women teased them by offering to pose in erotic postures of semi-nudity, each one suggesting a scene more lewd and provocative than the previous.

The mademoiselle who had caught my attention appeared to distance herself from her more bawdy associates, and I felt little surprise when she excused herself from their company and sauntered across the esplanade to view my work. The click of her heels on the paving stones drew my attention from the pallet on which I was mixing colors. In an instant my intended subject of cloud and skyline was forgotten. Seeing her bathed in the sunset glow, I felt compelled to capture that wondrous moment in oils for eternity. Pose, she did, and not just that one time either. In the following months I captured the essence of her innocent beauty against a variety of settings around the city.

Originally from Buenos Aires, she resided in Paris with parents, her father being a high ranking Argentinean diplomat. Perhaps it started from her infatuation of being seen with an artist, dare I say, a good artist?—I had studied under the tutorship of Amedeo Modigliani shortly after his arrival from Venice. Catalina took it upon herself to promote my work among her friends at college, and guests at the soirees hosted by her mother, on every opportunity. Our relationship, during those months, flowered like a rose in the gardens of Versailles.

That first autumn, a new dance craze swept like a fire-storm through the bars and cafés of Paris. Having its origin in the country of her birth, Catalina performed the moves with the grace of a gazelle. I am certain her skill and erotic elegance fueled the explosive popularity of the

Tango in this country.

During one of the sittings at my studio—I maintain 'studio' although it would probably be considered no more than a two-roomed apartment—she proposed to teach me the steps. She arrived in chauffeured embassy automobile the following afternoon, and instructed the fellow to set up a gramophone. Due to the limited availability of suitable musical recordings, we had only a copy of Carlos Gardel's song, Milonga Sentimental, to accompany her tuition. Whether it was the excellence of my teacher, or my natural instinct to appreciate the rhythm I am unsure, but we were soon two of the best known performers of the tango in Parisian society.

Sadly, it soon became clear to me that the amour between us was not in accord with the wishes of her parents. More and more, our clandestine trysts were conducted in secret, often beside the lake behind the chateau where her family resided. There, we would sit in romantic embrace among the shadows beneath the trees, whispering vows of servitude and forswearing our undying love whatever adversities our differences in upbringing should bestow on our happiness.

One such night in late May as I savored the seduction in her brown eyes, her papa discovered our romantic liaisons. He, being a military man, I doubt if I would have fared better in a fair fight, but the fact that he was accompanied by several underlings from the embassy made the outcome even more one sided. Making his displeasure clear in words pertaining to the inevitable termination of my life if I approached, again, within five kilometers of either Catalina or the chateau, he dragged his weeping daughter back toward the house. The henchmen then stressed the point with several vicious blows to my face and head before pitching me onto the streets.

I heard nothing more from my beloved for six weeks, until, in a letter delivered to my rooms by an embassy servant, she begged that I might find the courage to rendezvous with her on the night of three days forward. On that date, her nineteenth birthday, her parents had organized a celebration during which a public announcement would be made of her engagement and intent of marriage to Signor Romano de Silva, the son of one of the wealthiest men in South America.

The match was obviously made by her parents with no regard for the wishes of their daughter. I was devastated, but uncertain whether her intention was for a final farewell, or something more. I returned a letter in reply that a garrison of mounted cavalry would not prevent me from making the effort to see her, and arranged a time to meet at our regular haunt.

In the shadows cast by the trees encroaching to the water's edge, I waited. Like tonight, a half-moon gleamed as if some apparition floated beneath the black surface of the lake where only faint ripples disturbed the crystalline smoothness. Sounds of laughter and music drifted from the veranda of the chateau like the chatter of starlings, fluttering on the evening breeze, leaving no doubt of the carefree party atmosphere inside.

Ten minutes passed before a sylph like form flitted from the shadowy recess at the back of the house. I watched her progress beneath the trees until she emerged onto the beach a few paces from my secluded location. The silvery glow glittered in her dark eyes and her soft lips spread into a smile when I moved into the moonlight. We embraced, hugging without speaking, for words were unnecessary. The delicate allure of her perfume teased and taunted my senses as we

kissed.

Attired in a gown of cream, silky texture, the skirt reaching almost to her ankle, she appeared, truly, to be an angel. A split at the side from hem to thigh allowed me a tantalizing glimpse of stocking clad leg, Two tortoiseshell combs held her long, ebony hair in a tight coil at the back of her slender neck, around which she had fastened a three-tier choker of pearls.

As we gazed into each other's eyes, I was surprised to hear the orchestra break into a tune with a rhythm I knew so well, the Milonga Sentimental. The soft murmur of her voice was almost inaudible as she spoke. "In two days I am forced to obey the wishes of my parents to board a ship bound for Buenos Aires. I asked that the band play this now that we may dance one last tango together."

I felt icy fingers of anguish clutching at my throat. I tried to speak, but she pressed a finger to my lips. With a faint shake of her head, she said, "Please, say nothing to spoil this moment. I swear that one day, if you have not forgotten me, I will return to this place that we may spend eternity together."

She had no need to ask me twice. There seemed a futile hopelessness in my life as, almost in a daze, I led her into the first 'el paseo' or slow walk. In all the times we had danced together, I have never known her movements to appear so sexually explicit while we performed 'el cruzado' the scissors step, and then entwined our legs for the 'la vigne' the grape vine. The tempo of the dance increased as we whirled in the moonlight on that beach until the final steps when we dropped almost to our knees, with lips pressed together in the final kiss. I wish I could have held that kiss until the end of time, savoring the perfume of her skin, the warm sweet taste of her breath, but it was not to be.

A single slow hand clap brought the rush of reality back to my senses.

In horror I looked up to confront two male figures emerging from the shadows. The bearded face of the taller dressed in military uniform, I recognized at once as Catalina's father. The other shorter but plumper figure, a younger man with sallow complexion, was immaculately dressed in black tuxedo over a white dress shirt. His receding hair was greased back over his scalp with a few wayward strands falling to the side and over his ear. I assumed this was the one she would marry. It was his hands from where the applause originated, yet his face was twisted into a sneer.

"Bravo, for someone foreign to our national dance, that was some performance." His voice, weak and whining as his complexion, slurred the words. He continued, "Such a shame there will never be an encore."

He reached out, grabbing Catalina by the arm. She stumbled as he pulled her from me. It was only then I saw the glint of moonlight on something metallic held in the hand of her father.

Catalina must have seen it at the same time. She screamed words that sounded like, "Papa! No!"

I tried to stand, but the world seemed to turn in slow motion as a flash of fire and sound of an explosion tore through the stillness. Something struck me in the chest like the kick from a race horse. I felt ribs shatter and flesh burn and a searing agony that continued for an eternity. My awareness felt as if it was curling up like a screaming fetus inside my body as breath was torn from my lungs.

Eventually the pain dissolved into nothing, blown away like dust in the moving stream of air from the lake. And then came a sudden realization that I was sprawled on my back in the shallow water. I saw the expression of horror on the face of my beloved, as she tore free from the grip of her captor. Her mouth was moving in agonized scream, yet I heard only silence. She knelt in the water beside me, lifting my shoulders and pressing my cheek against her breast. Thick blood oozed from the gaping hole in my chest staining the creamy silk of her dress to burgundy before eddying in swirls with the water of the lake.

The two men grabbed her, one on either arm, pulling her away. I stood up and watched as they dragged her back along the shore to the house.

It is difficult to imagine that almost sixty years have passed since that awful night. Whenever the half-moon rises in mid-summer, I am drawn to this spot from my shallow grave beneath the trees. Rotting fragments of clothing cling to the remains of mummified flesh hanging from my bones. So much, I wish a realization of the vows we made so long ago, yet in reality I am aware of the grotesque parody of death I have now become.

And what of my sweetheart from so long ago? If still alive, she would be approaching eighty years of age. I cannot think of her as the wrinkled, gray-haired crone she may have become. To me, she will remain the erotic dancer, my partner of that last tango so many years in the past. Would she even remember me after all this time?

I wait, enthralled with the silence of the night air. Never, in all the years I have been held to this place have I felt so close to my sweet Catalina, and then, a moment of surprise, as I hear those strains of music from the crumbling dilapidated walls of the derelict chateau, the same orchestra playing our song, Milonga Sentimental. I hear a whispered voice in my ear, "I asked that the band play, so we may dance one last tango together."

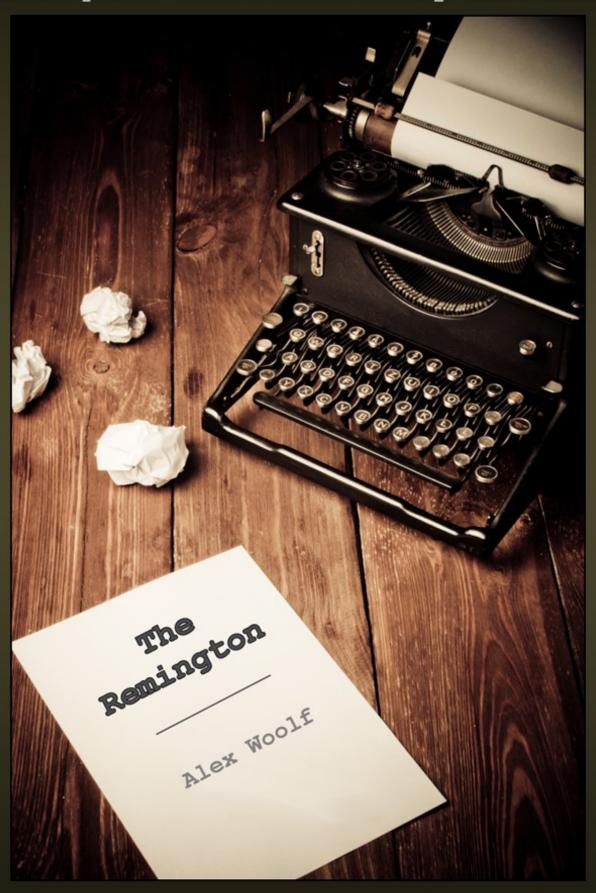
Turning, I gaze on her almost satanically dark Latin beauty. Even in the darkness, she shines with radiant light. She appears not one day older than the last moment I saw her. Her eyes glisten with a mischievous gleam that I have never seen before, and her perfect mouth curls into a smile of unadulterated happiness. Can she not see me as the gruesome remains I have, in death, become? Evidently not; we kiss, her lips so warm, so alive, press against me. It is as if she breathes life into this decomposing form as we embrace.

There is no necessity for her to ask me twice. Our bodies begin to sway, then our feet to move in response to the rhythm. In the moonlit shadows, two specters now haunt the shore at the water's edge of a lake on the outskirts of Paris as we dance our final, never ending, last tango.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Originally from the southwest of England, Robert A. Read now resides in Burgundy, France, an area renowned for some of the best red wines in the world. A writer of short stories and novels, he adheres to no particular genre, although much of his writing depicts elements of the occult and paranormal.

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Memento Mori | Joseph A. Pinto

Within Mr. Vanitas' snifter, fine Scotch swirled; it clung in languorous beads along the rim. At length, he admired its legs. Then he spoke. "And so friends, yet another month we commence together. The floor is now open."

Nine in total shared the silence of the café. But Mr. Vanitas, he did not quite call them friends; aficionados, perhaps. Chairs creaked anxiously. Larkish shadows, spit from the occasional candle, canvassed the walls.

"May I?" Eyes wide and far too dazzling, a middle-aged woman inquired of the room.

"Of course, Rita." Mr. Vanitas smiled between sips of Scotch; an oaken subtleness teased the plastic smoothness of his lips. He knew the café owner forbade drinking on its premises, but fistfuls of hundreds turned the cheek of many a steely individual. Besides, no one possessed the nerve to rebuff him. Of that, Mr. Vanitas always remained quite confident.

"Thank you." Her smile infected the gathering, eyes so very, very bright, but gourmet finger sandwiches soon passed through the room; her giddiness discarded for poached shrimp and alfalfa sprout delectability. "I died last week."

A smattering of polite applause. "Excellent, Rita." Mr. Vanitas, enthusiasm sincere, placed his glass down and brought his hands together. Only four meetings under her belt, and already she absorbed his teachings without question. "So very wonderful. Do you wish to share further with us?"

"Yes, Mr. Vanitas, I would. It was so much easier than I could ever have imagined, really. Completely impulsive. A car accident. The road had been very slick, and I took the turn—"

"How fast were you going?" interrupted a pudgy man jammed into a tweed coat.

Mr. Vanitas glowered at Jenson; the vibe of the café quavered. Even Rita's eyes dimmed—just a tad. Scotch eventually moistened Mr. Vanitas' lips back to a reassuring smile. "As you were, Rita."

"I took the turn rather fast," daring a curt glance toward Jenson, "and then skidded. My husband has told me countless times what to do if such a thing occurred. Of course, I ignored it all. The ravine came up quickly. The tree quicker still. I never stood a chance. Beyond that, however, I've sadly nothing more to recount."

From the gathering, disappointed sighs.

"Everyone, it's okay." Mr. Vanitas raised a bandaged hand. "What is important is that Rita took her first step. I am so very, very proud of her. Now the next time, Rita, you must focus on the retention of your sensations. What did you smell, taste...this is most important for your development."

She withdrew a compact mirror from her purse, dabbed makeup around the concave dent in her brow. "I will certainly strive to do my best, Mr. Vanitas."

He nodded appreciatively. "Anyone else?" His fingers worked between his shirt buttons, scratching atop ribbons of gauze.

"Yeah." Jenson's meaty face shimmered—a prancing goblin—within the flickering café. "I got something." He rose from his chair, shook the coat from his arms with a chuff. Then he yanked hard on his sweater collar, revealing a welt that ringed his neck. "Hung myself," altogether cool and matter-of-factly, "while I had my dick in my hand."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," gasped Mrs. Delancy from across the room.

"I'm not shitting any of you. Rigged the noose from my attic rafter."

Alexander Green balled his sandwich to the other side of his cheek. "I'm surprised it held."

From the gathering, sly chuckles. "You assholes want to hear or not?"

"Now, now, Jenson," Mr. Vanitas scolded. "We'll have none of that."

"Well, we're always talking about pushing the envelope," Jenson snorted. "I figured, why not off myself while choking my chicken, you know?"

"Autoerotic asphyxiation is what you mean." Glancing at the disgust creasing the pruned ruins of Mrs. Delancy's face, Mr. Vanitas silently amused himself. "And while some within our group may be somewhat... put off... by the visuals your death may induce, I will admit, it was another admirable effort on your part."

Jenson settled back into his chair. "Yeah, well, that ain't the best of it. My wife tried getting me down. Dumb fuck, who would've figured she'd stand below me? Crushed her on my way down."

"Cheese and crackers!" Stanley Henderson covered his mouth.

Jenson chuckled, spittle spraying his jolly cheeks. "Never even had a viewing. Her family disowned her before we met, and you know we had no kids. My own kin died awhile back, and fuck knows I never needed friends. Only ones there were the funeral director and his partner."

Mr. Vanitas eyed Jenson carefully from above the rim of his snifter. "I was not aware of that." He pulled his gaze away, slowly scanning the group, fixating finally on a man seated in the corner of the café. "Robert."

The gathering froze; Alexander Green shoved shrimp back into his mouth while keeping entrails from escaping the cavity of his torso; Ms. Bernadette fingered the bubbling hole in her throat. Even Jenson stiffened, jowls blue tinged.

"Robert?"

"Yes, Mr. Vanitas?" squeaked a shaky reply.

"What do you wish to share with us tonight?"

The man absently fumbled with his shirtsleeves. "I slit my wrists right after last month's meeting, Mr. Vanitas."

"Yes, of course you did, Robert. As well the meeting before that. And the one before that. Where is your sense of adventure?" He shook his head sadly. "I believe you've strayed from the intent of our group."

From the gathering, a strained hush.

"I haven't, Mr. Vanitas."

Mr. Vanitas knocked back the remainder of his Scotch, then shattered the snifter upon the floor. "Memento mori! Do you know what that means, Robert?"

"No, Mr. Vanitas."

"It means, remember that you will die. But do you *understand* what it means, Robert?"

A pitiful shake of his head.

Mr. Vanitas rose, lurched through the small arrangement toward the man. The gathering shrunk in their chairs. "Death is our inevitability, Robert. Born we are only so that we may die. Raised as children so that we may one day fit the black jeweled crown of death upon our skulls. Only the chosen may come to revel in its splendor, lather its sweet decay across perpetually damned flesh. We live only to die, and die only to die again. A fortunate lot, are we not?"

A resounding *yes* reverberated through the café. "And so we indulge ourselves, over and over again. But it's never enough, Robert. In our deaths, we live out our agonies, our ecstasies, our artistic splendors. But it's never enough..." his voice trailing away.

"So then we never die, do we, Mr. Vanitas? Not now... not ever?"

Mr. Vanitas paused in the middle of the room—deftly unbuttoned his shirt, bandaged fingers moving with fluid grace. It dropped to the floor, besides Jenson's tweed coat. Exposed, the expanse of bloody bandages wrapping his torso; a fine mesh network. He picked at it, laboring meticulously, unsheathing ribbon by ribbon, layer by layer, until ruinous, smoking flesh peeked through; a glint of bared rib. Then lastly, with a wet rip, the veil of gauze that surrounded his head came unwound. Before them, Mr. Vanitas preened—bandages clutched tightly within each hand, a figure of charred wickedness. "Perhaps Jenson is better suited to answer your question."

Jenson winced, the stench of broiled muscle full in his nose. "What are you talking about?" "No one remained to see you off, is that not what you claimed, Jenson?"

The fat man's eyes widened as Mr. Vanitas wrapped his dressings tightly around Jenson's neck. "You see, Robert, we do not *truly* die until the very last person we know in life dies. Not until then." He jerked mercilessly until Jenson's final death wheezed from his throat. "I do expect you to die in the best interest of our group from this moment forward, Robert."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Joseph A. Pinto is the author of the poignant novella *Dusk and Summer* and the horror novel *Flowers for Evelene*. His short fiction has been published in a variety of anthologies. He is a member of the HWA as well as the co-founder of Pen of the Damned.

Twitter: <u>@JosephAPinto</u> Blog: <u>www.JosephPinto.com</u>



The Croaking Raven | Michael Wombat

"The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge."

**Hamlet* (William Shakespeare)

From the ebon pit where foul worms writhe and creep, black as Beelzebub and cold as bare winter, she crawled at midnight's bell, clawing noisome ooze from her misshapen eyes. Her malformed, demonic gait dragged rotting feet through corpse-fed grass, stinking gobbets of onceflesh falling upon the rank ground.

Eternal rest had not been hers to grasp. What chance of rest when her fiery wronged heart and the acid taste of betrayal deep in her soul both cried without unceasingly for bloody revenge?

She had loved him as a fire sparks, dancing to the tune of an autumn wind. She had loved him as the enridged sea surges unrestrained on a spring tide. And she had made him love her. Yet he had thrown her love aside like a snake's skin. He had betrayed her adoration, and he had murdered her, destroying her in a fire of traitorous fury.

Stronger than a lover's adoration is a lover's hatred, and stronger is it still than even Death, who, mighty sable wings unfurled against the turbulent lightning sky of purgatory, had looked her in the eye and roared "Go! Fulfil your dread purpose 'ere I take you."

Starless, this black night; a night for hell to breathe out contagion into the world, and she was that disease. Her poisonous intent was to drink hot blood, and with patient cruelty draw exquisite agony upon her lover's face, as pale as a grave. He had spat away her love, and for that he must suffer tortured agonies. She uttered a raven-croak of promise, the only sound that the remains of her throat could now make, a sound of rising vengeance.

She was close now, fluttering like rivulets of hellsmoke through crevices, between thin gaps, finally materialising by his bed, a hollow ghost inside her remembering warmer times there with him. She pulled the sharp bone out of her left arm and raised it high with her right, ready to strike, to pierce him through as he slept, to finally sate her need to be avenged.

He whirled, a blur, a flashing blade severing her arm so that both flew across the room.

"Did you think to surprise me, witch? I knew you'd come. Christ, you stink more than you did alive. And you even gave me warning. You know, in Sweden, ravens that croaked at night were thought to be the souls of murdered people who didn't have proper Christian burials. I think the Swedes might be on to something."

He swung his blade again, and again, in violent sweeping arcs. Her limbs fell; her torso writhed, shedding rotting flesh across the floor.

"Why do you think I killed you, witch? I know that you cast a love spell on me, as I know full well your powers now, and I say that I will have no more of you! I was a fool, believing that the fire would rid me of a sorceress. I know better now. I know the true doombringer of a witch!"

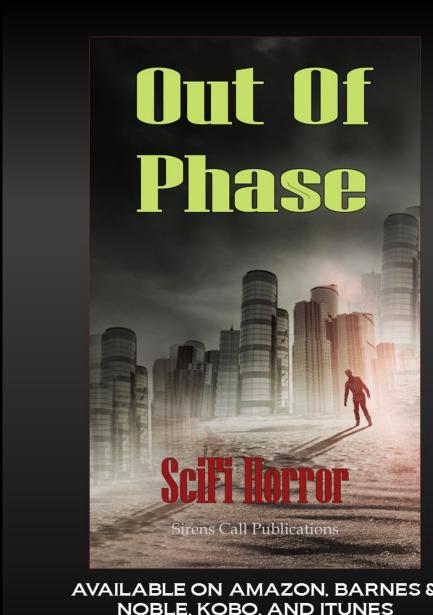
He hacked off her head and, gathering all the pieces of her, plunged them, still croaking faintly, deep in a barrel of consecrated water. Its sting pecked at her withering soul, and awareness left her.

"Welcome back," said Death. "Are you ready to go now?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A Yorkshireman living in rural Lancashire, Michael Wombat is a man of beard. He has a penchant for good single-malts, inept football teams, big daft dogs and the diary of Mr. Samuel Pepys. He is an indie author of seven books, editor of two anthologies, and his short stories have appeared in several other collections. His tale Descent was shortlisted for the HNS Award 2014.

Twitter: @wombat37

Blog: https://cubicscats.wordpress.com/



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It's Meant to Be | Michael Mulcahy

If it's meant to be, it will be.

I opened my eyes to the daily realization of my acquired space in Hell. For the first few days, when I had woken up with quick flutterings of hope that it had all been just a nightmare, full of groggy wishes for blue skies and a sunrise to greet me.

If it's meant to be, it will be.

My mother had always told me that since I was a little girl. If I broke a toy, she told me it was meant to break so that I could play with a new one. When our family dog died, she told me it was so that his soul could rest, and I could fall in love with a new pet. When a boy broke my heart, my mother would say it was so that it could heal and become even stronger than before, and then I could love the next one even better.

If it's meant to be, it will be.

The room was pitch black, and my eyes were only beginning to get adjusted. Nothing had changed since I had arrived though, and I had been down here long enough to be well acquainted with my surroundings.

It was a small room, going about six or seven feet either way, standing somewhere around ten feet high. There were metal shelves lined along the rusted concrete walls, boxes of randomly assorted items ranging from gardening knives to old board games. The ceiling was unfinished, rows of fluffy pink fuzz sticking out past the rafters. I had always wondered what that stuff was called.

The middle of the room was bare, except for me, and the chair I was bound to. I was positioned facing the wooden staircase, and all of its twelve, rickety, splintered steps. I heard them creak every twelve hours. Like clockwork.

I wriggled in my chair, a decidedly lazy attempt to check the state of my bondage, that perhaps it had somehow loosened itself since my last attempt. No such luck. I had tried so hard the first few days to break free of my bonds that deep, hardened callouses had formed upon my hands and my back. My stomach and wrists had compiled dozens of rashes and burns as well. On the second, maybe third day, I had even dislocated my shoulder. Six hours later, it was reset for me.

My arms were tied together behind the chair, and my ankles and feet to its front legs. There were rows and rows of rope going around my chest to the back of the chair, stripping me of any capable movement. It was tight enough that taking a deep breath brought on a sharp pain, something I learned very early on. And then there was the yellow handkerchief tied around my head and traveling between my teeth, stained with the blood of my early struggles. There had been so much gnashing, tearing, grinding, all to no avail.

If it's meant to be, it will be.

The last time my mother had told me that, I had been complaining about my newest job. I hated secretarial work, and my career was not going in the direction that I had desired. I expressed to my mother the fear over leaving the safe and comfortable paycheck, reaching for something bigger and better, even if it was something I may never actually retain. I was told to shed my fear, take the leap, and trust in myself. And, of course, *if it's meant to be, it will be.*

Dammit, Mom.

My eyes finally adjusted, and I could make out the milky outline of my pale skin, each leg pockmarked with purple splotches and dark red cuts. I couldn't remember how much blood had flowed from each carving, or if any blood had been drawn at all. My memories of my holding cell had congealed themselves into mere flashes of despair, muddled and distorted by the constant pain.

Every 12 hours, there came the creaking of steps. The untying of rope, the cradling, the probing, the licking, stabbing, slicing, tick, tock, tick, tock, unending and hellacious clockwork.

I shifted my fingers to get a better grip of the screwdriver wedged between my bandaged wrists. If I lost my grip, it was all over, and it'd be back to the maddening clockwork.

It was after he had knocked me down, firmly planting a foot to the bridge of my nose, that I had caught sight of the screwdriver. He had always been so careful not to leave anything lying around after each session, but he had been in quite a mood last night. He was rabid, more so than he had ever been. The impact of one of my many falls that night must have caused it to rattle off its shelf, the clattering to the floor muffled by his vocal cries of rage. I took the chance he gave me when he put a fist into my ribs, and I let my arms fling over my head, taking hold of the screwdriver and tucking it between my thighs as he proceeded to pound himself against the wall.

When he ties up my hands, he likes to mount me from the front, and wrap his arms around me. Last night the routine was the same, and when he thrust me back into the chair, I pulled the screwdriver from between my legs and clenched it between my hands as he bound me back in place.

If it's meant to be, it will be.

I heard the jiggling of the doorknob upstairs, and I noticed I had been gripping the screwdriver so tightly my fingers were ghostly white, and they stung when I loosened my hold. I tried to conjure up a good memory to calm my nerves.

I was 14 years old, and trying out for the freshman cheerleading team. I had stayed up for so many nights doing twists, turns, handsprings, anything and everything to ensure my spot. I had practiced all the assigned cheers in the bathroom mirror, stretching my face in a large smile until it hurt, trying to be that glorious embodiment of school spirit. I thought if I could look so damn joyful they would have to accept me.

It was one of the most exciting times of my life, and two hours before call time for auditions, I turned to my mother for some advice.

If it's meant to be, it will be.

The basement door opened a few inches, a small sliver of light crawling its way down the stairs, stopping just short of my feet. I couldn't see him yet, but I could hear him, breathing heavily as if attempting to suck in all of the oxygen in the room for himself. When he would get close to me, he'd be sure to pant, hot and wet like a heavy-set Rottweiler.

The familiar creaking began as he took the steps, each one with its own accent of old, rusted wood. He made it to the concrete and I could make out the outline of his figure, the piggish lumps and sagging skin. A horrifying, disgusting, sack of flesh.

The paranoia in me screamed that he would notice something was amiss, that I was too revealing. I could sense my body was more erect, more lively, and I felt it was impossible to hide the anxious waves rollicking around in my chest. Hope had found a small hole in my body and drilled its way through to my very core. All I was at this point was the hope that I had so recently created. I was no longer the sorry, bruised plaything that had run out of batteries but was put to use anyway.

I was eight years old when my grandmother received the news that her illness was winning, and chances of remission were dwindling. The lovely, established woman who would take me to the park every Sunday, feeding the birds and telling fantastical stories of heroic princesses and their perilous adventures. I couldn't lose those Sundays, couldn't lose that beautiful member of my family with her marvelous tales, and I cried to her often in those final months. My grandmother held the same beliefs as my mother, most likely passed down from her in the first place.

If it's meant to be, it will be.

He took several steps forward, and climbed on top of me, the same way he had done before, and the time before that, and so on. Tick, tock, tick, tock. Clockwork.

His hands caressed my face, pudgy fingers prodding at my dirty skin, squeezing and pinching my cheeks, my chin, and my lips. He was breathing me in, and it took everything I had not to vomit all over him. The last time I had released the contents of my stomach while he was with me, he had stayed in the basement an extra hour.

The handkerchief in my mouth was removed and tossed aside. His lips moved towards my own, and he snaked his tongue inside my mouth. I could still feel the hardened scab that had formed where I lashed out and clamped down with my teeth during one of his early attempts. I had paid dearly, and hadn't since been able to work up the courage to try again.

The rope around my chest was removed next, and he took his time as he allowed his fingers to be reacquainted with my shape, and all that came with it.

My mother used to tell me all the time about my own birth. I had transformed my umbilical cord into a noose, and the doctors struggled to reverse the process. She was told there was a

likely possibility she would give birth to a strangled baby. After it was all said and done, I arrived to the world a healthy, breathing baby.

If it's meant to be, it will be.

The hairs on my neck went erect when he reached around the chair to my wrists, and a cold shiver raced down my spine to my feet. He unraveled the rope, his fingers brushing closely past the metal between my hands, seemingly oblivious. He bent down to undo the binding of my legs and I raised both arms high over my head.

I moved surprisingly fast, quicker than I expected, and my aim proved to be slightly off. The weapon slashed through his clavicle, a sickening thunk as metal collided with bone. Blood rocketed onto my face, and he let out an agonizing squeal.

He rocked backwards and keeled over, his hands wrapped around his neck like he was choking to death. The blood escaped through his fingers in a feverish fashion, and his moans turned to violent threats and insults. I scrambled to untangle the rope from my legs as he ranted and raved, denouncing me as a bitch, a worthless whore, a dirty slut. His screams were filled with threats of vile acts he hadn't even performed yet.

I freed my legs and started to stand up, and realized how weak I had become. A searing pain stretched from my pelvis down, and I was forced on my knees. Too much abuse, too much playtime for the pudgy pig, and I resigned to a slow crawl. I worked my way past the screeching behemoth, moving unbearably slow towards the stairs. The first step gave way to its squeaky trademark as I began my ascent.

One step, then another. One more, and then another.

A hand latched tightly onto my right leg. My progress was completely stopped despite my arms continuing to swing forward. Dread dove down my throat and stole the breath I had left. I looked behind me and the features of his face were gnarled by a twisting mixture of blood and sweat, and he continued to scream all the foul words he had ever heard.

The basement door was three steps away. Three, creaky wooden steps that had their own familiar sound, and it stabbed something deep inside of me to think they'd never play for me.

My strength gave way and the count became four steps, which turned into five, and then six steps. I could feel pain bubbling inside of me, threatening to explode, but still I tried to push on.

Nine steps. Ten.

My adrenaline relinquished, and with it my last bits of hope. My body went limp, resigned to my failure as he dragged me back down the stairs.

Eleven steps.

I was dropped onto the concrete floor headfirst, colliding with a mind-numbing crack that caused the right side of my face to go slack. He got down and snatched my neck in his hands, fingernails digging into my skin. His eyes were a wild yellow, head and neck drenched in his own blood. His grip got tighter and tighter, and I realized I had nothing left to give, nothing left to fight with. He would win, and I would die.

At the age of 23, I was kidnapped by a vile, depraved monster. It had been weeks, possibly months since I had been in the outside world. I had finally received an opportunity to escape and I failed. As everything began to fade and my world became total darkness, I heard a saying being whispered in my head, over and over and over again.

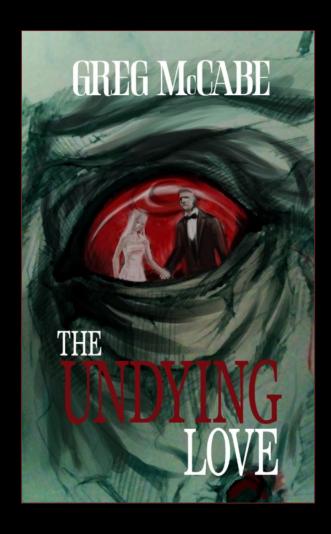
If it's meant to be, it will be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael Mulcahy is an aspiring novelist living in Los Angeles, California. He graduated from Full Sail University with a Bachelor's Degree in Film and has since turned his attention to the written word. He is currently working on his first full-length novel where bad things will happen to good people.

Twitter: <u>@entertainmulk</u>
Facebook: <u>Michael Mulcahy Writes</u>

The Undying Love Greg McCabe

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Beauty | Sonya Herbach

All I saw was a garden, not all of it, but rather a small patch through a crack in the wooden beams of my shed. The outside was made of light, everything shone in sparkling colors, the grass was a bright green, the flowers were vibrant and clean, the sky was soft, and clear, and blue. Flowers grew right next to the crack in my wall, scenting the air that came in, giving me a relief from the smell of the rotting, damp, molded wood surrounding me, if only just for a moment. Everything outside was so light, so perfect, so beautiful, so pure, and so clean; but the inside was a dark, menacing, horrible, dirty, and rotting place. All I could manage was to look with one eye through the fracture in my wall and into the garden. Saving me from the smell of the rot, saving me from the rope that burned around my wrists and ankles, bringing me away from the darkness that surrounded me.

At first He came every day, that dark and dismal presence that would brush my hair, touch my skin, smell my neck. I never really got to see Him, it was so dark in my little shed, but when He came there was always a little more light, and when He would go there would be a little less. The little bits of light started coming less and less, even though the light would be brighter each time He came. After awhile there was no light at all, save for the little crack in my wall.

After He stopped coming, there was no light, no thought of being let go, of being released. Even if I could break the ropes He put on me, even if the shed was not locked and nailed shut, even if I could stand and walk away into the garden just on the other side of this wall, I can never leave this. This is what I am, his Sweet, for now, for always, maybe I always have been. I remember when He left, I remember the sound of his hammer hitting the heads of the nails, his key turning the lock on the door, his footsteps fading as He walked away from me. There were a total of 13 nails put into the door to my shed, 13 nails that sealed me into the dark, and away from Him. There is no way out of this, no way into my garden, free of the rope that bites at my wrists and ankles, no way to eat, no way to breathe a full breath of bright air, now that He is gone.

At some point it must have all stopped, longing, hunger, struggling. It did all stop, but I stopped with it. Stopped wanting, hoping, thinking that I could be rescued, or even remembered. I remember when I was young, in primary school, when things like the brand of your pencil or what type of juice you had mattered. I thought that nothing could happen to me, and I would always be safe. I remember sitting on the couch with my parents and watching some cop show and thinking that those types of things only happened in movies. My mother had told me then and there to be careful, but I thought it was all fake, that people just told children these things happened to scare them. Later on in middle school, one of the kids died. Then, I thought bad things only really happen to other people, not me. Nothing could ever happen to me. Never me.

Now is different, I know people are captured, tortured, left to rot in the dark. I know I can be harmed, taken, hurt, starved, and blamed for all of it. I know the difference between what happens in real life, and what happens in fiction. In real life you sit confined in a rotting shed that smells of decay, with your hands tied, your ankles tied, and only a small hole in the wall that

gives you a glimpse of a garden for comfort. You sit for days, weeks, months, you lose track of time, you wait for Him to come, you wait for Him to leave, and you wait for Him to be done playing with your dirty, broken, skeletal body. Eventually, you never stop waiting, you want Him to come, you want Him to play with you. You want to be his Sweet forever and always. But He stops coming, He stops playing with you, He is done with you, He places 13 nails into your shed, turns a key, leaves you with your rot, your pain, and your garden. He will move on to another girl, that He will put in another shed; He will leave you in yours to die. All you wanted is the stench of the rot, of the mold, of the decay, and the dark to go away and let you die with your garden on the other side of the wall. So that you will no longer be the imperfection hidden behind such beauty. Nobody will find your body, nobody will remove your rotting corpse from this beauty. And while you are here He will go on forever while your corpse slowly mixes with the rot and decay of your shed.

I don't remember being taken, there was no white van, no stranger following me. Nothing was out of place, then again everything is in place now, so what difference is there? I had been scared when I had first felt the rope, first smelled the rot, first felt the damp wood beneath me, and first felt the dark, still air around me. I do not know how He took me, where, when He took me, but it was Him, He brought me this beauty, He took away my pain, my suffering, He saved me from life, and He brought me my beauty.

I want to be in my garden, His garden, before it is gone, away from this shed, away from the rot, the nails, and the dark. If my rot-ridden corpse is found I don't want Him to be blamed, I don't even want his to see his Sweet all mangled and dirty. I want my Savior to be safe, I want Him, to always think of his sweet as whole, just as He left me. I want Him to know that He saved me. He fed me, He brought me beauty, He brought me light. He made me into His garden, I want my corpse buried near Him, so I can always be with Him. I want Him to know that He gave me life, gave me beauty, and light, and that everything before was meaningless. Tell Him, for me "Thank you for making me your Sweet."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sonya Herbach is a student at UAlbany who majors in European History. She has been an avid reader and writer for the majority of her life. Recently, Sonya has begun to buckle down and start writing more, focusing on psychological and historical horror. She hopes to have more works published soon, and hopes to complete a full novel.

Twitter: <u>@S_Herbach</u>

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/disfiguredbeauty/









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Gallows Hill | R. J. Meldrum

The decision to build the housing estate on top of the hill had been a stroke of genius; there were magnificent views of the surrounding countryside from every angle. The first phase had sold out in three months and signs dotted around the area declared that the second phase of Lilac Hill was open for sale.

Julia closed the front door of her brand-new house and jumped into her car. She called to her husband who was cutting the newly laid turf at the front of their house.

"I'm just popping to the store."

He waved in response.

It was a short drive to the village. As she walked down the main street she noticed a group of people gathered on the sidewalk. The person at the center of the group was Jethro, one of the village's oldest inhabitants. He was talking to anyone willing to listen.

"Lilac Hill? Gallows Hill more like. Place of death it was, place of execution. I wouldn't live up there, won't even go up there after dark. Haunted it is!"

Jethro moved on, not waiting to see the reactions from the people. Julia, mildly thrilled by the tale, finished her shopping and headed home. Parking on the driveway, she exited the car to find her husband pruning the petunias.

"You'll never believe what I heard in the village. One of the locals was saying this area used to be called Gallows Hill! People were executed up here."

William stood, his back cracking.

"Could be. Traditionally gallows sat outside villages on high ground and this is the highest point in the area."

"How morbid!"

"Well, it's not as if we can do much about it, even if it's true."

"I'm not sure I want to live in a place where people were hanged."

"People live in converted churches with graveyards. And I imagine in most houses people have died."

"Well, yes I know, but this is different. If executions were performed here, that makes it different."

William shrugged.

"I'm going to find out. See if Jethro was telling the truth."

"Okay." He felt a sense of trepidation. He hoped Julia wasn't starting again, last time had been bad enough.

After dinner, Julia explored the topic. She checked out the local historical society website. Jethro had been right; the area had been called Gallows Hill since the late eighteenth century and in fact still was; only the housing estate was called Lilac Hill. The location of the gallows themselves was disputed, with different sources disagreeing on the actual spot. But what was incontrovertible was that there had been gallows on the hill. Thieves, highwaymen and various other ruffians had been hanged over the years, their bodies left twisting in the wind as a warning

to others. The gallows had been finally destroyed in the nineteenth century, the location unmarked. It was creepy to think her house could be sitting on the site.

William kept up to date on her investigations, waiting to see if her interest would reach the tipping point. He was worried she'd become obsessed again.

He left the next morning for an overnight visit to one of the factories he inspected. It was a common occurrence and Julia happily settled down for a night on her own. She sat in the lounge and enjoyed the silence. They had only been married a year and she was still getting used to sharing her life with another person. William had been married before, but she'd always lived alone.

With her computer on her lap, she sipped some wine and continued the investigation of Gallows Hill. An infamous highwayman had been executed on the hill. Tall John. Born 1738, died 1773. He and his gang had robbed and killed for two years before being caught. There was an engraving of the man, his face cruel and handsome. That night, alone in her bed, she dreamt of him; his face close to hers, somehow threatening. She didn't tell William about her dream. He would just worry.

Over the next few days she found herself constantly thinking about the gallows. Where had they been located? Where were the graves? Where was Tall John buried? She dreamt of him, his face looming over her. She dreamt of the gallows. In her dream they were crudely built, six feet high, with steps on one side. There was a horizontal single crossbeam, supported at both ends by upright posts. There were two nooses. One held the dangling figure of a victim, freshly executed. The body moved slowly in the wind, twisting around. The other noose was empty. The executioner stood on the platform next to the lever that would open the trapdoor, his face obscured by a black mask. There was a priest standing next to him, reading from a bible. It was all horribly real; horribly vivid. After the dream she woke up sweating, the bedclothes twisted around her. She couldn't conceal her nightmare from William. He was concerned. This was one of her triggers.

"Perhaps you should get some sleeping tablets from the doctor. This nonsense over the gallows seems to be affecting you badly. I wish you hadn't started reading about it."

"It isn't nonsense. Somewhere on this hill is the place where people were killed. It's ghastly to think it could be on our property. We could be sleeping above the graves! I have to find out!"

"Try not to think about it, you're only making yourself anxious. Overwrought. You know what you were like before, we don't want a repetition of that incident."

Julia twitched. She didn't like to be reminded. It was just after they'd married. They had moved into a rented house while the Lilac Hill house was being built. William had shown her a woman's shoe he found in the attic. The leather was cracked and the sole worn thin. She remembered staring at it, suddenly convinced it belonged to a murdered woman whose body was still somewhere in the house. She had no evidence, but she was utterly fixated. It was irrational, but she couldn't help herself. She knew she had to find the body; it haunted her dreams every night. Her obsession lasted three months; weeks of hell for William as she obsessively searched

the house, even going as far as to dig up the cellar and garden. Her nights had been wracked with excruciating nightmares, her screams keeping the whole neighborhood awake. It was only after the police had been called that she'd agreed to counseling.

"I thought moving to the country would help. Please try to stop thinking about the gallows."

"I can't! It's preying on my mind."

"Do you want to go and spend a few days at your mother's? That might help."

"No, I want to stay here."

She got up and headed downstairs to make coffee. As she stood over the kettle, she admitted he was right. She had to stop obsessing over the gallows, it was damaging her mental health. She had always been slightly neurotic and it was triggered by the oddest things, a shoe, in an unknown location.

She resolved to be strong. She focused on the tips the counselor had given her, tips that would stop her obsessing and would allow her to focus on the important things in her life. She hoped the strategy would work; she didn't want to think what would happen if the dreams didn't stop.

After a week, they did stop, much to the relief of them both. William was especially relieved; he was due to spend five days away at a conference and had been intending to cancel if she wasn't any better. Since she was alright, he headed to the airport, his conscience clear. Julia, happy the dreams had gone, settled down to a few days of peace. She waved at the departing car then grabbed the dog leash. It was time to take little Gem for a walk.

The evening was clear, dry and warm. As she walked, she wondered what the hill had been like before the houses had been built. Probably all trees. The developers had done a very thorough job of clearing the area, but thankfully had left a few mature oaks. There was one at the top of her street, a magnificent specimen about fifty feet high, with a trunk at least five feet thick. As Julia walked towards it, a sudden piercing pain lanced through her head. She knew what it was; the onset of one of her periodic migraines. She turned back towards home, hoping she was in time to take her tablets. Out of the corner of her eye, something caught her attention. Something under the tree. It was the gallows. The image shimmered and flickered. It looked exactly as it had in her dream. Her head pulsed with pain. She made it back the house without fainting. She took the tablets and then fell into bed. She dreamt of the gallows and of Tall John.

The next morning, her head clear, she'd reasoned she been hallucinating. Her obsession and the dreams had bled through into her conscious brain. She didn't tell William when he phoned that evening. She didn't want him to worry or, even worse, cut his conference short. He had his career to consider and these conferences were good networking opportunities.

That afternoon she walked Gem again. As she headed past the tree she smiled to herself. It was silly what her imagination had done to her. Suddenly, her head exploded with pain again. She saw the gallows. This time she could make out every detail, right down to the knots in the wood. Instead of running, she stopped and stared, Gem standing forgotten at her side. She saw the executioner, dressed in black, and the priest, clutching his bible. She saw the dead man,

dangling from the rope. The sight of his dead eyes, staring directly at her, broke her. She ran home. This was getting out of hand. She decided not to walk Gem again, William could take her out when he got back.

That night she dreamt. She found herself walking up the street towards the oak. It was daytime, but she was entirely alone. She stood at the base of the gallows. The executioner looked down and his eyes met hers. It was Tall John, his face handsome and terrible. She heard a voice in her head.

"Come, climb the steps. Join us."

Part of her mind tried to wake up, but her body would not obey. Her eyes were fixed on Tall John.

"Come, it will only take a moment. I know my job and I do it well. You won't feel anything, just a brief tug."

Involuntarily, she stepped forward. Her unconscious mind screamed for her to stop.

"Come, it's painless, just like falling asleep."

Above her Tall John and the priest beckoned. She climbed the steps to the platform. Tall John guided her. She placed her neck into the empty noose. It was tightened. The priest mumbled a blessing. She relaxed, accepting her fate, it was alright now. Nothing to worry about. Closing her eyes, she waited for the sound of the lever.

William got back from his conference three days later. Gem met him at the front door, frantic with thirst and hunger. Ignoring the dog, he called Julia's name, worried when he couldn't find her. After searching the house, he headed to the garage. That was where he found her. She was hanging from the support beam, her face black and distended. It was clear she'd been dead for quite a while.

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

Facebook: Richard Meldrum



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Escape Velocity | Steven Wynne

In March of 2015, my father was rushed to Bundy Medical Center where emergency surgery removed a gelatinous tumor the size of a lemon. I had no idea why they used that as a descriptor, truth be told, but 19 months later I'm wondering if the doctor's use of such an odd comparison was by design. To make all of us accustomed to things that don't quite fit, and to accept what we're given and make things fit as best we can.

We learned my father had a Stage Four Glioblastoma; a tumor known to spread through the brain with vicious aggression, and a documented resilience in the face of chemotherapy. It was curious to hear the doctors talk about things like 'time left' and never once hearing the word 'terminal'. I guess this is because when someone is terminally ill, they have a very reasonable set of time in which the patient in question will expire, whereas in cases of Glioblastoma, some people can live five, maybe ten years before they are cut down by God's divine plan. Most, however, are gone within eighteen months. About 80%, roughly.

Nineteen months later, my father has outlasted the lion's share of others so afflicted, but it's become very plain to see now that he's put everything into this fight to beat the numbers. Now that he's earned himself a respectable spot in the rankings, he's finally willing to lie down and rest after years of work in the world we are all shot into like a cannon. Our trajectories, no matter how strong, will always submit to the will of gravity and send us crashing into the dirt upon which our foundations rest.

His has been a strong, stable attempt at escape velocity. Even when given the prognosis, and the first couple of meetings with the oncologist, he still believed he would one day soon break through the Newtonian force that pulled him to the ground. Nothing would stop him from leaving this Earth to endlessly search that great vacuum to find ... whatever.

For those of us around him, we find ourselves at a loss for status. The father of my brother, sisters and I, the husband to my mother, was followed home from the hospital by Disease and Death. Two new members of the family that join us for every meal. They do not speak, but they are always present. They find space on crowded couches and sit in while we watch television with Dad. They run their bony, pale fingers through his hair, the first caress killing it to the root, the second pulls it from the scalp to fall onto the armrest in little piles.

They have been with us for longer than most. They stand behind him every second of the day. Their teeth show in wicked smiles as he grunts in pain, trying to rise from his char. As turning the doorknob with his right hand becomes more difficult, their knuckles crack in anticipation. They don't like waiting this long, and finally, their months of hard work and dedication is about to pay off. When Dad tells Mom if adult diapers ever become a serious option to just bring him his gun so he can get it over with, the specters behind his recliner are shaking with excitement. Mom leaves the room, her eyelids holding back rivers with titanic strength. The two dark figures are smiling such shiny smiles that it's almost hard to be mad at them. They're like children in their glee; they're actually *holding fucking hands*.

And just for a second, one of them looks as us sitting on the couch. It looks back to Dad

before elbowing its partner and pointing a bony, dead finger at us. Their smiles never falter as their empty eyes pass over us. Suddenly, my brother and sisters rise from the couch and leave the room. Death and Disease keep their eyes leveled on me, the single protuberant finger pointed directly at my chest.

The last thing I see before they disappear is their smile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Steven Wynne was born during Reagan's second term in Central Pennsylvania, and has been dreaming of escape ever since. He writes horror, dark, and weird fiction, and when he can help it, he avoids writing in the third person. He lives with his wife and cat on the outskirts of a dirty town where nobody notices them, and the neighbors keep to themselves.

Facebook: Steven Wynne

Blog: http://www.stevewynne.blogspot.com



Available Exclusively on Amazon

Sylvia | JP Lorence

The man and the woman stood before the threshold of the rented room and embraced, kissing passionately. He slid the key card into the lock and pushed the hotel room door open, pulling away from her slightly as he did so. Once again, he got the strange feeling that she was somehow *sticky*, something he had felt in touching her several times that night. Dismissing the impression once again, he led his long haired prize into the room by the hand and briefly reflected on the events of the night that had led him here with her.

Lance Henry James looked himself over in the mirror once more, patting down his hair and admiring his slickened appearance. He would be a real lady killer tonight. He secured his wallet, room keys, and pipe case and headed for the door of his hotel room.

Lance stopped himself halfway to the exit of his hotel room and sat down again on the bed. He withdrew the pipe case and opened it. He gazed at the contents knowingly and broke into a slightly disturbed grin.

It was so much more to him than a glass tube and a vial. It was a train ticket, one that ran a line towards self-validation. At least validation of himself, although few others would concur. He stepped back in front of the mirror and took stock of himself again. His pupils were widely dilated thanks to the contents of that same case, and he intended to dilate someone else's tonight. Here in this rented room.

He braced himself and headed for the door once again. This time he made it all the way through without questioning himself. He made a silent promise that he wouldn't again for the remainder of the night.

Lance sized up the nightclub he was about to walk into. *Typical low grade poser bar*, he thought to himself. But it was perfect for what he had in mind, and that wasn't listening to pop music. The room held around two hundred people, most of them in their early twenties. This was the crowd he was looking for. She would be here, he could almost smell her.

He ordered a gin and tonic from the bar and began his search of the room. It was littered with pretty young things, some of them clearly unaccompanied. Lance had become reasonably good at picking that one thing out quickly, a few good fights had been endured before he had learned to see the signals without asking. A particularly attractive redhead walked right in front of him without even glancing his way. No matter. The night was young. Younger than him, anyway.

A pair of girls hit the dance floor as the music turned to something eighties sounding, although he couldn't identify the band. Neither of them were what he had in mind, and they looked as if they were on a date with each other, in any case.

He backed away from his vantage point with the vague idea of refilling his drink when he made contact with her. They bumped backs at an opportune moment, for him at least. Lance spun around with alarm hoping he hadn't provoked something awkward. The sight that greeted

his eyes addressed his concerns completely. He looked into the eyes of a beautiful young woman, perhaps under thirty, with long blondish brown hair and dazzling eyes.

She touched him on the shoulder and said, "I'm sorry, I didn't see you there." Lance was choked up at the sight of her, trying to tell her there was no need to apologize, but he couldn't even speak as he gazed into her eyes. They seemed to split, it was as if her pupils divided right in front of him into eight or so. He shook his head to clear it, this was obviously the drug coming on and screwing with him. After a moment, she just looked like a beautiful young girl again. "Oh, no, my fault entirely. Might I ask you your name?"

She giggled slightly. "Sylvia. What's yours?"

"Lance." He was about to make one up, but his instinctive reaction was to tell her the truth.

"Well, what brings you here, Lance?" She seemed to ask in all honestly, as if the answer wasn't self-evident.

"Wanted to get out my hotel room for awhile. I'm here on business, and hoped to see a little of the town's nightlife before I have to start working tomorrow." He had gotten over his initial reaction by now. She seemed to take the story at face value. She eyed him up and down thoroughly, and seemed to be sizing him up with a slight hint of a smile on her face. This one looked like a winner. He marveled at her appearance. "Would you like a drink, Sylvia?"

She touched him lightly again before responding. "I'd love one, thank you. Red wine is my usual." Her eyes flashed as she withdrew her hand this time. Lance felt extremely excited and mildly disturbed at the same time, but he braced himself against the latter feeling. He wasn't letting this one get away.

Two hours later they were both laughing and kissing and passing through the door of Lance's hotel room. They had drank a reasonable amount, although he had seen that the drinks seemed to have little effect on her. She could hold her wine like a pro, no two ways about that. They had talked at length and danced for a time at the club, and he noticed that every time she touched him on the arm like that, she seemed to shiver slightly and her eyes flashed that way again, with a shine that looked more like malice each time. But after a few more highballs he had stopped noticing anything but her hair. Sylvia was truly stunning.

They embraced and sat down on the bed together, then Lance pulled away and said, "I have something special to show you. I know you'll like it." He withdrew the case from his coat pocket and took a small drag off of the pipe.

She looked at him without surprise and asked, "What is it?" It didn't even sound like a question the way she said it.

"Something to relax you." he replied. He offered it to her. Lance relied on this particular tool to have his way with women. He just needed them to be rendered powerless to get what he wanted. He could have brought her here and enjoyed the night with a conscious and willing partner, but he just wasn't that kind of guy.

"No thanks, I'll be fine." she said. "Now I have something special to show you." She put her hand on the back of his neck and began kissing him as she leaned him down under her on the bed. As Sylvia pulled her hand away, a web like thread seemed to stretch between them for a second. He momentarily thought the drug might be causing him to hallucinate, but the impression had been far too real. He felt the back of his neck, and it felt sticky. He looked up at her in confusion and saw that her eyes seemed to have split up again, just as he had seen at the club. Then he noticed two thin protrusions sticking out of her shirt just below her breasts. They looked like short teeth. *Oh My God, What the Fuck*-

She grabbed him by the shoulders and thrust her body against his, driving the sharp projections deep into his torso. He felt a blinding pain, as if acid was pumping straight into his chest, but it disappeared just as suddenly only to be replaced by a glorious warmth, one far deeper than anything the drug could have provoked. He forgot all about his panic, his disgust at what he was looking at, and his vision quickly blurred. The last thing he saw was her mouth widening.

Sylvia drove a large dose of her venom directly into Lance, hugging him tightly to avoid missing the precise placement of her teeth. Her objective was to inject the digestive enzyme into his chest cavity rather than his bloodstream, because she wanted to ensure that his brain remained intact for at least another several minutes. There was something else she wanted to digest here.

Twin feelers extended out of her mouth and wove themselves into his eyes. They were already showing the telltale yellow tint of internal digestion, so she knew she would have to be quick if this was to work. She drove the pair of antennae straight into his brain and began to feel around for the key spots. After mincing a considerable portion of the organ, the terminal point was found and the process began.

Lance Henry James found himself on a playground. He recognized this perfectly, he was back in third grade and this was recess. He knew he didn't really belong here, but he suddenly found himself unable to remember who else he was supposed to be. He was a third grader again.

There was Molly on the jungle gym. He hated Molly. She was smarter than him, and he pretended to be her friend so he could copy from her homework. The young Lance had a mild learning disability, and was too ashamed of it to let on. Methods like this kept his condition secret.

"Hi, Molly." She looked at him with a scowl.

"Lance, my math homework was gone. You took it, I know you did."

Lance flushed. He had stolen her paper, but he could never admit it. He couldn't understand the assignment, and he needed hers to copy before the teacher called for it. "You probably dropped it." He could see she didn't believe him.

"No, you took it. I saw you by my book."

Lance boiled with rage. She needed to be taught to keep her mouth shut. He looked away, and when he looked at her again, her face was bruised. "You did this."

"What?"

"You hurt me! You pushed me off and I fell and then I looked like this. You did it because I called you a liar!

He hadn't experienced the incident of shoving her off the jungle gym here in the dream, but he knew he had done it. He could recall it perfectly now. She looked at him mockingly after he denied the theft and he had lost control. She had burst out crying with gravel still sticking to her face, and for the next week she had looked like she did now in front of him. The entire third grade class was reminded every day of what young Lance had done, and he had never recovered from the shame of it.

The boy on the jungle gym burst into tears. He knew he was dreaming now. "I'm sorry, Molly. I didn't mean it. I just..." He fell down down and buried his head in his lap and sobbed uncontrollably. She walked up to him and raised his head, pressing her forehead to his. Molly looked him right in his tear streamed eyes and said, "I forgive you, Lance."

Sylvia withdrew her feelers from the already liquefying brain and turned over on the bed, staring straight at the ceiling. The memory extraction had been far more traumatic for her than she had expected, more because of the emotional intensity of the experience than what she had seen. But she had gotten what she wanted.

This was a predator, and she had determined some time ago to understand the mindset of those she fed on. Lance had had the misfortune to attempt his game against a *real* predator, an arachnid—human hybrid of a type that had remained hidden from the rest of the human race for this long.

The venom had been in his body long enough to do its work. She turned over and began the other side of the feeding process, placing her mouth directly over one of the holes in his chest. By the time she finished, the remains of Lance Henry James looked like a balloon that had leaked most of its air.

She wrapped his remains in the bedsheets and stuffed the bundle under the bed. It would be found, of course, but this would buy her some time and let the remaining venom break down as much of the body as it could. She would be far away from here by the time the skeleton was discovered.

Sylvia looked in the full length mirror on the closet door and took stock of her appearance. This hadn't been a bad profile, but she couldn't keep it for now. A different woman had to be seen leaving than the one who had entered.

She sat down in the corner of the room and strained as hard as she could. Her skin started to ripple and her bones contracted slightly, and within a few minutes a completely different girl stood up. She looked at herself in the mirror again, and this time a shorter redheaded teenager looked back. It suddenly occurred to her that freckles would have been a nice detail, but it hadn't occurred to her. No matter. She straightened her clothing, now somewhat long on her. Her outfit was badly stained, but that was inevitable. Sylvia could make her escape looking this way. She gathered her purse and coat and left the hotel room.

As she walked down the hallway, it occurred to her that she didn't know where she was going once she left the building. She had a sudden urge to ask a young boy pushing a janitorial

cart that she passed, but she held off, knowing conversation with anyone was a severe liability after what had just taken place in the room. But unfortunately, she glanced his way as she passed, and the boy caught her eye.

"Do you need help, Miss?" he said, intercepting her slightly. She touched him on the shoulder and looked into his eyes.

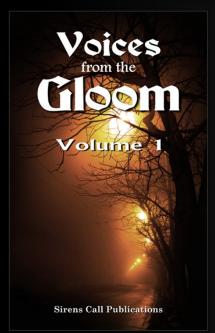
"No, I think I'll be okay." A look of the deepest softness and sympathy came from her towards the young man for no more than a couple of seconds. Then the young Sylvia wound up and punched him in the face. He recoiled, wiping blood off of his lip and looking aghast.

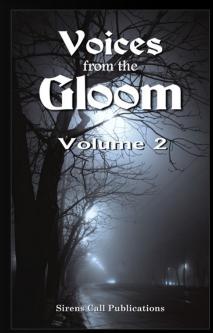
"Don't mention it." were the last words he heard from her as she bounded down the stairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: JP Lorence is an amateur science fiction author and performance poet from Vancouver, Canada. When not annoying people on stage he spends most of his free time writing and sitting along the local coastline. His previous stories have been published in *Birdy Told Me*, *New Lit Salon*, *Oddville Press*, and *Grey Borders*.

Facebook: JP Lorence

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This Day | Aspen deLainey

"Another day, another dollar," I whisper, surreptitiously opening my online bank account, depositing most of this paycheck into the joint account, closing it quickly as personal use of our work computers is strictly prohibited. I delete the transaction from my browser before taking a look around the office.

My fellow employees hunch over their keyboards, striving to keep up with the extra workload last month's layoffs burdened us with. No one complains. No one voices any dissension to the piled-on work, as no one wants to be the next head axed while our company struggles to maintain enough profit for shareholder dividends and obscene executive bonuses. No one wants to stand in the unemployment line, hoping to get one of the few jobs left in this economy. No one.

Working through lunch, ears perked the whole day as the bosses walk the floor looking for any excuse to berate an under-performing employee, we manage to clear most of the load; unfortunately proving upper management's belief that the department had been overstaffed.

I heard a snippet of conversation as I passed the senior management office this morning. Sounded like they're looking at outsourcing our department. I can see the writing on the wall. We're doomed. Doesn't matter any longer how hard we work.

At five-thirty I lock the uncompleted files in the cabinet, powering down my workstation just as the manager returns for his unpaid overtime headcount. Only two of my fellow employees glance up, one warning me with a flick of his eyes.

I no longer care.

As I shrug into my winter coat and pull on my gloves in anticipation of the cold outside, I nod to the boss.

"See you tomorrow," I say to the office at large. No one answers.

I watch the boss mark his clipboard, narrowing his eyes, glaring at me for my daring to leave on time for the first time since the layoffs started - over a year ago.

"Fuck it," I mutter as the door slams a death knell.

Dusk falls as I board the transit. Walking to my car in the dark I grope through my deepest pocket for that all-important, crumpled piece of paper. The car warms as I unfold the much worn list.

Check—Company insurance plan.

Mandatory sign up after a three month probation when I started working here.

Check—One million dollars in whole life insurance. Check.

Smiling, I remember taking it out one year, three months ago, payments up to date for the year.

Check—Mortgage insurance. I checked last Friday night.

All in order; the T's crossed and the I's dotted. Payment yesterday.

Check—Car and house insurance paid for the year.

As we've been doing forever.

Check—House reshingled and painted last summer, furnace cleaned and checked last month, hot water tank replaced in the spring, more insulation added to the attic.

Check—Credit cards all paid off.

Like we'd been doing for over a year; even with the purchase of new appliances Marion thought we really didn't need yet.

Check—Will.

Both of us had them written two years ago.

Check—Weather.

Perfect. Cold ice fog glazing everything, snowing lightly, bit of a breeze in city so the prairie route I take will be gusty.

I start the long drive home, slowly as usual, allowing commuters in more of a hurry to pass me. No need to rush. Plenty of time.

Finally my exit out of the city nears. With my blinker on, I edge over, slowing to ease onto my bridge over the highway turning to the dark secondary roads that eventually lead to our little acreage. I turn on my high beams as the road takes me further away from the city lights. I need the extra brightness out here in the wild where occasional farm yard lights, set well back from the road, don't light the roads like city streetlights.

With half an eye out for the field entrance I'd decided on earlier, I again review the steps I'd taken.

There! I slow, pull in and park. Filling the cardboard coffee cup I'd saved with my now crumpled list, I step out into the cold. I struggle to light the paper, finally sheltering it from the early winter snow and breeze under my coat's edge. I hold the warmth until the cup itself smolders. Setting it down between several large pieces of gravel, I watch, waiting until every bit of planning evidence burns. I lift the ashes, scattering them into the wind. No trace can remain.

Returning to the warm car, I speed up the journey a little. Again I increase my speed, my little car jerking against stronger gusts of wind.

I've chosen the place, a downhill spot into a swampy gully where the road curves just a little too much, and several large boulders have been placed to anchor a telephone pole against moose rubbings.

Amazing how much damage even one of those majestic beasts can do to one pole over a season.

My mind drifts to Marion, our marriage and our wonderful children. A vision of the first time I saw Marion, her long legs, her perfect body, her shy smile as I tried to disentangle my candy floss from her hair; as if fate had decided to take that moment to play with her long hair, ensuring we met. Soul mates from that moment.

I remember the panic in her eyes when she first told me of her pregnancy, though we'd talked of children in our future. Our someday future when we'd finished our education, traveled, made our fortune. Our joy and fulfillment as we met our daughter after that long night of fear and strain. I can see the peace, the relaxation of her country-bred shoulders when we finally found our little acreage, the pride she took in the little kitchen garden and that first egg our hen laid.

Marion will have the house free and clear plus enough insurance to allow her to stay home. I'd given up driving all the way to work's overpriced parking to pay for that premium. Should keep the wolves from the door until the little ones reached adulthood.

I will not, cannot let Marion, nor the children, lose all that we'd worked so hard for. They didn't deserve...

Hell, what am I saying? None of us, not one person, deserves what the companies are doing to us. What those Haves in their ivory towers, intent on lining their already bulging pockets, are doing to us.

I don't see any way out except this. This form of survival.

We'd talked about our final wishes several times over the years. When we'd bought the acreage Marion and I selected our trees, the one our ashes were to be deposited under - Marion, that elegant willow near the stream at the end of the yard and mine the lone spruce at the top of the driveway. We'd promised each other that we wouldn't spend anything on a lavish funeral, just a nice simple wake with close friends and family after cremation. We'd even written it down in the wills and on a card in our wallets alongside the signed organ donation card.

I'm nearing the spot. I can hear my heart beating faster and faster. My breath comes so fast I'm in danger of fogging up the windows. My hands grip the wheel hard; so hard my knuckles hurt. I press harder on the gas pedal.

Do I have the courage? Can I give up my life so they can be assured of a decent future? Can I not?

I'm at the point of no return. Either I slow down, make it safely home another day...Or I end it all.

The whole world slows down. Decision time.

I fishtail, spin. Braking, I lose total control. My car pirouettes, dancing down the hill to the sound of my heart's beat in my ears. The boulders are so very close, to my left, against my shoulder.

I hear glass breaking, feel the cold wind rush in, brushing my cheek like a lover's hand.

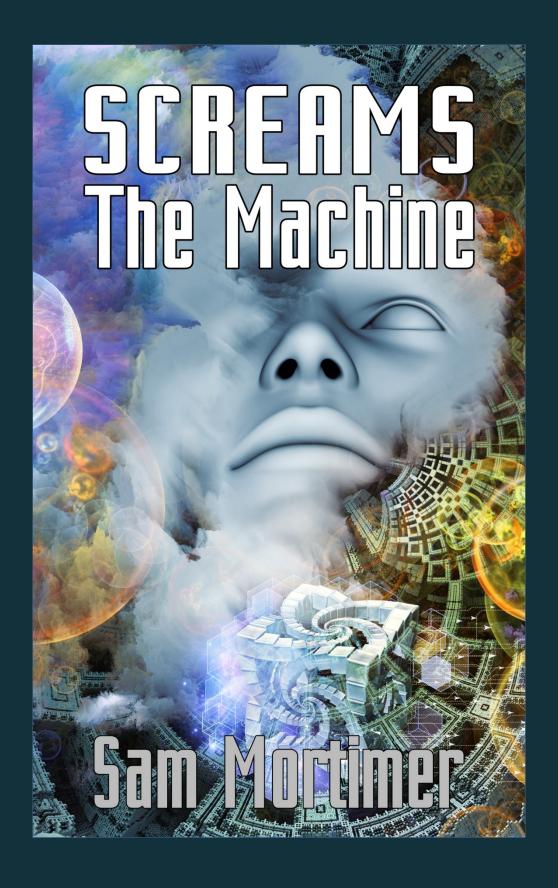
I thought I'd see my life pass before me, flipping through all the good memories just one last time. Not the gush of warmth where no warmth should be.

I hang, suspended in a twilight zone. I can see the whole scene, headlights highlighting the swamp, wheels spinning lazily, going nowhere.

Marion, I love you.

I feel no pain. Just the sensation of a sigh not quite completed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Aspen lives at the edge of the Rockies where the bitter winter winds howl unhindered across sparsely populated land. Watching dust dogs play across farmland and gravel roads through the seasons whets her imagination for the paranormal, and the occasional stranger passing stirs macabre visions scenes best written not spoken. Aspen has published two urban fantasy/paranormal novels; *Love 'n Lies* and *Howling Hearts*, and many short stories. She hopes to keep finding homes for her works.



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

Mr. Mean | Patrick Winters

Mr. Mean—that's what I always called him.

My friend—though he hasn't always been the most friendly sort, especially to others.

The voice inside my head—which wasn't my own, awful things whispered to me in the dark of night and the dull hours of the day.

I can't recall if he was always there, but it certainly seems like he was, looking back on my so-called life. A part of me recollects a time when I was still a baby, when I heard him cooing at me in my crib as I dribbled and looked about at the darkness, searching for the grave voice that didn't belong to either my mommy or my daddy. Whether this is a true memory or just a fancy, though, I'm not certain.

Whenever he'd first showed up, that was the moment I started listening to every single word he had to say. He often said mean things—hence the name—but I listened, anyway. I was lonely, even back then, and his companionship was the only constant one I had. So, I accepted his harsh comments about my parents, my baby brother (when he eventually came along), and the other children at school, who had always kept their distance from me.

The things he said would start to grow steadily worse, as time went by, but at least he spoke to me. That's all I've ever really cared about.

It was Mr. Mean who'd said I should smash the fingers of that snooty girl on the monkey bars, one afternoon way back in kindergarten. I can't even recall her name. But the scream she'd let out as my fist came down, and the pained look on her face as she rolled in the dirt—that, I certainly can remember. And Mr. Mean's laughter, mixing with my own stifled giggles. He'd said I needed to 'assert' myself that day, though I didn't know what that meant back then.

It was Mr. Mean who'd said I should kick our neighbor's corgi after it had barked at me one too many times. I think that was back when I was six? Not quite sure. After much prodding from my friend, I'd finally worked up the nerve to do so, one scorching summer day. I'd snuck into Mrs. Daily's yard and did it while the dog was asleep on its chain. I didn't stop kicking until it had stopped breathing, and until Mr. Mean said it was enough. Mrs. Daily moved out of town shortly after, and I don't think she ever suspected what I had done.

It was Mr. Mean who told me to put the Sedan in reverse one day when I was seven. I have no trouble remembering that day. My daddy had left me and my baby brother in the car. He had run back inside the house for something, keys in the ignition and the engine running. "Put it in reverse and get out," my friend had said. "Wait until you see what happens."

He'd laughed as he said it, so I thought it'd surely make for a funny prank. So, I did it. But when a speeding truck came out of nowhere and came crashing into the Sedan, I was scared, and I definitely didn't laugh. At my brother's funeral, Mr. Mean reassured me that it was quite funny, and one day, when I was older, he'd explain why it was.

He still hasn't, though.

When I'd... we'd left home and went out on the road just three weeks ago, Mr. Mean had been the one to suggest it. We'd leave my parents behind, to never see them again. I didn't think

they'd care much if I left (mourning my brother, even after all these years, would take precedence over missing me). We had money, but no car of our own, and my friend said we could walk the roads until someone picked us up. Then, we could beat the driver and take the ride for our own. We ended up doing just that, leaving the old man who'd stopped for us bleeding in a ditch. He had hollered quite a bit, at first, but he fell silent after a few good shots to the head. Mr. Mean had asked if I wanted to check on whether or not the old-timer was still alive. When I'd said no, it didn't really matter to me, Mr. Mean seemed alright with that. We drove on. And since then, we've found ourselves in the Big Apple, at our journey's end.

Now, sitting on a park bench and wondering what comes next, I can hear Mr. Mean murmuring in my mind. His voice has been growing louder these last few weeks, and I'm listening, as I always have.

He's telling me to look over to a jogging couple. To follow them and cut them with the knife in my pocket—the one I don't remember putting there—and to lick up the blood as it pours out. I know that shouldn't sound too appealing, but it really doesn't bother me.

I can taste the blood... No, we can taste the blood, and it hasn't even wetted our tongue yet. But it will. It will.

And Mr. Mean will have had his say again.

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

Website: Patrick Winters

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Deathly Cold | *Nicky P Gardiner*

It was an eerie, surreal scene. Those were the only words Samuel could use to describe what was before him. It was early evening, perhaps five in the afternoon, or maybe later. In truth, time meant so little anymore that he had discarded his watch, fearing it would just snag on something and maybe cost him his life. Yes, eerie and most definitely surreal. That was it.

Before him, as far as the eye could see from the pier's decking that he stood upon was a sea of people. Many had marched into the waters and struggled until they had filled their lungs with it and sank to the bottom; he could even see their shadows milling about under the surface. Those still on the pier reminded him briefly of a rock concert—all those shapes, thousands, if not tens of thousands of bodies, mostly standing still or moving listlessly around the building and pier he'd called home for months now.

Those shambling shapes were of course not people anymore; not truly. They were infected and they stank of death. How the plague came about no one knew. The few survivors Samuel had encountered all had their own theories; from the religious that it was a test or the end of times, to the plain bonkers that it was genetically modified food that had caused the outbreak. Whatever the cause, it had spread like wild fire and those infected tried to bite and eat any living flesh they could see. The army had tried to contain it and failed. Samuel had lost everything he'd held dear; his wife and daughter were lost to him, although he hoped they were still alive. He'd tried calling them when the phones were working but just got the answer machine. He'd headed home from work to find the house abandoned. He'd waited for days until the hordes of dead had broken through a door.

Then he had fled, banding together with a few other souls, but they had either died or left him behind. He had run, but nowhere had been safe as the undead forced down doors by sheer press of bodies. Eventually Samuel had found a boat, loaded it up and headed down the estuary away from London. He was no navigator or sailor, and had been glad of the engine. He'd taken the boat out of London and had headed east along the River Thames eventually passing seaside towns like Leigh-on-Sea and Westcliff. All along the river banks he'd seen the shambling shapes of the Zombies.

They were now parodies of their former selves. Some were mere children dressed for school, their faces now blood-stained around their mouths which gnashed spasmodically. Others were adults; some of which were dressed for the beach in shorts as it had been a warm summer, which looked even more out of place now the temperature had changed.

This is where he had met Sarah, the first survivor since he'd left London. She was fleeing along the beach, jumped in and swam for the boat. He knew he was too far out, but such was the lady's desperation she was attempting to reach him regardless. With a curse, Samuel changed his heading to pick the girl up. He hadn't wanted to. He'd found that, as people were getting more and more desperate, the worst aspects of human nature were surfacing; there was a degree of risk in teaming up with anybody.

As he'd drawn close he had leaned over the side and helped haul the soaking woman onto the deck, she weighed a lot more than he had expected given the water-soaked clothing and she flopped onto the deck panting hard.

"Thanks," She said between gasps, brushing her blonde drenched hair from her face.

Samuel just nodded and headed back to the tiller.

"Where had you been hiding?" He asked eventually once Sarah had taken off her waterlogged coat and wrung herself out as best she could. The boat was basic; a simple sail, some oars and an outboard motor, so there was nowhere for her to go and shed her clothes in private.

"I was held up in a store with four other people... but..." She began to fill up with tears.

Samuel had wanted to tell her it was okay, but that was a lie. Instead he just said, "You don't have to tell me."

They sat in silence for some time after that.

"Where are we headed?" Sarah had asked.

"As far as we can get," was Samuel's only answer. In truth he hadn't thought beyond getting out of London. The population had been dense *before* the outbreak so now it was a virtual necropolis. He'd figured getting somewhere with a smaller population was key to survival.

They had just reached Southend-On-Sea; it's truly huge pier dominating the horizon when the engine sputtered and died.

"Out of fuel," Samuel announced. Sarah reached for the oars, and Samuel got up to help her.

He didn't see the blow coming; it caught him under the ribs and the boat rocked. The next thing he knew he had plunged head first into the freezing water. Involuntarily and in shock he took a breath and gagged on the sea water. When he surfaced Sarah was already rowing away. At least I'm close to shore he thought, but he was unwilling to give up on his ride just yet. As he started to swim towards the retreating vessel something grabbed his left ankle. Shocked, Samuel looked down just as he was yanked below the surface. He screamed in horror at what he saw, the bubbles from his mouth exploding up to the surface. His wrist was then grabbed by a bony hand, the figure which held it had a shrivelled face but no eyes; they had decayed first in the water. Little fish swam around the figure, picking off its flesh. As Samuel fought to get away and out from underwater he felt the corpse lift from the seabed beneath him. He broke the surface gasping for air before its weight dragged him down again into the chillingly cold water.

I am going to die, he thought. Suddenly anger flared in him and, despite his instincts, he dove under the surface towards the creature that had him trapped. It was trying to pull his foot towards its mouth and even as he watched it bit ineffectually into his boot. Samuel punched it but the water slowed his impact, so he grabbed its head in both hands and forced it back, further than a human neck could possibly turn. There was a snap and he let the head tumble slowly to the sea bed where it gnashed futilely in the silt. The hand's grasp lessened and he burst to the surface.

Looking around he could see Sarah was a good distance away and had raised the sail. *Damn*, he thought.

Samuel made for land twice; the first time he had been chased right back into the freezing water. Summer was well and truly over—not that the water was ever warm here. The sheer amount of undead was staggering and he hated heading back in fearing what was unseen below the waves. The waters here were far from crystal clear and were more a brown-grey in color than the clear water of the Mediterranean. On his second trip to the shore he found a small rowing boat but it had no oars, so he was forced to improvise using a dustbin lid he'd found on the shore line.

With no other plan he headed for the pier.

The pier seemed much larger up close; its solid struts towering over Samuels head. He had approached it at its furthest end from the coastline; luckily the tide was just the right height that he could just about reach the railings to pull himself up. He smiled when he reached the top despite the cold. There was only a handful of the undead. *In small numbers they're not a challenge unless they catch you by surprise* he thought, briefly reflecting on the fate of James, one of the people he'd been surviving with in London.

Using the dustbin lid he battered the first two who turned to face him. The third he pitched over the railings as he did the following few. There wasn't much left at this end of the pier; a few small buildings, an abandoned lifeboat station with nothing he could use, a small lifeboat shop which sold souvenirs and a small cafe. It was here that Samuel set up camp and dried his clothing. He was also able to swap his top for a souvenir t-shirt.

Once changed, he armed himself with a knife from the cafe and a broom handle with which he could hit things from afar. Walking down the pier towards the land he found only one more zombie which he knocked to the floor with the broom before stabbing it through the eye. About halfway down the pier he discovered the reason for the lack of zombies; the middle of the pier was burnt out completely. The wooden boards near Samuel's feet were blackened and the gap was about fifteen or twenty feet across. The only remains of the pier in this section were the metal struts that stood like a skeleton in the opening with some warped by the heat from the fire. To his right ran the tracks of the small pier's train; this too was melted and the carcass of the train itself stood as a burnt-out wreck. Samuel wondered if the blaze had started there. Beyond the gap stood hundreds of zombies; they surged forward on sensing him and fell pitifully into the gap and the crashing waves below. One individual managed to impale herself through the breast and hung limply just above the waves reaching out a hand towards him and gnashing her teeth frantically. Samuel, seeing the area was secure, turned and walked away.

Samuel survived like this for months. The seasons had moved on and the weather had most definitely changed now—there was a colder breeze and the waves had become choppier. It was during this time his small boat had gone missing. Not that he could have got far on it. He kept himself busy; initially he'd nearly eaten all the food left in the cafe, but soon realized he needed to ration out, so he had gathered up some crab lines. There were loads of these in the small shop and he was now catching crab, as well as the occasional fish. There was more than one fishing rod left behind by fisherman in the chaos. Samuel had also made an SOS distress sign on the end of the pier, which was probably insane as he hadn't seen a single plane in months.

Soon the snow had come and the temperature plummeted. The fish had stopped biting and he was starving. That's when he decided to take a walk. And found himself here, in this eerie and surreal situation.

In the dead of winter he stood at the gaping hole in the pier. It's ruined blackened edge still noticeable in the snow. He watched the zombies all oddly dressed for summer; their bodies, no longer producing heat, appeared icy and were topped with snow. He could still see the impaled woman hanging below him—as the tide had risen and fallen back so many times, rot and the fish had taken most of her lower half into the sea, leaving just her upper torso hanging there. Samuel could see some of her internal organs dangling from her ruined rib cage and on seeing him she reached up for him again. The other zombies turned at the noise, saw Samuel, walked towards the hole, and began falling in one after another to be replaced, again and again. He gazed up looking at the horde before him; it was never-ending. It was like all the world's undead had come here. *Am I truly the last one alive?* Samuel wondered.

It was so cold. Not cold like it was just the ending of a year, but the twilight of a life, or maybe all life. The fish had stopped biting, as had the crabs. At first he had thought maybe it was just the fact they were feasting on the dead.... but what if that meant they too were infected? Maybe they had likewise died. Thoughts of being eaten by zombie fish if he fell into the water filled his mind. It all just seemed hopeless to Samuel. It had been months since he'd seen a living soul and then she had struck him and left him for dead. His wife Maria and daughter Sophie were probably dead, or worse, by now. He looked into the creatures dead eyes and screamed, "LEAVE ME ALONE! Why won't you leave me alone?" and began to cry. The sudden outburst just made the horde more frenzied, causing more to topple into the sea. Wiping tears from his eyes Samuel decided to head to bed.

Samuel awoke to a crash and the sound of footfalls outside. Briefly he thought he was back in his house and that the footfalls were that of his daughter coming to bounce on his bed, but then reality crept in and he shot bolt upright. There was another crash and then their groaning noises seemed louder.

"Shit" Samuel cursed, "What the...?" He rushed outside grabbing his knife and broom handle. As soon as he left the building he could see a group of the zombies were at his end of the pier, heading in his direction. Looking towards the gap, he could not believe what he could see; they had filled the hole with their own, hundreds were being washed away by the motion of the waves yet they were being replaced quicker than they could dissipate. Samuel cursed and turned to go back inside to see that they were inside too! They stumbled over his few belongings and must have entered via the other door.

Samuel started to panic but then, unexpectedly, he felt a sense of finality settle over him. There was no fleeing this, no more running to be done. It seemed he was the last survivor. The struggle was over; he would soon be at peace. He just regretted not seeing his wife one last time.

"Come on then!" Samuel yelled, smashing in the first creature's skull. The second he stabbed in the head, but the blade stuck. It was then that he felt the teeth in his shoulder and fell to his knees. Samuel disappeared under the press of bodies.

Samuel did see his wife one last time on the pier, but he did not recognise her—their shambling forms passed each other like strangers seeking out something to quench their hunger.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Nicky P Gardiner is the author of the *Deadly Shades* series, comprised (so far) of *The Showman And The Shade* and *Shades Of Vengeance*—Nicky is currently working on book three in the series. This action-packed, fast-paced series follows the tale of departed shades, is written from their unique viewpoint and are available through Amazon. Nicky is 37 years old and lives in Essex, England.

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

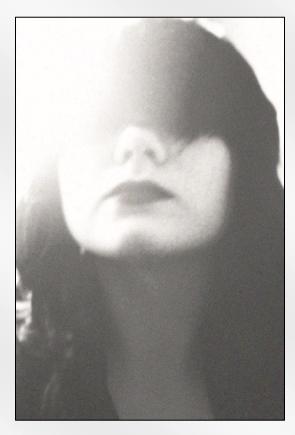




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An Interview with Author, Jessica B. Bell

Having recently released the debut collection from author Jessica B. Bell, we thought it might be fun to sit down with her to discuss a variety of topics relating to writing and *Viscera*. Keep reading if you'd like to learn more about this Canadian writer of strange fiction who is rumoured to live in a damp, dark basement, writing her twisted tales in her own blood on faded yellow parchment...



Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Jessica! What made you decide to become a writer?

Jessica B. Bell: A short-lived career as a recreational brain surgeon led me to believe that my talents lay elsewhere. No, no, that's not true—it was being marooned on a desert island with no one to talk to that started me on my path to storytelling. Or perhaps, it's just that I'm a habitual liar, and so making things up comes naturally.

SCP: What is *Viscera* about?

Jessica: Well, it's a collection of strange tales—some of them scary, some of them darkly humorous. I chose the title *Viscera* because all the stories, in one way or another, hit you in the gut.

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

Jessica: No animals were harmed during the writing process.

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

Jessica: Most of the time, I'm a planner. The stories that come easiest to me are the ones that come more or less fully formed in my head (I'll often come up with the ending before anything else, and then figure out how to get there). I'm currently writing a story, however, that began with just a concept, and while flying by the seat of my pants, it developed into something I had not even thought about.

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

Jessica: Finding an audience in the modern Internet age, when anyone and everyone can publish online. Writing isn't like any other art—a musician can get a gig, and can play for a room full of people and get that instant gratification. An artist can show their work and it only takes someone

a moment to like it and show their appreciation. Finding readers is a different story altogether, because it takes an investment of time and interest.

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

Jessica: I think there's a story in *Viscera* for everyone. There are tiny little 100 word stories, stories about monsters, both human and otherwise, twists on classic horror tropes, stories that will make you laugh when you know you shouldn't.

SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?

Jessica: I'm in the middle of reading *B.P.R.D.—Hell on Earth* by Mike Mignola and John Arcudi. It's a graphic novel and if you're familiar with *Hellboy*, it's set in that same universe. Mike Mignola is the modern heir to the Lovecraftian tradition, and it's everything that the Marvel and DC crowd is not. It's smart, frightening, and fast-paced.

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

Jessica: Stephen King, H.P. Lovecraft, Chuck Palahniuk, Shirley Jackson, Neil Gaiman... too many to list, but there's a handful. My favourite novels are *Lord of the Flies, Fahrenheit 451*, and *The Haunting of Hill House*.

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

Jessica: Honestly? The admiration of complete strangers! That's messed up, I know, but I don't trust the praise of friends or family. It's one of the reasons I write under pseudonyms. And so, have I been successful? Yes, I suppose I have. But one thing I've learned is that it's never enough. You always want more.

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?

Jessica: Write first to entertain yourself. If you don't want to read your own work, no one else will. Learn the rules first before you start breaking them. And for the love of god, don't write *everything* in first person. There's a certain type of story that it fits, but not *every* story.

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

Jessica: Well, I should think they'd know how to serve the perfect Hasenpfeffer, as well as who to avoid at the office party. I hope they feel satisfied, and go back again to visit their favourites from time to time.

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

And now for a little teaser from one of the stories contained within Viscera...

An Excerpt from H(A)UNTED

"What about Reality TV?" Dax suggested to the room of studio executives. They were brainstorming show ideas for the next season, and the well had gone dry. They'd run through every sitcom formula, every franchise reboot, not to mention live action versions of beloved classic cartoons, and viewers were getting bored. With the latest writers' strike now into its third year, producers were looking for more basic forms of entertainment. There was the Gladiator Revival of 2025—and with the latest CGI advancements, they hadn't even needed to use actual actors—which cut costs substantially. But, people had complained about the lack of emotional involvement, knowing nobody was actually at risk. So that hadn't lasted very long. But then, game shows were making a comeback—just over thirty years into a new century plagued by economic collapse and global political re-structuring, backward-looking nostalgia was at an all-time high.

"What *about* Reality TV?" A bored looking woman in her late fifties asked. "It's all been done."

"Well, hear me out," Dax said, flipping through a file containing a proposal she'd been working on for months. "The Russians want to hire out their empty space station, right?"

"Soviets, Dax," one of the lawyers corrected her. "It's Soviets again since the latest revolution."

"Okay, whatever," Dax dismissed the sniveling man with a wave of her hand. "Russians, Soviets—all I know is that they're broke, and they're hiring out their empty but perfectly functional space station."

Dax looked around the room to see if anyone was thinking what she was thinking, and found herself staring at a lot of blank, unimaginative faces.

"Oh, come on!" She cried, annoyed at their lack of enthusiasm. "Reality TV in space!"

The Vice President of production sighed in disinterest.

"In space, in a school, on a bus, in Hawaii or at the Playboy Mansion—it makes no difference. You put a bunch of socially inept people with carefully chosen adversarial polarizing attributes in a room together, and they get on each other's nerves and bitch about each other in the confessional interviews. It's been done to death, and nobody wants to watch that shit anymore. Anybody got any other ideas?"

Dax wasn't finished.

"Yes, but you can't escape in space, Mr. Fox," she said, and something about the dark tone of her voice intrigued the older man.

"Go on," the VP said, and all eyes suddenly turned to look at Dax.

Cassandra kept very still and pressed her body up against the precious heat of the Artificial Gravity Unit. She pressed her face into her sleeve to muffle the sound of her breathing, which was coming in hitching gasps. She wasn't sure how many of them were still alive, but she was pretty sure she knew who the killer was. The crazy thing was, nobody was supposed to be dying—not for real—not really dying. It was all supposed to be faked. They explained everything to them during orientation. It was a whole Haunted Mansion scenario, only in space. Nobody was going to get hurt—not really. They were just going to stage some creepy accidents,

essentially 'killing off' the contestants one a week. And whoever was left at the end would be going home with a million dollars prize money. Well, less tax, of course, but none of them were complaining about that.

The viewers at home would decide who lived and who died—it was sort of an interactive murder mystery, and if you lost popularity in the Internet polls, well...

But it was all staged. The tension came from never knowing. Not even the contestants knew who would be 'killed', or when. And the 'killer' would always strike when the 'victim' was alone. After that, no one ever heard from them again.

Except that Cassie had seen what that monster had done to the last one, and she didn't think that was something you could fake.

"Randall!" She cried out, catching her breath and gripping tightly to a screwdriver—the only weapon she could find. "Randall, you son-of-a-bitch, are you out there? You better stay away from me. I'm ready for you, Randall, I'm..."

"Well, shit," Dax swore, pausing the feed. "We'll have to scrub that—can't have her spilling the beans before we're ready."

Dax sat watching a wall of twenty different monitors. There were cameras all over the station—not counting the camera crew that was there to capture the contestants during meal times, or to take individual interviews at the end of each day.

Dax and her unusually small crew were tasked with editing the footage and packaging it together for the show each week. Dax had personally handpicked the people on her team, and she trusted each of them implicitly. She'd worked on shows in the past where insider information had been leaked to the Internet, and Dax wouldn't tolerate that for this project.

"Ms. Ginishami," one of her interns interrupted, an ambitious girl whose name escaped her. "I'm afraid..."

"Please, I've told you, call me Dax... um..."

"It's Becky, Ms... Dax. And I'm afraid the families are still calling. Some of them are quite upset."

Dax smiled at the young woman. She was too sweet to be pulling damage control duty, but someone had to do it.

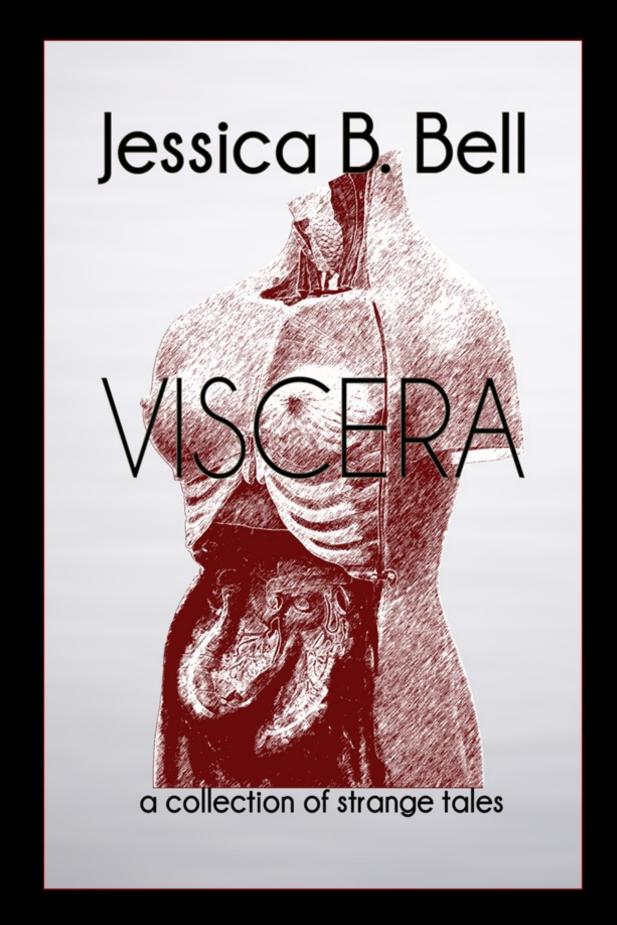
"And as I believe I told you before, you need to assure them that *HAUNTED* is a controlled environment, and their loved ones are resting safely aboard the station. Their radio silence is all part of the illusion—they all signed gag orders as part of their contract. They remain aboard that station until the entire show is over, with no contact with the outside world. They are being generously compensated for their participation."

"Yes, Ms... Yes, of course. It's just, the images are quite... convincing."

"Well, thank you, Becky. That means I'm doing my job."

"Right," the intern smiled nervously. "But perhaps if they could just talk to their families."

"Absolutely not," Dax snapped. "Out of the question. Do you know how hard it is to create this kind of illusion; to cast this kind of doubt and questioning? Right now, millions of viewers out there are convinced that this just might be real—that they might actually be witnessing something gone horribly awry. Two minutes after you let one of those losers up there talk to their family down here, it will be all over the Internet that it's fake. And then we might as well all pack up, because it'll be all over."



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