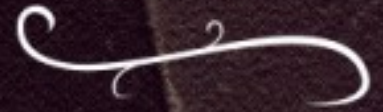


The Sirens Call

December 2017

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Undead 2017

*A Dark Fiction
Horror eZine*

*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, & Poetry,
for Horror Fans!*

*Artwork by
Multiple Artists*

*Featuring
Julianne Snow,
author of 'Glimpses
of the Undead'*

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Drop-Off | *Mark Steinwachs*

Janice turned the wheel hard. Tires squealed over Freddy Mercury's soaring vocals from the car stereo as the vehicle shuddered down a two-lane road leading into suburbia.

"I'm on Crescent. There's a small horde behind me, but I should be safely back to you guys before they catch up," Janice said.

Her voice, mixed with Queen, sounded in Tim's earbuds. Tim stood on the balcony of their apartment with their fifteen-year-old son, Steven. Both of them scanned the area for zombies as the summer sun beat down, intensifying the stench of rotted flesh. "You're clear all the way to the drop-off. Then we'll cover you the rest of the way to us. Can you turn off that music? It's not—"

"It's the only time I get to listen to anything," Janice interrupted her husband. "Do you really think it's any more likely to draw out our friends than a car engine?" Janice pushed on the gas pedal and cranked up the volume, drowning out her husband.

The rev of the engine echoed in the air. Tim spared a glance at his son as he surveyed their surroundings. "Your mother can be dangerous sometimes. It's unnecessary. That's the sort of stuff that will get you killed."

"Dad, give her a break. We've been doing this a while now and it's fine. I'm heading down." Steven set his rifle on the table and grabbed the pistol lying there.

"Be careful, son."

"Love you too, Dad."

The door clicked shut after he slipped out.

"Steven's standing by. You're both clear." They'd been doing this for over a year. The school parking lot a block away was littered with vehicles they had discarded. Survival of the fittest, that was what Tim had been telling his wife and son since the outbreak occurred.

Tim went on the first couple of supply runs but as a strong, able-bodied male, he was given a wide berth. Janice was petite and cute with eyes that sucked you in. People were drawn to help her. But the minute they got close, she would shoot them and put their bodies in the backseat of whatever car she had grabbed that day, then take any supplies and head back. The fresh corpses left in the cars kept the zombies from sniffing the family out in their apartment. The fetid scent of death was like a drop of blood in water to a shark.

Janice had cried after her first time. Tim kept reminding her—and Steven—it was survival of the fittest. It became his mantra. Kill or be killed. That was what their life would be from now on.

The white Azera Janice had acquired for this run crested the little hill on Crescent. It caught a split second of air before slamming back to the road. Janice gave a delighted whoop.

A commotion in the trees lining the road to the right of Crescent drew Tim's gaze. Five zombies rushed from the wooded area and stopped in the middle of the lane. A couple looked left toward the noise of the engine. The other three looked straight at Tim and Steven. The smell. Damn it.

“Janice!”

“Shiiittttt.”

Tires screeched. The Azera slammed into the first zombie, sending it into the windshield then up over the car. Janice gunned it and plowed through another one. This time the zombie managed to latch onto the vehicle; it snarled at Janice through the cracked windshield.

Janice pumped the brakes and turned the wheel left, trying to throw the zombie free. She started to lose control and turned back to the right, flooring the gas pedal. Another slurping thud resonated, and rotted zombie organs sprayed up the passenger side of the Azera.

Thump thump thump thump. The front passenger tire exploded, jolting the zombie from the car. Janice’s vision cleared just in time to see the drop-off at the side of the road past her turn to the apartment. Once more she slammed the brakes and jerked the wheel to the left, but she stood no chance. The car swung sideways and slid down a couple of feet before wedging itself against a tree. The impact rattled Janice’s insides and sent a shock of pain from her right ankle up her leg.

“Janice!” Tim said, bringing his rifle up.

Two of the five zombies remained standing. One bolted toward the apartment, but Steven was already on his way back up, or at least he was supposed to be. The second zombie started toward the car.

“I’m here, Tim,” Janice said over a Brian May guitar riff. “I think I’m okay.”

Tim lined up the shot and pulled the trigger. A single retort scattered the few birds perched on the roof. The zombie’s chest opened wide as the bullet hit home, knocking the creature to the ground.

“Go, Janice. You’re clear.”

Janice grabbed the pistol that had managed to stay in the seat next to her and opened the door, swinging out. She stood up and promptly crumpled to the ground, pain exploding in her right ankle. She pushed herself up and limp-ran two more steps before faceplanting in the middle of the road.

Tim watched his wife fall to the ground. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He looked down for the zombie that had made for the apartment but couldn’t find it. And where the hell was Steven? A pistol shot sounded below. Followed by another. And another.

Tim took aim at the zombie he’d shot in the chest. It was struggling to right itself. He fired one more round and got a clean head shot, dropping it.

The apartment door opened. “Dad, where’s Mom?” Steven kicked the door closed behind him then beelined for the balcony. “Oh, shit,” he said when he saw the chaos below.

Janice stood and got another few steps before she hit the pavement again. Gritting her teeth, she got to her hands and knees and started crawling in the direction of the apartment.

A half-dozen zombies burst through the same trees as the others had, then came to a stop as their brains processed the information around them.

Tim fired and missed his target. “Run, Janice! Go!”

The shot snapped the zombies to attention. They ran toward both Janice and the two men on the balcony. Tim couldn't tell which was heading where and he pulled the trigger again and again. One shot spun a zombie down but not out. Steven joined in and took three quick shots, two of them taking down one more of the six.

Blood dripped from various scrapes and cuts on Janice's body and her ankle throbbed, but she ignored the pain and got herself up, running as fast as she could, crying out each time her right foot hit the ground.

Two more zombies emerged from across the street, followed by another three from the trees. A couple lunged at the car with the corpse in the backseat, but most were heading for Janice.

Tim fired as fast as he could, barely aiming now. "Janice, you can do it, honey. Keep going. You're almost there."

Steven took aim and pulled the trigger.

"Janice!" Tim screamed.

Her head snapped back. Her body dropped for the final time.

Tim dropped his rifle and wailed, "What did you do?" He wheeled on his son, grabbing him. "What did you do? Fuck, fuck. She was going to make it. What..."

More zombies crashed through the trees, a horde forming. "Dad, we have to go—" Steven didn't finish the last word as Tim punched him in the jaw. The boy staggered to his knees. More punches rained down. "Dad! Stop! Please, we need to go."

Tim missed a punch and instead hit the table on the balcony, knocking the pistol to the floor. Steven grabbed it and pulled the trigger. The bullet ripped through his dad's thigh.

Tim barked in pain and grabbed the balcony railing. The synapses fired in his mind, growling, he said, "Fucking hell! First thing is we need to get out of here then I'm gonna finish dealing with you."

Zombies littered the ground, most of them distracted by Janice's body. The two men didn't have long. The blood dripping from Tim's leg slipped through the slots in the balcony floor, beginning to draw their attention.

"We need to go. Right now," Tim said. "You'll need to drive."

Steven looked at his dad and the scene behind him. *We'll never make it*, Steven thought. For a moment the world stopped except for Freddy starting another song. Steven swung his fist out as hard as he could and caught his dad in the temple. The butt of the pistol struck his dad first. Tim groaned and flopped over the railing. Out cold.

They were never going to make it, but Steven could. His dad had taught him well. Survival of the fittest. He put the gun to the back of his father's head and pulled the trigger, then shoved the corpse over the balcony.

That should give him enough time to get to the car and get away.

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. Growing up in Buffalo, NY and spending many winter nights reading fantasy and scfi novels, he never imagined he would one day be writing his own stories, and oddly enough, writing primarily horror stories. He is also a member of a horror writer group called Pen of the Damned.

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

Facebook: [Author Mark Steinwachs](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMarkSteinwachs)

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CHILD OF FIRE



Ela Lourenco

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Gene looked at the photograph of his family. *Death isn't pure*, he thought. *It's damn filthy. It chews and spits, leaving you half-digested until you eventually dissolve.*

He watched the virus take them. Minions of quietus ravaged their bodies until souls departed through fevered brows. The infection killed them quickly. But it never let go. A collective consciousness still carried their undead frames. Shuffling feet and hands scraping against the boards nailed over the kitchen doorway were all he could hear anymore.

What little strength his mind retained had been used to pretend they weren't there—trapped together, rotting away... But nothing remained in the world to divert his attention. He hadn't seen another living person in weeks. He considered if he might be the last. In a way he hoped it were true. Then at least humanity would be unchained from the nightmare and could finally rest.

Guilt tightened his gut, more than pains of hunger. Why had he been spared? What made him immune? Was it punishment for some forgotten sin he committed? Maybe it was just shit luck. He preferred to assume it was only his misfortune; it made the most sense.

His eyes lazily rolled to the makeshift barrier keeping a ravenous, zombified family from eating him alive. He wondered how long it would hold; but realized it didn't matter. Sure, he'd suffer an agonizing death if they broke through, but no one would ever know of it. He sat alone in a miniscule blip of time. Human life no longer held meaning. History had been erased and would never again be recorded. In a way, he didn't even exist.

He found that to be a comforting thought. It settled his nerves, calmed his raging heart.

Fingertips released their grip. The picture of his family rested next to a shotgun on the table.

As a calm settled within, he picked up the gun. Peering into the box of shells to see how many were left, he made his choice.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Lee Forman is a fiction writer and editor from the Hudson Valley, NY. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. He's a third-generation horror fanatic, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters. His work has been published in numerous magazines, anthologies, websites, and podcasts.

Website: <https://leeformanauthor.com/>

Facebook: [Lee Forman](#)



Alone Among the Living Dead | *Julianne Snow*

Liberty gazed out at the city of New York from their perch high atop the Empire State Building, her eyes stopping for a moment on the falcon's nest resting between the front feet of one of the stone gargoyles. The frozen sentry stood guard over the tiny hatchings that clung to the detritus making up the nest, their mother circling the skies above, waiting for her moment to land again. "Look at them.... Do you think there's anyone else alive down there?"

"Lib, I don't know. Maybe?" Her brother answered as he searched through his ever-dwindling pack of supplies—soon they'd need to concentrate on restocking, but first they'd have to get out of the city. "Hell, we're alive, so there must be others too. It'd be some fucked up karma if you and I were the only ones left..."

The words fell between them—dead like so much around them. There was a time after this all started when there were more people who'd survived the initial outbreak. Family, friends, strangers who became friends, even some who didn't want to connect. But in the past few months, life found a way of happening. Even the most careful, the ones who never took chances, began to get sloppy. And now Liberty and Trevor were the only ones who remained—alone among the living dead. At least that's what it felt like...

"Do you see a way out?" Trevor asked, slinging his backpack over his left shoulder and grabbing his trusty round point digging shovel that had seen better days. But it'd also gotten them through a lot of rough times, so he carried it out of need and nostalgia.

"Once we get down to the street, it's going to be a little rough, but we need to get out of Manhattan."

"We're not taking the tunnel, no fucking way Lib!"

Liberty stopped in her tracks as she moved toward the roof's access door, bringing her head around to stare at her brother, dumbfounded. "Are you fucking kidding me? You think I want to take the tunnel? After the last time?"

Trevor's body visibly relaxed, but his face still read of panic. They'd come into Manhattan about a month ago with the rest of their group from the New Jersey side—using the Lincoln Tunnel as their point of access. There were still people broadcasting at that time, people who told them Manhattan was free from infection, a last bastion of sorts.

What they hadn't expected was the influx of the dead who'd found their way into the mouth of the tunnel, both before and after them, all of them moving like a wave that would crash once the light of the sun bathed over them again. They'd lost many that day, only a few managing to break free of the horde to find refuge in the husk of a building. The escape was harrowing and since that day, their numbers had dwindled steadily as they moved around the island, looking for a way to get off.

"We're going to take I-78 and cross the Hudson. Might not be the best option, but from what I can see, it looks pretty clear." She spoke with a level of authority, knowing it was what Trevor needed from her in the moment. While he was great in the thick of things, getting him to make a needed move was sometimes difficult.

“Okay let’s get moving then. We need to make it out before the sun goes down.”

Getting down to the street was a slow process for the pair—while the stairwell wasn’t a haven for the undead, the descent exhausted the energy stores within their muscles quickly, demanding they stop every few flights to rest. Once at the bottom, they peered around a corner to get a look at the street through the glass panes that surrounded the lobby. For the moment, everything looked clear.

“Should we go now, or do you want to rest for a few minutes?”

Trevor looked at his sister before answering, “If you’re good to go, so am I.”

With the decision made, the pair crept to the large revolving door they’d locked after entering the building a few days ago. They hadn’t wanted to worry about anyone or anything finding its way up the stairs after them. As quietly as possible, Trevor slid the bolt up from its snug reservoir in the marble floor, his eyes searching the street for any movement. Straightening back up, he placed both hands on the push bar of the door and glanced back at his sister, eyes searching her face for any hesitation. Seeing none, he leaned his body weight forward and the door started to spin.

“Wait!” It was Liberty, her hand grabbing on to his pack, pulling his body backward, making him lose the forward momentum.

“What?” The fear was back in his voice, his eyes scanning left and right up the street in a panicked frenzy.

Then he saw it. The flash of vibrant purple that had caught Liberty’s attention.

“Is she alive?” Trevor whispered, his question falling heavily in the absolute silence.

The pair stared as the girl with the purple hair came toward them, her body burdened by the pack on her back and the sling she wore across the front of her body. “Is that a baby?”

Her hands smacked up against the glass, panic evident on her face. “Let me in!”

The request was simple, but full of danger. She could be infected. Or worse. She could be one of those people who were sent out to lure other unsuspecting survivors into an ambush where her cohorts would claim supplies and weapons, possibly even their lives.

Her hands banged against the double-paned glass again as she looked back over her left shoulder, the bundle strapped over her chest wriggling around frantically. “Seriously, they’re coming!”

Looking in the direction of her gaze, they could see the living dead round the corner, their lifeless eyes searching for the movement that had brought them to the intersection. Seeing the body banging on the glass only a few feet away gave them a burst of energy, as if new life breathed through their deadened limbs. With renewed purpose, they moved faster.

Trevor and Liberty shared a look, a silent question passing between them. In the end, they made the only choice they could—yes. With a quick push on the revolving door, Trevor propelled the door around on its ring, sucking the young girl into the building before making his way back around. Quickly slamming the lock back into place, he ushered Liberty and the new girl back into the hallway that contained the bank of now useless elevators.

“Have you been bit?” Liberty asked the question, knowing what the price would be if she answered yes.

“No. Never.”

Liberty stared at her for a while, sizing up the answer and trying to figure out whether or not to believe her. The girl stared right back, with no fear in her eyes and a look that said she was willing to back up her claim.

“What’s your name?” It was Trevor who asked, breaking the awkward silence between them.

“Lynn. Lynn Hardgrove.” She pushed out her palm in an attempt to shake, but let her hand fall back to her side when neither of them made the move to accept the gesture. “And this here is Stanley.”

As she drew back the cloth, Trevor and Liberty were both surprised to see a small pig poke its snout out. It grunted quickly and then nestled back into the warmth of her body.

“A Pig?”

“Yeah, he’s been with me since the beginning. As soon as any of them get close, he lets me know it’s time to move!” Her hand cupped the bundle and stroked the fabric lovingly. “Pigs are actually really smart.”

As if to prove her right, Stanley began to squirm against her just before the banging started. Looking around the corner quickly, they saw the undead pressing themselves up against the glass, their grimy hands trying to break through to get to their prize. It was in the moment Liberty knew there was no way Lynn could be infected—the pig wouldn’t have been so calm otherwise.

“What are you doing in the city? Are you part of a bigger group?”

“No, it’s just me left. My boyfriend and I had been hiding out in an abandoned building for a few weeks, listening to anything we could find on the airwaves. He was ex-Military and knew some of their emergency frequencies, so we listened in the hopes that someone would tell us what to do.”

“What happened to him?” Trevor asked as he poked his head around the corner to take another look at the situation out front.

“He went out one day and never came back. I waited a few days and then figured it was time I made a move of my own.” Lynn relayed the information without emotion and Liberty understood why—you could only mourn so many before loss became so common, it was all you experienced. “Hey, have either of you heard of a city called Setagaya?”

Trevor looked back, puzzled, “No, why?”

“Well, on the radio there was this guy who said he was from Setagaya and that he’d found a cure.”

“Yeah right! A cure for death? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No, I’m serious,” Lynn continued. “He said he had a cure. He explained it a little bit; said he couldn’t cure those who were already dead, but that he could prevent those of us who were uninfected from getting infected. Even said he’d cured two people who’d been recently bit.”

“Really?” Trevor asked, hope relighting in his eyes.

Liberty knew it was dangerous to foster hope, especially lately, but even she wanted to believe it was true. Now they just had to figure out where Setagaya was and how to get there...

“It’s in Japan—there’s no way we can get there!” Trevor exclaimed, looking at the atlas he’d found in one of the abandoned offices inside the Empire States Building.

He closed the book and sat there at the large conference table, his arms folded akimbo and his body drawn into itself, sulking.

“Trevor, geez... There’s no reason to get so upset over something that really can’t be helped. We don’t even know if what Lynn heard has any merit.” Liberty glanced over at Lynn as she spoke, trying to gauge her response to the truth of the statement and her brother’s childish behavior.

“You’re right, I have no idea if the news is true or if the camp in Setagaya even exists, but what else do we have to go on at this point?” She stared out the window down at the street below, her eyes seeming to search the faces of the living dead she could see below. “But if there’s hope, I’d rather go searching for it than ignore it completely.”

Liberty knew what she was searching for—a familiar face—and understood her need for hope. Once upon a time, she’d felt it too. Had actively searched for a silver lining at the end of each day, more often than not counting a day survived as the only triumph in a long line of devastating defeats. Her heart was tired of fighting the despair, but she knew the moment she let it take hold of her, she’d stop trying.

And the only thing that kept her trying each and every day was a little smidgen of hope. With the news there may be a cure, and the arrival of another living person, her stores of hope had bolstered and expanded a fraction.

“Trevor, whether or not Setagaya exists, or we ever find a way to get there, we still need to get out of Manhattan.”

Lynn’s eyes snapped to Liberty’s face, “You’re going to leave? Have you got a route planned?”

Trevor piped up quickly, his voice still tinged with sullenness, “We’re going to take the I-78 and go over the Hudson. There’s no way we’re going underground again.”

Liberty and Trevor shared a shudder as Lynn got lost in her own reverie for a moment.

“That sounds like a decent plan, mind if Stanley and I come with?” Her eyes searched their faces for any negative sign that might pass between them; when she saw none, she started to calm a little. It had been hard on her own for the past few days and to find another group around her own age that didn’t seem like they’d harm her at the first possible moment was more luck than she’d normally have counted on.

Not that she trusted them quite yet, but it looked like things were off to a better start now than this morning. She still couldn’t quite shake the feeling Martin was still alive out there, her eyes back to searching the slack faces for the confirmation her belief was wrong. If Martin was alive, where was he and why had he left her alone for so long?

Liberty spoke before Trevor could answer, “If you can keep up, you can come. But understand one thing—if you do anything to slow us down, we will leave you.”

The words of warning were harsh, but Lynn understood them completely. There was no room for dead weight on this team.

“When do you plan on going?”

“It’s not like we can just waltz out of here with all of them down there now. We’ll have to wait until they thin out or find another way out of here.” Liberty looked down at the horde gathering in the street as she spoke, her eyes resting on the sea of heads below.

Turning back to the boardroom, her glance ran over a small movement in one of the windows across the road, but it was gone before she could draw her eyes back to it. Someone else must be out there—friend or foe? She didn’t have time to worry about it with the problem looming in front of them though. They had next to nothing in the way of food and staying put much longer could have devastating effects on them.

Trevor went back to sulking, his eyes dark as he stared at Lynn. Liberty could tell he blamed her for their current predicament but there was nothing else they could have done. She had needed help and Liberty was glad for the presence of someone other than her sullen brother.

“Have you guys tried the underground parking yet? Maybe there’s a way out there? Or the city beneath the city—a way into one of the other buildings around here?” Lynn spoke quickly, bolstered by the confused looks on their faces. “There’s tonnes of interconnected walkways and stores and all kinds of stuff that can only be accessed through the buildings. Maybe it’s a better way out than taking the street?”

Lynn’s idea was something neither her, nor Trevor, had considered. Not being from NYC, they didn’t know of the underground city that functioned beneath the metropolis sprouting from the surface.

Trevor started looking through the map books and brochures he’d found, pulling out a small booklet he opened up to reveal a spiderweb of tunnels and stores snaking out from the Empire State Building.

“This may just work... So long as it’s not teeming with the dead.” For the first time in a long time, hope began to shine behind Trevor’s tired eyes.

To be continued...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR —Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist and Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves.

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

Blog: [Days with the Undead](http://DayswiththeUndead.com)



There's Always Another One | Karen Thrower

I huddled in the closet, trying to keep the light of my cell phone hidden against my chest. 'Virus Outbreak!' the headlines said. *Yeah, no shit*, I said to myself. 'Thousands Dead and Thousand Rise!' That might be the last clever headline that reporter would ever write since it was the end of the world. The virus was spreading quickly from an experimental research facility about twenty miles away. It seemed to start with a homeless man getting bit by a squirrel that escaped. I remember watching that video, the man was flailing around while the squirrel's tail tittered in the air, biting the man over and over. Yeah, I feel like shit for laughing at it now, if I had known I was watching the beginning of the end, I wouldn't have. I swear!

I clicked on a less catchy headline and saw there was a video attached to the article. I could imagine what it was. Seemed like no one cared about getting sued by the FCC when zombies were running wild in the streets. I made sure the volume was all the way down on my phone before I clicked on it. Up popped some reporter from a station I didn't watch. She was standing in front of one of the police precincts and seemed calm. A key popped up that read, 'Food Drive', but a second later someone tackled her to the ground. The photog tried to help but from the shaking of the camera you could tell he was being attacked too and he dropped the camera. It was pointing at the reporter who now had a zombie sitting on top of her, chewing on her cheek. Blood was pouring from her neck and had run into the camera lens. It might have been a neat effect if it wasn't real blood. The photog's hand came into view, it was twitching and covered in blood. The video was dated two days ago. Now I was hiding in my closet because my roommate didn't believe it was happening; got bit, came home and I didn't have the guts to kill him before he turned. *Note to self, always kill your roommate if they come home with a bite during a zombie apocalypse.*

The sound of smacking startled me and I pressed my phone to my chest. The shadow of my roommate's legs shuffled in front of the closet door. I swear I could hear my heart beating out of my chest. Little drops of blood were raining onto the white carpet and I jumped as he dropped what looked like my dog on the floor. He had killed and eaten poor lil' Asshole! No, I didn't originally name my dog Asshole, he was Chili. But he turned into such a little asshole it sort of stuck. *Damn it, undead motherfucker ate my Asshole! Now I'm mad.* I knew I had a sword in the closet, but I wasn't sure where and I knew if I stood my zombie roommate would hear and start trying to break down the door.

I got as close to the floor as I could and watched the legs shuffle to the other side of the room. I sighed in relief and slowly sat back and turned on my flashlight app, making sure to point it away from the door. I searched the floor but didn't see it. I slowly pulled myself to my feet, desperately trying not to hit anything hanging. I pointed the flashlight up and saw the gleaming handle of my samurai sword I got at Ani-Con. I also saw it was covered with boxes. *Shit.* I'd have to move quick, I wasn't sure if these were fast zombies or slow ones. So far the only videos of them I'd seen were attacks from behind where the person wasn't paying attention, so they could be either.

I crossed my fingers for slow, those fast ones freak me out. I wrapped my hand around the handle and put my phone in my back pocket. I had to move fast so I played it out in my head. I'd pull the sword free of the boxes then kick the door open. Next, I'd slide the sword from the sheath and rush the zombie who was hopefully still on the other side of the room. Behead the mother fucker who ate my dog, then make sure the rest of the house was secure. *Okay I can do this, I can do this*, I said, psyching myself up. I kicked the door open, yelling.

"Aah shit!" I was supposed to pull the sword free first not kick the door open! *Shit!* Thankfully my zombie roommate was across the room, slowly turning to me. He looked awful. The bite on his neck was black and there was something brown leaking out of it. His face and shirt were covered in blood. It was Asshole's blood. He raised his arm and groaned loudly.

"Slow motherfuckers, yes!" I pulled the sword free of the boxes and took a step to rush him, but I forgot about Asshole on the ground and tripped over his dead body. I yelled out as I fell and hit the carpet. My cheek landed in a puddle of that brown goo that was pouring out of my roommate. It was warm, sticky and smelled like rotten food. It made me want to puke. My roommate growled again and I looked up to see him rush me.

"You're supposed to be slow!" I flipped onto my back and pointed the sword up. "Shit!" It was still in the scabbard! My roommate fell on top of me and if the sword were free it might have helped, but it just turned him into a zombie umbrella.

"Damn it!" He reached for me, flailing his arms and gnashing his teeth. *Maybe I can push him off?* I pushed the sword away from me, but a squelching noise filled the air and I realized he was sliding down the scabbard. "Oh gross!" The scabbard was buried a few inches in his chest but I managed to get up, albeit a lot slower than I wanted to. I had to stay out of range of his hands, who knows how this virus is spread! I held the sword away from me with one hand, while I hit the little latch that freed it from the scabbard with the other. I kicked my roommate in the stomach and he flew back a few inches, taking the scabbard with him. My sword was finally free!

"Ahh!" I screamed as I slashed the sword across my roommate's neck. I swung as hard as I could but apparently, I missed a bit, so his head was now hanging over his right shoulder and he was still coming for me. "Brain, idiot!" How could I forget that? I stabbed the sword through his eye as hard as I could, and his body stopped moving. He fell to the floor taking the sword out of my hand as he went.

The only thing I could hear was my heavy breathing. I pulled my sword out of his head, it made a gross sucking sound. I wiped brain and that foul brown liquid that was oozing out of his body onto his shirt. He wouldn't mind. I ran around the house making sure it was locked up tight. I still had power, so I quickly plugged my phone in to make sure it would be charged and turned the TV on, only half paying attention. I sat on my couch in a daze, my roommate and my dog were dead, and there were zombies in the world. According to the news, the zombies had been contained to a fifty-mile radius around the facility. My town included. I leaned back on the couch, samurai sword lying next to me and waited for the next zombie to come. Because we all know, there's always another one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Karen Thrower is a native Oklahoman, wife, and mother to a rambunctious four-year old. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Deaf Education from The University of Tulsa. She is also a member of Oklahoma Science Fiction Writers and serves as the Vice-President and Facebook 'Wizard'.

Twitter: [@Maisery9](https://twitter.com/Maisery9)



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Cold Pursuit | John H. Dromey

The few uninfected survivors had banded together and were fleeing the city on foot.

“We could go a lot faster in a vehicle,” their leader said, “but I don’t know how to hotwire a car.”

“Lucky for us the zombies won’t either. We can easily outpace them.”

Shortly after reaching the suburbs, they heard the sound of an engine roaring to life.

“What’s that?”

“I think it’s a riding lawnmower.”

“Zombies can’t operate them, can they?”

Other engines started.

“Don’t be too sure,” the leader said, as he started walking faster. “Those machines are equipped with a *dead man’s switch*.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries especially—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, *Crimson Streets*, some previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*, *Stupefying Stories Showcase*, and elsewhere, as well as in numerous anthologies, including *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree Publishing, 2015).

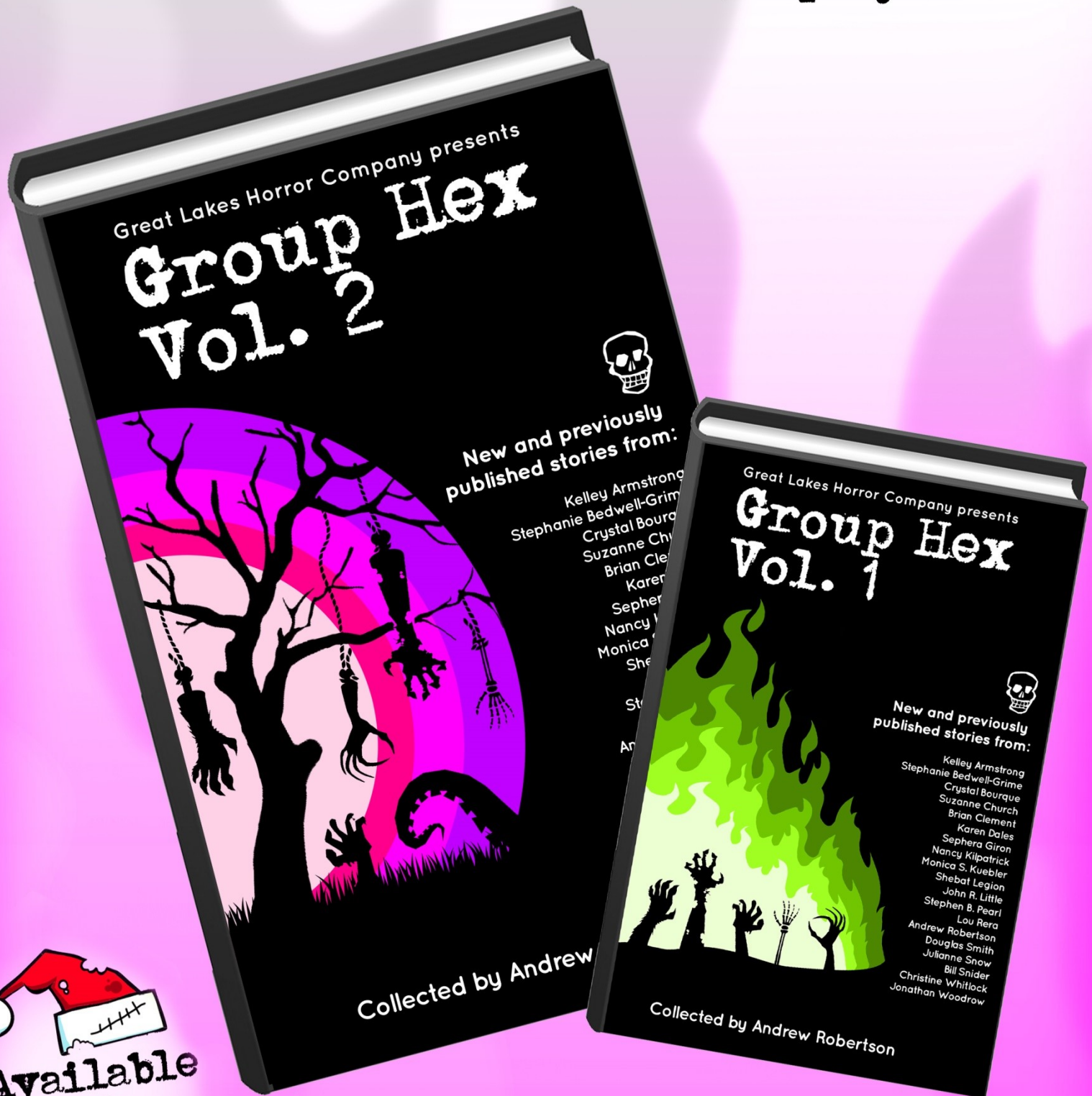
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Body and Soul | Kevin Holton

I woke above our bed. Not in, nor next to, nor under. Above.

Understandably confused, it took me a moment to work out what happened, and how to move. Gravity relented, no longer tugging at my frame. As I ‘sat up,’ I saw I no longer had a frame to speak of. All that remained of me was a translucent shimmer, barely more than a heat mirage, and looking down through where my stomach should’ve been, my gaze landed on my bed below.

It shook in an odd way, squeaking faintly with an arrhythmic side-to-side. A wet gnashing sound gradually drew my attention. I’d likely been hearing it this whole time, but only now noticed it. The sounds came alongside a wet, raspy breathing.

A little more spinning made me recoil, then scream. I—not really me, but my body—leaned over my wife, its teeth buried in her neck. Blood soaked through the sheets, staining nearly the entire bed. The covers had been thrown back, her belly torn open, intestines pulled out and either flung aside or eaten. Her crystal blue eyes now looked terribly at odds with the horrible red canvas.

“Ximena!” I yelled, as if that might replace her organs and sew shut her wounds. “Oh no, oh gods, what... why?”

I knew I’d always be asking why, but I didn’t need to ask what. This happened before. To other couples, to strangers, to homeless camps, even to princes and dukes in foreign countries. Everyone thought zombification would happen en masse—that, like in *The Walking Dead*, or *Resident Evil*, or any Romero film, there’d be some huge viral outbreak that would cripple humanity, destroying civilization in days. Turns out, that’s not the case.

Elliot was right when he said the world wouldn’t end with a bang, but with a whimper. A virus did infect most people, but it lays dormant, then triggers upon death. Being bitten never turned anyone. Gangrene, accidents, heart attacks, severely low blood sugar, any sort of condition brought on by running like hell away from the undead, *that* could wind up turning someone.

Now, I’d turned too.

At some point in the night, my body decided to stop living. Then, as it happened these days, my body decided to live again. It just did so without me.

As a ghost, I could be subjected to an experience few others likely ever had. I might’ve been the first. I could watch my own zombified corpse eat my wife.

Crying spectral tears, I covered my ‘face’ with my ‘hands,’ not that this could prevent me from witnessing the destruction of her body. I didn’t know enough about the post-life conditions to understand why she hadn’t risen too. Willing myself to her side, my intangible form grasped at her hand as it dangled from the bed. My fingers slipped through hers. I instinctively avoided kneeling in the puddle on the floor, but her blood would no longer stain my clothes, and I wasn’t even really kneeling.

The only thing that could have made this situation worse happened: a thump came from our children’s room, and a faint, high-pitched moan suggested Julio fell. He had a tendency for sleepwalking. Yet, in slumber or otherwise, the kid tripped over everything, at every possible moment, so he often woke himself up by stumbling or outright hitting the floor.

Normally, this would mean a bruise, or a slight headache. This happened enough that he’d developed a toughness to smaller injuries. He’d get right back into bed. If he had a bloody nose,

or cut, or anything remotely serious, that boy would come crying to us. As his parents, we were happy to help him. That's what parents do.

We weren't parents anymore. We were dead.

One of our house rules was that everyone kept their doors shut when sleeping. It kept Julio from getting anywhere far, most nights, and would prevent him or his brother, Manuel, from stumbling into our room and seeing anything too adult for their juvenile eyes. That might keep him safe, for the time being. I had no idea how I'd get in to see him, protect them both, warn them, or generally do anything useful. Then I remembered my ghostly state of existence, and almost flew through the door, but decided to expedite things and go through the wall instead. I felt nothing of significance, and the inside of the walls had no lights, so I couldn't see what lurked within. Probably for the best, since I didn't need to be distracted by dust or termites.

Julio's thump on the floor woke Manuel. They were six and ten, respectively, and now that Manny had reached double digits, he'd found himself a little too cool for his brother, or any former youthful antics, really. Sitting up with a slightly-too-loud groan, he glared over at his brother, who sat cross-legged on the floor, rubbing his head. Julio was easy to spot in the matching sky-blue pajamas Ximena picked out. Manuel, despite pretending to be a grown-up whenever possible, had bright red *The Flash* sleepwear. That would be very helpful for if they got away. Someone would see them.

"What are you doing?" Manny threw back his covers and stared at his kid brother.

"I hit my head."

"What, sleepwalking? You know only babies sleepwalk, right?"

"I'm not a baby!" Julio snapped back, careful to keep his voice low for fear of waking us, not that he could anymore.

"C'mon, boys," I said, hoping they could hear me. "Not now. This isn't the time for fighting."

"Yes, you are. Everyone says so."

Before they could bicker any further, my body slammed its blood-soaked fists against the door to the master bedroom. My kids jumped damn near a mile high, looking toward where they knew their parents to be.

"W-what was that?" Julio asked.

"Shh!" Manuel got up and covered the kid's mouth. We'd versed them both on what to do if a zombie showed up, but as he was still so young, Julio hadn't fully grasped the seriousness of such situations. Both knew the golden rule, though: look out for your brother.

Another slow moan echoed through the house, courtesy of my shambling corpse.

No parent should ever have to know how it feels to watch their child realize you're dead. Manny's eyes widened, too big for his skull, shimmering with tears. He turned and hugged his brother tight.

"A zombie got into the house?" Julio whispered, hugging him back. The master bedroom door gave way with a resounding bang, and he freed himself, jumping up and running.

Manny dragged him back. "Don't go out there!"

"But Mom and Dad are in trouble!"

"No! Shh. Listen."

They stopped, and my body's dragging footsteps approached them from down the hall. The door rattled with a hard thump, and all three of us jerked backward.

"Julio... we need to leave, okay? We'll go out the window."

Their window opened up onto the back-porch balcony, where Ximena and I had installed a sturdy metal lattice for such a situation. Well, almost. We thought we'd all be escaping together. Manny rushed straight for it, throwing the screen open, before doubling back to get his cell phone from his bedside dresser. Julio hadn't moved.

"Come on!" Manuel said.

Julio gave a hard shake of the head. "Mom and Dad could be in trouble." The boy clearly wanted to help us, but stared at the door, shaking.

Biting down on his own trembling lip, Manny dialed my cell phone. I usually slept with it in my pocket, just in case. It rang from the other side of their bedroom door, blaring its tinny, happy tune in the absolute worst of times. Tears rolled down my older son's cheeks, but Julio stayed placid.

"Don't you get it?" Manny said, walking over. "That's Dad, okay? Dad is... Dad is gone. We need to leave too."

The door began to splinter, the top hinge creaking as two screws tore loose of the frame.

I tried yelling again. "Boys, go! Get away!" They didn't hear, of course.

A light drew my attention. Up above me, the sky had opened to a soft but brilliant white, offering solace and escape. My kids hadn't left yet. Neither could I.

Flying out into the hall, I did everything I could to distract my body. Grabbing its legs, screaming at it, anything. I tried knocking paintings from the walls, or seeing if I could possess myself again, control the corpse despite having lost my life. Nothing worked. It knocked the top hinge off and tore through enough to peer through with a rheumy, red eye.

"Dad?" Julio whispered.

Manny didn't speak. He raced over, grabbing his brother under the arm and dragging him toward the window, but Julio pulled away.

"That's Dad!"

"Dad's dead, you stupid baby!" Manuel shouted. No point in being quiet—they couldn't hide anymore. Sorrow strained his voice, making him sound older. Wearier, though I knew his troubles were just beginning. "We need to leave or we're gonna be dead too!"

"Please, Julio, listen to Manny," I pleaded, floating down to look him in the eye, not that he'd see me back. "Just go. You can't help us."

"You're the baby!" Julio shouted, turning and shoving his brother away. "You're the scared one! I'm not scared!"

I screamed as he ran forward, grabbing the knob and throwing open their bedroom door. Watching that undead horror consume my wife had been awful. This was far, far worse. If I had a throat, I would've blown my vocal cords. If I had a stomach, I would've puked at the sight. My walking corpse was upon him in an instant, hands grasping his shoulders, teeth in my son's neck.

"Julio!" Manny screamed, but the zombie focused on his current feast, not interested in prey that would run when it already had prey that wouldn't. My older boy, brave and smart as he was, looked at the scene, then around the room for a weapon, but shook his head. He knew he didn't have the strength, or anything sharp enough to destroy the brain.

Or, just maybe, he couldn't bring himself to kill his dad. That's okay. I can't say I blame him. If they'd turned, I wouldn't have been able to do it either.

Manny turned and scrambled out the window. I watched the scene unfold, weeping at my boy's side, holding his hand as best I could while what remained of me ate him alive. I watched the light leave his eyes, and wept into my hands as my corpse stumbled away from its meal, already hungry for another.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Kevin Holton's work has appeared with Radiant Crown Publishing, Mighty Quill Books, Thunderdome Press, and Sci-Phi, among others. His novels *The Nightmare King* and *At the Hands of Madness* are being published by Sirens Call Publications and Severed Press, respectively. When not reading and writing, he's an actor, athlete, and professor who spends too much time talking about Batman.

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

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I Am Zombie | Jeff Durkin

Deirdre shoots the homeless man in the chest with her Walther PPQ. He lets out a wet grunt and then is still and silent.

Jenny is on my shoulder, wet mouth next to my ear.

"I need some Zed, baby," she says. She is a typical California party-girl; plastic body and a brain that calculated life in Gucci purses and the drug of the hour. In another life, she would have been the fuck buddy of the week. With the living population on a glide path to zero, I couldn't be so picky.

"Fuck, we'll get some Zed next. Let's do this thing first."

This thing. What is this thing? There's not enough death around, so we make our own?

"Come on, asshole," Deirdre says. She kicks the man's leg with the steel-toed tip of her Doc Martens. "Man, this better not be some fucker who takes half a day to rise."

Whoever is in charge of the whole zombie apocalypse thing must be listening, because the homeless guy's eyes flick open. They have that unfocused, meth addict pupil look, nothing but black and white. His limbs jerk spastically as he reanimates, a dance we've all become used to since the Rising.

"About time," Deirdre says.

He looks up at her and his mouth falls open, letting out a gasp of dry air. Jenny grips my shoulder tightly, excited by something other than the drug urge. For the moment, her brain has switched to violence mode.

The zombie struggles to his feet, eyes glued to Deirdre. She is grinning ear-to-ear. The adrenaline is pumping through her, giving her an all-natural-no-dealer-needed killing rush.

"Aw, look, he's taking his first steps. They grow up so fast," I say, because I think I'm funny.

Deirdre laughs and kicks the zombie in the crotch. It stumbles backwards a bit, but otherwise doesn't seem affected. "Seth, give your bro a whack."

Seth is the last member of our quartet. Body of an underwear model, brain of a gnat. His weapon of choice is a baseball bat, which he swings at the zombie, hitting it across the back and sending it sprawling.

"Home run, Seth," Deirdre says. She looks at me, face glowing with excitement. "You're up. Take any piece you like."

"I've always been partial to the leg." I pull out my machete and bring it down in a smooth swing, hitting the zombie's left leg just above the knee. The sharp steel slides most of the way through, getting hung up in a knot of muscle and cartilage. The zombie is squirming. I wave at Seth. He steps on the zombie's back, holding it steady for me.

"Thanks." The blade comes free and Seth steps back. We watch as the zombie tries to stand. The few strands of flesh and muscle holding the leg together give way and the zombie flops over on its back.

"You want any more?" Deirdre asks. We all shake our heads. "Sure you don't wanna suck him off, Jen Jen? Maybe he has some blow?"

"Fuck you, Deirdre!"

Deirdre suddenly looks pissed. Her whole face scrunches up. The eyes get narrow, like a feral dog about to go for the throat. Her thin lips part just a little, showing the tips of white teeth. I get scared when she looks like that. I know she could kill any of us when she wears that face. But, she doesn't. She aims her Walther at the zombie's head and fires. "Let's go get some Zed."

“Finally,” Jenny says, not understanding just how close she came to dying.

Later, we are driving through LA.

Jenny is in the passenger seat of my midnight blue BMW X6 SUV. Well, ‘mine’ in the sense that I have the keys. Everything is Daddy’s. A lawyer turned movie producer, Daddy was in Europe when the Rising happened. All air travel came to an end, even for movie producers who are richer than Paraguay. Now Daddy is stuck in Paris with whatever supermodel he’s fucking this month. We still Facetime once a week, which is about as parental as he has ever been. Mommy is still here, but her coping skills run to Seconal and Stoli Elit for breakfast. She’s dealing with the zombie apocalypse by staying wrapped tight in drug-alcohol bubble wrap, watching the world come to an end in our home theater.

Jenny leans over as we drive through the empty streets and sticks her tongue in my ear. Her hand goes up my shirt and cups one of my La Perla covered breasts. Behind us, Deirdre and Seth are in her Porsche 550. She calls it her James Dean Death Car, because she is that type of obvious hipster.

These days, LA is more surreal than usual. Half the lights in the city are out. Military patrols on Rodeo Drive. Chanel and Vera Wang with boarded up windows. Random bodies on the street, some torn up, other with heads blasted apart. Still, there’s a party if you know where to look.

We know where to look.

Deirdre knows a guy, who knows a guy, who knows a guy. And that guy is having a little rave for a few hundred of his closest surviving friends. The ‘club’ is in an abandoned strip mall in North Hollywood. A few months ago, it was up and running, an overflowing consumer Mecca. I’d go there for my ten dollar ‘hand-crafted, fair-trade, double-hot, double-sweet’ lattes and to max out Daddy’s credit card at Coach. Now, people’s tastes are more essential. Food, water, bullets. This year’s model is sporting a shoulder holster by Dior, with combat boots from Miu Miu.

Tonight, however, the buy-and-sell rhythm is back, and consumption is king. We’re consuming X and coke, Tito’s and Red Bull, spit and semen. And Zed, of course. Have to have the Zed.

Like a lot of drugs that I consume, I don’t know where Zed came from. Nobody does. There are rumors, of course. It’s from an army project to control the dead. It’s what started the Rising, bad juice from some dusty country. It’s a way to weed out the population, an NSA/CIA/DEA plot to wipe out junkies that got epically out of hand.

I don’t know, and I don’t really care. All I know is that you take some heroin, mix it with the black fluid that serves as blood for the living dead and shoot it up.

And. Then. You. See.

The first time I took it, I saw my Mother.

Not Mommy. Mommy is mom number three... or is it four? Daddy collects them like I collect vibrators. Mother is supposed to be dead, although Daddy is always vague about the ‘whys’ and ‘wheres’. Maybe she’s living in some South American compound with a bunch of wild-eyed Jesus freaks, harem mistress for some jungle guru.

Mother floated down through the ceiling. She hovered over me, where I lay on a soiled mattress in an abandoned machine shop in Inglewood. Among the grime and grease and hard metal she hovered gently above me. I wanted to reach up, but Zed paralyzes you. It gives you a little taste of death.

She smiled at me. Colors spilled out of her mouth, a foam of red, gold and lime green. And then she was gone and I came out of it and sat there crying in a building that smelled like old oil and stale cigarette smoke.

After that, I was hooked.

The shooting gallery is in an Old Navy. The store was left in 'as is' shape, so people have made mounds of baby tees and khakis into junkie nests. A few people are already sprawled out, lost in their heads, in a drug-induced netherworld between life and death.

I recognize the dealer. Cody. When I was still a teen, I blew him for some X in a parking lot behind an In-N-Out. Then he bought me an Animal Style burger. It was a nice gesture. He became one of my main suppliers. We fucked a few times, but it was nothing special. His use of my pussy for my use of his drugs. Commerce.

He sits with his back against the service counter, tools of the trade spread out around him. Needles, a small butane burner, sandwich baggies of heroin and a bright blue Coleman cooler. A slow, rhythmic sound is leaking out from the cooler. *Clack, clack, clack.*

"Leesa," Cody says to me, smiling. His teeth are perfect. When he becomes a zombie, they'll last a long time. He'll eat well.

"Cody," I lean down and give him a friendly kiss on the cheek. "Can you set us up?"

"Sure thing, girl." He says. "For the four of you, it'll be two-kay or 50 rounds of nine mil."

I pull out a roll of money. "Drinks are on me."

He checks the roll and then proceeds to cook the heroin. When that's done, he unwraps four disposable needles and sucks a little heroin into each one. That's one of the things I like about him. No chance of HIV or hepatitis with Cody. Just the chance that the stuff you're shooting into your veins will kill you and you'll come back as an undead eating machine. I'm a glass half-full kind of gal.

He opens the cooler. I glance inside.

The head of a woman, probably my age. She is snapping her mouth and rolling her eyes. A black fluid is leaking out of the neatly sliced neck, pooling in the cooler. Cody carefully adds a bit of the zombie juice to each needle. He then hands them to me.

"You want to shoot up here?"

"No, this a to-go order. I got a place. You take care of yourself."

Cody smiles, waves his hand at the junkies sprawled on the floor, the zombie head in the cooler, the ravers outside, burning an immense pile of books and manikins.

We leave and go back to our cars. We drive down the 101 to Santa Monica Boulevard. It's a straight shot from there to the end of the continent. In the darkness is the Pacific Ocean. We stop at the edge of the beach and kill the engines.

The white noise wave sound washes over me. "Ready?"

Jenny nods. Of course she is. I have drugs in my pocket; she'd follow me anywhere.

We head out onto the beach. It takes my eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness, but soon I can make out the faint glow of the sand in moonlight. I pick a spot at random and plop down.

I pull out my Glock and lay it in my lap. Zombies cluster where the food is and that's not out here. Still, you can't be too careful. There could be some undead surfer lurking in the water, ready to catch a last red wave.

Seth looks nervous. I don't think he's had Zed before.

"What's the matter, baby?" I say.

Seth shrugs. "Is this shit safe? I mean, who knows what kind of germs those things have."

Deirdre lets out a laugh. “Germs? Baby, you’ve had your dick in me. If that don’t kill you, nothing will.”

Seth doesn’t look satisfied, I take pity on him, like I would on a kicked puppy that’s whining in an annoying fashion. You want to be nice to get it to shut the fuck up.

“Look, we’ve all done it before. And Cody knows what he’s doing. You just relax, baby, and let it happen. It’ll all be good.”

It’s not a lie. I’ve heard stories about people turning; but I’ve never seen it. Just stories.

Jenny wraps her arm around my shoulders. “Seth, if it helps, I’ll go first,” she purrs. I know her; she was going to go first no matter what.

Deirdre starts tapping out a muffled beat on the sand with the soles of her boots. She stops and lays down on the sand, her head in Seth’s lap. He runs his hand over her spiked pink hair. “Seth baby, you’re gonna love this. Once you come out, the sex is fucking amazing. We’re gonna find a place and screw likes monkeys. Okay?”

He smiles. Deirdre might be an unbalanced thirty-years-too-late punk-rocker wannabe; but she is fun in bed. I can see the little wheels in Seth’s brain turning. He’ll shoot up now, no more questions asked.

“Okay, do me,” Jenny says. She’s getting impatient, drug brain in full control. The drug brain can’t be argued with, only satiated. My drug brain is starting to rise from the murky depths, looking for a fix. I’ll need to shoot up soon.

“Sure thing. Where do you want it?”

“Between my toes,” she says, closing her eyes. She slips off the Jimmy Choo wedge from her left foot. I insert the needle between her big toe and index toe. She lets out a sigh from the pinch, knowing that in a moment, the Zed will be coursing through her body, flooding her brain.

Her eyes move rapidly beneath closed lids. Her chest is rising and falling slowly. I get a sudden urge to hold her hand; but you never touch anyone using Zed. I don’t know why; that’s just what everyone says.

She suddenly lets out a moist moan. I lean towards her.

“Jenny?” I whisper. Deirdre is sitting up now. I can see her hand is on the butt of her gun.

“Jenny?”

Her mouth opens and a wet grunt emerges. Something is wrong. I’ve never seen anyone on Zed do this. I move away from her, gun dropping out of my lap. Deirdre is on her feet. Seth is scooting away on the sand, too scared to even stand, like a big, blonde crab. I laugh when I see it.

Jenny moves with the jerky, spastic limb flailing motion of the newly risen. It feels like a sledgehammer smacks me in the chest. I killed her.

“Aw, fuck me,” Deirdre says. She pulls out her Walther and fires two rounds into Jenny’s forehead. Her brain explodes out the back of her head, a dark spray that hits the sand wetly. “Well, that’s the show for the night.”

And so it is.

We all knew the score. Taking Zed is a trip, but like all good ones, it can kill you. Jenny, sweet Jenny, what was your last thought before Deirdre sent your brain into flight? Did you think of raw meat, of my guts in your mouth? Did you wonder where you were, like some sleep-walker waking up in the backyard of a stranger’s house, clothing on inside out?

It doesn’t matter. We are all going to be joining you soon. Walking the streets, red meat junkies, looking for a warm, wet fix.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. After 14 years of Federal service as a computer engineer, Jeff transitioned to full-time writing in 2013. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres and owns and operates a number of movie and pop culture blogs. He published his first novel, *The Age of the Jackal*, in 2015.

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

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BODIES

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Daryl was a bundle of nerves. It didn't help that the ritual was to take place in the old church—a place Daryl had always hated. The look of it certainly didn't help matters, half the building was rubble; the walls that were intact were charred, all the stained-glass gone, statues broken, pews smashed. It instilled in him a dread he didn't understand and couldn't shake.

Also adding to his distress were the stories he heard at school about the church that gave him this unfounded fear of the place. Just yesterday, Sam told him that years ago, before their ancestors won their independence from the Living, this church was a holy place for the Living God. He said they would come here to drink the blood of this god and eat from his flesh. He also said they would gather in the night and nail the dead onto crosses and hang them up as an offering.

Daryl told himself that these were just stories and that Sam was just trying to scare him. He also agreed that both the church and Sam's story weren't the real problem. The real problem with Daryl was that today he was to be given Communion.

And he didn't know if he could go through with it. He had never eaten a live human before. The food he was used to came from a store, processed and prepared. The thought of eating a man raw like an uncivilized savage made him extremely uncomfortable.

He looked himself over in the cracked mirror of the boys' bathroom and wished it was physically possible for him to throw up so he could get the nerves out of his rotting stomach. Father was already pissed off because he asked to go to the bathroom in the first place. "What for, the Dead don't piss," he had said.

Daryl could hear his mother outside the bathroom door, hissing at his father to leave him alone. "When's he gonna grow up? He's thirteen fer cryin' out loud! You're not helping him, you know." Daryl could tell Mother was trying to keep her chastising under her breath, but it came out loud and clear anyway. She was in the process of telling Father to stop making a scene when Daryl came out.

The argument stopped, silence prevailed. Father glared his disgust at Daryl long enough to convey the message to him that he was not happy with his behavior, then he turned, slapped his hand on the heavy wooden door, gave it a shove, and joined the congregation inside. Daryl looked up to Mother. "I'm sorry, Mom."

She smiled, took his chin in her hand, stared him in the eye and said, "Don't be, sweetheart. Your father doesn't mean half the things he says. He cares. He just doesn't know how to show it." She then pulled him in for a quick hug. "Don't worry, honey. Everything's going to be fine. Now let's get in there—the family is waiting. Ok?" Daryl nodded, conceding to the fact he was going to have to go through with Communion. His mother put her arm around him and the two entered the knave.

They walked down the center aisle, stopping before Father Francis, who was encircled by the six members of Daryl's family. Father, Aunt Millie, and Daryl's older cousin Dave stood to

the right of Father Francis, while Aunt Edna, Uncle Edwin, and Daryl's younger sister, Amy, stood off to his left.

All eyes were on Daryl now, as Mother left him to stand at his father's side. She gave him a smile of reassurance as Father Francis stepped before Daryl.

The priest raised his hands out to the youth, palms up, and began his sermon: "It has been one hundred years to the day, the Great Worm Abaddon, arose from the ash of the dying world of the Living, to bring forth the second coming the Living God had promised, but failed to deliver. Abaddon decreed, 'If the Living God would sit on His hands while the Living desecrated the Garden, then He is a truly a God not to be feared.' And so, Abaddon awoke the first of the Undead. And as the Living fought our kind, they also continued to fight their own. And as they did so, our numbers grew. Abaddon understood it was in the Living's nature to be self-destructive. That is why he knew, in a war with the Undead, the only way the Living could win was to cease the killing. It was a lesson they could never learn—He used their nature against them."

Daryl had zoned out. He caught bits and pieces here and there, but for the most part, he wasn't listening. He was busy staring at Uncle Edwin. The poor sap was missing his jaw and his left eye. Father said he lost them in the war. He said Aunt Edna had to blend his food up for him and then pour it down his throat with a funnel. What a shitty deal, Daryl thought, and then caught himself before he cracked a smile.

"...but, even though they were risen, the Undead still had their limitations. It was time—the great equalizer, the destroyer of all things—along with its emissaries of rot and vermin, laid waste to our people. We were a creation, much like the Living, born not to last."

Dave wasn't paying attention either. He was busy looking over his shoulder to the wooden statue that was the alter. It was of Abaddon. It looked to Daryl more like a wooden carving of a sea anemone than a worm, but who was he to judge. He also was supposed to know the incantation that was carved into the altar's base, and recite it along with Father Francis. Of course, he couldn't remember a single word of it, pissing off Father even further. Mother said it was no big deal. She said as long as a holy man read the words and Daryl took the offering, the spell would still work.

"...and Abaddon heard our prayers. And since He is not a god who sits on His hands, He gave us the gift of everlasting undeath. He said, 'I have given you the Living, take them and drink from their bodies, from their blood you shall receive the everlasting covenant. Recite the Prayer and consume the flesh. Only then will you achieve true immortality.'"

Amy was bored. She got out two fart noises before Father snapped his fingers. Edwin patted her on the arm to let her know she needed to knock it off and pay attention. Daryl thought, if Uncle Edwin had a lower jaw, he'd be fighting back a smile.

Daryl felt his body involuntarily tense up as Father Francis began speaking those ancient words. With them said, the priest continued. "...then Abaddon said, 'take the flesh of the Living, all of you, and eat of it, this is my body, which will be given up to you, so you may live without fear of rot.'"

At this time, Father Francis turned to Edwin and nodded his head; he then turned toward Father and did the same. The two brothers left the group and walked past the wooden Abaddon, and through a door at the back of the stage.

Daryl's stomach dropped. He knew what was next.

Sure enough, the two brothers came through the door carrying a man—a living man. He was glistening with sweat and naked as the day he was born, hands tied behind his back, legs bound at the ankles; he also had a gunny sack pulled over his head. The man was sobbing.

The congregation made way for the brothers as they brought the naked man to Daryl's feet and held him there.

Father Francis stepped back before Daryl. "It has been decreed by our Lord Abaddon, for us, the Undead, to achieve everlasting life, to escape the brutalities of time, to live a life free of vermin and rot, we must recite the Prayer and consume the flesh of the Living. This is the Eucharist He has bestowed upon us." The priest turned toward the man. "All there is left to do is eat, my son." He then joined Daryl's family in the semi-circle, where they altogether waited and watched.

Daryl looked to Mother. She smiled her warm smile of encouragement. She nodded toward the man. She said, "Go on. You can do it." He looked to his Father, who was still holding down the man. He said nothing, but his disgusted glare said it all. He looked away from his father in time to see Dave's smirking face. He was enjoying the whole scene. What Daryl wouldn't give to walk right up to that idiot and smack him in his stupid face, instead, he looked to Edwin. Uncle Edwin has always been his favorite. Even though he couldn't talk, Daryl could tell by the look in his eye, that he was in his corner and that he would understand, even if his own father wouldn't.

Suddenly, a chant of *eat him, eat him*, broke out amongst the group. They all closed in and began to pull and push him toward the naked man. Daryl tried to back away, but the more he resisted, the more the group pushed and pulled and chanted and continued to push and pull and chant.

Daryl cried out, "No!" He ripped his arm away from someone's grip. There was a collective gasp from the group. Mother yelped once, then her hand covered her mouth. Father let go of the crying man and stood, fists clenched at his sides, his frustration about to boil over. The whole group went silent. All they could do was gawk at Daryl in shock. The only sound now was of Father Francis, back-peddling from the group, muttering: oh no, oh no, over and over again. The priest then turned to face the altar of Abaddon and then he dropped to his knees.

"Oh wise and mighty One, please grant mercy to this naïve child, for he knows not what he does!"

The family was too preoccupied with Father Francis to worry about the naked man. In fact, they had left him to join the priest at the altar; each one fell to their knees, praying for forgiveness for Daryl's trespass.

So they didn't see how the naked man began to writhe and undulate on the floor, or how his arms and his legs seemed to melt together, or how his screaming head seemed to get

swallowed up by his growing flesh; nor did they see how he grew out of his binds, and kept growing and growing, and they certainly didn't see how one end split into a mouth that resembled a horrifying flower made of rotten meat. Only when It let out Its mind-numbing screech, did they witness the presence of their god.

The congregation slowly rose to their feet in unison—in utter terror—but did nothing more. The only one to move was Daryl. He stepped in between his family and their god.

“Please”, he said. “It’s not their fault. I’m the one who wouldn’t take Communion. They tried to make me do it. If anyone should be punished, it’s me.”

He could hear Mother start to protest, but before she could get her first word out, she froze. Daryl took a quick look back at his family. They all seemed to be frozen like statues. He was on his own. He turned back to Abaddon. The Worm spoke to him, and when He did, it was like nothing Daryl thought it would be; not a voice really, but more like a hum, or the sound of insect wings on the wind.

“If you will not receive my gift of everlasting life, then you shall take the life of pain and ruin.”

Then he was gone.

Then something strange happened to Daryl. He could feel the damp chill of the air. He looked at his arms and noticed they had changed from a gray-blue color to a pinkish, tan color; he also noticed they were covered in goose bumps.

He turned back toward his family. They were unfrozen and were walking toward him. They came within three feet of him then stopped, but his mother kept right on going until she had him in her arms. She hugged him so hard it squeezed the air out of his lungs. He had to tell her he couldn't breathe...

Mother let go. She held him at arm's length and looked him over. She looked so confused. “You're warm. And did you say you couldn't breathe?”

Daryl wasn't getting it either. “Well, yeah, you hugged me so hard you...”

Then it hit him. He didn't want what Abaddon was offering, so He gave him the gift of the Living God—mortality.

Just then, Aunt Millie said, “Something smells... delicious!”

Daryl looked upon the faces of his family—now strangers—and they all seemed to go blank. Once again, all eyes were on Daryl, only this time, they weren't assuring or angry or innocent or well-wishing, they were the faces of pure animal instinct; of ravenous automaton hunger.

The group began to close in on him. Their moans were a throwback to the time when their ancestors first arose from the dead to take this world from the Living; their pack mentality coming back to them like they had never forgotten it.

Daryl shot a desperate look to his mother. She was shambling up from behind him. She too had fallen prey to her primal zombie instincts.

But, despite this fact, Daryl could have sworn, when he looked into her eyes, the only thing she wanted was to hug him and reassure him that everything was going to be alright—even as she bit into him, spilling his warm, sweet nectar down her throat.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Quinn is a construction worker, father, husband and writer from the Midwest. His work can be found in the anthologies *D.O.A.-An Extreme Horror Collection*, *Fearology: Terrifying Tales of Phobias*, and *Zombie Zombie Brain Bang!* to name a few, and his short story collection *Viva La Muerte!* is forthcoming from Hellbound Books Publishing. When he's not trying to write, he enjoys watching you sleep.



The Winds of the Wendigo | *Joshua Skye*

Francis Fey sat on her front porch, slowly rocking the creaking chair as she gazed out into the deep, dense, swathing flurries. Thirteen inches was expected to fall before morning, covering her little Pennsylvania town in a rolling blanket of white. Over fifty years she'd lived in her large Folk Victorian home, the bulk of her seventy-four. Though her bones ached and joints screamed, the winter months were her favorite time of year. In their depths, there was a profound quiet unfound in any other season. She loved the silence.

Beyond midnight, that hush hung over the valley, experienced by most as an unnerving calm, but to Francis it was welcomed as a secret lover would be on warm summer evenings. She could pretend being alone, without a care, without a soul to worry about, imagine she hadn't had children and as such the grandchildren didn't exist either. No one needed her in any discomfoting way, familial concern was but a myth lost in the ether, and Christmas wasn't just around the proverbial bend. In her fantasy, she was the only soul left in a world atrophied by an endless winter.

The streetlamps, few and far between, were merely dim orbs through the thick cascading snow. The surrounding homes of her neighbors were completely unseen, no lights in the windows to ruin her illusion. She sat beneath a blanket fashioned from rows of chunky braids, warm but aware of the arctic conditions all around her. Her every exhalation was an eddying phantom sluggishly waltzing in front of her before becoming embraced by the freeze. Life was like that, she mused, beautiful at first but ultimately taken by the cold, a kind of ballet in the breeze only tediously overextended.

The little old grandmother's eyelids grew heavy and fluttered. She didn't fret, she'd fallen asleep on the porch before, just a few minutes, nothing dangerous, nothing to worry about. The cold often beckoned it, a preternatural yearning summoned by a witch's spell beneath a full

moon on a Sabbath. In the whisper of the winter breeze, sleep brought children's voices, playful and sweet and haunting. She recognized the words as nursery rhymes she'd known as a girl, childish yet unsettling descriptions of plagues wiping out entire villages. Oh, the dark horrors of ignorant innocence trying to make sense of death and despair.

She was only vaguely aware that she'd stopped rocking, replacing the back and forth motion with a slight swaying from side to side in tandem with the phantom children's melancholy melody. Sing, sing, singing along. Indeed, she knew the words, and she mumbled them softly as a dream prematurely blossomed there in the darkness behind her eyelids. Seven little girls hand in hand moved in a circle like witches casting that spell, their cherubic faces all looked exactly the same. They were her as a child, seven identical sisters.

Her own voice issued forth seven times, a disturbing chorus slithering through the flurries as a whispering serpent gliding through the swamps, complete with a near-silent hiss as the tongue licked the air. The words telling of historical terrors became, lizardry and languidly, a tale far more modern, far closer to home. Remaining treacly and evocative, they reminded the old woman of local horrors recently experienced.

An English teacher had gunned down his entire seventh grade class and had then proceeded to take out fourteen other students and teachers before his own life was ended by the principal, the typically mythological good guy with a gun. The truly unsettling thing had been the insistence of surviving witnesses who'd claimed dead children had been the crawling predators, a mass delusion mocked on social media across the world. A local legend was told in verse, the myth of Solomon's Cemetery. Perverse chattering about a mortician's apprentice and his adoration for the sensual caress of icy flesh made Francis cringe. She knew exactly of whom the spectral voices spoke, a shy, quite young man named Mark. And then as easily as a breath, the rhymes gossiped about little Jimmy next door being incestuously devoured by his undead mother.

Another voice rose above the susurrated stories, sweeter than the others, more innocent even, uttering her name. It was as familiar as the stories themselves, and just as unnerving. Not only did the old woman's tissue-paper skin prickle, but she was roused from her lassitude. Weary, clouded hazel eyes fluttered open to behold a shadow standing on the bottom step of the porch. Instantly afraid, Francis jumped to her feet, heart pounding, thoughts racing. The rocking chair toppled over onto its side with a quickly muted clatter.

Who stood there, a curious ghoul in the haze, watching her? She meant to verbalize her interest, but no sound came out of her dry throat. When the shadow climbed to the next step, she rushed to the door, opened it and slammed it shut. Her fingers trembled as she slid the locks closed. Moving away, she thought she heard the steps creak as the stranger ascended to the porch proper and up to the very door itself. It wasn't so much a knock that startled Francis, but something more like a combination of tapping and clawing. Once again her name was spoken, louder than before, and akin to a hiss.

"It's me, Julianne," the outsider said. "From down the street. Remember?"

That's why she recognized the voice, as lurid as it was. Julianne was a little girl from a few houses down that disappeared one night a week ago, leaving her parents broken and forlorn. Many times she'd given the cute child, and little Jimmy too, a piece of candy or a cookie, some leftover treat from when her grandchildren had visited. As misanthropic as she was in her fantasy life, Francis was beloved by her neighbors young and old, the effortlessly kindhearted old woman all smiles and pleasantries.

"It's so cold out here. Won't you let me in?"

Francis wanted to answer, to assertively deny the request, but her voice disobeyed her, stubbornly silent at the back of her throat. Quivering fingers danced at her gullet as her wide eyes fixed on the front door almost as if she could see through it to the little girl on the porch with her own quivering fingertips scraping along the wood. But there was something else out there with her, shadowy figures behind her in the snowing haze. The old woman gasped as she envisioned those forms moving ever closer to her home.

The air around Francis flowered with the otherworldly tinkling of a thousand sleigh bells as snow began to drift languidly down from the shadowy ceiling. She turned her face upwards, eyes blinking to keep icy flakes out of them, though they clung to her lashes like frightened children to their parents' legs. She expected to see some gaping hole there, but only the tenebrous plane of the ceiling stretched from wall to wall. She might have taken it for a hallucination, some illusion roused by the horror of the situation, but she could feel the arctic pinpricks of each snowflake on her skin, smell the aroma of it as it chilled her lungs, and even heard the lowly whistling breeze slowly circling her.

From the recesses of her memory her grandmother's voice issued forth, muffled at first as from across a vast distance, barely comprehensible, but slowly it rose to a rasping mutter directly in her ear as haunting as the mysterious breeze. She told a story, one of many Francis had heard as a girl, the lore from her Algonquin heritage.

This one warned of the Wendigo and the wraithlike winds it conjured, winds that could flow freely through walls and sink down into flesh all the way to the soul. The memory frightened her and her skin prickled over the whole of her body, particularly discomforting at the back of her neck where it oozed down the length of her spine. The Wendigo was a forest phantasm, hungry, cannibalistic, an evil born in the seasonal melancholy. Its minions were lifeless things, humans seduced by the cold and drawn out into its painful embrace. That meant Julianne wasn't lost, she was dead, and the demonic entity had sent her to call upon Francis in the icy deep dark of a winter's night. The Wendigo had swept down from the brutal Canadian wilds to descend upon the Pennsylvania valley and reign in terror. As the memory of her grandmother laughed, a throaty choking sound, Francis bolted into the living room.

But the devilish winds had swirled in there as well, the furniture was hidden beneath piles of snow and it fell in steady flurries. Behind her the front door burst open. She screamed as she instinctually spun around to face the wicked, blue-skinned child stepping over the threshold. Her feet tangled themselves and she fell, crumpling to the floor as white clouds billowed up all around her, casting the nightmare before her in a deepening murk.

“I’m only a little girl, don’t be afraid of me.”

Julianne’s pallid, azure complexion sparkled with frozen moisture, and her icicle lips quivered as she looked about with wide black eyes. When they fell upon the old woman, her spindly arms reached out. “I’m so cold. Won’t you warm me with a hug?” Behind her a tall, hunched man with similarly grotesque skin entered the home, on his heels an assembly of undead seventh graders, wet-cerulean flesh all, crawled inside and the unwelcomed horde inched toward the fallen old woman.

“So cold, so very cold,” the dead little girl hissed. “*A hug...a hug...*”

Francis closed her eyes, squeezing them shut, preferring the blackness to the sight of the zombies coming for her. Her grandmother was out there in the dark, rocking in a chair not unlike the one she herself sat in on the porch, rocking and smiling and waiting. Francis did not open her eyes when she felt the frozen arms of the little girl wrap around her, squeezed them all the tighter when equally frozen lips caressed her ear. The breath of Julianne’s words was just as arctic as her flesh...

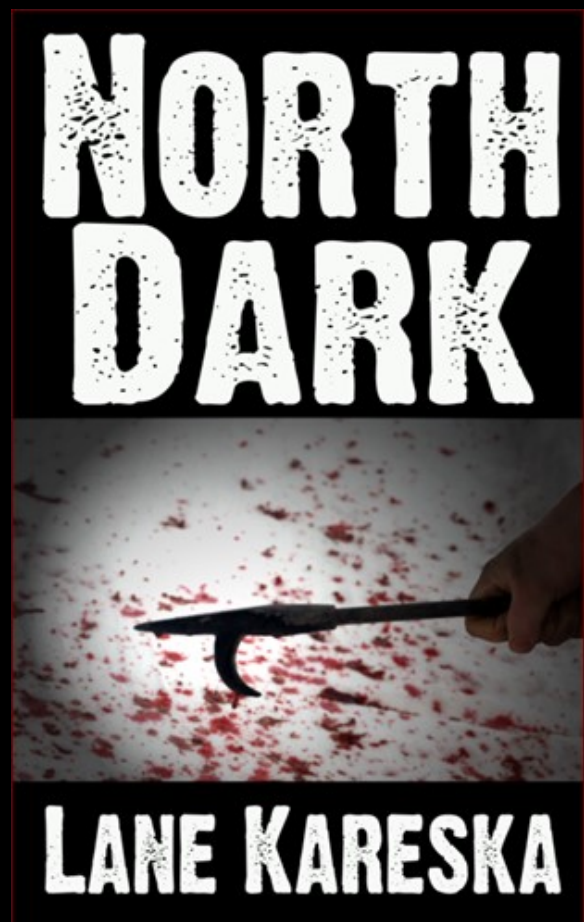
“Come, let’s play.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joshua Skye is the award-winning, bestselling author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in several anthologies and periodicals. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.

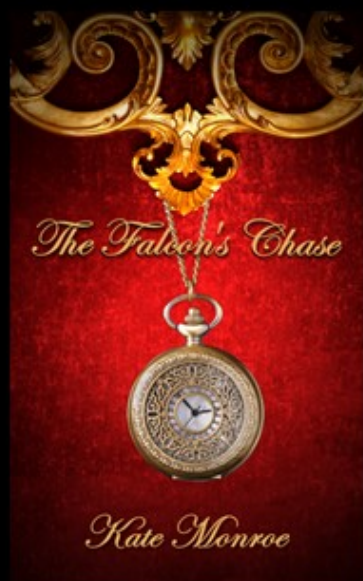
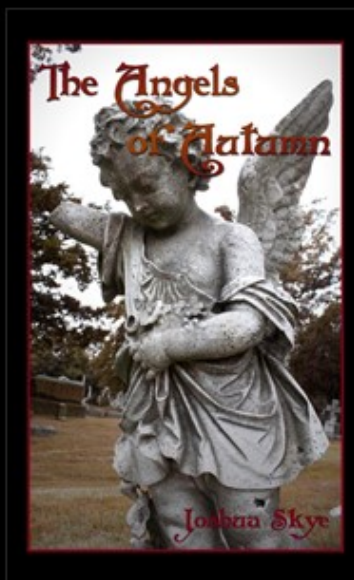
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The Needle and Me | *D. S. White*

Little did Mumford and I know we were being watched in our cells. When the government approached us about joining in the fight against the dark forces of the world, we jumped at the offer. I would have done anything to get out of prison. We were taken underground for a secret meeting and given our first mission. They told us about a Third World country run by a notorious dictator who was losing the fight against the undead. The government wanted us to clear out the perimeter around the airport and wait for the army to drop in, expendable guys who could finish the job of purging the city.

The undead had brought about disruptions in economies, militaries, and even messed up transportation around the world. They'd spread to every corner of the globe overnight. In country after country, the streets had filled up with uncontrollable swarms of zombies. Hospitals were overrun with patients. Stock markets plunged. Grocery stores went empty. People grew hungry and revolutions started. Governments were nervous. If they didn't start providing solutions soon, the civilized world might be thrown into chaos forever.

The job was designed for guys like us. The government that hired us was so ecstatic about our results the first time around that they routinely offered us new work. Our past crimes were erased. We were given a free license to travel anywhere in the world. Throughout it all, lives were lost in the fight, I knew that, but what we were doing, it sure beat hanging out in a cell.

Things took a turn for the worst when we were running an operation in a small country with lots of mountains located close to the ocean. They'd been waiting there when we arrived, as if they knew we were coming. The fighting broke almost the moment we landed in the airport. Mumford got bit.

"Get it off me!" Mumford yelled.

"Look, man. He's already locked his jaws on to you. If I pull him back, it'll rip your arm to shreds. You'll bleed to death before help arrives," I said.

"I don't care. Cut his head all the way off if you have to. It's killing me!"

"Well, here goes. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Mumford lost consciousness as the zombie lost his grip. I'd hit the beast in a pressure point just below the nose and it moved back reflexively, pulling torn flesh with it. For Mumford, it was too late. The poison was already working its way toward his heart. Time, Mumford needed more time. We all needed more time.

"Med-kit," I barked at our backup team. "Fast!"

They were frozen, pinned against the side of an airplane just inside the hanger door. I turned and shook my fist at them. No one had taken a shot at the swarm in minutes and the clock was ticking.

Through clenched teeth I barked, "Snap out of it, you broken slags. I need it now, not tomorrow!"

Someone with half a brain unstuck himself from the side of the plane and fished frantically in his backpack for a med-kit. He found one and tossed it at me. The case was already open and the contents hit the ground and slid across the floor. Without thinking, I grabbed the longest needle in the set and thrust it into Mumford's heart. Pure adrenaline. It would keep him alive for now.

Another zombie tore a hole in the side of the hanger. A fire ignited. It was one of the fuel tanks. I watched as the flames spread to the airplane. Our only means of escape was about to explode. Without thinking, I decapitated the intruder.

I searched my sidearm database for a safe-house somewhere near the airport. The closest one was just outside the city. And it would take us thirty minutes to get there on foot, under heavy fighting. I saw Mumford bleeding out on the floor and I flinched. It had been a long haul to get here, and already we were leaving, without finishing the job.

“Sorry, old buddy, but this is one messed up occupation. We both knew the cost when we got in. And now you might be paying with your life to get out. I only hope you can afford the bill,” I said and picked him up.

“Hello?” I yelled at the guys behind the airplane. “Get moving!”

They unglued themselves and shot at the swarm just outside, giving us enough coverage to slide out through the hole in the hanger wall. A covered truck was waiting there and I dumped Mumford in the back. Then it took off. It pulled away too fast, without a chance for me to jump in! As the airplane exploded behind me, I ducked down. I scanned my sidearm to see where the local hospitals were, praying they were taking Mumford in the right direction.

“You better know how to handle this,” I yelled into the sky, shaking my fist in the air.

At times like this I hated working with a backup team of government imbeciles. Mumford and I had seen the future a lot brighter than this. In the next few days, while I hid underground, I questioned our motives and the chances we took. I think at that moment I realized it was time to get out.

I found him in an understaffed hospital just across the border. They’d taken him over in the night and left him there to rot. Nobody working in the hospital had any recognizable qualifications other than an obsession with chemicals.

Mumford woke up in the night and moaned. Slime was oozing out of his mouth. The nurse put a fresh needle in his elbow and a moment later he dropped his head on the pillow and smiled.

“What are they feeding me?” he asked.

“Kelthium,” I mumbled, and he lost consciousness.

I sat by his bed throughout the night, and waited, putting water to his lips and encouraging him to drink.

When he awoke in the morning, he was coughing slime out of his lungs. I had guessed right. The doctors in backwaters like this loved kelthium, the cheapest antidote on the market for the poison the zombies carried. The stuff was miraculous to these doctors. Over the next few days, they lined Mumford’s veins with the brown mixture, which worked its way through his bloodstream and into his heart. Little did they care what they were doing to him. But he’d survived. He’d live another day. I gave them credit for that.

After he recovered, I started planning our way home. I had no way of taking us back to the airport we’d come through. The undead would be covering that region of the city for months to come. We found a freighter leaving the nearby harbor and we climbed aboard as hired help. Mumford struggled to get past his addiction to kelthium. Some of the other guys working on the boat gave him small doses when he really craved the stuff. I wanted to tell them not to, but the pain he was in was too much for either of us to handle.

While I watched the waves and felt the wind on my face, I thought about what happened. Someone had set us up on this job. And whoever it was, they didn’t understand one very important thing—we never failed. That was why I’d stayed with Mumford and made sure he got out of the hospital alive. Together, we always finished the job, regardless of the odds. Time after time, we pushed forward, always making our mark. I vowed to find out who it was and put a fix on things.

After arriving in the port back at home, I was picked up and taken in for questioning. I told them everything. I told them about being set up. I told them that when the time was right, we'd be going back. I never walked away from a job.

"We've tried to verify what you've said," they told me a few days later, after they brought me before a review board. "We've found nothing to prove any of it. The government denies everything."

"Of course they do," I blurted out.

"What I don't understand," a doctor said, "is why your buddy never made it back here alive. If he's so invincible, why can't we find him?"

"You'll have to ask him that yourself," I scoffed.

"We've been searching the city from the moment you arrived. If your friend is really out there, we'll pick him up."

I was in an uncomfortable position. The shackles were tight for a reason, I knew. They had expected I'd try to escape. They must have already looked at my prison record. I'd been told it had been erased, but traces of my past crimes would never go away.

My elbow itched and I wondered about the marks there. I had a headache and needed something to dull the pain. Why wouldn't they just give me one more shot? All I needed was a small fix.

The doctor put down his glasses before speaking. "The thing about kelthium withdraw is that you'll be disoriented. The only thing to do is wait it out. Reality hits you hard one day, and then the next, and the next, until you finally understand the depths of your illusions. Some guys can't cut it. They go back for another hit."

"So I'm free to go?"

"Certainly. The restraints are only there for your own protection. But I beg you to take my advice. Stay and complete the 12 step program. It's really for the best."

They released the restraints, and I got up and walked out the front door. Nobody tried to stop me. Out on the street, snow was falling. I held out my hand and let the snowflakes hit me, the momentary cold painful, like a needle puncturing my skin. But then the snow melted and only moisture remained.

I turned and saw the doctor watching me through the window of the clinic. He waved for me to come back inside. I shrugged. I knew I had a problem. The first step was to admit my problem. The other steps I'd deal with later.

Mumford came up the sidewalk and stopped to talk. He had a bag of groceries in one arm and was wearing saddles. I noticed the wrinkles on his face for the first time. He'd aged a lot since, but he didn't look like he was under any stress.

"Man, it's great to see you!" I shouted.

"Hey, how are you feeling? Getting stronger now?" he asked.

"They want me to stay for a while."

"Well, it's probably good advice. We all need a little time away."

I couldn't believe he was so relaxed. The undead should be coming around the corner any minute now.

"Tell me something. How did we meet?"

"I teach math at the high school. You were a student of mine. You used to like to write stories in class instead of paying attention. Numbers were never really your thing."

"Don't you ever get lonely living this way?"

“Not really. I’ve got good friends in my life. I’ve always enjoyed talking to you when I pass by. I believe in you. You’re going to beat this thing.”

His positive attitude was remarkable, considering the conditions. Underneath it all, he must have been fighting hard to keep in character, knowing we were being watched.

“Hey!” I said. “I’ve got this story I’m working on about a swarm of zombies in the arctic. It’s not on paper yet, just something in the back of my mind. Would you like to read it when it’s finished?”

“Certainly. Will there be a mathematical genius in there again, fighting to save the world?”

“Definitely. And I’ll call him Mumford, just like last time.”

“Sounds wonderful. I bet you could make a series out of that. Keep working on it.”

Just then, I heard a sound from the alley. Undead were coming in our direction in waves. Mumford and I ran to the subway entrance. Down below, a special train was waiting, prepared to take us somewhere far away, a place in need of guys like us, far up in the frozen north.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — D. S. White teaches high school and loves the short story format. His work has appeared in Pif Magazine, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Scarlet Leaf Review, Mythaxis, Zimbell House, Zero Flash, 101 Words, Rollick Mag and Novopulp. He was born in the mountains but now lives by the sea.



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I Am...? | *R. J. Meldrum*

I hate zombies. Seriously, I really hate zombies. I know, I know... I'm a hypocrite, since I'm actually one myself, but there is a good reason.

Have you ever read 'I Am Legend' by Richard Matheson? Not the film, that was terrible, but the book, that was just great. It's my favorite book right now. I'd read it as a kid and didn't think much of it, but I now I get what Matheson was trying to say. I get the main character, feel their pain. Feel the responsibility he felt, to rid the world of the monsters, not realizing he was actually the monster, the one all the others feared. I like to consider myself as very similar him, except for one difference... unlike Matheson's main protagonist, I know I'm the monster.

Let's go back three months. A normal morning, summer. I lived alone and preferred to wake up in silence. No news, no music. Now, I wish I'd at least turned on the radio. If I had, I might have avoided stepping out the front door to find myself surrounded by the fucking undead. Before I even saw what had surrounded me, I'd been bitten. I managed to stumble back into my house before they could do any more damage. Infecting me and killing me was bad enough, I didn't want to be eaten as well, although to be honest, they didn't seem hungry. Maybe in their dumb little zombie brains, they knew I was different. Maybe, even then, they knew I was going to become their monster. Or maybe they were all just full, they'd had a lot of people to eat that first morning of the outbreak.

Anyway, I flumped into bed, sweating and feeling even worse. I blacked out. I have no idea how long I was unconscious, but when I came to, I felt different. Well, I was dead for a start. That wasn't good. On the plus side, I could safely leave the house without being harassed by my so-called new brethren. The assholes.

It took me a couple of days to realize why I wasn't feeling very empathetic towards my new tribe. Overlooking the obvious issues, such as the destruction of the world and the death of all my family and friends, there was one thing that made me different. One thing that only I knew about. The thing that would make me their monster.

I'm a fucking lycanthrope.

You see, just as I was finally getting used to living with my 'monthlies', nearly five years after being scratched by a werewolf, the zombie outbreak happened. All that agony during the morphing of tissue, skin and bone. All those nights hunting and killing indiscriminately. All that time avoiding the hunters who came after me with silver bullets. Just as I was starting to enjoy myself, I died and turned into a fucking shambling, useless zombie.

At this point, it's worth noting I was really intrigued to see what would happen during the first full moon after I became zombified. Had the zombie virus cancelled out the lycanthrope? Would they combine in some way? Would I explode in some ghastly immune reaction? I have to admit, I was interested.

Turned out, the werewolf was the stronger. I became a zombie werewolf. Don't ask, I still haven't had the balls to look in the mirror.

After I turned, when I was on all fours, teeth exposed with all those lovely finely tuned animal instincts working, I noticed one difference. I didn't want red meat, I didn't want to hunt. My only desire was to kill my own kind. Not to eat them, just to slaughter them. Perhaps it was vengeance; perhaps I'm Zombie 2.0, the next stage on the evolutionary path, the one who must rid the world of lesser versions. Who knows. Who cares, it's fun no matter the reason

All I know is that I'm their monster. I'm their worst nightmare and I'll eventually rid the world of them.

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

Facebook: [Richard Meldrum](#)

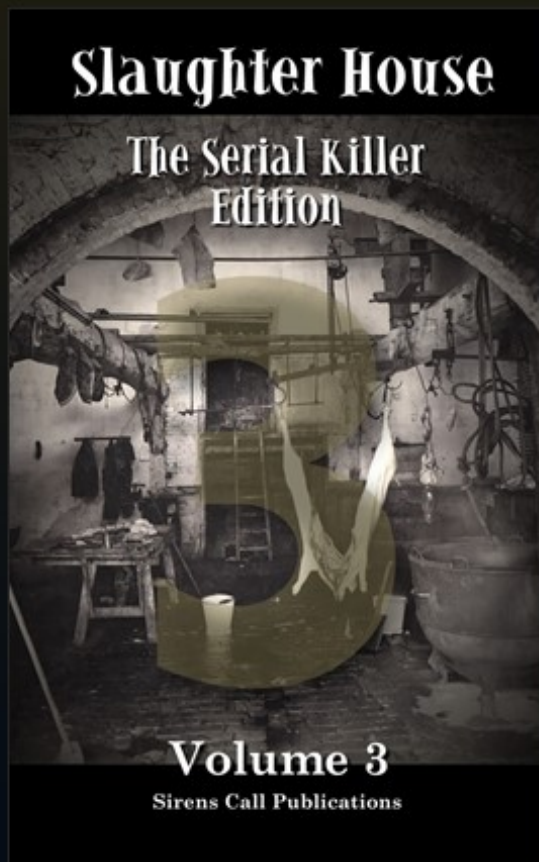
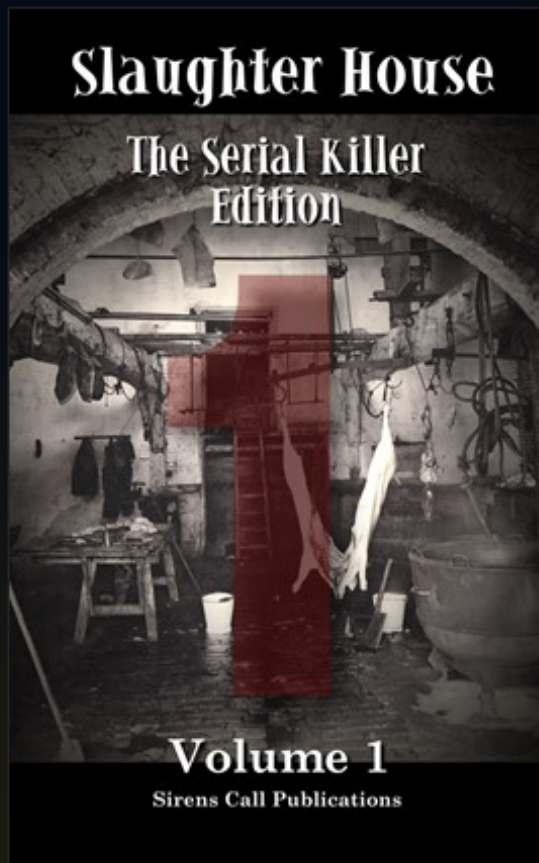
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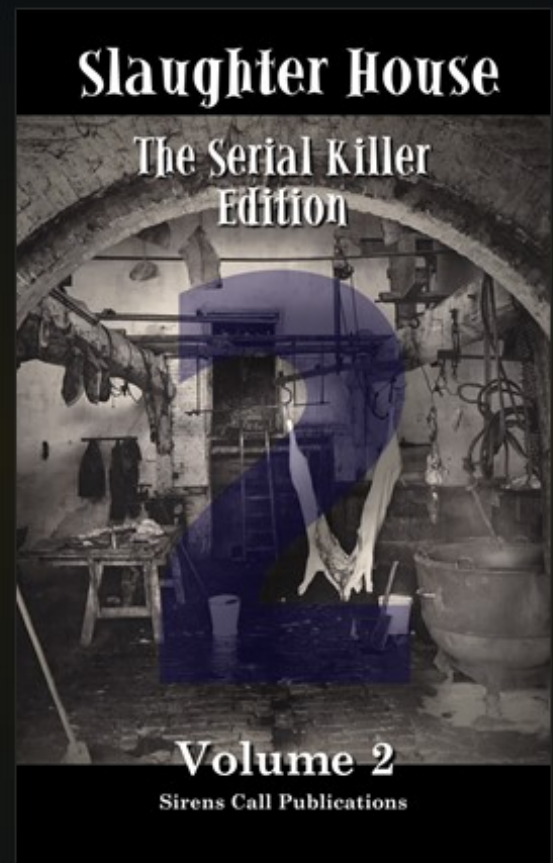
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When Bucky Comes Home | Hillary Lyon

Deep in the piny woods of East Texas, the thunder of an approaching storm boomed loudly enough to rattle the window panes of the Thompson's old homestead. The storm was moving closer, Ma Thompson noted to no one in particular. Pa was too preoccupied sharpening his old woodcutter's ax to listen to her. Sis was sleeping fitfully on the floor before the dying fire in the sooty fireplace, dreaming of more a peaceful past, where the weather was always warm. Brother may have been there in spirit, but in body he was long gone.

"If only he'd stayed, we'd not be in this predicament," Ma said to anyone who'd listen. She stood before the window, searching the dreary landscape for any signs of movement.

"Wouldn't have made a difference, Lawanda. Either way," Pa answered, looking up from his work. He dropped the metal file on the rag rug at his feet and held the ax blade close to his face for examination. Satisfied the edge was sharp enough, he stood and walked over to the fireplace. He gently nudged his sleeping daughter with the toe of his boot. "Up and at 'em, sleepy head. We have work to do—we've got to clear out the land on our eastern boundary today. The acre near the highway."

The girl sat up and stretched. "Ugh. That's the worst acre. Ma coming with?" she asked, rubbing the sleep out of her dull eyes. Ma turned from the window and shook her head.

"Not this time, Linda Sue. I have to watch for your brother. I feel like he might—"

"Ma, you *always* say that," her daughter groaned. "You *always* wait here, and he *never* comes. It's pointless. Your time would be better spent helping us. It's not like he's—"

"Watch your mouth, young lady," her father interrupted. "If that's what your Ma wants to do, that's what she'll do. C'mon, get your coat on. Let's go." He gave her the ax, picked up his well-worn backpack and the sledge hammer leaning against the front door, where he kept it as part of the family's collection of tools-turned-weapons. "We'll be home before dark. Keep the doors locked, like always, okay? You listenin', Lawanda? Yeah? Okay. Love ya."

As soon as they walked out the door, Ma threw the latch and returned to her post by the window. "Bucky'll be home soon," she murmured to herself. "And he'll be same as before. You'll see. I can feel it in my bones." She gnawed on a ragged fingernail, down to her cuticle, which she tore, and then licked the thick blood absent-mindedly, never taking her eyes off the world outside the window. Again, the thunder boomed, but the rain refused to come.

"Think of it as practice for one of your hack-and-slash video games," the girl's father, Beau, suggested. "Only it's real life, so make sure your hits count."

"You don't have to tell me," Linda Sue groused. "And you don't have to say (in a gruff mimic of her father's voice) 'there's only one life, and no do-overs.' How long have I been doing this with you? I know the drill. Sheesh."

Beau sighed. "I *know* you know, but I wouldn't be a good dad if I didn't remind you. Besides—" He was interrupted by a low growl, which, thankfully, gave them both enough notice to prepare for the oncoming attack.

Awkwardly, the source of the growl stumbled toward them through the brambles and undergrowth like a dazed, rabid dog. Drooling pink foam from a wide mouth deformed by rot, the once personable young librarian, Ms. Bonney, now madly propelled by an inhuman hunger, lurched toward the father and daughter. Fingers worn down to the bone spasmodically clawed the air before her, clumsily reaching for them. Beau took her out with one solid swing of the

sledge hammer to her matted head. He held her smashed head down with his boot, and roughly tugged the sledge hammer loose, flinging bits of rotted flesh and bone chips as he did so.

"Tck," Linda Sue complained as she wiped the back-splashed librarian gore from her cheek. "I will *never* get used to this. I mean, I didn't like spending time in the library, but I did like her. Always so helpful."

"Lemme see that ax," Beau said holding his hand out for it. Linda Sue dutifully turned it over to him. With one, two, three deft whacks, he severed Ms. Bonney's left leg into three segments. "Here ya go," Beau said, handing Linda Sue Ms. Bonney's fleshy calf.

"Good thing she had 'piano legs', as Ma once said," Linda Sue chuckled before she took a bite.

"Something to be said for a stout gal," her dad agreed, as he picked up Ms. Bonney's knee segment for his own light breakfast. "I'll save the thigh for your momma." He shoved it into his backpack.

"I know the way we feed keeps us from becoming one of them, at least for a little while," Linda Sue pondered aloud. "But in the long run, does that make us better—or worse—than these things?"

Her dad grunted a non-reply and led the way further into the wooded acre before them, oriented towards the distant sound of cars speeding by along the highway.

Bucky trudged up the over-grown trail from the highway, lopping off low branches and underbrush in his way with his machete, the one he'd purchased at a hardware mega-store on his way here. He knew this path from his childhood; he could walk it with his eyes closed. Once he left home for Houston—for work he'd hoped to find, but didn't—he often day-dreamed of returning to his family homestead, of being lovingly embraced and forgiven for leaving. But the months in the city turned into years, and his daydreams turned into waking nightmares of struggle and deprivation, of doing what he had to do to raise enough money to get home. And what he had to do was shameful; Bucky decided long ago it was best not to dwell on it.

From the grapevine, he'd heard unspeakable things were happening in the land of his birth. Things like people disappearing in the woods, only to show up weeks later with dead eyes and unnatural appetites. Folks not recognizing their own kin, and instead of embracing their families—slaughtered and feasted upon them. Such wild stories spread like a voracious house-fire in his urban community. He had to know if these monstrous tales were true.

The trail ended, at last, in a cleared swath surrounding the beloved Thompson homestead. The family's old two story house was built by Bucky's great-grandfather, at a time when the highway was just another back country dirt road. From the edge of the woods, Bucky could see the vague shape of a single figure standing in one of the front windows. From the height and build, he supposed it was his mother. The figure didn't move. Why was she watching from the window? What was she looking for? Perhaps Pa was out working the land. But where was his sister, Linda Sue? Normally, she'd be buzzing about the house doing her chores as quickly as she could, or goofing around in the yard like a chicken with its head cut off. But she wasn't. Was she with Pa in the woods? Was she sick in bed?

With machete in hand and a bad feeling in his heart, Bucky walked up to the front porch.

"I knew he'd come, I knew he'd come, I knew he'd come," Lawanda chanted to herself as she watched the lanky male figure approach the house. In her excitement, she gnawed off her finger, and with great satisfaction, crunched the boney digit between her molars.

He looked better than ever, to her eye. He still walked with that easy gait, like she remembered. Tall, but with not much meat on him, which disappointed her. City life had not been nourishing, she reckoned. Still, it was good to have him home. She rushed to the door and threw it wide open, before he even had a chance to lay his hand on the knob.

“My boy’s home!” Lawanda rasped with a guttural groan, and shivered with joy. Or with a hunger so fierce, she vibrated. Bucky couldn’t tell which for sure. His mother drooled and looked him up and down with her foggy blue-gray eyes—no longer the deep green he’d known all his life, but eyes that now reminded him of a dead dog he’d come across in the woods when he was nine years old. The poor mangled critter had crawled under a bush and given up the ghost. Bucky and his friends had poked the bloated corpse with a long stick, half excited, and half afraid of what would happen. Would the body burst, releasing a mix of maggots and gaseous stink? Would the dead dog come alive like a vengeful devil and tear them all to pieces for waking it up?

His mother reached out to him with her mutilated hand and moaned with glee. Up close, Bucky saw the black veins under her papery skin, the clumps of hair missing from her head. Up close, he smelled her fetid, graveyard breath.

“Aw Ma,” Bucky whined. “Did it have to come to this?” He moved back a step, and raised his machete.

“It was your Ma’s idea,” Beau explained to Linda Sue for the umpteenth time. “She comes from a long line of folk healers, herbalists, and—”

“White witches, they’re called,” his daughter piously corrected.

Beau groaned. He hated teenagers. Where had his lovely, amiable girl-child gone? For the first time, he noticed she’d developed black spider veins, like fine threads, running underneath the pale skin of her face. He didn’t want to think about what that meant. He, himself, hadn’t looked in a mirror in weeks. Lawanda had covered all the mirrors in the house with sheets, anyhow.

“Anyway,” he continued, “she was convinced that if we all ate the flesh of these monsters, a little bit at a time, then we’d become immune to their sickness. Like taking small doses of poison, to build up a resistance to it. So if, or when, you get poisoned, it won’t hurt you. Understand?”

“Uh huh,” Linda Sue muttered, having lost all interest in her Pa’s lecture. Her father grabbed her arm, and sliced the thin skin with the ax. Her blood oozed, thick and dark, from the wound. “Smear that all over you, and lie down on the shoulder of the road. And this time, *don’t* move until I come out for the kill.”

“I thought we only ate the flesh of the infected—these people who stop to help me aren’t sick yet, so why do we—”

“Why, on God’s green earth, do you have to talk so much and ask such stupid questions? Do you want to eat, or not? Maybe you’d rather starve until you’re a bag of rattling bones, walking and moaning to the end of your days? Huh? Maybe, instead, you should lie down on the shoulder until a car comes by with a good Samaritan inside? What do you think?”

She did as she was told.

Bucky took his Ma’s place at the window, watching for any movement in the gloomy landscape outside. After what seemed like a long wait, he spotted movement—two figures shuffled out of the tree line and into the open air of the clearing. A tall thing followed closely by a smaller thing; had to be his Pa and his little sister. Each carried what looked like cord wood,

but Bucky knew—after spending the afternoon his Ma—that what they carried was more like hacked up body parts.

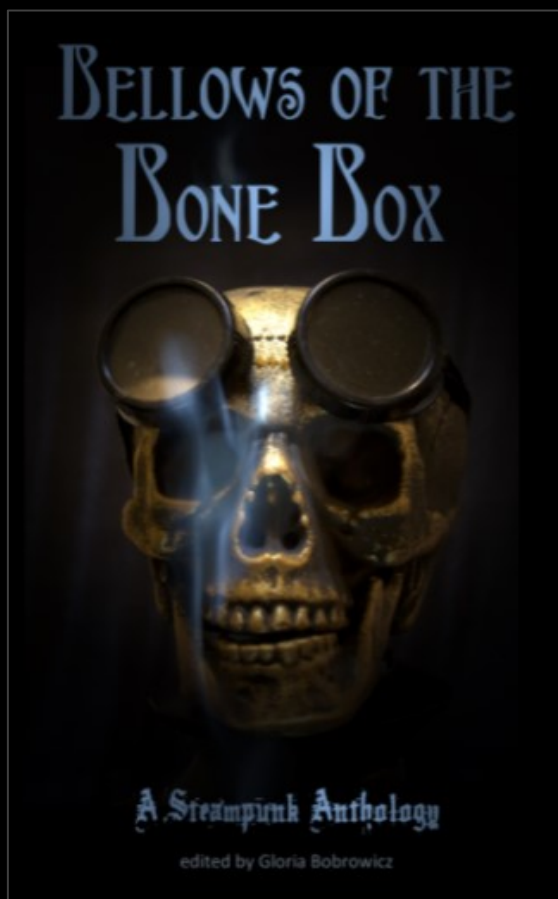
The few letters his Ma sent him, after he moved to the city, in turns berated him for leaving, and begged him to come home. Every letter hinted at big bad things happening in his home town. He assumed she exaggerated—as she often did when it came to manipulating people to get her way. So he ignored the letters, and carried on with his life. Wasn't until he heard rumors from other, more reliable, sources, that he decided it was time to come home.

And as of right now, he kind of wished he hadn't. He could have stayed in the city—struggling, sure, but safe. At least for a while, until the plague spread to there, which, honestly, was bound to happen. And in his heart, Bucky knew all his hipster friends in the city—they'd be like sheep to the slaughter. So, sooner or later, he'd have come back. Perhaps it was best he'd left when he did. After all, he'd heard all his life that a man raised right shouldn't have to be told he needed to take care of his kin.

Bucky steeled himself for the inevitable encounter to come. When he heard clumsy footsteps on the front porch, he moved from the window and adopted a warrior's battle-stance, with his back to the now-cold fireplace. He tightened his grip on his machete, and waited for the door to open.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Hillary Lyon is founder and senior editor for Subsynchronous Press. Her stories have appeared in *365tomorrows*, *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Night to Dawn*, and *Theme of Absence*, among others, as well as in anthologies such as *Dread State*, *My American Nightmare*, *Night in New Orleans: Bizarre Beats from the Big Easy*, and *White Noise & Ouija Boards*.

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



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The Monkey's Paw Spore | *H.B. Diaz*

Dr. Eliza Reilly picked up the doll and scratched at the crust of dried blood on its cheek. Its only remaining eye stared up at her, orb-like, lifeless. Nearby, a dog sunk its teeth into an unidentifiable piece of flesh, consuming it violently, tattered strips of denim and all.

She hadn't meant for any of this to happen.

No terrorist's explosive had littered bone fragments and entrails through the dust-shrouded streets of her little hometown. Mother Nature's wrath had not moved like a wraith down Main Street, splitting the earth at its fault lines. But, she had split Eliza, imperfectly, asymmetrically, so that the frayed pieces could never again become a whole.

Her brother was dead.

Eliza wouldn't stand for it. The stages of grief had not landed her wearily upon acceptance. Instead, they festered inside her like an open sore, amalgamating into sickness, into obsession. She had poured every fragment of herself and her profession into taking back what Mother Nature had stolen. When she discovered the fungus, a grotesque little organism that could resurrect, albeit enslave, the corpses of some insects, her line between genius and madness blew away like so much salt.

The experiments had taken months.

A few reanimated rabbit corpses had given her hope, if only because she'd ignored how they had cannibalized each other only minutes after waking. They were animals, after all. Her brother would be different. Last night, on the anniversary of his death, she'd packed up her syringes and driven to St. Gertrude's Cemetery. Eliza remembered now, as she stood in the aftermath of her genius, the six feet of packed earth that had stood between her and her brother. The raw blisters on her hands reminded her of the hours she'd spent digging, and of the hollow sound a coffin makes when it's struck with a rusted shovel.

Her brother's sunken cheeks and shriveled lips, pulled back from his teeth in a ghoulish grin, made it easier to jab the needle into his neck. She might have lost her nerve if only she'd recognized his ornery smile, or the dimple in his right cheek.

Eliza held her breath.

The fungus blossomed, black and malevolent beneath the mottled skin, and then disappeared. She remembered the sharp crack of stiff tendons as her brother's fingers flexed one by one. The spores swelled beneath parchment-thin flesh. Black veins crept into his neck and fanned like lightning across his face. She watched in horror as his eyelids cracked open, the deflated eyeballs like salt-shriveled slugs inside his skull.

Eliza fell backward against the dirt wall of the grave, a scream lodged in her throat. In twitching, unnatural movements, her brother sat up and fixed his black eyes upon her.

"Johnny?" she whispered. The creature opened its mouth as if to answer, the skin on its face cracking and exposing a line of yellow teeth. She buried her face in her hands like a child and listened to it claw its way out of the wound in the earth.

By the time she had worked up the courage to follow it, the Jacobs family was dead. She found them on the kitchen floor in their shotgun house, their limbs ripped from their bodies, bits of half-consumed brain matter clinging to dish towels and silverware. Grief suffocated her again, its dark fingers cold around her throat. She knelt beside the remains of the youngest girl and squeezed her severed hand. God, what had she done?

The hand squeezed back.

The family fell upon her all at once, ravenously seizing fistfuls of her hair, tearing at her skin with jagged fingernails and broken teeth. The girl's grip tightened until she heard the sick crack of bone, and then the pain came. With a savage cry, Eliza ripped herself from them and stumbled out into the street. Blood poured freely from a wound on her forehead and stained the town scarlet. There were more of them. They were everywhere, emerging from houses and climbing over wrought iron fences. She recognized the faces of her neighbors and friends, twisted now in pain or hatred, or *hunger*. Soulless moans escaped their bloodstained mouths, a death rattle beneath a Cheshire cat moon.

Eliza ran.

Gasping for breath, she burst through the doors of the cemetery's empty church, folded herself into the space beneath the altar, and prayed. The hope she had clung to all these months faded to a bruise. Her brother was gone, really, truly gone. Even as the tears stained her skin, she wondered at the strange blackness that mercifully infested her grief, mutating it into half-recognized craving. Even her shattered hand ceased to throb. It was easier this way, in the dark.

By midnight, half the town had been infected, and by dawn, when she finally emerged from her hiding place, they were all undead. Only the dogs remained. As the fungus crept beneath her skin, one of them lifted its head. Her fingers moved without her consent.

The dog sniffed the air, and then it ran.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — H.B. Diaz is a horror and mystery writer who also manages author and independent retail accounts for Penguin Random House. Her fiction has appeared in Horror Tree's Trembling with Fear and Salisbury University's Wordstock Magazine. Her most recent work is scheduled for publication in Danse Macabre, an online literary magazine. She lives with her husband in a historic (and probably haunted) Maryland town.

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

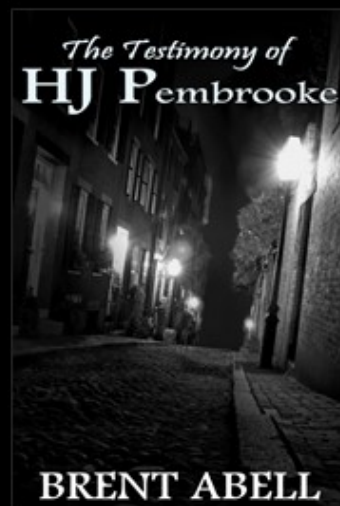
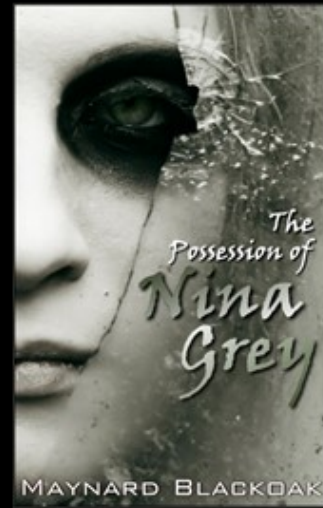
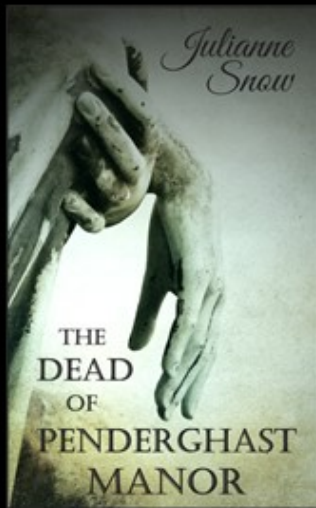
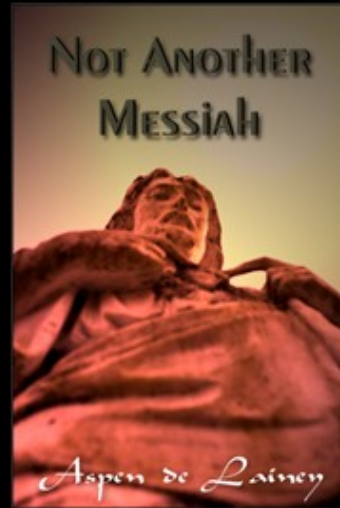


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“What is it, Reginald? It’s ghastly!” Beatrice pulls a hanky from the sleeve of her billowing forest green cote-harding dress and fits it to the end of her nose. Her voice is pinched and muffled through the fabric. The smell of putrid flesh hangs in the air like burning oil.

“A sombee, Lieutenant Rash called it, looks like a homeless wretch to me, maybe a man who forgot to stay dead perhaps. Watch this.” Reginald unlatches the cell door and the creature ambles forward with a painful groan that leaves its jaw unhinged and dangling.

“Wherever did you find it?” Beatrice asks in a brave voice but wanting to run, though knowing she asked for this and can’t. She begged to be shown the next interesting thing Reginald’s patrol brought back. Show me, Reginald, and I will show you. She watches the creature shaped like a man scoot closer, its left eye popping like an abscess, and oozing down its cheek.

“It was chewing on dead cats in an alley, it was.”

“Are there more?”

“We found just the one, but there might be.” Reginald just got off duty and his last task was to lock the thing below the Mage’s lab in the garrison. He stripped out of his irons and sprinted to get Beatrice, just so he could show her.

Because she promised to show him.

As the animated corpse reaches the iron door, Reginald pushes it open a bit further, allowing the sombee to pass into the hallway.

“Aren’t you worried?”

“Nay. ‘Tis as weak as a babe it is and has fewer teeth.” He pulls a long dirk from its sheath and nudges the wooden door open with a scuffed leather boot as the animated carcass passes through.

Illuminated by the torch-lit hallway Beatrice screams as the atrocity faces her.

“Ye Gods! Reginald, what’s wrong with it?”

The creature does not have much of a face left on its skull. More sinew and bone, and a soft oozing mess left over a thing somewhat resembling what a face once looked like. Its remaining eye is bluish-white with a soft dark blemish where an iris may have been. It still works and upon hearing Beatrice exclaim, the sombee shuffles toward her.

“Now watch this, dear,” Reginald says with fading confidence and stabs the ambling thing in the gut with his unsheathed dirk.

Balanced on rotting knees, the corpse falls backward, pulling the dirk from Reginald’s hand as it goes. The weapon dangles from its belly as it bounces against the stone wall, stills for a brief moment, then continues its slow-gaited attack.

“Not a sound. I didn’t even hurt it. Like a moving practice-dummy. Captain Sturgeon says we might have to put it to fire.”

“Reginald, watch out, he is getting close.”

‘Ech, not a worry, lass.’ Reginald grips his blade and attempts to pull it from the creature’s body, instead, the thing falls forward onto Reginald’s arm, driving dirk and appendage into its own chest cavity. The sound is horrible. Like mud taking an unexpected boot.

Forgetting his weapon, which clatters to the floor behind the monster, Reginald throws himself backward towards Beatrice and the far wall. He grabs a torch and lights the dry scrap of clothing that hangs loose around the sombee’s loin. The loose skin and bone quickly engulf into flame. The smell is sickening as the inferno of animated dead flesh falls to the stone floor, a puddle of boiling goo.

Reginald and Beatrice watch horrified.

“Oh Gods, my gloves are drenched with the vitals!”

“And you’re bleeding!” Beatrice says pointing to his ear.

Reginald holds a hand up to his ear. To the Gods! You’re right! I think the bastard bit me!”“

On a perfect summer day with fluffy white clouds floating serenely over endless shorn wheat fields, disturbed only with occasional black smoke smudges, a man marries a woman.

It’s the eve of battle, but still, these nuptials are a sweet affair. The priest stands, steel armor polished to a high sheen, sigil of Sif, storm clouds and lightning prominent, his black boots mirrors, blonde beard cropped close to his hollow cheeks, in front of a wall of blooming lilacs. Bumblebees work the blossoms. Skipping from flower to flower, sipping nectar. They stir the smells of fall into the air with the cadence of their work and compete with the thousands of tits sitting in the wheat fields, singing their chick-a dee dee dee to the lute-playing bard lightly strumming of the classic wedding song.

The congregation is hundreds of gentry and thousands of peasants. No military, they have battle to prepare for.

The bride and groom stand in front of an adoring crowd. A lord has found his lady. He is dressed in white-gold armor, the breastplate crushed with the yellow gold symbol of his family, a giant hare sitting in the middle of a field of wheat. He is known as Lord Bert the Defier and his hair is cut as short as his land’s yield. His eyes are hard and humorless and in his hand, a hand that would look more comfortable around the hilt of a two-handed sword is the small dainty hand of his bride.

A bride promised to another.

The bride wears shimmering white widow silk. Given to the lord as a gift from the Mountain Dvegar, who refused to come if any Southlanders would be attending.

Which was a stupid proclamation, being the whole wedding was a Southlander affair.

But nobody cared what Dvegar did, they usually arrived drunk and left drunker and a few hundred drunk Dvegar were far from welcome.

“Hurry, priest, the whole wedding is soon to be interrupted by the biggest battle ever to be fought in the history of man.”

The priest smiles at the bride and in turn at the groom who scowls back. He looks up at the large crowd of joyous onlookers and says, "This just might be the last wedding ever to be had."

Father Svyatoy Chelovek has never been known to mince words. Having the power of the Goddess Sif at his beck and call has not made him shy with his opinions.

"Chelly!" the groom grumbles.

"Did I say that out loud?"

"Keep it civil, priest."

Priest and lord meet eyes. Holy man's, crystal clear blue and Lord's, gray. Both faces are lined with decades of experience, their mouths tight in anticipation of what is coming.

The armor-clad priest of Sif pulls his mace from his belt and holds it high into the air.

"By the Goddess Sif and the fields of wheat she allows us to grow and protect, I declare our Lord Bert married to his Lady Gert. May children spew from her nethers for all time!"

Lord Bert shakes his head with annoyance but is distracted when from the blue sky a strike of white lightning streaks down and emblazons the priest's humble but brutal weapon. The electricity courses through the priest of the yield's body.

The priest looks as surprised as the lord.

The static discharge runs into the red clay ground and the priest lowers his arm. "By Sif and the almighty season of growth, I proclaim to King and Country and to all who are gathered and all who may hear told, Lord Bert and Lady Gert are lord and lady forever more! You may kiss your Lord, my Lady!"

And the Lady Gert does just that.

A pile of dead lay moaning and withering on the shorn field. Dismembered arms and legs kick feebly at the thin chicken wire wrapped around the lot.

"How many?" Lord Bert asks, still wearing his wedding gold armor and sitting a black stallion, mane billowing in the wind.

"Twenty."

"Sif bless us. Is everyone behind the moat?"

"Milord, there's more to burn."

"Hurry! The prince comes, commanding the biggest army I have ever seen maybe millions more of these follow."

"Maybe he comes to surrender his kingdom and declare his devotion to you, my lord," Lady Gert says arriving behind her new husband on a snorting gelding. Those gathered wonder whether to laugh or take her seriously until a small twitch at the corner of her mouth indicates she is joking.

Lord Bert smiles and offers a small chuckle. "Let's move this party inside, whether he brings me the crown jewels, or not, I think it better to show our friend some hospitality when he arrives."

"You didn't have to do this, you know?"

"What, rescue you from him?"

“Yes.”

“Would you have preferred him over me?”

“Never!”

“Well, my bride, we have a siege to honeymoon, shall we?”

“We shall, my husband!”

And they gallop toward their home. The setting sun casting a yellow and purple light over the land like a painful bone bruise. The gray castle stands strong in the center of a quaint stoic town of Sifton surrounded by a newly dug moat filled with water.

Prince Trogloditico is a small man with a fringe of thinning, sandy blond hair, combed over a shiny scalp. What's left blows in the soft prairie breeze. He has a weak chin that rests feebly on black chainmail over black steel armor. He rides a white stallion. A beautiful animal. His best. The world is ending. He is spending everything he has on this one battle. Nothing else matters.

Not anymore.

He replaces his helmet and raises his hand to commence the attack. A barrage of fireballs shoots overhead aimed toward Sifton leaving behind the smell of burning pitch.

They strike inside the city. He relishes the screams of terror and pain that results.

It has been frustrating moving this army. The bulk of it is dead already. Like cats, he has had to wait for the cattle wranglers to get them corralled back up time and time again and headed in the right direction during the month's long march from the capitol to Sifton.

He is surrounded by twenty thousand cavalry and fifty thousand infantry. His strongest soldiers. The entirety of his army that is left, that has survived the plague. Bronze armor-clad, spear-armed, leather boot stomping, war-hardened soldiers who as they march toward battle do nothing but glance over their shoulders at the stench behind them.

He has them digging a huge trench around his garrison. It will be filled with pitch and lit on fire to ward off the undead and fed with magic to keep the heat and smoke down. It is only meant to destroy the undead when they fall in.

Directly behind them are the works of war, catapults, timber for war implements, and the engineers to make them work.

Smithees and camp followers, medics, mages, and holy men all mixed into that jumble.

All will be protected by this moat of magic fed fire.

Outside the burning river are millions of head of cattle and the rustlers to keep them from straying and a mess are two million dead ambling citizenry.

The healers call it a plague. It will pass itself through the people and only history will remember it ever existing. But then the King ate the Queen.

Prince Trogloditico would be King now if he cared. King of what? Two million walking-dead?

Instead, he wants what has eluded him, Gertrude. On his deathbed, he wants to look into her eyes, nothing else matters, nothing, he flexes the swollen hand under the metal glove, a bite that happened only last night.

The plague spreads so fast the prince has no doubt every living person will soon be joining the dead, but before that day comes he will take back his woman from the man who stole her from him and watch his enemy slowly turn into a milky-eyed demon.

“Commander.”

“Yes, your highness.”

“Begin launching cattle and sombees at the town.”

Lord Bert watches the carnage below, “Douse them with pitch!”

The ambling thing continues to eat the dead soldier even as they both collapse into ash.

Bert shudders even as another fifty bodies flop in from the sky landing on the rest, smothering the fire and striving immediately for fresh meat.

Thousands mill around the courtyard as if half remembering what it is they are meant to do.

“I’ve never seen so many bodies.”

The air is filled with the sweet stench of rotting meat and burning flesh.

“Down, my Lord,” the priest of Sif demands, pulling his lord against the rampart.

From across Sifton another barrage of earth flies their way and strikes the castle front. Portions of the ancient stone have already begun to show cracks and large blocks have fallen loose.

“The monsters are feasting on a mound of our soldiers at the main gate now.”

“Are we lost?” Bert asks thinking of his bride tied up and wrestled away by a group of his horseman along with as many of the woman and children as they could find. To the elves to hide until either hell ended or came looking for them.

“Looks like the whole of the world is lost, Sire.”

“If only Sif could put out fire.”

“I Could ask,” says Chelly glancing eastward at a black smudge thickening from the East, “but I may not have to.”

The Prince points a feverish shaking steel-enclosed finger, at the smoldering town of Sifton, “Send another!”

The battle is already an orange inferno when the crack of more earth shoots into the castle’s wall, drowned out by thunder clashing across the sky.

“Sire!” A cavalry officer points East just as a bolt of lightning streaks white and hot across the animated dead on the battlefield. Several stop and jerk violently, parts of themselves smoking and withering to a crisp.

“Fucking Dvegar,” the prince groans as another lightning bolt strikes his prized stallion, cooking it to a toasty well done.

The horse falls to the ground trapping the prince under its weight.

A few infantrymen attempt to pull the prince free as the remaining force face the fast-moving black horde, but the prince isn't the prince anymore and attempts to enjoy his first bite of human flesh as the other soldier pounds him into a princely jam against the dirt leaving the remainder of the royal to struggle under the weight of his mount.

Tens of thousands of Dvegar ride fast moving giant black widow spiders and it doesn't take them long to arrive. Their priests work old magic and call lightning and wind from the sky. their sharp stone spears and swords don't just cut, they brutally dismember their human enemy, their stone armor covers every millimeter of their coarse hairy flesh, except their ginger bearded faces and singular ginger eyebrow and overly big glowering red eyes.

Their forty thousand enemies don't just die they lay dying painfully.

What's left are the ambling cadavers.

"What now?" Chelly asks.

"We clean up the dead."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Bryan Aiello hosts weekly podcasts on creativity and speculative fiction and is a writer of Fantasy, Sci-fi and the Macabre. Raised on Florida's Gulf Coast, Bryan served in the Army, graduated from the University of South Florida and now calls Brooklyn home.

Website: www.bryanaiello.com

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

Childhood Nightmares:

Under the Bed

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



It's time to let the monsters loose...



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

Bring Him Back | Evan Baughfman

Hell found me.

He'll find me.

The woman did her best to ignore the stupid autocorrect on her phone and in her journal began to copy down her list of deepest desires, which she had generated during her lunch break the day before. Writing down this wish list by her own hand was one step of many that would hopefully bring her husband back to her.

Earlier, the woman had filled a pen with her own blood. Now, she began to carefully transcribe an ancient chant from a weathered copy of Julio Smith's critically-acclaimed book, *Shortcuts for the Sorcerer in You*.

Two weeks ago, her husband had left their weekend cabin and gone for a hike in the woods. A bloody scrap of his yellow tanktop was all that was found of him. *Sorry, ma'am, but he was most likely eaten by a bear*, the experts told her.

The woman wished to hug her husband hard, hug him long. At least one last time.

Even if he was, indeed, dead. In fact, she expected him to be dead.

The only other explanation was far too difficult for her to believe: that he had run away from her. What she was about to do could only work if his love for her was pure and true.

Awash in moonlight, she kissed her wedding ring six times, just as the book instructed. She slowly read aloud the words she wrote as clearly as she could.

When she was done, she watched the edge of the woods from the bedroom window.

But a minute passed. Two. Three. Nothing happened.

The woman slipped into her favorite dress and studied herself in the mirror, realizing that she needed a little makeup to cover the bags under her eyes. But it also got her thinking...

How would her husband look when he eventually came? She imagined a rotting thing full of maggots, staggering to her, parts falling off or missing, eaten by scavenging creatures...

She went into the living room, switched on the lamp, sat on the couch, and waited.

One hour passed. Two. Three.

Her heart raced. She had heard bloody, tragic stories about what happened when tainted love was forced to live again.

Knock, knock, knock.

She wiped sweaty palms on the back of her dress and practically ran to the front door. She threw it open, ready to take her husband in again, no matter his current state.

She gasped. There was no one there.

Something tugged at the bottom of her dress. She looked down, and there at her feet was a severed arm, a piece of jagged bone sticking out at its shoulder. Its hand waved to her.

It was her husband's left arm. She recognized the scar on the elbow from when he had slipped in the bathtub as a boy. And there was his matching wedding band on the ring finger. The back of the hand was scratched deeply, and the pinky finger now ended in a bloody stump.

"What the *hell*?" She hoped the dark gods were listening. "All that work for an *arm*?"

The woman bent over and grabbed the arm by the wrist. It shook a 'peace' sign at her with its index and middle fingers.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Let's go see if we can make this work."

She carried the arm back into the cabin and closed the front door. "Sorry if it's a little chilly in here."

She placed the appendage gently onto the couch and went into the bedroom. She threw open the book of incantations and scanned the page from which she lifted the chant.

In small type, next to an asterisk, it read, *Upon completion of this spell, the wedding bands will be reunited. For it is the promise of taking one's hand in marriage that is most precious. Therefore, anything more than the reunion of the bands is not guaranteed.*

The woman sighed. She opened the closet, rummaged through a box, pulled out her husband's yellow mittens and a red Christmas stocking.

Back in the living room, the woman said, "I brought mittens. I guess you only need one. And if you get into this stocking you'll probably be extra-toasty."

The arm wriggled in approval and crawled into her lap, lifting its hand for her. The wedding band on its bloated ring finger glowed in the lamplight.

She quickly slipped a mitten onto the hand and pulled the stocking over the arm's stump.

The arm climbed from her lap and made a sharp left off the couch. It lay sprawled on the floor. It flipped itself over and slithered forward. Into a leg of the coffee table.

Apparently, the mitten had rendered the arm blind.

The woman removed the mitten. She laughed. The arm raised its middle finger.

"Now, there's no need to be crude."

It began to pet the top of her right foot, massaging her just below the arch.

"Oh, wow." Just like her husband used to do it.

Then she felt a pinch, and, with a reflexive kick from her other foot, she sent the arm tumbling. It lay still for a moment, dazed. It stretched its fingers and came back to her feet.

"No pinching this time."

The arm made a circle with its thumb and index finger. *Perfect. No problem.*

It grabbed her foot again and worked its magic. "God, that's *great*."

Another pinch. Harder this time. Sharper.

She kicked the arm away again. It was no reflexive action. The stocking fell off the arm.

The woman glared. "If you can't give a decent foot massage, what good *are* you?"

No reply. Not even a middle finger.

"Do I need to get a box and bury you deeper into the forest than you've ever been?"

The arm shot up the couch and leapt for her. Its hand clamped down upon her mouth. The woman stumbled and dug into the arm with her nails as it tried to wrap around her throat.

She lifted it from her face and threw it across the room, knocking the lamp onto its side. Light splashed across one corner of the room and stayed there.

The woman stood in the darkness, gasping for breath. She had to kill the arm somehow.

But the damned limb was fast, and it was on her again, this time stopping at her waist. It began to squeeze. She couldn't believe how strong it was. It was a thing possessed.

She felt the hand at her spine steadying itself, and then she *knew*.

She had gotten what she wished for: one last hug from her husband, one last good-bye.

Her eyes bulged as she watched her shadow struggle against the wall. The arm squeezed harder, she let out a banshee wail, and the front door slammed open, nearly breaking off its hinges.

A brown bear sauntered into the cabin.

The arm suddenly released its hold and fell to the floor. It scrambled away somewhere.

The woman staggered over to the couch, holding her side, trying to catch her breath. Her heart hammered.

To the bear, she said, "I know you're still inside that thing, Bill. I summoned every part of you here."

The animal was silent. Its head was held low in her direction.

"But you have to go. I can't deal with you like this!"

Something was off about the bear. Its pelt was mangy. Patchy. The woman caught glimpses of the creature's sun-bleached bone in the moonlight. Unhealthy portions of the beast's left side were missing, ripped away, as if they had been lost in a gory battle with a larger predator. Or a big rig truck.

How the hell could the bear still be moving around with wounds like that?

The flesh on its skull was also peeling like weathered wallpaper. Its right eye was an oozing, open sore. Even worse, the animal smelled like rotten meat. Not because that's what its diet consisted of, but because the beast *was* rotten meat.

The dismembered arm was not the only undead thing creeping around in the woods.

The zombear growled, and a piece of its snout fell away from its face, splattering against the floor.

The monster charged.

The woman screamed. The zombear crashed through the coffee table, slamming into the couch, flipping the piece of furniture onto its back. The animal tumbled along with the couch and thundered into the lamplight in front of the woman.

She shrieked, and the zombear roared. It had the arm pinned beneath one of its paws. The appendage wriggled in terror. It waved a futile peace sign at the beast. The zombear drooled.

The woman held a hand over her mouth to stifle her cries. A bloody piece of her husband's yellow tanktop was stuck between the zombear's jagged teeth.

The beast's jaws descended over the struggling arm. Bone cracked. The arm lay still.

The zombear fed. Because of its size, the arm had to be torn apart into smaller pieces.

"*Bill!*"

The zombear turned to her. Its lone eye was a dead black pool. No, her husband wasn't in there.

The animal had merely come to finish the meal it had started. Bill must have been tasty. His kisses had always been so sweet.

The zombear turned from the woman, snorted. It picked up what was left of the arm in its jaws, walked around the couch, and strolled back out through the front door into the night.

The woman sat in silence for a few moments. She finally let out a long sigh of relief. She was about to stand when she noticed something lying on the floor in front of her.

A ring finger, dead, bitten off.

And, attached to it, a wedding band, gleaming in the lamplight.

The woman knelt down to retrieve the finger. She removed her husband's ring. She wondered how much it might earn her at the pawnshop back in town.

Floorboards creaked.

The undead bear had returned. Of course, a single scrumptious arm hadn't been enough to quell the creature's relentless hunger pangs.

This time, the zombear didn't watch the woman from the front doorway. It came straight for her, food the only thought on its starving mind.

The woman tossed her husband's finger at the animal, hoping she could distract it like some dog focused on a yummy treat. But the woman's aim wasn't true. The finger bounced off the top of the zombear's head, bending back one of its moldy, maggoty ears.

The monster was upon the woman less than a second later. It swatted her down with a powerful blow and then held her to the floor.

It filled its jaws with her shrieking face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Evan Baughfman is from Southern California. His newest play, *A Taste of Amontillado* (an adaptation of *The Cask of Amontillado*), is available through Heuer Publishing. Additionally, Evan's authored the collection, *Twisted Tales from Edgar Allan Poe Middle School*. Many of those tales have also been adapted into short screenplays. "The Emaciated Man" won Best Overall Short Script at the 2017 International Horror Hotel Film Festival.

Website: www.evanbaughfman.com



Gothic Revival

Carson Buckingham

Available on Amazon & Smashwords

Poetry by Matthias Jansson

Puberty #1

Blood is red, brains are blue
But mixed together they are purple
As my rotten skin

In the mirror reflection
I see my dead face
Filled with maggots
Crawling out of my mouth
The tickling feeling
When they eat my eyes
I try to staple the skin
Back to my cheek
Using duct tape
To hold the nose in place
And a wire to hold up my chin
But I look like a fucking freak

I ask myself every day
How can a mother still love
A zombie son
Falling in pieces.

Puberty #2

Brain, brain, brain
nothing else than
brain, brain, brain
stewed brain,
cooked brain
grilled brain
and raw brain
I am so tired of brain
gray matter
white matter
does it matter?
I hate brain
I used to fantasize
about eating a heart
a blood red warm heart
but every day you serve
brain, brain and more brains
I hate to be a zombie
I wish I was born as a vampire
or at least a werewolf.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press etc.

Blog: <http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se>

Amazon Author Page: [Mathias Jansson/](#)



Sirens Call Publications
PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION

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Poetry by Joshua Skye

In Locked Surroundings

Beautiful nightmare...in cool flesh tones,
Empty eyes that stare and hearts like stones,
It's astounding.
But we'll be safe in here,
In our locked surroundings.

Once contained...trapped with their rages,
Rats clawing the corners of their black-barred cages,
Slaves to their bindings.
But we're safe in here,
Our locked surroundings.

Endless toiling...they never sleep, you see,
Hollow vessels that drudge eternally,
It's confounding.
We thought they couldn't get out,
Of their locked surroundings.

Desire and tragedy...the end is looming,
We can feel our fates, no more assuming.
The damned abounding,
They were able to break free,
Of their locked surroundings.

Fevers, dreams...now we're the trapped ones,
Like rats huddled in the corners of glass-walled enclosures,
Slaves to our bindings.
We're not safe in here,
In our locked surroundings.

Terrifying, multiplying...they're all around us,
An endless swarm, you see, beating down our fortress,
Unending poundings,
We're no longer safe in here,
In locked surroundings.

See, they're breaking into...our locked surroundings.



Sirens Call Publications

PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION

Julianne's Love of Snow

The twilight came with rainbow reds across the heavens,
A quiet crept lazily upon the valley that softly beckons...
The townsfolk to snuggle down deep for the night,
Leaving just one soul to wander alone in the lamp light,
A cherub child outside without permission,
She'd been told to get in bed, but she didn't listen,
The winter night called to her through the ether dread,
A mere whisper inside, a child's voice that said...
"Come out and play."
And so she did, nightfall's stowaway.

The day had tiptoed languidly by, snowing all the while,
Crafting a wonderland from an ordinary landscape's smile,
Mommy's so sick, Daddy was at work, she's their only daughter,
Julianne was entombed inside, there was no one else to watch her,
Through frosted glass she watched it snow, she loved the snow...
Oh, how she loved the snow! But no...so sadly no,
She couldn't go out and play without some sort of supervision,
And she was a good little girl, so at the time she did listen,
Even though that snow called to her through the daylight,
A strange expression inside, a child's voice would say...
"Come out and play."
But she didn't, she'd wait out the day.

With Mommy tucked into her big king-sized bed, snoring loudly,
And Daddy passed out on the sofa from a beer buzz, rather cloudy,
Their only little girl skulked outside dressed properly for the weather,
Boots, thick padded clothes, and a jacket made of the softest leather,
There was no one around to tell her what to do or where to go,
It felt like the flurries were meant only for her and no one else,
Not her Mommy, not her Daddy, not anyone...no one else,
She was on her own and it was so much fun making a snow angel...
But only just one, if the snow snuck inside it could be painful,
Run in circles, leaving tracks, catch a snowflake on her tongue,
Cross the street, against the light, being naughty just for fun,
Swing on the swings, aiming high, jump and charge, unafraid,
Pet the reindeer they'd brought in for the Christmas parade,
Knock on the Mason's temple door, then run and hide...
But a deep voice stopped her, a voice that cried...
"Come here and play."
She looked around. "What did you say?"

Too naïve to be scared, when she saw the shadow man she just smiled,
He was standing in the darkness beside firewood that had been piled,

By a house next to the swings.
Had he been watching all along?
She crossed the street back to the playground, unaware anything was wrong,
She went right up to him, kicking and dancing merrily in the snow,
Breathing in the cold with glee, doing a child's counterfeit calypso,
"My name is Julianne," she shyly said. "What's yours?"
"I don't know," he replied. "What are you doing outdoors?"
"I came out to play," she chirped. "And what about you?"
"To get something to eat," he answered. "And then I found you."
She giggled and said, "You're just silly...a big old silly willy!"
When he stepped out of the dark, his skin caught the moon and glistened,
He was icy and blue, eyes cloudy green, and lips bizarrely twisted,
He reminded her of Jack Frost grown old, desperate and deadened...
A frozen facsimile of what once was, a sad worn shell no longer lived in,
But his lips pulled back into a truly peculiar grin, he held his hand out...
Mean people don't smile and they never say...
"Come, let's play."
So Julianne did. She took his hand and he took her away.

An Autumn Tale

The fall had come, forecasting winter's wroth,
The season such a gift for me,
My favorite time of year, when misfit and goth...
Adore my idiosyncrasy,
With a crisp scent of apples woven like a cloth...
In a breeze from across the sea,
It comes like a lover, melancholy and cross,
A desire meant for only me,
After a late lunch of steaming, aromatic broth,
I set out from the house at three,
I needed time to myself so I fluttered like a moth...
Far from the community,
Through forest, across a field I found a cradle of moss,
A bed for the bourgeoisie,
Idle and yet serene, feeling quite like a sloth...
I lay beneath the boughs of a tree...
And read *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*.

Hours did pass, the clouds in the heavens drifted by...
As lazily as I lay beneath that tree.
It was a beautiful autumn day, and the time did fly,
As I read that Lovecraftian fantasy.
Words as spells conjuring a beauty not unlike Versailles,
The man was a sorcerer, you see,
He made the impossible believable in the blink of an eye,

And I got lost in his illusory read,
When red ribbons marbled athwart the dusky sky,
And the daylight began to flee,
I could read the words no more, no little wonder why,
It was simply that I couldn't see,
I closed the book and stood stretching with a sigh,
Below the branches of a stately tree,
Standing and stretching I just happened to descry,
Lingering at the far end of the lea,
An unnerving sight, some hunch-backed swaying guy,
And he was staring directly at me.

Skin prickling, I realized my route home was blocked,
He was between the path and me,
Looming and swaying, his wide eyes eerily gawked,
What kind of deviant was he?
His face was odd, something long lifeless and pocked,
A visage of rotting filigree,
I was sincerely afraid, I confess I was shocked,
By this man so weird and beastly,
I wondered how long he'd stood there as if crocked,
Wreathed by gaunt Fabaceae,
Staring and waiting, what horrors did he concoct...
To deliver unto me?
Lost for hours in my book, unaware I'd been stalked...
It troubled so drearily...
To think this man at the edge of the wood where he rocked...
Had been silently observing me.

Darkness descending, I could waste not a moment more,
However afraid I may be,
I had to get to the path and through the woodland soar,
Before night fell upon me,
That meant approaching the fiend and trying to ignore...
His ominous occupancy,
But to disregard what could be a waiting carnivore,
Could be the end of me,
So slowly I advanced and noticed he was drooling galore...
And glaring manically,
The salivating increased the closer I dared go,
A peptic sap flowing with glee,
The smell of rot hung heavy as from a long-dead boar,
There were flaps of flesh hanging free,
Just when I thought he would let me pass without uproar,
He suddenly lunged at me!

I avoided his claws and I ran into the forest fleeing,
He came right after me,
The tips of his fingers raked my spine, a distressing kind of feeling,
Like some secret iniquity,
The woods were darker, denser, otherworldly and demeaning,
A realm of malignity,
I ached down to my bones and I was screaming...*screaming!*
In anguished symphony,
For Death had given chase in this life or death race, revealing...
His indefatigability,
It seemed the knotted boughs of the trees were scorning...
My vulnerability,
And the beast at my back, so hungry it's jaws were frothing,
Didn't tire physically,
But I knew that I would, and I'd fall into the dirt squealing,
Torn apart impishly.

I had to get away, I had to push harder, faster, *faster* still,
Shrieking like a banshee,
Ducking and dodging, though the dark forest uphill,
Dear Lord help me, *help me!*
Running and jumping, my screams grew shrill,
Good God, almighty!
I chanced a glance back and was met with a chill
As I saw him so close to me,
He was snarling and snapping and lunged in for the kill,
His fingers barely missed me,
Thank God, *thank God*, the fiend took a disastrous spill,
Face distorting like a palsy,
But I didn't stop, I wouldn't stop, I kept running until...
I was home, safe and cozy,
Over the years, I've often told the tale with a writer's skill,
Of my run-in with a zombie,
It's no surprise they all thought me mentally ill,
And never believed my story...
Calling it nothing but hyperbole.

Through the Dark

It was very dark, absolute, the night of a new moon,
The heavens had turned gray sometime in the afternoon,
In the distance a storm brewed over a tumultuous sea,
I was tucked in bed, ill and feverish, all alone, only me.
I anxiously listened to the fiendish winds howl outside,
Imagined an ethereal groom in battle with a phantom bride,
I counted the moments between lightning and thunder,

My distress was fed and nurtured by the storm growing closer.
The sickly sweet petrichor haunted heavy the air and the gloom,
Like a specter in a waltz twirling from room to room,
Then a fear was realized as lightning burst overhead,
And an explosion of thunder filled me with an icy dread,
The very roof and all the walls rumbled dark delights,
The vicious tempest had stolen all the lights.

But something else. There's something else.
Something impossible is on its way.
There's a mumbling and a shuffling...
And a gnashing and a chewing...
Something horrible is coming this way.

It was more than a thought, more than just a fevered dream,
The storm had disturbed a darkness, blacker than it would seem,
A chilling vision came to me of wet earth sluggishly churning...
As the resident of an ancient grave was awakened and stirring,
Digging up through the dirt, wriggling through the muck,
A desiccated monster was reborn into a squall raging amok,
He shrieked toward the heavens, the rage of the tomb,
And got to his feet to stumble and shuffle into the gloom,
Through the cemetery he skulked and beyond the gates he stepped,
On his slowly shambling way across the fields he crept,
To my antediluvian estate, he came with malicious intent,
Through the front door and up the stairs, an awkward ascent,
His skeletal toes carved vales into my beautiful hardwood floor,
The dead thing was here and just outside my bedroom door.

Something's wrong. There's something wrong.
Something impossible is out in the corridor.
There's a mumbling and a shuffling...
And a gnashing and a chewing...
A dead man's clawing at my door.

Bathed in blackness and clinging to my sweat-soaked cover,
I sat up in bed with my eyes fixed on the door fearing to discover...
What the face of the intruder would look like through the dark,
How his rotted eyes would appear in a lightning's spark.
Imaging strings of fleshy decay hanging from his quivering jowls,
And worms writhing in an orgy amidst his exposed bowels.
There were pictures in my mind of a fiend so grotesquely aberrant,
Making me whimper like a child cowering before a drunk-mad parent,
Lightning! Thunder! The storm churned with a maniacal grin,
And a devil was scraping, scraping, wanting in... *wanting in!*
I cursed this madness, my malaise, and this terrifying night.

I wanted to get up and flee my deep dark house in feverish flight,
But I was blind in the dark, too weak to stand and too afraid to move,
So I sat there shuddering and sniveling like some pitiful rube.

It's so wrong...so very wrong.
Death is out in the corridor.
There's a mumbling and a shuffling...
And a gnashing and a chewing...
A dead man's coming through my door.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joshua Skye is the award-winning, bestselling author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in several anthologies and periodicals. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.



My Enemy Is Resting | *Judson Michael Agla*

I can hear breathing like calm ocean waves
Claws and teeth in atrophy somewhere close
One day I'll build that treehouse
A place where our thoughts won't betray us
My enemy is waking
I hear labored breathing and claws digging through dirt and stone
You died before you became famous
Your absence born a silent revolution like those that they make documentaries about
I'll have to start moving now
I am the hunted and my history will be painted black like coal
My enemy is here

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Judson Michael Agla is a spiritually blind man creeping through the Arts on his hands and knees through the streets and bars of Toronto. Being blessed with attributes such as O.C.D. and Bi-Polar disorder, his life has been a continuous crawl toward the surface. Judson paints, draws, writes, carves wood, sculpts, fights monkeys (real or not), takes a lot of pills (prescribed) and waits for Death, not to die however; he just think the Reaper and himself could have a nice conversation over coffee.

Website: <http://judsonmichaelagla.com>



Sören Kirsch

Poetry by Linda Lee Ruzicka

Unlived Dreams

Cold rain splashes to the ground
washes away the traces of yesterdays
drop by drop, scatters the fragments
of what was then
fog's shiftless form ever rises
as ghostly shadows in the mist,
clammy tendrils flex invisible fingertips
grasps the earth ever closer

Wind's moaning vibration, echoes
among the silent tombs in the eerie twilight
voices my unspoken thoughts, of dreams
which were yet unlived
the empty clouds flee softly, allows
the silvery moonlight to glow
outlines the grave shaped mound,
the scent of overblown flowers, stagnant in
the air

I turn and stumble aimlessly, blindly
the pathway no longer clear
memories forever haunting, not forgotten
engraved deep within my mind
unknowingly, far deep beneath the earth
sequestered from all sound
within the smooth satin confines
a hand moves.... tentatively

Moonlight Madness

The moon has risen in all its silver glory
as tendrils of fog creep across
the humps and trails of the marsh,
hide the path from unwary eyes

As the cold mist rises, wraps around my feet
leaves a trace of its icy touch, caresses
lightly,
shivers touch my spine like a cat's paw
as the night sounds cease, all is deathly still

A scratching is heard, faint, hard to locate
the sound of dirt pattering, soil loosening
scrabbling noises, a sound of wet suction
as if something is trying to pull free from the
earth

As I step backward my ankle is clutched,
bone yet familiar in its frantic iron grasp
I look down into the hollow sockets, blazing
with the undying love of the forsaken

He's come back to me...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Linda Lee Ruzicka has poetry published in Twilight Times, Dark Krypt, Fables, Descending Darkness, Writing Village, Spine and Page, the June Cotner anthology, "House Blessings" and "Garden Blessings" the Muses Gallery, Rosette, Lycan Valley Press Publications and The Sirens Call. She has short stories publish in The Grit, Reminisce, Edify Publications, LLC in Dec 2017, Haunted Encounters: Friends and Family.

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/linda.snyderruzicka>

Website: <http://lindaleeruzicka.weebly.com>

Poetry by DJ Tyrer

Corpsicle

It was a tragedy
When the mountaineer vanished
Fifty years on
Wife long dead
His daughter gets a call
He's been found
Frozen in a glacier
They don't mention bite marks
Too strange to be sure
Slowly thaw out the body
For the autopsy
He twitches unexpectedly
They stare in shock
He bites them
Hungry for flesh
They, too, rise
Back at the family home
His daughter waits
A horrific homecoming

Zombie Slave

A proverbial fate worse than death
Poisoned by the Vodoun powder
Taken down to death
So close, yet not quite there
Paralyzed, mind destroyed
Awaiting the call
When your new master
Comes spade in hand
Digs you up out of the earth
And issues the command to rise
The first of many
You are now his zombie slave

Brains!

He always scoffed at the notion
A silly, silly stereotype
Then, one day, he died
And rose from the grave
Hungry, so hungry
Craving but a single thing
Brains... Brains...
A barely-audible groan
Brains... Brains...
Now, he's *unliving* the stereotype

Ocean Floor

Submersible seeks the wreck
Ship sunk for unknown reasons
A deliberate sacrifice
Surprised, *shocked* to see
A figure on the ocean floor
No diving suit, little flesh
Slowly stumbling
Never halting
Marching on in search
Of human meat

Twitcher

A blow to the head
Not quite right
Downs it
But doesn't destroy it
A twitcher
Flopping on the floor
Yet get too near
And it can still grab and bite
Hope they do you right
Don't leave you to twitch...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing, was placed second in the 2015 Data Dump Award for Genre Poetry, and has been published in The Rhysling Anthology 2016, issues of Cyaegha, Carillon, Frostfire Worlds, Illumen, The Pen, Scifaikuest, Sirens Call, Tigershark and California Quarterly, and online at Makata, Three Drops from a Cauldron, Bindweed, Poetry Pacific, Scarlet Leaf Review and The Muse, as well as releasing several chapbooks, including the critically acclaimed Our Story.

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

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



Pages upon pages laid scattered across a messy desk, some worn and crumpled from repeated readings. Coffee stains marked a few, others wore oily fringe prints. Months of research is what it was, time and effort John Volkan spent to craft an exposé. A story of utter reality, which told a tale of the collapse of community on one small town. And after his search, John found one such town, Silverlodge.

A former mining town from the early fifties, located in the great white Canadian north. John's research revealed Silverlodge used to be a prospering town, but when the mine collapsed it shut down the local industry. Most people left, the ones who stayed shunned the outside world. If it wasn't for an old Ontario map, John wouldn't have found Silverlodge. In an internet age, Silverlodge didn't exist, so John's first point of reference on a story was to travel to Silverlodge and make contact with the locals. To persuade them to tell their story.

John scrolled through his contacts and stopped at the name Michael. Michael's name had brackets around it, with the word videographer inside of them. He hit the dial button.

"Hey Mike, how's it going?" said John.

John nodded in agreement to Mike's response.

"Ok here's the deal, I need you to take video of this project I got, I've spent the whole day setting up travel expenses, can you meet me at the airport on Wednesday?"

John crossed his fingers and held his breath while he waited for Mike's answer.

"Great, great, bring the usual gear and to be upfront, you might have to camp out," John said, as he cocked his arm backward in a victory pose, "and rest up we have a few days of travel."

Hours of travel led John and Mike into the deep Canadian north. The night approached before they reached their destination. Their car traveled down a dark two-lane highway, the only light emanated from the car's headlights. John flicked on the high beams, his mind worried about hitting a moose. But, it was an empty worry, they hadn't seen anything in miles. The only sight to be seen was expanses of snow-covered fields and mazes of trees.

Endless stretches of road continued for some time. While they sped down the highway, their car passed a barricaded road.

"Wait, John, we passed by a blocked road back there," Mike said, while he looked over his shoulder.

"Well that could be the spot we're looking for, but I didn't think we would get here so soon," John said, as he notched the gear stick into reverse.

The tail lights illuminated the snow banks, showering the gravel road entrance in an eerie red glow.

After they grabbed their equipment and supplies from the trunk of the car, they hopped the barricade. The snow-covered road hadn't been plowed and the residents hadn't erected a proper light source. John and Mike clicked on their flashlights. Beams of light scanned in either

direction, like a prison spotlight searching for an escaped prisoner. The men followed the road which led to Silverlodge, their trek would be thirty minutes until they finally arrived.

Each step through the snow became heavier, exhaustion started to build in John's legs.

"Isn't it alarming how there are no street lights or lights in general?" Mike asked.

"No, these people could have decided not to put street lights on this road," John said, while he rubbed his face to generate heat. "Plus, we're here to find out answers."

"What about the barricade, that's not strange either?" Mike asked.

"Maybe they closed off this road and opened a new one instead," John said.

"Still, what about the lack of lights? We've been walking for forty minutes and nothing," Mike said.

"Haven't you been in a small town past ten o'clock?" John asked.

"Ya, they shut down everything," Mike said.

"So what makes you think this is any different," John said.

The snowfall picked up a faster pace, while the wind growled and bit with a freezing sting. Shadows danced off the tree trunks. In the distance, a shop sign was eligible but was flanked by a sharp cliff.

"Look," John said, while he pointed his flashlight towards the cliff. "We need to get down there."

"How that's a ten-foot drop, man?" Mike asked, with an exasperated look on his face.

"Do you want to get paid for this? We need to get down there and that's final," John said, as he pointed towards the shop.

"Well, of course, I want to get paid, but I don't want to risk my life in the process."

"Fine, I'll walk ahead and look for a path," John continued, "stay here and set up the tent."

John walked to the edge of the cliff and peered down. He spotted a steep impression that led down the cliff. But John needed to know if it was traversable. With a deep breath, John took a step into the woods further, he tried to navigate through the darkness and fallen branches. The forest itself was silent, aside from John's steps against broken branches. When he finally approached the start of the path, he steadied his balance. The steepness didn't deter John, he felt gravity push him forward down the cliff. Once he arrived at the base of the cliff, he got a clear view of the shop.

Broken glass marred the facade of the building. The store appeared abandoned, and a little of John's hope went with the sight of the building. But, the sliver of hope pushed John to justify his curiosity. He decided he should regroup with Mike before he delved deeper into Silverlodge.

Finally, regrouped at the base of the cliff, John and Mike examined the state of the shop. From its collapsed door frame to its vacant parking lot. Nothing was left inside, no clue to follow, no person to question. The men changed their attention to the street further into Silverlodge.

Snow drifts had formed on either side of the street. Twenty feet from John and Mike stood a shadowed four-legged figure. It stood perfectly still, captivated by the presence of two

strangers. John directed his flashlight towards the figure. Two gray eyes glared from the beam of light. The figure was revealed as a mangy dog, plastered with a snarl on its snout.

"That dog looks off, something seems wrong with it," Mike said, while he took a step backward.

"Dogs mean people, we just have to find them," said John.

"Holy shit, dogs can be stray," Mike continued. "We should leave right now."

"No, we are getting this story."

With John and Mike's vitriol lobbed to one another, the dog started to trot towards them. Unaware of the dog's approach, they didn't notice it break into a cantor. The dog yelped, but unlike a normal dog bark, the noise was flat and distorted. The men turned and saw the dog had leaped from the ground. It collided with John and bit his arm. Fluff clouded the air from his sleeve. Mike pulled back his arm and swung, his flashlight collided with the dog's skull. John scrambled to his feet, while the dog laid lifeless on the pavement.

"You good, John?" Mike asked. "God damn thing is rabid."

"I'm alright, I think it nicked a bit of my arm."

They peered at the dog on the floor, its skin had receded on the top of its skull. What was left was exposed bone, but no sign of blood. The dog's right paw had rotted away to the muscle fiber and its skin had a gray pallor.

"John, I think this thing is dead."

"Well no shit, you did hit it."

"No, I mean like dead before it attacked you," Mike said, as he poked the dog's corpse with his flashlight.

"Are you saying undead?" John asked.

"Ya, I guess I am."

John pulled a piece of fabric off the liner of his jacket and tied it taut around his arm.

"Hey look, it started breathing again," Mike said, with his head turned towards John.

In a flash, the dog craned its head at Mike and bit. Trapped in its maw were three of Mike's fingers. His screams of agony rang throughout the outskirts of Silverlodge. John ran to its side and kicked with all his might. The movement from the kicks pulled on Mike's fingers, they started to split from the joints, until Mike felt a pop. His pinky finger had separated from his hand, with his opposite hand he bludgeoned the undead dog over the head repeatedly. Mike only stopped once his hand was free, and with the wounded appendage, he tucked it in his jacket.

"We need to find shelter and I will patch up your hand," John said.

Mike nodded in agreement. His jacket covered in blood, stuck to itself when he moved. John started down the length of the building, in the distance he saw a cluster of roofs.

"This way Mike, I think I see some houses."

John turned the corner and was confronted with a sight that froze him in place. A pack of dogs all with the same appearance of the one that attacked him; the appearance was one of death. Just as Mike turned the corner, he breezed past John, and into the head of the pack.

Sharp broken teeth tore flesh from Mike's legs. Blood pooled in the snow and gurgled gasps escaped from his mouth. Veins snapped and bone cracked from the collective bites of the dogs. But Mike was still alive, the look in his eye screamed utter pain and fear. Suddenly one of the dogs broke away from his limbs and bit down on his neck, Mike's windpipe shattered under the pressure.

John ran away from the pack, adrenaline pumped in his legs. When he looked back, a few dogs had followed him. John made an attempt to make it to the houses behind the shop. He stopped at the first house he came upon. John tried the back door but found it was locked. Panicked, John scanned the exterior of the house, until he found a reachable window. John's flashlight crashed against the window pane. The shattered glass clanged on the inside of the house. Shards of glass punctured John's hands as he climbed through the window.

Two shriveled human remains rested on top of the bed. John had found his answer to what happened to Silverlodge, they had been overrun with a population of horrific dogs. Barks and the patter of paws carried in the distance. John knew he had little time to hide, so he scampered under the bed. The stench from the bodies was rancid and caused John's stomach to tumble.

The sound of nails pattered against the hardwood filled the house. John spotted eight pairs of dog paws at the edge of the bed. A big German Shepherd stuffed its head underneath the bed and chomped its teeth at John. The German Shepherd was missing its ears and one of its eyes, when it pulled its head out from the bed, tufts of skin stuck to the metal bed frame.

"You fuckers, can't get me down here," John said, as he started to laugh.

Then a small patter piqued John's attention. A small Pomeranian slid underneath the bed. The Pomeranian's nose had rotted away and its eyes glazed green. Inch by inch the Pomeranian got closer. John prayed to whomever listened but knew his time was short.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Daniel Braithwaite writes in the genre of horror, inspired by his love of all things dreadful. Read his previous work in *The Sirens Call* Issue 28, and Issue 32

Facebook: [Daniel Braithwaite](#)



Cradle

Joshua Skye

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

The Calling



BRENT ABELL

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

At lunchtime, four hours of achieving absolutely nothing, Tom decides to pack it in and go home.

It's the firm's own fault, anyway. Old McKay makes such a fuss over sick time that everyone always crawls into the office no matter what's wrong with them. And then, what with the dodgy air conditioning recycling all the germs, everyone else immediately goes down with it.

Today, the place looks like a ghost town. Even McKay himself hasn't shown up, and if that isn't a sign of the apocalypse Tom doesn't know what is.

He shuts the file he's been staring uncomprehendingly at and slaps it back on top of the To Do pile. On his way out, he stops off in the Gents and splashes his face with cold water. It makes him feel marginally more awake, but no less like shit.

The mirror confirms that he looks as bad as he feels. His face is pale and sweaty, his eyes look glazed. Every part of him is sore: bones, muscles, teeth. His joints feel like they're made of ground glass. Even his eyelashes ache, which is a new one.

He swallows a mouthful of metallic-tasting saliva and wipes his face. He needs aspirin, some proper food—a Cup-a-Soup and half a packet of softening Hob Nobs doesn't fill much of a hole—and sleep. In that order. Drugs, grub, bed. The universal cure-all.

He closes his eyes and leans his forehead against the cool surface of the mirror.

Blackout.

It feels seamless, but when Tom opens his eyes again he's in his own kitchen, staring into the fridge. There's a packet of bacon in his hand.

He drops it onto the worktop, slams the fridge door and runs to the window in the living room. His car is on the drive, parked a bit slantwise, but in one piece. He might have driven the fifteen miles through North London in his sleep, but at least he's apparently done it without having an accident.

He turns around and leans against the wall, breathing out hard as a wave of dizziness tries to spin him out.

Low blood sugar, that's what it is. He needs to get some food inside him.

Bacon. He'd been holding a packet of bacon. Perfect. Giant doorstep bacon sandwich. Exactly what he needs.

He runs back to the kitchen. Frying pan, oil. He can't remember where they are. Is there any fresh bread? He can't remember that either.

The packet of bacon is still lying on the worktop. He stares at it, then shrugs. It's been in the fridge, so it's fresh. And people ate raw fish, didn't they? It isn't that much different.

He grabs the packet and rips it open with his teeth, inhaling the meaty smokiness.

Blackout.

He dreams about food. Great hunks of steak, hot and slippery with bloodied juices. Crispy fried chicken, plump sausages, tender lamb chops and chewy, sinewy ribs.

He wakes up on the floor, surrounded by broken eggs and spilled milk. It's dark in the flat,

and silent. The plastic packet of bacon lies about three feet away, under the table. The meat itself is gone.

He hauls himself upright, legs trembling. The fridge door is standing open, and what's left inside smells bad.

But he still needs to eat, and there's no way he's getting out to Sainsbury's, not the way he feels right now. And beggars can't be choosers, after all.

He reaches inside.

Blackout.

Pain. Muscle cramps, nausea, migraine. Light hurts. Air on his skin hurts. He's burning up from the inside. Can't breathe; his lungs have been pumped full of hot lead. It's agony to move, but just as bad to stay still. Spasms wrack his body, keep him awake through the exhaustion. He can't rest. He feels sick, used up, hollowed out. But above all, he feels hungry. So very, very hungry.

Blackout.

He dreams about Sofia. Dreams that she comes to him, pulls him up from the floor and winces when he screams. Dreams that he tries to smile, and say, 'Don't feel too good, Fi. Think I've got the flu.' Dreams that she strokes his cheek and starts to cry.

Blackout.

Sofia lied to him all the time, when they were together. He tried not to mind, because she didn't really have a choice; when you worked for the government, all classified hush hush stuff, you didn't really get to play 'And How Was Your Day, Darling?', sitcom style. Instead there was the Official Secrets Act, terse phone calls at three o'clock in the morning, sleek black cars with tinted windows idling outside the house and scaring the neighbors. He tried to get used to it, to be easy-going about it—she could tell him about her day but then she'd have to kill him, right?

He never stopped loving her, he simply stopped being part of her life. At five o'clock she'd call to say she was coming home and was going to pick up a pizza and a bottle of wine on the way. Then at nine o'clock her assistant would call to say she was giving a presentation to the MOD, or flying to Washington, or in precautionary quarantine for 48 hours. On her thirtieth, he posted his birthday greetings in the comment thread of a BBC news story about bacteria and hoped she might see it. Or that her assistant might, at least.

He never asked for a divorce, but only because it never really felt like he'd been married in the first place.

Sofia has never been to the flat he lives in now, so it takes him some time to realize that what he'd taken for fever dreams are real: she's there, wiping his face, taking his pulse and temperature. He has an unpleasant moment of clarity about just how much of a mess he's in, how badly he smells, but she either doesn't notice or doesn't care. She looks at little frayed around the edges herself.

She really is crying, too. He hasn't seen her do that, especially over him, in a long time.

He's carried out of the flat, through a front door that looks like it's been kicked in. No stretcher, no paramedics, just two men lifting his arms and legs and swinging him between them

like a sack of potatoes. They're in full hazmat suits, great white puffy things that make them look like astronauts. They lay him, not gently, in the back of an ambulance. One of them yells something he can't understand at Sofia, who's just wearing jeans and a stained red shirt. She shrugs, and gets in the back with Tom.

"I'm taking you somewhere safe," she says, brushing the damp hair out of his eyes. "It's all going to be okay. You're going to be fine."

Tom doesn't reply. He never made a fuss about her lying to him before, and it really doesn't seem worth starting now.

Blackout.

It doesn't look like a hospital so much as a cross between a science lab and a nuclear bunker: featureless concrete walls, bare bulbs, the hum of a generator and a faint smell of damp. Tom's room is about thirty square feet of completely empty space. No IV drip, no monitoring equipment, no bedside drawers. In fact, no bed. No toilet, even.

Worse, no food.

The front wall is a sheet of plate glass, overlooking a large open plan room laid out with desks and benches in a random arrangement, as if they'd been dragged in and dumped wherever there was space. It's a total mess, with dirty coffee cups on every surface, beakers tipped over, folders and papers dropped on the floor and not picked up. At least two of the widescreen computer monitors have been smashed in.

Tom paces the floor. He's naked, although he doesn't feel cold. In fact, he can't feel anything at all. His entire body is numb, unresponsive. His legs keep on ferrying him around the small space, his bare feet keep slapping the concrete. He doesn't want them to do that—he wants to stop, to sit down, to think—but they're not listening to him. He tries to call out, but his throat and tongue won't do what they're told either.

After what feels like days of strenuous effort, he manages to get his head to move a little, an inch downwards, enough to watch his feet as they shuffle him onwards.

Blackout.

Sofia stands on the other side of the glass. She's wearing black jeans and a lab coat that he assumes used to be white, once. Her hair is pulled up in an untidy knot, secured in place with a chewed pencil. She looks beautiful.

Tom tries to call her name—to cry out, wave, anything—but instead he just carries on walking. His ankle turns, and he stumbles into the glass. His shoulder impacts hard, but there's no pain. Sofia flinches and takes a step backwards.

A door at the back of the room opens and a young man walks in. Tall, thin, curly black hair. Tom doesn't recognize him.

"Are you still here?" the man says.

"Funny," Sofia says, without turning around. "Where else am I going to go?"

He gives her an oversized grin. "I keep telling you, you could give my bed a try."

Now she looks at him. "Fuck off, Mitchell," she says, but it sounds tired rather than angry. She goes back to watching Tom. "I'm still his wife."

Mitchell sweeps a pile of papers off the table next to her and perches on it. He faces backwards, away from Tom. “Technically, you’re his widow.”

Sofia’s jaw clenches and a muscle jumps in her cheek. She folds her arms and stares straight ahead.

There’s silence for a while. When Mitchell speaks again, his voice has softened. “Come on, Fi. You’ve got to know.”

“Know what?” Her tone is brittle, strained. “What exactly have I got to know?”

“That we can’t fix this.”

She walks up to the glass, puts her palm against it. I can. I can reach him, I know it. I just need more time.”

Mitchell shakes his head and gets to his feet. “I wasn’t talking about Tom,” he says.

Blackout.

The rest of his senses are shutting down. Touch is long gone. Vision comes and goes. Smell and hearing are harder to judge in his barren environment, but he can’t even hear his own breathing anymore. Only taste torments him, phantom memories of hot meat that fill his mouth and make drool run down his chin.

He can’t remember the last time they brought him anything to eat.

He expects to get weaker, but it doesn’t happen. His body ticks over like an engine, a perpetual motion machine. Even when he sleeps it keeps going, propelling him in an endless zigzagging route across the concrete floor.

He spends his time trying to regain control, to bring his body back into line. They’ll have to bring him food at some point, and he’ll need his hands, his jaw, his tongue. He’ll need to be able to bite, to chew, to swallow.

He practices the motions of eating. He practices hard.

Blackout.

The day starts badly. His feet tangle and he crashes against the bare wall, leaving his upper arm scraped raw. Dark blood oozes from the graze in small, slow trickles.

He stares at the blood for a long time. It doesn’t hurt.

He first managed to make a fist a few days ago, and this time he does even better. He moves his whole hand, lifts it up and clamps it around the bleeding section of his arm. His fingers come away red.

Energized by this success, he flings himself at the glass. His hand moves—jerkily, clumsily, but under his own direction—across its smeared surface.

When he’s finished, the letters look like the wavering first attempt of a child, but they’re readable. He’s sure they’re readable. They have to be.

Blackout.

Sofia’s hand flies first to her chest and then to the glass. She traces the words *feed me* with a trembling finger.

Her lips form his name and she sprints for the door to his cell.

He closes his eyes. Now, finally. Finally. Sofia will help. Sofia will save him. And she’ll

bring him something to eat, something to satisfy this clawing, relentless hunger. All he has to do is find a way to make her understand, to make her see what he needs. He can do that. He has to.

She rushes over to him, crying and laughing. Tom reaches out, fastens his shaking hand around her arm and pulls her towards him. He opens his mouth.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Michelle Ann King was born in East London and now lives in Essex. Her stories have appeared in over seventy different venues, including Interzone, Strange Horizons, and Black Static. Her first collection, *Transient Tales*, is available in ebook and paperback from Amazon and other online retailers.

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

Blog: <http://michelle-ann-king.blogspot.com>

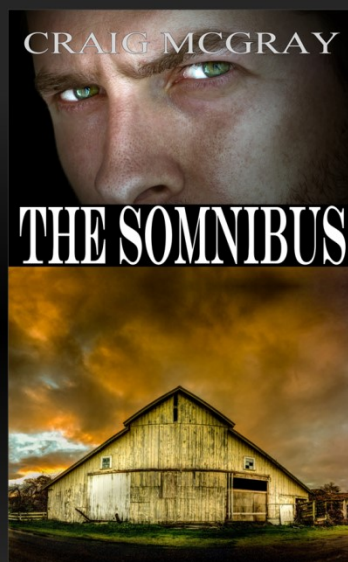


Little Jimmy's Mommy | *Joshua Skye*

Six-year-old Jimmy peeked out from beneath the covers and saw his mother's twisted body. Bloody and broken from the fall down the stairs, her splintered bones click, click, clicked as she crept into his bedroom, her bulging eyes focused ravenously on him.

Quickly, he pulled back, slapping the blanket closed. In his innocent, naïve little boy mind, he truly believed the covers were magic, that they would protect him. They always had before, but tonight they didn't. His mother crawled right under them with him, wrapped him in a tight tentacle embrace, and then slowly, so very slowly ate him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Joshua Skye is the award-winning, bestselling author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in several anthologies and periodicals. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.



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Mental Ward

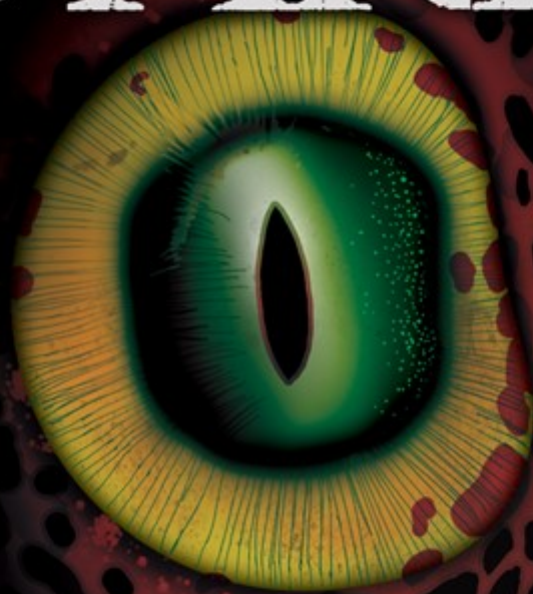
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Deep in the snow-covered woods, something is waiting...

STILL DARK



D.W. GILLESPIE

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“Mommy, tell me a story.”

“Sure, honey. Would you like to hear about the sun or the oceans? How about the green forests?”

“No, Mommy,” the little girl replied as she pulled the dirty covers up to her chin. “I want to know the story about us. Why are we here?”

“You’re too young for that story,” her mother replied. “So, pick another story.”

“No. I want that one,” and the little girl brushed away some dirt that had fallen into her hair. “That story, Mommy.”

“Okay,” her mother finally said.

“Helen,” a woman nearby snapped. “She’s too young for that story.”

“She’ll fall asleep before the end,” and the little girl’s mother leaned over and dimmed the lantern nearby. “A long time ago, there was a spaceship with eight passengers. They were returning home after a distant journey when they were suddenly caught in some kind of solar storm, and when the storm passed, their ship was badly damaged.” She watched the little girl fall asleep. “They thought that they were going home, but they were wrong.” The little girl’s mother moved away from her, knocking more dirt to the ground beneath her feet.

“Helen, I don’t even know why you believe that story,” the other woman replied. “It’s bullshit,” and she touched her face, tracing the scars that ran over the right side of it. “There’s hardly any air in here. I don’t think the air pockets are working.”

“They’re dying just like us,” Helen replied. “We’re not going to make it, Maggie. We’re low on supplies, food and water. They don’t know that we are here.”

“Or they’re dead,” Maggie replied as she pushed her long, black hair over her shoulder. “We might be the last,” and she brushed a pile of dirt off a wooden chair nearby. “I don’t know what happened.”

“Me neither,” Helen sighed as she sat on the ground next to Maggie. “Someone’s got to go out.”

“You won’t make it. The last search party didn’t either. I think that we are the last.”

“We can’t be,” Helen cried.

“But what if we are? What if your daughter is the last living child? If they know about her, they won’t stop coming ‘till she’s dead. Look, Helen, if someone’s got to go out, then it has to be me,” and Maggie laid a hand on her shoulder. “Let me do it.”

“You know how to fight. I don’t. She’s going to need you more, if she’s going to survive, but she’s not going to survive in here.”

“We don’t know if there are any more caverns left. They could all have been filled.” More dirt fell down around them.

“When did they get so smart?”

“Just this year, Helen, and they’re killing all of us. They might have killed almost all of us.”

"I can't believe that, Maggie. There has to be some of us left. I mean... You've heard the stories. The children that lived. They could have lived and had their own children."

"It doesn't matter, Helen. There's more of them than us," and Maggie fell quiet. "It's probably day right now. It's worse at night. If you are going to go out, then I would do it now. Take the chalk," and Maggie reached into her pocket, withdrawing a long piece of white chalk. "Do the markings, and come back. Do not wander, Helen, and if you see them..."

"I know." Helen took the chalk from her. "Play dead," and Helen moved away from her.

"Helen?"

"Yes, Maggie?"

"If you don't come back, then what do I tell her?"

"Tell her that I love her very much, and I will always love her." Helen stared at her daughter, who was fast asleep in a small bed made up of dirt and broken pieces of wood. "She doesn't know the whole truth of what is out there, and I don't want her to. But if I don't come back... Tell her everything," and she watched Maggie nod in response. "Thank you."

"Be careful," Maggie said as a tear raced down the left side of her face.

"You too," and Helen knelt down and crawled through a small tunnel of dirt to the other side of the cavern, where there was nothing but more dirt and a wooden ladder leading upward. "Please," she whispered as she pocketed the chalk. "Please, let someone be out there that is not them."

The wooden ladder creaked beneath Helen, threatening to break. Little splinters of wood rose upward, begging to tear flesh. One step cracked, but not enough to make her fall. Helen continued to pull herself up toward the wooden makeshift door that hid the opening to the cavern, and she gingerly slid it to the side, hoping not to see them. Instead, sunlight blinded her, and cold air filled her lungs. She wished that her daughter could have enjoyed this, but then a cloud came and stole the sun away. The air turned bitter in her mouth.

Helen slid out onto the ground, looking around to make sure she was safe. Then, she slid the wooden makeshift door back into its spot. She took a handful of dirt and covered the door, making sure it seemed like nothing more than just dirt and wood. Once satisfied that the entrance to the cavern was safe, Helen slowly rose to her feet, but not before pouring more dirt over her hair and body. Then, she walked slowly, moving her weight more to the left, and trying not to look up at the sun. They didn't care about the sun or the stars, but if she made the mistake of making eye contact with them, they would know. And they would kill her.

Half of a brick wall was nearby. Helen wanted to hurry over to it, but she heard the scraping, their feet dragging across the ground. Their arms were hung low past their waist, and their heads were turned to the side. Their eyes were wide and searching while what was left of their nostrils were twitching, trying to smell her, and Helen couldn't freeze either. They were always moving, even their arms and legs when their bodies disintegrated back to the dirt.

It felt like forever as that group moved on, but then they were finally gone. Helen had to circle around back to the brick wall. She glanced around to make sure she was alone, and then she slowly pulled the white chalk out of her pocket. Her hand shook so badly, but there was no

time to hesitate. Another group was coming. She quickly drew a white square and then tried to pocket the chalk, but it fell from her hand. The chalk rolled toward the next group, who all zoned in on it, and their eyes rose upward, trying to meet hers. She was shaking badly, but she avoided their looks and slowly stumbled away. It seemed like they bought it, but they still stared down at the chalk.

That group took the longest to move away, and Helen knew that she should head back. She was tempting fate, but then she saw a stone fountain nearby. It was filled with water. It must have rained recently, and it must have rained a lot. There was even a plastic bag nearby. There were some red spots on the outside, but the inside looked clean. It was large enough to be filled with water, and it didn't seem like they were around. So, Helen hurried over to the fountain, grabbed the plastic bag and filled it with water.

Something moved out of the corner of her eye. Helen froze, holding the bag of water in her hands. She slowly turned around. Her face nearly brushed against his. A scream rose up into her throat, and she bit her tongue, trying to force the scream back down. But she made eye contact, and this jawless creature leaned in closer with black saliva dripping down its throat. But it couldn't bite her, so she knocked it to the ground. She ran back toward the cavern's entrance, but as she did, this creature let out a god-awful sound that nearly brought Helen to her knees.

Suddenly, a thunder of scraping, feet dragging filled the air. A wind of arms moved fast, and heads spun around, set on her direction. Eyes shined white, and mouths snapped open and closed. They came from all sides, and Helen looked down at the bag of water in her hands. If she threw it toward the entrance of the cavern, they would be discovered. Instead, she slowly opened the bag and turned it upside-down, watching the water pour out before her, and the sight of water falling into dirt broke her heart. She looked over at the brick wall, and as they surrounded her, she thought the white square looked different. She tried to look past them, but they now grabbed a hold of her. They pulled, and her body ripped and tore and snapped apart. Blood rained out into the air, and they eagerly lapped it up. What was left of her fell to the ground, but Helen tried to hold onto her last breath. She struggled through the growing darkness to look at the brick wall, and there it was, a pink chalk line drawn through the white square.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction Author published numerous times in *The Sirens Call*. She has also been published by Antarctica Journal and Bartleby Snopes Literary Magazine. Earlier this year, she finished writing her first Horror/Science-Fiction novel, *Lizardian*, and she is currently working on another Horror novella/novel called, *Ghost In The Porcelain*.

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

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



Zombie Road | *Stephen Crowley*

In one crushing wave, they descended on the city. The virus had spread faster than anticipated by the CDC; whole communities condemned to a horrifying fate as it ravaged the land, bringing down populations in hours, not days.

Like the infection, once bitten, the undead moved fast; masses of ghouls with rotting dead limbs reanimated quickly, victim to victim, as the horde hit the once peaceful home of Samuel and Josh. Residents fled as groaning cadavers with entrails dangling from stained gnarly teeth dove through windows and smashed down doors, mindless corpses able to maintain a high agility, driven by a voracious appetite.

A swift attack ensued as high concentrations of the undead shuffled from city to neighboring towns to seek food elsewhere. They moved in droves of fast-moving, moaning flesh eaters—they had purpose.

And now, the survivors drove away, as swift as Sam's Subaru outback could take them; on the run from Bakersfield, heading south-east.

Samuel turned up the radio station for news of the pandemic progress.

“Reports of reanimating corpses continue to come in. All we know is what our reporters, those able, have managed to report back to us. The outbreak spread fast. Maybe airborne. We have already lost contact with many major cities. Military troops man, where are you?”

Samuel strained to hold back tears as he gripped the steering wheel; he watched helplessly as the undead devoured Mom and Dad as they made a break for the car.

“They turned, fucking, fast,” a teary-eyed Samuel spoke in brittle words.

In the front passenger seat, brother Josh, head bowed down as he tried to erase the gnawing from his memory, the crunching, the screams. “We...we just had no chance.”

A slim arm from behind reached forward and caressed Josh's shoulder, Kiki, Josh's other half. “Nothing we could do.” She paused for thought, her crystal blue eyes peered out the window stained with putrid human goo after Josh managed to bash one with a crowbar as they frantically escaped in the car.

The radio broadcast continued.

“Our reporters advise all to head for the nearest military base or secure location. Anyone bitten must be avoided, the incubation period is just quick folks. The disease may be airborne. The CDC is working as best they can on a vaccine, so we are informed, for this pandemic. We also need to evacuate soon.”

“We should hide, best and closest hiding place.” Josh clenched his sweat-drenched, mussed hair.

“Josh, we stick to what the broadcast says for now.” Samuel winced as he noticed Josh, sullen, far gone and not listening. “Josh. There are bases around. Irwin, I think is the closest base.”

“Ok, ok.” Josh wept again as Kiki continued to caress his shoulder. Josh, a broken man, unable to focus. His trembling and grimy hands stained with the putridness that spurt like a geyser when the crowbar struck the undead man's skull.

Felix, a Bakersfield resident, rescued during the escape, squirmed nervously in the back alongside Kiki. “My phone signal, not good. Networks may be failing.”

A lucky break for the young Brazilian; he managed to clamber inside the vehicle as the boys and Kiki sped off from the attack.

Samuel ignored Felix. “Shape up, Josh.”

Kiki threw Samuel a scowl. “Chill, Sam.”

“We both lost our loved ones, Kiki,” Samuel glanced quickly at his passengers, “all of us, but to get through this, we have to focus. We gotta make it to a base. There will be armed soldiers able to defend us, we will be safe. Sorry Josh, but right now I need you strong, Josh?”

Josh lifted his weary face a little. “Got it.”

Samuel pursed his lips glancing at the fuel gauge. “Fort Irwin, I think, only an hour or so away from here, we...” his voice trailed off on inspecting the gauge again, “we need gas much sooner, like now.”

The broadcast continued, broken up as unrest hit the station; muffled yells emerged in the studio background.

“The bases report... low numbers heading their way...not expecting many survivors. If you make it, and I hope you can... quarantine zones will help shelter you from the madness...”

Dying screams filled the speakers, background cries, then the broadcast ended with few words.

“Oh no, they are here, must leave now. Godspeed.”

Silence.

“Fuck, okay, unless anyone knows better,” Samuel wiped droplets of sweat from his forehead as they stung his eyes, “I am heading for Irwin, we'll be in Mojave soon where we have to stop, we are about out of gas.”

Mojave, just silence.

Pockets of wind stirred the sandy desert roads. The stores empty. Torn bodies lay strewn across store and house doorways and sidewalks. One moaning cadaver, groans, unable to move, severed at the waist with tire markings across its crushed waist.

“There is a gas station along here.” Samuel, a little more cheery despite a strong sense of foreboding in the air.

Kiki nodded and pointed ahead. “One close now, stay on this road.”

“Shit. We really need it.” Samuel rocked in the driving seat.

Josh raised his head, puffed cheeks streaked with tears. “What we need is safety.”

Samuel exhaled. “Damn it, there was no time to do shit when we got outta Bakers.”

“Be thankful you made it this far, more than I can say for your home or this place,” Felix mumbled.

Josh tried to hold his head up. “Fuck. Military bases? They won't be able to let everyone in. We should have headed for the forestry, sheltered under the canopy of the trees.”

Samuel huffed. “There was no time to think, Josh, we barely got the hell out of there.”

Kiki spotted something, not too far behind them on the highway, dust clouds billowing and moving towards Mojave town. “Anyone see that?”

“What, Kiki, kinda driving.” Samuel swung his neck left and right.

“Behind us, what's all that dust, wha...” Kiki started a series of short breaths.

Samuel followed Kiki's line of sight through the rear view, trails of dust darting towards them, just minutes away. Felix held up his phone, and switched to its camera, and zoomed in on the dusty movement.

His face lit with fear, mouth wide open. “Oh God.”

In his phone camera view, hundreds of them, running fast towards Mojave.

“They come, they really come,” Felix yelled.

“Shit, I see them,” Samuel cried out, “we have to get further away very soon. The gas station is just along here. But we must be vigilant while I fill her up.”

“How the fuck do they move so fast?” Josh whimpered.

“Perhaps they can smell us, who knows, but they come this way.” Felix kept his eyes on his horrifying phone view.

Samuel checked the road ahead, a keen eye for trouble. “Keep your eyes open, let me know if any are close.”

The gas gauge needle hovered closer to the red E.

Kiki and Josh screamed.

Samuel braked.

An onslaught of marauding undead pelted for the car from just a dozen feet or so ahead. Empty staring gray eyes, drooling, a hungry pack.

“Where did they come from? Fuck it, the air and space port, we can make it, cannot stop.”

The car whirred into acceleration and steered away sharply onto an intersection.

“Could be overrun with these things, radio said military bases.” Josh slapped the dashboard as he shouted.

“No time, Josh! We have just minutes of gas, we have to hope the airport is secure.”

Felix nodded emphatically, anything worked if it meant leaving charging zombies in the rear view somewhere more distant. “We need a place more secure than a gas station, we cannot stop till then, too many of those things.”

Kiki wrapped her arms around Josh from the back seat. Josh whimpered. “Oh God, we're gonna die, fucking die out here in the desert.”

Samuel grimaced, no acidic tongue response, no hollering at Josh—this time he agreed.

Josh's whimpers flowed like the streams of sweat down his forehead. “What if the airport is overrun, there may be nobody, just, just those things, fucking zombies.”

“I am aware, Josh. But we have to try, must find a secure place.” Samuel returned a calm tone to Josh; as the world fell apart, he wondered if hope could ever be in reach.

The car sped past a signpost to the airport and along a road to the main entrance gates.
Shudder. Sputter, sputter.

The quiet hum of the engine was replaced with a grumble as the car slowly halted.

Samuel, as did Felix, checked window views to take stock of any danger, checking for flesh-eating cadavers. The airport entrance just ahead; the iron gates were twisted and bent inwards, someone had already driven through without stopping.

Trailing clouds of dust came into view near the signpost they passed.

“We gotta run for it. That's it, car is done. Let's go.”

Without hesitation, the four leapt from the car and ran for the smashed gates.

Samuel skidded to a stop; he quickly inspected the administration building, tower and parking lot ahead. Below the tower, arrows on whitewashed walls pointed one way to a meeting room, the other to an office. Next door, the entrance to a restaurant.

Empty. Not a whisper.

Josh kept spinning around to check every direction; Felix panted for breath—and his skin had paled. Kiki kept an eye on the approaching dust paths as gangs of undead raced for their position.

“I think we will be safe in there, let's get...”

Before Samuel could step forward any further, a series of snarls emerged from the restaurant entrance.

Then they came.

A file of pelting corpses poured from the entrance to the restaurant and from the office doorway.

“Run. Get back to the car.”

A shriek from behind. Felix snarled; demonic, feverish eyes fixed on Josh.

Kiki already made for the safety of the car.

Felix lunged at a stunned Josh.

Chomp.

Felix sank into Josh's neck and ripped out a meaty chunk, Josh fell, spitting blood.

“Josh!” Samuel ran for the car, the undead gave chase; he ran, crying, arms flailing.

Kiki just hovered over the car hood, swaying side to side, fingernails scratching the paintwork.

“Kiki, what you doing? Get in the car.”

Samuel pushed her to one side as the snarls of the hunger-driven undead closed on him from the rear.

Kiki spun around, her mouth open as a loud growl bellowed, face that of a hellish maniac.

Samuel pushed Kiki away but within a few seconds felt the force of several rows of teeth in his skull and shoulders as the zombies indulged their lunch.

Kiki sunk into Samuel's neck, tearing away a portion of throat flesh.

Samuel rolled his eyes. “Okay, guys, stop, another fail.”

The attacking zombies all froze. The images then pixelated and fell away.

A gentle digital female voice spoke.

"Thank you for participating in simulation 248, Zombie Road."

Samuel removed a virtual reality headset, chest heaving from mental exhaustion. Around him in a spacious studio, a mixture of men and women in office attire raised a smile slowly. Then they clapped. One of them, Josh, more happy and relaxed, gave Samuel a thumbs up.

Samuel held out his hands. "Oh, woah, woah guys, I failed, why are you clapping? I got eaten, again."

Josh smiled. "Yes, but you lasted longer on this one."

"Josh, the previous simulation had me trapped in a gas station, this one was easier, I should have lasted longer." Samuel dropped the handheld touch devices and hurled the headset at Felix, he just about caught it.

"I really don't like my avatar in that sim, such a whiner, coward." Josh then brayed.

"I quite like me in that sim, just cool, no fear." Kiki strode forward and kissed Samuel.

Josh, a smirk on his face. "You squealed, and hey, in that sim, you are my girl."

"Yea right bro, in the sim, and your dreams." Samuel lifted Kiki, holding a kiss.

The studio was filled with a crowd of CDC associates overseeing the demonstration. A freeze frame of Samuel in the simulation on an overhead display being eaten nurtured some further chuckles.

Felix, hands slipped into his jacket pockets, edged forward closer to Samuel and Kiki. "Ok guys, let's not just laugh, I do not need to remind you all of the seriousness of these simulations."

"248, in total," Josh added.

"Yes Josh, and so far, we have survived, none." Felix's tone stern.

The room fell silent.

"We have been given funding to figure out the best escape plan from what is sure as shit, coming our way." Felix sent a steely glare to the crowd. "Epicentre is unknown. There are outbreaks in New York, in Florida, and some claimed sightings of undead activity in San Diego and L.A. None of this is good news."

Samuel cleared his throat. "Yep. Of course."

Kiki slapped his chest. "Josh's avatar. The right one, forest shelter closer. A lodge there, good hiding spot."

Murmurs emerged from the crowd.

"Why are they fast? Why are they running? The Walking Dead, erm, they walked, not ran. That is why the show is called The Walking Dead, right?" Someone quizzed.

Samuel narrowed his eyes. "Dude, Dawn of the Dead, Zach Snyder, the zombies were chasing their victims."

Murmurs and nods again from the crowd.

Felix waved dismissively. "Guys, guys, this is reality, not fantasy. This is happening, and we have to test all scenarios. That is our project and what we at the CDC have been tasked to see through. Virtual reality is providing the means to test hundreds of survival scenarios so we can pass on much needed, useful intel to millions of civilians. We started before any outbreaks, now

we still test while the virus spreads as we do not, people, have all the answers. We are not concerned with fast or slow, but every possibility, that is why we have many sims to test.”

“The CDC needs to prevent the spread of infection now before it's too late for sims.” Samuel's words ignited more murmurs.

Felix continued. “We cannot yet, still. Incubation period being analyzed, vaccine not effective yet. They want their zombie survival guide at least to help millions when distributed in just a few days time.”

The lab crowd fell silent again.

Samuel, Josh and Kiki regarded a second television display. CBS News on 24/7 with frequently updated reports on zombie sightings from the cities mentioned by Felix. Samuel and Josh both sighed and nodded to each other; this was no game, and they knew it.

Felix approached the crowd in wide steps. “The doomsday clock is ticking folks. The zombie apocalypse is coming.”

A somber mood fell on the crowd, weary heads shook in dismay.

Felix looked directly at Samuel. “Let's help save humanity.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Stephen Crowley writes horror stories from micro-fiction length to novellas. He is based in South Wales, UK. Inspired by early horror movies and great authors including Stephen King and James Herbert, Stephen has submitted tales to a popular ezine and currently writes his series titled The Slices Collection.

Website: <http://stephen-crowley.blogspot.co.uk/>

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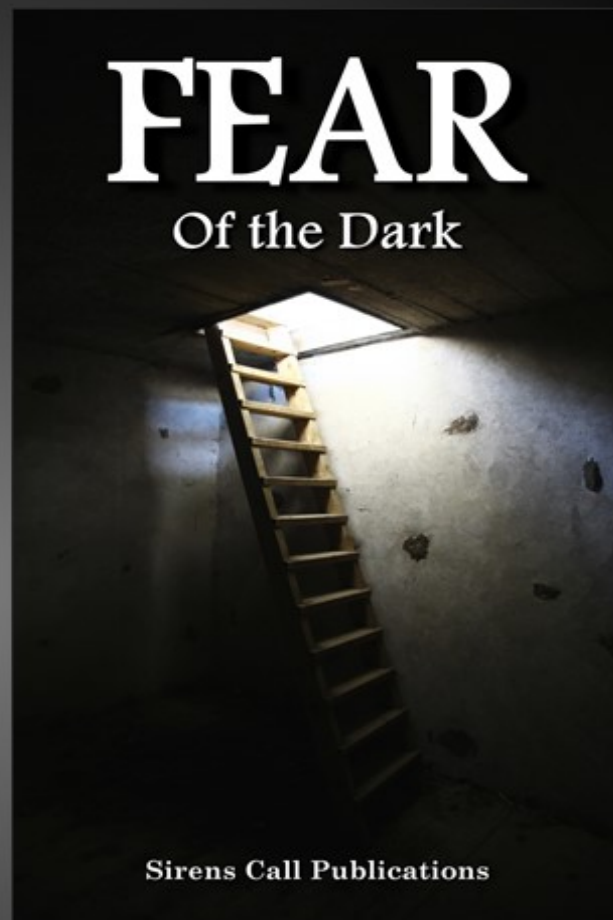
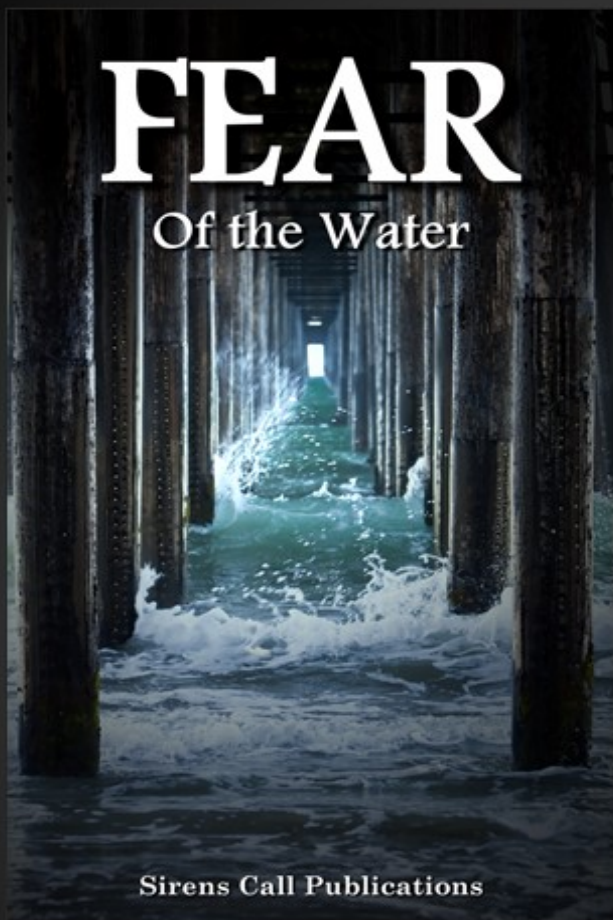
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Return of the Lost | *J.W. Grace*

“Hey Captain. What should we do with the bodies?” asked a partially toothless sailor.

Dovar One-Ear, captain of the *Eel’s Tooth*, was a massively-built greenskin of mixed heritage. He stood at the prow of the captured fishing vessel holding a gore-spattered saber in his hand as he nudged a lifeless corpse at his feet. He looked out over the water to the shoreline. Smoke rose from a few of the huts and smaller buildings as the bulk of his men rushed through the fishing village. Shrieks and screams rang out over the steady rush of the surf. He’d have to get everyone back under control before they ruined anything important. He glanced over his shoulder at the crewman waiting for his reply.

“Toss ‘em overboard. The tide will serve ‘em up nice for the sharks.” A series of splashes answered his command as he turned to make his way back to the tiller. He nodded to himself as he inspected the boat. It was solidly-made and would sell for a nice sum when they returned to Blackreef.

A voice from his left made him pause. “We really should burn them, sir.” Dovar turned to see his medic, Grish. His hands were covered in blood, but unlike the rest of his men, most of it came from tending to the wounds of his fellow crewmen as the fishermen had put up a surprisingly good fight. The man was good but the captain still missed having the old cleric on the crew. Skill with a needle and thread paled in comparison to even the simplest of healing magic.

Dovar scowled at the man. “Don’t tell me you’re superstitious about the restless dead?”

“It’s not superstition, sir. I’ve seen it myself.” Grish rubbed his hands on a cloth tucked into his belt. “You’ve got to put the dead to rest, especially the ones who died violently. If you leave them a body, they can get back up to take revenge. Some don’t even need the body.”

The captain leveled a long, cold stare at the sinking bodies of the fishermen. “Let ‘em come. We’ll just cut ‘em down again.”

Crestfallen and nervous, the medic walked away to tend to some other wounded. He pointedly avoided watching the last of the dead being dropped into the sea, but he winced with each heavy splash. The captain looked back to the shore as he guided the boat to the docks. As the vessel bumped into the study platform, his men hopped off to secure them to the worn wooden structure.

As soon as the captain gave the order, they all rushed off to the village to join in the murderous revelry. Grish stayed on the boat and tried to ignore the screams of the unfortunate souls.

Sometime later, the medic jolted awake at a new unfamiliar sound. A wet slap followed by slow whoosh of something dragging through the sand. He had fallen asleep on the fishing boat which was still tied to the docks. The pirate crew’s fun had gone long into the evening but judging by the position of the moon and stars, it was still hours before dawn. The village was silent except for the slow, rhythmic pulse of the tide punctuated by the thud of the boat against the dock.

Moving quietly, he peered over the railing and gasped at what he saw. Over a dozen shambling forms were trudging up from the surf and moving toward the village. Though he fought to keep a rising wave of terror from consuming him, he was also fascinated. The bodies were bloated from the seawater and the terrible wounds that had slain them were still visible. One was even missing its left arm above the elbow. Glowing eyes pierced the darkness and when one swept his gaze over to Grish's hiding place, the medic dropped down out of sight and held his breath.

The shuffling moved away from him and after a few minutes, he risked another look. The creatures had reached the village itself and were slowly looking around at the collection of huts and small buildings. Three of the pirate crew had passed out near the fire. A small cluster of undead stood over them, watching in silence. Then without making a sound, they dropped to their knees and began brutally attacking the sleeping men. Screams rang out in the night and Grish watched in horrid fascination.

The rest of the zombies snapped to attention, and with a gurgling growl, they charged into huts. None of their slow shambling was present now. They moved in a lurching, staggering run. Grish covered his ears to block out the sickening wet sounds of clawed fingers tearing into flesh. He began to hear the clang of swords and thuds of clubs and maces, but as inexperienced in combat as he was, even he could see that it was too late. Captain Dovar staggered out of one of the larger huts. Shirtless and bloodied from several deep gouges across his chest, he held his sword, already dripping with gore as he raked his gaze over the terrible scene.

Suddenly, he locked eyes with Grish and the medic could see the anger in his gaze. It was as if the captain was blaming him somehow for what had happened. Grish shuddered and tried to look away but he couldn't. He saw glowing-eyed shapes stepping out from the shadows around Dovar and tried to call out a warning. All that came out was a ragged gasp, but something in his expression must have warned the captain. He whirled around, sword flashing as he swept the blade across the body of the closest zombie. The thing made no sound as a deep slash appeared across its chest. There was no pause in its advance so the captain was forced to retreat.

Another zombie rushed up to him and with a scream of defiance, Dovar drove his saber into the creature's left eye. It spasmed on the blade for a few seconds before collapsing in a heap. The man howled wildly and pulled the weapon free. The things could be killed! He pulled a dagger from his belt and threw it at another monster with deadly accuracy. The small blade buried itself in another zombie's eye socket and it too dropped to the ground.

As he reached for another dagger, he cried out as teeth clamped down on his arm. He bashed the hilt of his saber into the creature's skull but it held fast. He staggered as another jumped onto his back and bit down into his shoulder. Thrashing wildly, he tried to get free, but the things were just too strong. Time seemed to slow down until every heartbeat was a thundering boom in his ears. A soft hiss and slow shuffling steps made him look ahead again.

Standing ten feet away from him was a child, no more than eight years old. It watched him with a vacant expression for a moment but there was something odd in the way it was standing. The doomed captain could see that the left side of the child's chest was almost caved in from a

heavy blow, likely from a mace or a boot. Then it smiled and blood dripped from its mouth. Moving with frightening speed, it closed the distance and jumped up toward him, clawed fingers outstretched and mouth wide. It was the last thing that Dovar One-Ear saw.

Grish watched the captain collapse under a wave of attackers. The half-orc's screams were quickly silenced and the medic fought to control his rising panic. Looking around wildly, he couldn't see anything to help his situation until he looked further down the dock. The dinghy from the *Eel's Tooth* bobbed gently in the waves and the slow thuds of wood began to sound like a heartbeat in Grish's mind. He looked back at the shore, but none of the zombies seemed to be aware of him.

Moving carefully, he crept down the gangplank to the dock and made his way to the small rowboat. After untying it, he sat down and secured the oars. Under his breath, he prayed to every god he had ever heard of and though he doubted that they would ever answer his pleas, it did calm his trembling hands. He gasped as a loud caw pierced the silence, and Grish looked up to find a large black bird sitting on the rail of the fishing boat. Stories of the Lady of Crows flitted through his mind. It was said that she hated undead and aided those who would fight to rid the world of necromancy.

He spoke in a ragged whisper as he started to row. "Lady please let me get to safety and I will come back to this village with more men and put all of these unnatural creatures to rest. This I swear." The bird seemed to nod at him and Grish noticed that the air around him suddenly became peaceful and silent. No sound came from his oars slapping against the waves. No water sloshed against the sides of the boat. All was silent as he continued to row.

The bird watched until he reached the ship anchored in the bay. Sailors on deck lowered a ladder and the newly-blessed acolyte climbed to safety. With another loud cry, the crow launched itself upward and flew away into the waiting darkness.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — J.W. Grace started writing seriously in 2009 and self-published two novels in a genre he calls "Action-Horror". Based on his work and hobbies, he is a Geek and a Nerd, but he's also a Husband, a Father and a Musician. When he's not writing or spending time with family he's usually gaming.

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

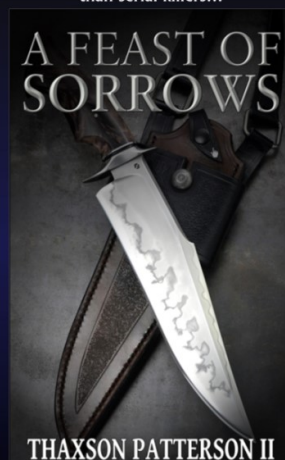
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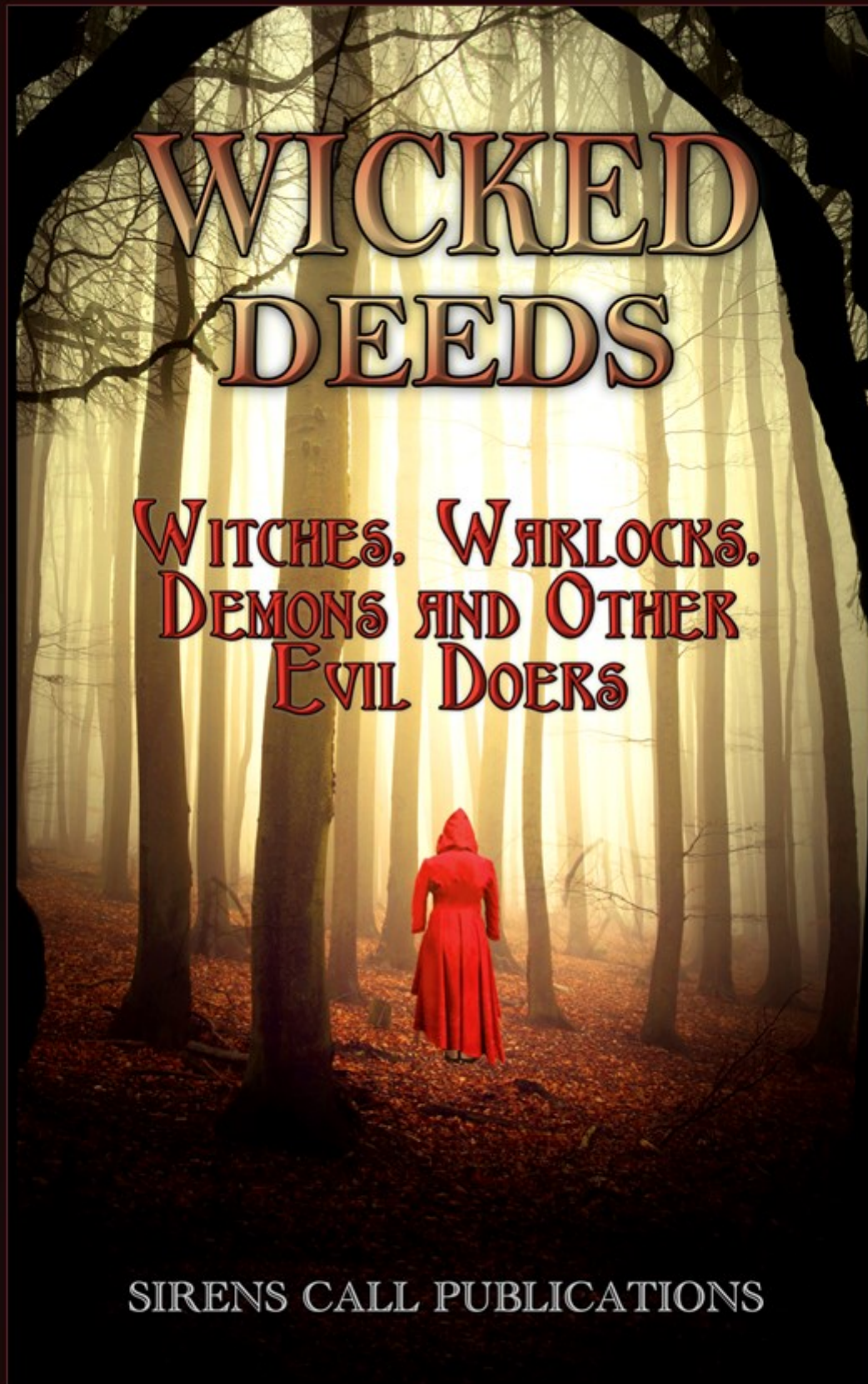
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Blind Man's Bluff | *Sheri White*

Connie woke up to the sounds of slurping and chewing. She hated when the damn cat messed with his paws; it was disgusting. Connie sat up and stretched, then leaned over to scold HairyCat.

But it wasn't HairyCat making the eating sounds. HairyCat was being eaten. By her neighbor, Scott. He had his face buried in the big cat's stomach, chewing into the intestines. HairyCat's paws twitched, but Connie wasn't sure if he was still alive or if Scott was moving the cat as he ate.

Connie screamed, then clapped her hands over her mouth. Scott sat up and looked around the room. Connie knew he couldn't see her—he was blind. Connie looked at what remained of HairyCat and shuddered to think about Scott's seeing-eye dog, Charlie.

Although Scott couldn't see her, she was aware he could hear her very well. Quietly she felt along the nightstand for her gun as she kept her eyes on Scott, now back at his meal.

It wasn't there.

Connie remembered that she had left the gun in the bathroom down the hall before she went to bed. She had been so tired she had forgotten to take it to the bedroom with her—too careless for these times.

She would have to walk by Scott to get it.

Slowly she put her feet on the floor, but as she rose, the bedsprings creaked. Scott's head whipped straight up, but he stayed where he was. Connie quietly got back on the bed, making sure she moved slowly enough that the bed made no sound.

Now what?

Suddenly, Scott leapt to his feet and started sniffing the air.

Dear God—can he SMELL me?

Scott shambled towards the bed, moaning, skin flaking off as he moved. Connie scooched across the sheets as silently as she could. Scott ran his hands across the mattress, searching for his prey. Finding nothing, he turned and shuffled his way out of the room, his hands held out in front of him to help him feel his way, like he did when he was alive.

Connie let out a breath she didn't know she had been holding. Scott was no longer in the room, but she knew he was still in the house. Somehow she had to get out without getting attacked. Scott may be blind, but he was still a zombie and would eat her if given the chance.

Slowly, excruciatingly so, Connie shuffled across the floor, not wanting to step on squeaky floorboards. Beads of sweat ran down her face as she made her way to the bathroom. She grabbed the gun, feeling more secure now with it in her hand.

She didn't hear Scott come up behind her. She felt the bite on her arm and knew what it meant, but still she whirled around and shot the zombie in the head. He went down with a loud thwack on the wood floor. Connie went back to bed, crying, still holding the gun.

It took her hours to get up the nerve to use it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Sheri White lives in Maryland with her family. She's a mom to three girls, ages 29, 22, and 19, and has instilled a love of all things scary in them as well. Her husband Chris is very understanding, if a little wary. In addition to reading and writing horror, she's also the editor of Morpheus Tales magazine. Sheri's fiction has been published in many small press magazines and anthologies.

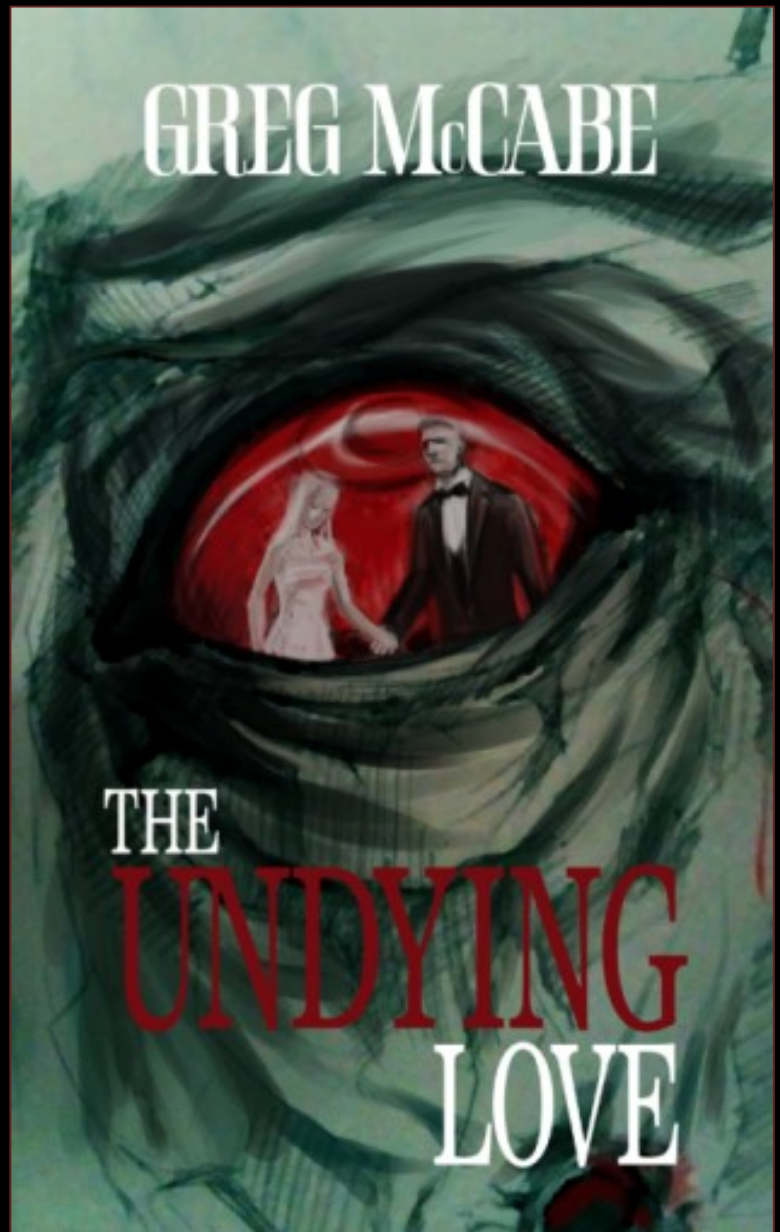
Twitter: [@sheriw1965](https://twitter.com/sheriw1965)

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The Night Drums of Damballah | Neal Privett

The drums were *alive*.

The primeval sound did more than merely enter the ears... it entered the bloodstream, the flesh... the spirit. The incessant, pulsating rhythm rolled in on the night breeze from some dark and ancient realm, almost in warning. The music chilled LaSalle's blood and made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. A savage shiver ran over his sweat soaked body, despite the thick heat of the tropical night.

There had been many miles and little sleep since the uprising began. His was an exhaustion that soaked deep into his very bones, but he would not stop until he found them and disrupted their heathen ceremony. He would not rest until they tasted the sting of his lash and finally regretted their stubborn refusal to abandon the primitive bloody religion they had brought with them from Africa. They would submit, return to the plantation and rue the day they defied his authority over them by meeting in secret to worship their gods.

But despite his righteous fury, the planter felt his resolve begin to turn cold. Even though he had heard their drums on many occasions, beating until the rising sun and the crowing of the cocks, he never got used to the sound. He had heard the drums call up spirits, or *loa* as they referred to them, deep in the night. It was a blood curdling ritualistic dirge no white man could ever get used to, LaSalle thought to himself.

But regardless of any misgivings about being deep in the forest and far away from the safety of the house, LaSalle's stubborn pride pushed him onward through the shadow haunted foliage. He had ordered his workers to cease worship of these profane deities... these unknown gods dedicated to death and serpents, and to return to their work in the sugarcane fields.

The workers had refused and disrespected his orders, and they must be brought round to compliance. *Harsh* compliance, as the French planter saw it. The kind of compliance that would give them pause next time they got the urge to walk off the plantation in the middle of the night and worship *snakes*.

The snake worship was not the worst of it, however. The locals swore that deep in the jungle, when all Christian sons and daughters of Adam were tucked safely in their beds, the Vodouists raised the dead. The skull-faced *houngans* worked their dark spells far back in the trees, unleashing the corpses of the recent dead to claw their way to freedom beneath a cursed moon that screamed in silent terror at the secret blasphemies beneath its silver rays. The frightened locals stayed in their homes at night, clutching their crucifixes, bolting the doors, and cradling their muskets and machetes to their quivering chests. Any sudden sound that came from outside made them cry out and pray all night long, until the saving grace of the morning sun saved them.

And in the midst of their fearful reveries, there was always the night drums. The serpent's hiss of Damballah. Calling in spirits from some distant unknown land. Mocking drums. Savage drums. Beating heart drums. Blood drums. Haunting drums that sang songs of Old Africa and the ghost-world that existed long before man.

The drums were louder now and louder still. LaSalle was almost upon the midnight gathering. On the other side of the grove was a clearing. He could see the orange glow of bonfires emanating through the green wall of palm leaves. When he parted the leaves and pushed through, the shadows of flickering flame and writhing bodies danced upon his eyes.

The concealed LaSalle turned a chalky pale as he watched silently from the trees. Drums filled his mind and burned like a fever. Cold sweat rolled down his face and he found himself struggling to put thoughts together. The quivering brain in his skull took strange paths into the unknown and he found himself falling fast into delirium. His heart trembled uncontrollably and quivered in his chest and for a moment; the Frenchman wondered if the organ was still beating or had ceased to beat and he had actually died, but had not fallen yet.

The moon hung like a lost idol over the jungle canopy, bathing all in shadow and silver. The scene was something from a nightmare. The ceremony assaulted the planter's ears with a hot rush of deafening sounds that melted together, dream-like and mystical. The chants, drums, and cries of possession and joy were indistinguishable from one another.

The Vodouists danced wantonly around a blazing bonfire that rose upwards towards the star-littered firmament. Men danced or beat on drums and howled in ecstasy with the flame shadows licking their faces. Women fell to the ground and writhed in the dust like snakes as the ghost of Damballah invaded their willing bodies.

A hand-cut wooden table, the altar, rested beyond the fire, where a skull-faced priest calmly spoke forbidden words and poured a cup of white rum as an offering to the snake spirit, the omnipotent Damballah. LaSalle gasped as the priest produced a white chicken and calmly slit the creature's throat and splattered its blood across the altar. The mysterious figure smiled and chanted, "*Damballah!*" The others joined in and chanted the snake god's name over and over.

LaSalle could feel the soul-ripping teeth of the god's vengeful spirits as they flocked angrily around the outsider's taboo vigil. LaSalle knew that he was witnessing a ceremony forbidden to white men. And he knew that he would pay for it with his life if the Vodouists discovered him.

The sudden and unexpected touch of a hand on his shoulder caused him to jump and push his loaded pistol into a shadow-masked face. The voice was instantly familiar.

"You look as if you need some help." A half-whispered laugh filled the anxious planter's ears and he breathed a sigh of relief. The figure in the shadows moved closer and spoke again, "LaSalle! It's me... Dugan! *Relax!*"

LaSalle glanced deep into the eyes of his neighbor, John Dugan. His knees buckled on him, but the burly newcomer caught him and held him up. "My God, Dugan," LaSalle said. "I thought I was to have my throat cut."

"We heard your men had taken up the snake worship again," LaSalle's Scottish neighbor and fellow planter laughed heartily. "Thought you could use some help breaking up their little reverie and sending them back home."

“Yes... I would welcome it.” LaSalle glanced behind Dugan and saw others, all men fearful of the voodoo and determined to send the rebellious workers scattering back to the plantations they had abandoned.

“We knew you bloody well would, you goddamned French bastard! We’ll teach you to handle your troubles yet!” Dugan motioned for the others, all local men, armed and ready. They brushed aside the palm leaves and moved out into the clearing where the Vodouists gyrated, building up into a frenzied crescendo. The revelers were so deep into their ceremony that they did not notice the white men approaching and when they finally did, it was too late.

Dugan aimed his musket at the crowd. The night shattered suddenly into jagged shards of chaos and death. LaSalle fired next, followed by the other men. They pumped volley after volley into the frightened worshippers. They fell, one by one, men and women, and the survivors escaped into the trees and shadows. The sound of jungle drums was quickly replaced with the screams and howls of the dying, as well as the deafening silence of the dead.

LaSalle fired upon a dying man attempting to crawl away. “Poor devil,” he cried as the smoke cleared.

“*Poor devil?*” Dugan laughed as he moved closer. “That wee bastard would’ve cut your throat had he been given half a chance, boy-o, and don’t you forget it!” The Scottish planter surveyed the pile of corpses with a smirk. “Him and his damnable snake god.” He spat. “Good work, men.”

“*Damballah!*” A harsh voice from the trees caused the planters to wheel around. It was the priest, his face painted in the likeness of a Death’s-head. He wore a ragged coat unbuttoned to display his bare chest, which was also painted. Around his throat was a necklace of bones. “Damballah curses you all!”

Dugan drew a pistol from his belt and fired at the priest. “*Give Damballah our regards!*” The white men stood there, staring into the smoke, and when it cleared, their jaws dropped in awe. The shaman was gone, as if he had never been there. A thorough search of the surrounding area turned up nothing. He had vanished completely.

The jungle grew quiet, save for the crackling of the bonfire and the beating of their hearts. They listened intently for a moment, straining to pick up any signs of the Vodouists returning. There was nothing.

LaSalle shivered. He pulled his shirt tighter around his body. The night took on a new kind of chill and he wanted nothing more than to return to the safety and warmth of his house. This was a night of horror and mystery and the only redemption for him was a half-drained bottle of rum waiting back at the plantation. He looked at the dead and felt sick to his stomach. “I... I only wanted to stop their heathen chants.” He studied the blood-spattered bodies before him and sighed. “We should bury them properly.”

“After the sun rises, LaSalle... then it will be safe. For now, return to your house.”

Dugan’s words died in his throat as a new sound came reeling, catching the burly Scot off guard. The heavy sound of drums appeared again from out of the darkness. LaSalle wheeled around with his gun held high. “They are still here!”

Dugan and the other men moved towards the trees. “*Let’s go!*”

LaSalle took one step and screamed. A great white light exploded in his brain. The pile of corpses was *moving*! It was impossible, but true. One of the dead men flapped his arm, then rolled over, as if guided by some unseen force. The corpse pulled itself to its knees, then slowly rose, with great streams of red blood gushing from its open wounds. The sound of the jungle drums grew louder and picked up pace. Other bodies pushed themselves up from the blood-soaked ground, like awkward marionettes that shook and struggled to stand as the life ebbed through their hardening muscles and curdling veins once again. The drums grew faster. LaSalle tried to block out the sound, but he could only cover his ears and stare helplessly at the horror before him. The dead opened their eyes to reveal solid white orbs, devoid of any light or conscious thought. One of them opened and closed its jaws, snapping at the air ravenously.

“*I don’t believe it,*” one of the men cried. He dropped his gun and raced for the trees. Another followed.

“It’s true,” Dugan said, his shaking voice riddled with disbelief. “The Vodousists *can* raise the dead...just like they say!”

The things shuffled closer and reached out for the awe-struck planters. Dugan raised his gun and fired again. His remaining compatriots did the same, but it did not stop the dead men from moving. The arrogant smirk on Dugan’s face was replaced with something more primal. A cold mask of fear covered the man’s features now. Raw animal fear.

One of the living dead men lunged for Dugan’s right-hand man and before he could react, the thing sank its teeth into his neck and ripped the jugular from his flesh. An explosion of blood soaked the man’s face and shirt. He tried to push the undead creature away, but it held on too tightly. The thing lapped at the dying planter’s blood and continued drinking as life ebbed from the white man’s body. The survivors could only stare in shock as another walking corpse rushed over and ripped at the dead planter’s flesh. The zombies tore at the red muscle and the succulent fat. They feasted greedily on the gore, never bothering to glance up at the horrified spectators.

LaSalle regained his senses finally. He screamed and ran, with a host of milk-eyed monsters lumbering hungrily after him. Another shot rang out and the last of Dugan’s men fell. The doomed man howled in pain as one of the living dead ripped his arm from the socket. Another shambling corpse fell upon the planter and dug its teeth into his face, tearing the flesh from the bone. The man screamed his last as they pulled the intestines from his torso and stood over him, gnawing and chewing.

LaSalle retreated into the foliage and never looked back. Dugan followed close behind, but tumbled to the ground when one of the walking dead men raced alongside and tackled him. They rolled a few times before two more of the zombified revengers descended upon Dugan. LaSalle fell to his knees and retched when he heard his neighbor’s cries and the wet gulping noises that emanated from behind him. The Frenchman wiped his lips and picked himself up. He headed for his house with the drums pulsating mercilessly in his brain.

LaSalle didn’t bother to close the gate. He raced for his front door and threw it open wildly, vanishing inside the front parlor and slamming the door shut. He pressed his sweat-

soaked back against the wall and closed his eyes. He could still hear the drums out there. They were coming closer... after him. The priest and his contingent of dead men. Perhaps he would empty the graveyards and take this rebellion to its unimaginable end. An island of dead men. LaSalle could not believe any of it.

A sudden noise caused LaSalle to jerk around. A cloud of powder hit him in the face just as he turned. Before he could stop himself, the surprised planter sucked the air and powder inwards. His muscles froze automatically as the poison rushed through his veins. Before him stood the skull-faced Voodoo priest, with a hand cupped in front of his pursed lips.

LaSalle tried to speak, but it was no use. The room turned dark immediately, as if the sun itself had been extinguished by the hand of an angry deity, and LaSalle knew nothing more.

LaSalle awoke to the sound of drums in his head.

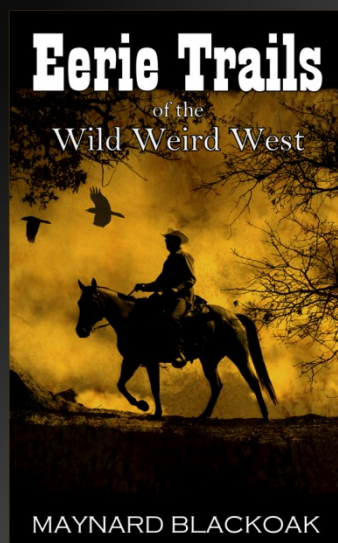
He opened his eyes, but blackness engulfed him. He stared at nothingness for a long time, until the sound of a shovel sinking into dry earth culminated with the explosion of moonlight and the glow of painted faces staring down at him through a wall of torches.

“Rise, slave of Damballah,” a deep voice boomed. It was the priest standing over him, grinning from ear to ear. The shaman held a serpent. It coiled around his arm and hissed. LaSalle tried to speak, tried to cry out, but the sound did not come. He tried to blink, but his clouded eyes remained fixed on the sky above. He rose slowly, even though he tried to resist. Every fiber of his being seemed called to do the bidding of something else. Something stronger. The drums pulsated in the night and grew louder and louder until the inside of LaSalle’s skull felt as if it would burst. The drums of Damballah.

“Come,” the priest commanded, and LaSalle climbed from the grave to stand before his master.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Neal Privett lives on a farm somewhere in Tennessee, where he writes furiously, drinks too much coffee, and brews horror pulp in the barn. He has been published in many magazines and anthologies. He avoids the living dead at all costs.

Facebook: [Neal Privett](#)



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T-Shirt | Julianne Snow

It came at me. From a direction I completely wasn't expecting. Fucking zombie!

Sometimes you think you're in the clear, you know? You look in front of you and all seems normal. That's the problem with thinking you're living in a normal world. Nothing is normal now.

I'd been surviving on my own for about a year now. In the beginning there were more people, but you know when they say you can't cure stupid? They're right. Once, I watched this guy walk right into a grocery store without even checking first!

I mean sure, we hadn't seen many of them that day, but it wasn't like they had jobs to go to anymore. They just hung out sometimes waiting for the living to wander by.

I guess that's their job though isn't it... Hunting us. Who can blame them for getting a little smarter about it?

Geez man, now I'm giving them some intelligence. But I swear, if you watch them too long, you'll see what I mean. They have an uncanny ability to sense things. I watched a few people walking down the street yesterday, doing the normal look-out and advance stuff we've all learned from watching movies.

The funny thing was that none of them thought to watch their back. Classic rookie mistake, but it wasn't like any of us are rookies. Jesus, it's been at least 16 months since everything went down. If you've survived this long the dumb luck has to have been tempered with a little skill.

And I was beginning to think my own dumb luck had run out.

Its fingers caught the hem of my shirt, pulling me back as I struggled to get away. In a the briefest of seconds it was on top of me, weighing me down. I knew it was over and had kind of come to a sort of peace a while back.

No one could survive forever, especially not alone.

You want to know the funny thing?

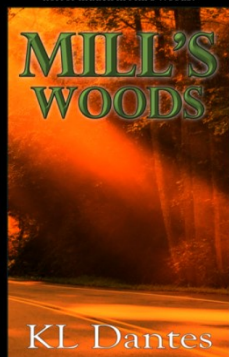
We were both wearing the same fucking concert t-shirt...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR —Julianne Snow is the author of the *Days with the Undead* series and *Glimpses of the Undead*. She is the founder of Zombieholics Anonymous and the Publicist and Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications. Writing in the realms of speculative fiction, Julianne has roots that go deep into horror and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. With pieces of short fiction in various publications, Julianne always has a few surprises up her sleeves.

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

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Some things are better left unknown...



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For the tenth time in the last hour, Carl fired a quick barrage of gunshots out his attic window at the shapes lurking below. Every time he peered out to survey the lawn, another zombie tried to hide in the bushes or make their way up the front walk toward the door. Louise was dead and gone twice now and he hadn't heard from his only son Dale since the mess started. Like clockwork, he awoke every morning, checked the perimeter from the second story windows, and then he would try to relax because it hurt like hell to even move. This is what his life was reduced to in the new world; the world after the dead came back and wouldn't stay that way.

Over the past two months, the war between the living and the undead raged around him; and he was running out of bullets. When the dead started walking, he didn't have time to hit the sporting goods store during the chaos caused by the normal world screeching to a halt. Nobody really knew the hows or whys of the dead returning to life, everybody just knew it happened. By the time the news outlets caught wind of how widespread the problem was, the networks were crashing and the radios were going off-air into static and then a haunting silence. Information was as scarce as supplies in the world. His food stores were depleted three days ago and he was glad his thirst vanished overnight.

Carl cocked his head over towards the remains of his wife. There were still small tatters of flesh hanging off her bones and her wedding band had slipped from her skeletal finger onto the floor. He had eaten the rest of Louise earlier in the morning with a splash of ketchup and some pickle relish; if not for taste than he did it to cover up the discoloration the skin and muscles had taken on. The body remained in the kitchen where she died, but he eventually brought parts of her up to his perch to munch on while keeping watch on the lawn. The fetid flesh still tasted bad, but he didn't care, his belly eagerly accepted it. He put the ring on his pinky and it fit. A few weeks ago it wouldn't have, so he knew he must be losing weight. He hit his fingers together and heard the rings clink in the quiet attic. Her ring was the last piece of her he had left.

Since the bowels of hell had opened wide and the dead had come spilling forth, existence was done on a day to day basis. He always thought that the book of Revelations amounted to complete and utter bullshit, but now he figured the Jesus freaks were right.

Sometimes it really sucks to be wrong, he thought to himself as he fired another shot down below.

He'd be fine as long as he didn't get bit by one. The shit from the movies was something else that surprised him: a bite would turn you, flesh tasted good, and a blunt force trauma of some sort to the head would kill you.

Why the hell was he always wrong about everything? Carl mused.

The day passed with only a few more rounds getting fired below. The sun started to set in the west and exhaustion began to overcome him. Carl knew it was getting to be time to begin his nightly ritual. He let out a grunt as his stiff joints groaned while he began to bring himself to his knees. He gingerly pulled himself up to his feet and used the rifle to steady his shaky body

before trying to walk. Carl carefully went to each door and window, checked the boards he nailed in place to keep unwanted things out, and then retreated back to the attic where he would continue his assault on the living dead. Taking his shooter's position, he watched the day fade into night.

Carl snapped awake and was instantly upset at himself for dozing off. The sounds of footsteps pounding on his back sidewalk had brought him back to the war whether he wanted to be back in it or not. He shouldered his rifle and slowly positioned himself so he could see out of the window. Following some sudden movement in his scope, he scanned the bushes and found the shadows of three shapes moving around the yard. Carl carefully flicked the safety off and gently put his finger on the trigger. His stomach rumbled.

He drew a bead on the front shape and squeezed the trigger. The explosion of the bullet firing from the gun and escaping into the night pleased him. As his stomach rumbled again, he heard the shriek of the zombies as the bullet found its mark. In a bright crimson spray, the bushes were painted in gore and brain matter. He looked through the scope and sighted the brains and skull pieces sliding down from the leaves and pooling on the ground. The two other shapes fled. He wondered if the zombies ever ran like that in the beginning. In the past few days, it seemed they all ran when he opened fire. He compared it to the first week when they just shuffled along and never looked like they were much of a hurry to get anywhere. Another yell came from below and for a moment, Carl thought it sounded like Dale, but then it grew quiet outside again.

Exhausted and hungry, Carl slipped into sleep once more and in his dreams he could hear the voices all around him call him home. He'd hoped to hear Dale's voice once more in his dreams, but his voice remained silent.

The sun was not yet rising in the east when something jerked him from sleep. A loud clatter sounded from his garage. The banging echoed through the early morning dawn and stopped as quickly as it started. He sat up and groaned again. Getting old sucked and he hated sitting still in one place for too long because his joints and muscles would tighten up. Setting his rifle in the window sill, he pointed the muzzle at the garage and placed his eye into the scope. Someone, or something, had turned the lights on in his sacred garage, his temple. The house had no basement so the garage was his personal man-space, and right now it was being violated.

Carl brought the rifle up and used the scope to take a peek into the garage window. His spot shoot trophies were blocking his view. The numerous awards were for his skill with his rifle shooting. He never shot at an animal, but paper deer and targets feared him and Dale when they went competing in local spot shoots. Dale was a good kid, but he was never the man that Carl thought he should be. While he was smart, Dale was not an expert at sports, fixing things, or fishing.

But boy, that kid could shoot though, Carl thought after some effort.

He was able to see enough of the shadows in the garage to make out that there were five of them this time. He looked in the chamber of the rifle and found only four bullets. It was less than what he thought he had.

Carl hated being wrong...again.

Time went by, and Carl knew the sun would be coming up soon. He also knew the zombies still hadn't left his garage. Once again, hunger pangs raged in his gut. Before long, he would have to make a move, with no food or no ammo; his days in the house were quickly becoming numbered. The zombies in the garage perplexed him.

What were they waiting for?

The dead did not have a sense of patience as far as he witnessed. Anytime one or more had stumbled onto his property, they immediately came to the front door trying to get in.

Why did they go to the back this time?

Waiting for them to come out was making him crazy, but Carl sat motionless, wondering. The stomach growl reared its ugly head again. He had to move. He'd always had his escape planned out in his mind.

"Game on," he whispered and gave his wife's hand one last mournful glance.

Carl slowly stood and slinging the rifle on his shoulder, headed down the stairs. As he came and passed the pictures in the hallway, he glanced at the memories of a simpler time, with no zombies, and Louise by his side. He tried to cry, but the time that passed had hardened him, he guessed, because the tears never came. He also looked longingly at the pictures of their son, and he wondered if Dale lived or if he wandered around looking for human flesh. He hoped their time spent at spot shoots or out practicing on the range prepared him to handle the zombie infestation. Carl finished making his way down the stairs and shuffled through the kitchen towards the door.

In the back door he had left a small opening that he could shoot through if they moved in on him while he was on the ground floor. He found the wood block covering the shooter's hole and pulled it out. He glanced over his shoulder at the rest of Louise's remains rotting in the corner behind the table. Curious that there was not a smell he could detect, Carl figured that he was used to it at this point in time and that it was now just a normal part of his senses. The sight made his hunger grow and it sickened him to his core. He tried to throw up but found that he couldn't, the bile never even leaving his stomach. Carl decided it was time to take out the zombie trash once and for all and get out of the house. He slipped off Louise's ring and held it tight as he gripped his rifle.

Carl waited for what seemed like hours the zombies to make their move on the house. He had not seen or heard anything else from the garage, but he knew that they were still inside. Nothing had entered or left since they woke him up last night. His arm ached from holding the gun in the ready position for so long and the tightening of his old joints and bones were murdering him. But like a true man, he held his ground and waited...and waited...and waited.

When the sun moved to its central point in the heavens, Carl finally saw movement in the garage. They were finally going to launch their attack on him and his house. He opened the door and took a different shooting spot low on the back porch. He went down to one knee and prepared to fire. From the corner of his eye, he saw that one of them moved off the back of the garage like they were going to flank him and then move in. He never moved the gun from the door. Tightening his finger on the trigger he fired off two shots at the garage door. Both splintered the wood and hit nothing else. Carl was left with only two rounds.

The one trying to flank him moved to his right and Carl turned. With his attention focused to the right, a shot rang out from the left. Carl never saw the shot as the bullet ripped through his head. His brain and bits of skull showered the door and the house. Blood sprayed in a wide radius and ran from the gaping hole in his cranium. Five figures stepped out from behind the garage and the corner of the house. They met at the bottom of the porch steps, surveying the corpse, guns at the ready.

"I'm so sorry, Dale, but that was a hell of a shot," the oldest looking one said. He placed a hand and squeezed his shoulder as the man started weeping.

"It... needed t-to be d-done," Dale managed to say between sobs. He continued, "W-when I saw he ate mom, I-I knew he had turned. I've never seen one go on about like they were still alive, it was like he didn't even know. R-rest in peace, Dad."

Dale walked up to the body of his father and closed the eye that remained open in his father's head. Glancing down at Carl's hand, he watched as a ring rolled from his father's dead grasp and fell still by his foot. Dale reached over and picked it up. He held it in the air and turned it back and forth.

"Hey, what do you make of this? My dad was carrying my mother's wedding band," Dale pointed out as he stood "He would have started carrying it after he turned, before we arrived the other day."

"I've never seen anything like it. It's like he knew what those represented," answered one of the other men.

Dale reached over and took his father's ring off. Gently, he placed both rings in his pocket and patted it. Bending over, he grabbed his father's rifle, slung it on his back, and the group of five headed back out to fight the undead hordes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Brent Abell resides in Southern Indiana with his wife, sons, and the spirit of his beloved pug who still hangs out at his desk looking for treats. He's had stories featured in over 30 publications and his books *Southern Devils*, *Southern Devils: Reconstruction of the Dead*, *In Memoriam*, *The Calling*, *Dying Days: Death Sentence*, and *Wicked Tales for Wicked People* collection are available now. He is also a co-author of the horror-comedy *Hellmouth* series.

Website: www.brentabell.com

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



A Conflict of Interests | B.E. Seidl

Erin still loves Vince even though his body is rotting away in her basement. She is nervous someone could take him away from her at any moment. Often she lies awake half the night, paranoid that a pair of headlights will pull up her driveway. Listening to his desperate growls from below, she frets the possibility that he might escape. He must not get away. She made sure by killing him in the first place.

Terrified that he will abandon her, Erin lured Vince down the stairs of their townhouse with the promise of a big surprise, a promise she kept. Vince did not anticipate the rifle in her hands or the fact that she would aim at his heart and shoot him without warning.

It hasn't changed anything. Insatiable, Vince still constantly craves new flesh. Though he can't enjoy touching them anymore, he now devours their entire bodies. As soon as he is finished with one, he immediately demands another. What choice does she have? If she denies him his bait, which gets increasingly complicated to provide, he protests noisily. Still, Erin isn't ready to give in, to give herself up for consumption. His hunger fascinates, scares and disgusts her all at once.

The other day she asked the pizza guy to help her loosen the hot water tap on the boiler. Unsuspecting, the poor boy descended the stairs unaware that he was the main course in place of the pizza he had come to deliver. Erin is running out of ideas of how to feed her hungry lover, who is not to be tricked with animals—their meat is not exquisite enough for his taste.

In the evenings after she returns from teaching biology at a local high school, Erin eats alone in her kitchen, feeling sorry for herself. She wants to keep him, she isn't ready to let him go. At times she can almost ignore his presence down there in the basement. She muffles his growls with loud music and diffuses his foul smell with room fresheners. Yet, Vince is still there, creeping back into her head like a chronic migraine.

"It is me or him," Erin says one day to herself as she considers her gaunt figure in the bathroom mirror. She has lost so much weight. As if Vince is sucking the life from her through the keyhole, eating her alive. She needs to touch him, to feel him close just one more time. The urge to be with him has become so strong. She knows it's time. Her heart pounding, Erin walks toward the basement, slowly unlocks the door. Vincent's smell is revolting yet she doesn't pull back.

It only takes a moment before he senses her. His arms reach for her greedily. Shivering, she responds to his embrace. Flattered by his hunger and passion as he rips her apart, she almost doesn't feel the pain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — B.E. Seidl is a bilingual fiction and nonfiction writer. Her work has appeared both in print and in online magazines such as Flash Fiction Magazine, Tethered by Letters, Microfiction Monday Magazine and in several issues of *The Sirens Call*. In her writing she seeks to collect kafkaesque moments and transform them into mysterious tales. She lives in Vienna, Austria.

Website: <https://www.beseidl.com>

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

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Hospital Attack | *Alex Woolf*

Leanna was puzzled to see police at the entrance and reception area of the hospital. When she asked the receptionist if she could see Jenny Harris, the girl almost jumped.

"I-er-Dr. Harris is in our infectious diseases unit at the moment, and unable to receive visitors."

Leanna could tell the girl knew something: "I'm a close friend, just visiting," she said. "I'm only in London for the day. Can you at least tell me what's wrong with her?"

The girl glanced nervously at a nearby policeman. "I'm afraid we can't give out that sort of information, except to next of kin."

"Excuse me, madam." Leanna turned to see a tall, ugly man with thinning ginger hair, dressed in a white coat, sipping from a polystyrene cup. "I couldn't help overhearing: you're visiting your brother, er... John Smith. Am I right?"

"No."

"Right, well let me bring you up to speed," he insisted, leading her firmly away by the elbow. Startled, Leanna allowed herself to be led.

"Just keep walking," he whispered, "and I'll tell you all about your friend Dr Harris."

He marched her through the automatic glass doors, past the ambulance parking bay, to a bench by a grassy verge.

"I'm sorry for the subterfuge and semi-forcible abduction," he told her when they were seated, "but I couldn't think of any other way of getting you out of there. The place is swarming with police, and your friend is why they're there."

"You mean Jenny?" blurted Leanna.

"Yes." He took a sip from his coffee. She noticed his hand was shaking. "We're not supposed to talk about it. Sickening really. Even if you'd been her *sister*, it wouldn't have made any difference. The police have imposed a total news blackout... I could lose my job even talking to you."

"So why *are* you?"

He fixed her with his pale blue eyes as the breeze agitated the reddish strands that floated above his scalp. "Because I think it's vital this story gets out. And I know that you're not really a friend of Jenny Harris."

Leanna drew back at this, preparing to let fly with some indignant response, but the man quickly continued: "For someone only in London for the day, you'd be carrying something bigger than a handbag and be wearing more practical shoes."

Leanna looked down at her platform-heeled sandals and almost laughed. "So, Sherlock, who am I then... according to you?"

"Exactly the person I was hoping to meet—a reporter."

"And why would a reporter be asking after Jenny Harris?"

"You must have caught a sniff of something. I don't know how you people operate. Just tell me... am I right?"

“You are.”

“I knew it!” he hissed triumphantly.

“Leanna Begriffe from the *Evening Standard*,” she said, offering her hand.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Dr. Neil Edwards.”

“So, Doctor Edwards, what’s the deal? Why all the secrecy?”

Edwards took out some Rizlas and a pouch of tobacco. As he rolled himself a cigarette, he began telling her the whole story of what had happened since Jenny Harris’s arrival at the hospital, how she had attacked seven patients and staff, killing three. After a deep drag, he concluded: “I’ve just read the virologist’s initial findings. I wasn’t supposed to, but the guy assisting her is a friend of mine and he slipped me a copy. It’s pretty scary stuff. Have you a notebook and pen handy?”

Leanna grubbed around in her bag before extracting a pencil stub and a pharmacy receipt for a pack of tampons—what a professional! Luckily, she knew how to write small.

“Dr Harris *was* infected by a virus,” Edwards told her. “And the same virus has been found in the blood samples of her four surviving victims. It’s a previously unknown species of *Lyssavirus*—the same genus as rabies, but far more complex than that. It’s transmitted through the bite of an infected person and then moves quickly through the neural pathways to the central nervous system. About six hours after infection it reaches the brain, causing a period of deep sleep. During this phase the virus seems to change the victim from the inside, preparing the host for his or her future role as a hunter-transmitter. By the time the victim wakes, around 18 hours after infection, the higher functions of the brain have been suppressed—there’s not much evidence that the infected do much thinking—and the excess energy is channelled into the muscles, which become stronger. The victim develops a liking for human flesh—not to kill but to taste, usually leaving the victims alive, so they can pass on the virus... That’s about it. The five infected are on permanent watch by police marksmen. Last I checked they were all sleeping like babies.”

Leanna surveyed her smudged, microscopic, virtually indecipherable scribble. “Okay, I may just need to check over some of these details with you later on the phone... One quick question: you said the four surviving victims have got the virus. What about the three who died?”

“Well, I’m sure they got it, too,” said Edwards. “But they’re dead now, so I guess it hardly matters.”

Leanna chewed her little pencil, trying to stay calm. “Where are the bodies at the moment?”

“In the hospital mortuary. Why?”

“And how long did you say since they were killed?”

“Oh, about 18 hours... What are you saying?”

“Okay, we’d better check on them right now, doctor. I don’t think there is such a thing as death with this virus.”

“Holy shit!” cried Edwards, almost burning himself with his cigarette.

The hospital mortuary was a mess when Leanna and Dr Edwards reached it. There was blood on the floor, on the cabinet doors and sluice trays. A hydraulic lifting trolley lay on its side, and on the floor, amid a jumble of scalpels, forceps, hooks and artery tubes, a green-coated technician was crawling. Blood was pouring from a wound in his neck. Two cabinet doors were ajar. A mad thumping could be heard from inside a third.

Edwards ran to the wounded man and knelt by him. The man stopped crawling and looked up at the doctor with desperate eyes. He croaked something unintelligible.

“Pass me that first aid kit, Miss Begriffe,” asked Edwards.

Leanna retrieved a green box with a white cross from a hook on the wall and opened it for him. Edwards frantically pulled out bottles, tools and packages before lighting on a pack of alcohol swabs. He quickly pressed one of the swabs to the injured man’s bloody neck. When this was soaked red, he replaced it with a fresh gauze pad, all the while whispering comforting words to the man.

Leanna worried about the escaped corpses. She saw from the blood trails that they must have exited through a set of internal swing doors. Kicking off her cumbersome heels, she dashed through the doors into a corridor that led towards the main hospital. The blood trails curved left at a T-junction, and beneath a door marked ‘Radiology, Ultrasound’. Nudging open the door, she saw at the reception desk a woman slumped forward over her computer, while a naked man, with part of his own face missing, crouched on the desk top and stooped over her like a bird of prey, feeding on her neck.

Through another open door she could see a nurse attempting to fend off someone else, out of view. The receptionist looked past salvation—the nurse, however, desperately needed help. Very slowly and quietly Leanna opened the door wide enough to slip through. The living cadaver remained engrossed in his meal. Leanna was grateful for the silence of her naked feet on the lino. Unfortunately, the door behind her closed with a small bang. She froze as the bloody-mouthed corpse on the desk looked up. There was a deep red wound where his upper cheek, eye and lower forehead should have been. His other eye studied her. Leanna’s breath shook in tiny sobs. Her muscles were tensed to run, but she couldn’t find the power to move them. Then, to her relief, the dead man dropped his head and returned to his feeding.

Reaching the adjoining room, Leanna saw a naked woman with a large, deep-red cavity in her chest closing in on the nurse, who was defending herself with a wheeled metal stand normally used to support saline drips. The nurse was a thin young woman with short, dark hair. She was using the pole end of the stand like a lance, jabbing it at her attacker, but the female corpse kept pushing it aside and advancing, forcing the nurse further into the corner of the room. From the gray and saggy look of her flesh, the attacker looked old, maybe in her 70s, but her muscles were firm, rippling as she deflected or recoiled from the jabs.

Leanna looked around for something she could use as a weapon to help the nurse. She picked up a cylindrical metal bin and swung it as hard as she could at the dead lady. It hit her on the back, making her stumble a few paces, but not fall. Leanna shuddered as the woman turned and stared at her, her expression unexpectedly mild, like that of a cow. Leanna could now see in

full detail her wrecked chest with its exposed, smashed ribs and torn drooping flaps that had once been breasts. Her face, including the lips, was shockingly pale. The corpse-woman approached stiffly, her semi-frozen joints straining with each step. Leanna had to react fast to defend herself. She tried to thrust the base of the bin into the woman's face, but then felt it coming back at her with astounding force. A crack sent a bright riot of pain shooting through the side of her skull. Then the floor came crashing upwards onto her hip and shoulder. An ice-clamp squeezed her arm and yanked her upwards, but her dazzled head just lolled, neck exposed—oh god! A sweet, gamey smell. She heard an intimate gurgle, almost a belch, saw the dark cavern of an opening mouth.

Abruptly the grip loosened. The mouth sagged—its anticipatory flecks of spit turned pink. There was a short drain-like rumble and it gouted blood, which fell on Leanna's cheek, hair and shoulder like cold custard. She crawled away, shook her head and waited for her vision to uncloud. The nurse, she now saw, had impaled the corpse through the back with her saline stand. The metal shaft protruded nearly two meters from the thing's gut, while the cross-shaped base and its four wheels stuck out from her back. And yet, to the nurse's horror and revulsion, the woman was already moving again—dumbly struggling to get back to her feet. As she did so, the pole caught on the underside of a desk, ripping an even wider hole in her abdomen. Now on her feet, the pole drooped and dragged along the floor as she reset her sights on her original quarry, who—now weaponless—ran to the far side of the room. The nurse, casting around for something with which to defend herself, noticed she was standing beside a heavy-looking gray door with a horseshoe magnet symbol inside a red triangle. Her attacker was slowly turning to face her, smashing aside furniture as she did so with her new metallic appendage.

"Do you have anything magnetic on you?" the nurse asked, keeping her eyes fixed on the corpse-woman.

It took Leanna a second to realize she was being addressed. "N-no, I don't think so."

"Good. Get over here now, and when I say so, grab the metal shaft."

Leanna slipped through the gap between the desk and the woman while the nurse unbolted the heavy gray door, then pushed it open to reveal a large, gleaming white room. Standing inside the room, well clear of the door, she said: "Okay, now grab the stand and start pulling her into the room."

Leanna did as she was told. The corpse-woman didn't seem to object. Her arms rose up and groped the air as she tried to grab at Leanna, but the length of the shaft made this impossible. As Leanna backed further into the room, she felt a new force acting on the stand. It seemed that she didn't need to do much pulling: it was moving eagerly forwards by itself. She turned to see a large white drum in the center of the room. The drum lay on its side and had a hole a little bigger than the width of a human in its center. Adjacent to this hole sat a narrow bed on wheels. When Leanna got to within three meters of the drum, the force became so great that she was obliged to let go or be dragged along herself. As she let go, the corpse-woman briefly turned her head and tried to make a last grab at her. Then the stand abruptly accelerated, carrying her along with it. The stand flew through the air like a missile and smashed into the hole at the center of the drum

with a tremendous force and a deafening bang. The woman, who was too big to enter the hole along with the stand, lay spreadeagled across the face of the hole, pinned there by the cross-shaped base.

“It’s an MRI scanner,” explained the nurse to a gobsmacked Leanna. “The magnet in there is super-powerful—40,000 times stronger than the Earth’s magnetic field.”

They watched amazed as, even now, with her insides being crushed flat by the enormous force acting on them, the corpse-woman continued to thrash her limbs about in a vain struggle to free herself.

“What the hell is she?” the nurse muttered.

“Let’s get out of here,” suggested Leanna.

As they reached the anteroom, they heard a loud report from the reception area. A policeman charged in. Assuming the women were hiding from the male corpse in reception, he said: “It’s okay ladies. The mutant’s dead. You can come on out now.”

The nurse smiled wearily at Leanna and popped a thumb over her shoulder. “We’ve just dealt with another one in there,” she told him.

The policeman glanced through the door to the MRI room, and swore. Then he raised his pistol, took aim and fired. Leanna saw the corpse-woman’s head wobble and blood splatter the drum wall behind it. Her body finally went limp.

“A bullet in the head is the only thing that seems to kills ’em,” the policeman grunted. “We had to put down three others like that in the past hour. There may be more. We’re shutting down the hospital. Evacuating all patients and staff. You two as well.” He took a look around. “Anyone else in here?”

“No, just us,” said the nurse.

“Okay, follow me... And not a word about this to anyone—especially the press.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Alex Woolf is the author of over 20 commercially published novels and chapter books aimed at young and YA readers. They include *Soul Shadows*, a horror novel about cannabilistic shadows, shortlisted for the 2014 Red Book Award, and *Ship of the Dead*, about a zombie attack on a cruise ship. He’s also had numerous adult stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Strange Circle and Vagabondage Press.

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

Amazon Author Page: [Alex Woolf](https://www.amazon.com/Alex-Woolf)



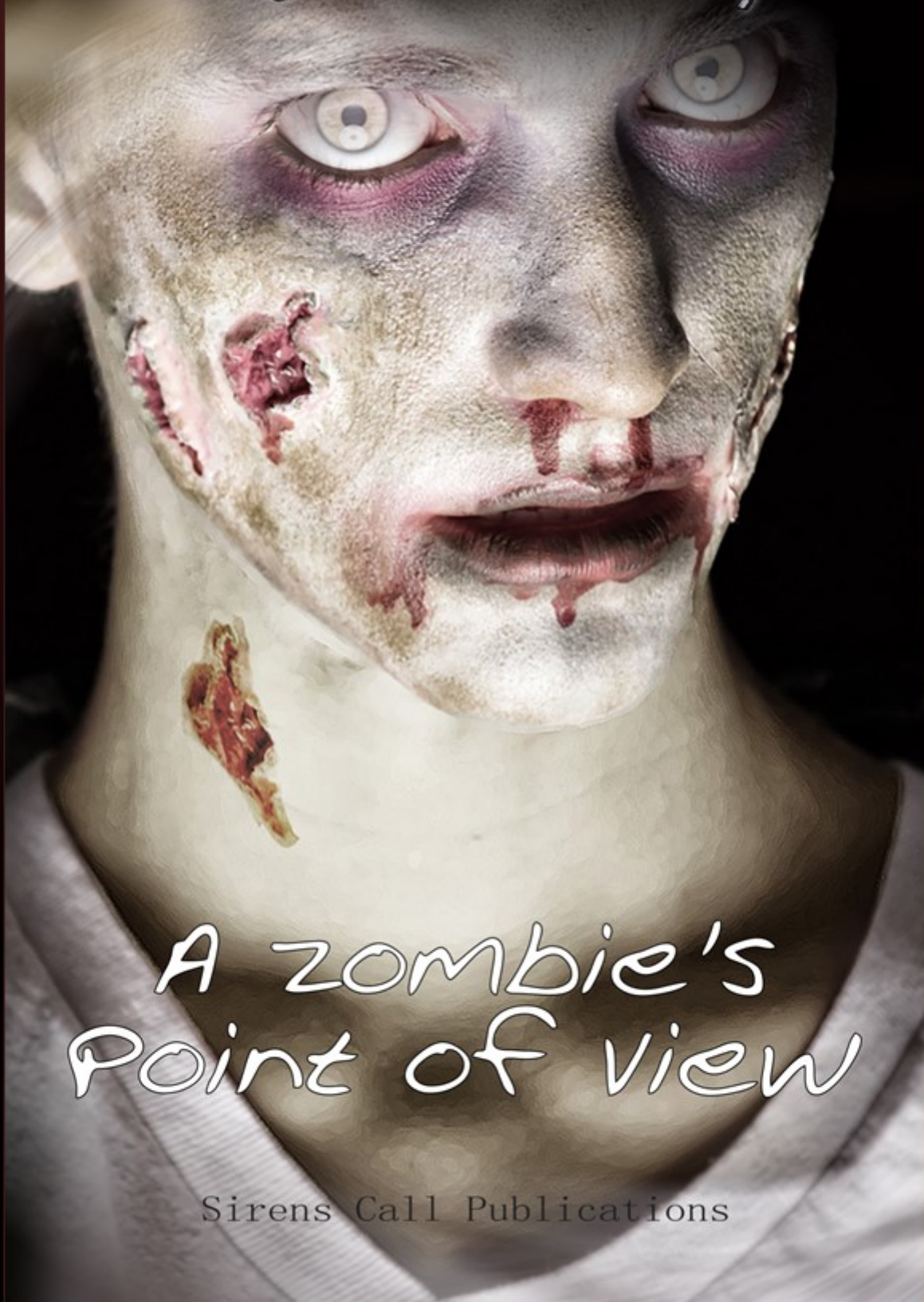
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Through Clouded Eyes



A zombie's
Point of view

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The man who walked in had to duck to fit under the door. He also had to turn to the side so that he could slip his shoulders through the frame.

“You ready?”

The big man looked to the left, at the short, balding guy in road-worn leather and a pair of scratched glasses. He nodded to the little man and after putting a few bills on the table in front of the guy, the big man was waved back through the curtain.

Inside the room, a pale, skinny blonde was sitting in a chair. Her head was hanging down so that her hair hid her eyes from view and her hands were pulled behind her. There was a little table beside her with a glass, and spoon and knife on top of it.

The man knelt beside the chair and grabbed a handful of hair to haul the tiny woman’s head up. He peeled her eyelid up so he could see her pupils, and after a moment, they contracted. He chuckled and reached for the knife.

The woman whimpered as the cold steel slid into one of the spots on her arm that didn’t have a scab on it. The man put the little spoon against the wound, waiting for a moment as a few drops of blood settled into the tarnished dish.

“That’s the stuff,” he said before putting the spoon into his mouth with a satisfied smile and a groan of pleasure. A moment or two later, he sat on the floor beside the door and let his eyes close.

Lights began to flash and dance in front of the man and he relaxed so that he slid down the wall. “Oh man,” he whispered. “Damn.”

“Please.”

The big guy opened one eye. The girl in the chair had her head turned so that she could look at the man with one eye. From where he was sitting, he couldn’t see her mouth move but it had to have been from her. “What?”

“Please.” The word was almost too soft to hear. As he stared at her, the little bouncing lights danced around the girl like fairies around a mushroom. “Please.”

He wanted to ask her what she needed, but for some reason he couldn’t figure out how to move his tongue anymore. He tried to open his mouth, but it seemed like his lips were glued together.

She looked down again and they sat together in silence.

There was a soft thump from the first room followed by a scraping sound. The big man thought it would be a good idea to go see what was going on, but with his legs being made of ribbons there was no way he could float in. Instead, he turned his wide face to look at the curtain.

The edge of the fabric moved a bit on one side and there was a soft hiss from the other room.

The other edge of the fabric moved, then everything settled back into place.

“Wwwhhhaaaaa,” the guy said. His lips felt fuzzy and he wasn’t sure but it seemed like a little drool might have slipped out of the right side as he tried to speak.

A foot stepped through the doorway. As he focused on the scuffed, black army surplus boot the big biker slipped over until his head rested on the floor. The boot and its twin moved into the room and the guy watched the boots stop in front of the woman tied to the chair. The black toe bumped into the dirty, bare foot of the captive, then turned to face the man.

“Wwwhhhaaaa?”

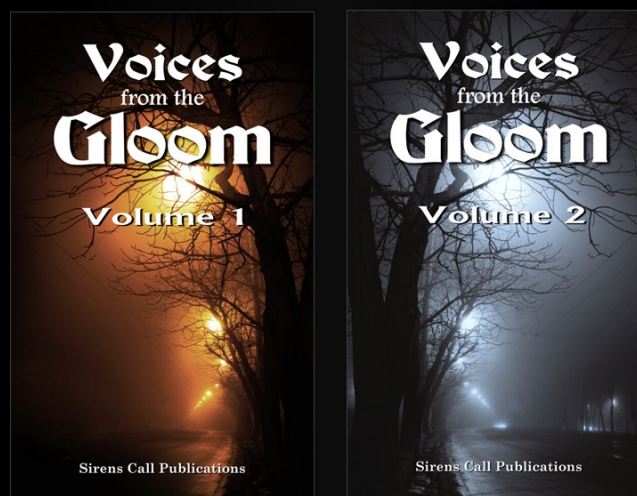
It walked closer and knelt beside him. The big biker tried to lift his head and failed. Cold, wet fingers put tingling spots on his cheek as his face was turned up. He saw tiny spheres of light swirl around the dark hole of the mouth before the teeth came into view. He looked at them, blinking one eye, then the other, before retching when he was hit by the smell. He should have been scared, he was sure of it, but the flashing lights distracted him. As the teeth came closer, they shifted from white to yellow and brown. They stopped being even, and turned jagged and sharp where some of them were broken. He could see ragged bits of red sticking out from the top and a drop of something leaked out from between the lips to fall on the man’s face.

He could see the blue lines under the white skin, but all he could think of was the lights. The man shivered when cold air moved across his neck. The rough fabric of an old, denim coat blurred in and out.

There was a sharp pain and the guy closed his eyes. He took a huge breath, released it in a massive sigh, and then everything went dark.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — L. E. White is a happily married father of four, living on his family farm in southern Indiana. His first book, *Forever*, was recently published by Sirens Call Publications and is available from Amazon. You can find years of his fiction on his blog.

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The Sköll and the Swine | *Suzie Lockhart & Bruce Lockhart 2nd*

Elmer was circling the Farmer's feet, acting like he didn't want the man to leave.

"What's wrong, Elmer?" the Farmer asked, scratching his pig behind the ear.

Not like the pig could relay what the problem was. Even if he could talk, how would he describe the baffling odor, caught up in the late summer breeze? The animal tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to plead with the Farmer through his eyes.

"Sorry, boy, I've gotta wash up for dinner."

Elmer cocked his head as he stood, staring after his caretaker until the burly man opened the screen door and entered the red brick house.

There it was again. He lifted his snout in the air, trying to decipher just what, exactly, the odd smell was.

Feeling nervous was an unfamiliar sensation for the pig. His home, here on the farm, had always been a serene, comforting place—with an abundance of food, mud, and affection.

His ears perked up at the sound of a sickly howl in the distance. Elmer's siblings were busy splashing mud on each other, appearing not to have noticed.

The ruddy colored pig decided to join them and lumbered over to his favorite spot. They romped around in the cool mud bath, the delicious feel of the silt calming Elmer's unease.

Just as he began to relax, another howl pierced the night. This time it was closer, and what had been a faint whiff now became a pungent stench.

Peeking through the fence surrounding the pigs and their hut, Elmer saw a mangy looking animal staggering out of the forest, heading in their direction. Elmer had never seen a wolf before, so he wasn't aware it was a predatory animal.

A sworn enemy.

Still, long-ingrained instinct made him wary.

He backed up, burrowing deep down into the mud as he tried to ignore the discomfiting new sensations rising within him. Elmer tried to pretend the animal wasn't there.

The pigs were startled when the disoriented wolf bumped into the wooden planks lining their pen. Milky eyes stared blankly at them as the beast growled, saliva seeping through its sharp teeth. Its gray fur was matted, and there were patches missing all over to reveal the discolored skin beneath.

Natural curiosity was competing with the pigs' inner promptings, as they stared back.

Decidedly unconcerned, one of Elmer's brothers snorted defiantly at the wolf.

The wolf snapped out of its befuddled state, and all at once the sickly beast charged the fence, snarling viciously at the prey just beyond its grasp. The wolf's diseased mind couldn't figure out how to get past the barrier, and it just kept banging into it; over and over again until blood began seeping out of small gashes all over its snout.

The three pigs watched in horrified fascination. The animal looked so pathetic, but Elmer couldn't seem to rid himself of the apprehension that had taken root deep down in his gut. He found himself so unsettled by the bizarre creature, that he'd even lost his ever-present appetite.

One last snarl and the predator turned away, swerving back and forth as it headed towards the woods.

Puzzled expressions crossed their features for a moment before the pigs cautiously returned to their pit. They sank into the mud, breathing quietly as they continued sniffing the air.

The unusual stench lingered, and the pigs weren't certain that the peculiar creature was truly gone. They couldn't understand why they were frightened of it; they just were. Lightning streaked through the sky, illuminating the trees that bordered the small farm, and the clap of thunder that followed was enough to set the already antsy pigs' hearts racing. Three pairs of eyes darted to the spot where they'd last seen the wolf. A cold front began blowing in fiercely from the north, tossing twigs, leaves, and other debris through the impending dusk. The sickening odor quickly dissipated into the twilight.

The other pigs disengaged themselves from their mud bath and meandered past the feeding trough, heading deep into their huts to sleep.

Elmer was still wary.

Something about that animal had deeply disturbed him. Unable to shake his unease, he continued to take comfort rolling around in the soft, damp ground. The coolness washed over his frayed nerves, and listening to the farmer's voice drifting out through an open window, he gradually began to settle down.

Feeling drowsy, he made up his mind to join his brothers. When he entered the small dwelling, however, a sense of dread greeted him immediately.

A scratching sound could be heard near the far wall, and before he knew what was happening, the wolf's bloody muzzle had punctured the thin skin of their hut. Opalescent eyes held a sinister glare against the absence of light as a low-pitched rumble rose from deep within the animal's throat.

The nearest pig squealed as he backed up into bales of hay resting in the center of the hut. The other two huddled near the front of the structure.

For the first time in his life, Elmer was truly terrified. He was able to discern that the animal intended to do them harm. The vile beast was pawing at the dirt floor, making its way quickly inside, his powerful jaws snapping greedily, eager to sink them into one of the plump pigs now within reach. Elmer had fled back outside, heading for the mud pit, his other sibling at his heels. Unable to resist the urge, he looked back just in time to see the other trapped pig trying to wriggle his ample form between two piles of hay. It would have been comical, had it not been for the wolf bearing down on him.

Sharp teeth tore open the terrified animal's throat; a geyser of blood sprayed everything nearby. Yellow hay was stained crimson as the wolf's assault continued. Elmer didn't know what to do or where to go.

Horrible slurping and licking noises could be heard as the wolf continued dissecting Elmer's brother. It ripped out huge chunks of flesh, spilling the pig's innards all over the floor of the hut.

Elmer whimpered uncontrollably, unable to divert his gaze from the horrific scene. Tears welled up in the sensitive animal's eyes.

Then another thought struck him, like the bolts of lightning that warned of the storm now raging outside.

Would one pig be enough to satiate this sick, crazed animal? Elmer shuddered; he had to escape! Motioning to his remaining sibling to follow his lead, the two of them slid quietly past the feeding frenzy.

The hole wasn't big enough for their large round bodies!

Elmer chewed and bit at the wall, and then pounded what was left of the structure with his snout, until the opening was large enough to set them free. By now, the wolf had finished its meal and all the racket caught its attention, and in mere seconds, the beast was following them outside. The two pigs split up; Elmer headed towards the Farmer's brick house, and the other took off towards a pile of lumber stacked in one corner.

Ouch! The wolf caught Elmer's tail between razor sharp teeth, so the pig kicked up his hooves, flinging dirt into the sick animal's eerie eyes. An irritated howl escaped the beast, and Elmer was released. After spinning around for several disoriented moments, it set off in the direction where the other pig had fled.

The wind was howling as a torrential downpour exploded from the clouds, like water balloons bursting on the ground. Lightning flashed, cutting through the darkened sky, which allowed Elmer to see the wolf prowling menacingly towards his remaining sibling. Its lips stretched wide apart in a hideous snarl.

The round logs tumbled at a frantic pace when the wolf charged them. All at once, the creature clamped its jaws down greedily on the pig's ear, ripping it off along with half his scalp. Grief overwhelmed Elmer as he huddled against the red farmhouse; shivering while pellets of rain pounded him.

Helpless, he faced away from the grotesque sight before heading for the door of the Farmer's house. Whimpering, he began slamming his body full-force against the metal frame of the screen door, panic causing him to repeat the process over and over again.

The wolf had finished his second meal, and was now sniffing the ground, searching for Elmer. The thin sticks that were its legs carried the wolf's deformed body with surprising speed.

The pig continued hitting into the door as the wolf found Elmer's scent. Again, Elmer threw his whole weight against the door frame. The wolf was bearing down on him; he knew his end was near...

The thought of the beast's fangs piercing his skin made him shiver, until something bumped him suddenly off the steps.

A loud blast rang through the night, and then the Farmer was standing over him, a grim expression marring his face.

"Two of my damn pigs!" He shouted, followed by a stream of cuss words. The Farmer patted Elmer. "It's alright now, boy." He headed towards where the wolf lay, dead and bleeding

from a gunshot wound through its scalp. Farmer Mike kicked the dead creature onto its side. “Don’t know what the hell kind of wolf that was.”

“Mike, does this pork smell strange to you?” the Farmer’s wife asked.

“Abby, I lost two whole pigs last month to that damned wolf. This one here was healthy. That’s too much money already down the drain to be worried about some pork not smellin’ right.”

Abby shrugged. “The Mendlesons will be here by four tomorrow for their quarter of the hog. The Wrights and Hollysterns will be here for the other two quarters after six.”

Farmer Mike shook his head. “I don’t know how I’ll recover these losses, Abby.”

“We’ll make it. We have before.” His wife put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “C’m on inside. I’ll make us some bacon.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Suzie Lockhart attended The Art Institute of Pittsburgh after graduating, but a gnawing urge to write always remained. Her middle son, Bruce began writing chilling tales, and five years of working together have yielded over 50 short story publications and several poems, in dozens of paperbacks and eZines. The pair have also edited eight anthologies.

Twitter: [@suzienbruce2](https://twitter.com/suzienbruce2)

Facebook: [Suzie Lockhart](https://www.facebook.com/SuzieLockhart)

One Bad Fur Day

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ESSENCE



Ela Lourenco

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It was Monday when I went to the doctor coughing with a sore throat, stuffy nose, body aches, and swollen glands. He looked up my nose, took my temp, listened to my lungs, and felt my glands. He said he didn't think I needed antibiotics.

"Well, Josh I don't think you need any antibiotics. I believe it could be allergies and or just some virus. It's causing your sinuses to go crazy. Your nasal passages are very swollen. I have seen lots of it going around lately. Your lungs are clear. I will give you some nasal spray, and you should get some rest. Take the rest of the week off."

"You're going to give me a doctor's note, right? I mean my job isn't going to just take my word for it. Sadly, we live in a world of distrust now. I mean, at 26 years old you would think that I could be trusted when I tell my boss I'm sick. Also, I have allergies, but this feels different. I just feel that this is something... worse than allergies, doc."

"I understand that, Josh. It's probably some virus, and your regular allergies exasperating the situation. 'Tis the season for allergies. I feel like mine are also starting to bother me. How is your Xanax script? Need more?" Dr. Billings scratched some red bumps on his neck.

I wasn't going to question Dr. Billings. He was usually pretty good. I took his note, got my sample of nasal spray, and headed back to my cottage. It was quiet where I lived. No one around really. I rented a small cozy cottage on a dead-end road. There were only two other houses on my road and the people went south in the winter. It suited me, as I hated being around a lot of people. You never knew what they might do. That is why I didn't want to rent an apartment.

It wasn't that I was anti-social altogether. I just liked my few close friends, my family, and my little dog Wicket. So, being at home away from all my annoying co-workers for the rest of the week was not a problem. I would call work, and make a couch bed, because couch beds were always the best when you were sick for whatever reason. I would get a box of tissues, watch bad movies, eat junk food, and fall asleep with Wicket snuggled up next to me. I needed that since I never got the chance to take a break. Between work, family, and friends, I barely had time to watch the news. It's pathetic that you have to be sick to actually take a rest and slow down. So, on that Monday I went home and did just that.

Tuesday went by pretty much the same as Monday. I spent the day blowing my nose, eating salty canned soup filled with chunks of dry meat and thick mushy noodles, and drinking neon green Gatorade. I couldn't really taste anyway due to my sinuses, so whatever I could warm up that was hot was fine by me. I watched stupid television, streamed some movies, and dozed on and off with Wicket close by.

Wednesday was the same other than me taking a hot bath for the first time since I was a child. Guys don't really take baths. At least the ones I knew didn't. I decided it would be help me feel better. I still felt super weak. My head hurt pretty badly, and my throat still hurt. I took a long hot bath, sipped some tea, and enjoyed the way the hot water relaxed me. The only weird thing was Wicket wasn't in there with me. He normally lay curled up on the bathroom rug when I showered, but today he didn't.

After my bath I put on my flannel pajama bottoms, heated up some tomato soup, and decided to make a grilled cheese. Wicket lay in his bed and watched me. It was weird that he wasn't in here begging for cheese. He loved cheese! I even pretended to drop some on the floor by accident, so he would run in and snatch it. He brought his head up as if he would come and get it, but he looked back at me and stayed curled in his bed. Well, what the hell? Maybe he wasn't feeling good either. I decided to keep my eye on him.

Later when I went to take him out, he would not leave the cottage. He only ever did that if it was snowing or raining. It was doing neither. It was a normal, quiet, chilly day outside, well, quiet other than some sirens in the distance. Luckily, I had some old newspapers. I decided to lay them out in the laundry room in case he needed to go. I went back to the couch, covered myself with a blanket, and turned on Netflix. Wicket kept his eyes on me, but soon I fell asleep.

I woke up around midnight. The TV went dark, but I could make out the room. Wicket was still watching me, but I could tell, he must have gotten up at some point because his dog blanket was strewn about in front of his bed and a few pieces of his kibble were on the floor next to him. I could still hear sirens in the distance. I lived not too far from a major road. Probably more stupid people texting and talking on their phones while driving. I got up, drank some tap water, went to the bathroom, and noticed some small red bumps on my arms.

I wasn't too alarmed. They hurt only a little and I decided I would just go back to sleep and investigate them again in the morning. I went over to Wicket and reached down to rub his head and he growled. I quickly pulled my hand back.

"What the hell is your deal, Wicket?" I shouted at him.

He just looked at me, whined, and then put his head back down. I was beginning to really worry about him. I would have to call the vet in the morning. I felt so weak. It had been almost three days since the doctor, and I wasn't getting any better. My mouth was so dry, like devoid of saliva. In the bathroom mirror my eyes looked bloodshot. My urine was very dark; it reminded me of the broth of wonton soup. Whatever I had it was taking its sweet ass time to go the hell away. I didn't panic though, because some viruses took their time. So, I got back under my couch-bed blanket and went back to sleep.

I awoke again at around 4:30am. Wicket was not in his bed. I decided I had to get up and look for him. My joints felt locked up. I stretched, but it didn't help. I felt dizzy upon standing so I sat back down. I finally got up and turned on the living room light. I looked at my arms and the red bumps were filled with what looked like yellow pus. Ugh. I was definitely going to have to go back to Dr. Billings. I searched for Wicket.

He had used the newspapers. That was a good sign. His water bowl was half full. Also, good. Where was the little guy? I went to my bedroom and didn't see him at first. He was hiding in my closet under some dirty clothes. He peeked out at me and whined. I tried to go in there and pet him and see what was wrong, but he clearly did not want me near him. I was going to have to call the vet. Great, both of us were sick. I only wished the doctors were open this early in the morning.

My red bumps were hurting pretty badly now. I was wondering if I had the measles or something. Could it be shingles? I mean, I don't know how that would happen, but you never knew in this world what kind of shit you could get despite being vaccinated. I was upset about Wicket, and feeling feverish. I actually felt like crying. I felt useless. Here I was, sick and unable to help my poor dog. No one was around. I would have called my parents, but they were on a cruise to Cozumel. I fell asleep with the TV on and awoke in the daylight of Thursday.

I didn't see Wicket, but knew he was probably still in my closet. I felt terrible. My body felt like it was on fire. The red bumps spread to my chest, stomach, and back. I was freaking out! I was running to the phone when the TV caught my eye. It said breaking news in bold capital letters. I saw images of people panicking, and military vehicles. I slowly walked back to the couch, found the buried remote, and turned the volume up.

"This is Vivica Turner with channel 7 news. A strange virus has been sweeping the country and world at an alarming rate. The CDC says they are trying to track down where it began and what it may be. They're unsure as to what it is, its origin, or how to stop it. They are working diligently to figure all this out. Schools have closed to slow the spread, as well as many businesses. The president is asking that all Americans report to their local hospital right away if they develop any sickness that resembles this virus. The National Guard as well as many other members of the military are out now helping people get the help they need."

Holy fucking hell! What the fuck. I sat down without even knowing that I did and continued to listen as my skin burned.

"I bring you now to our reporter in Sheffield County who witnessed a man eating his neighbor's cats and bird. A tragic ending, Phil Hartzell. I see you have your face mask on. Good idea, Phil."

"Yes, Vivica. Tragic indeed. I was standing outside getting ready to report how many in the neighborhood had been taken to their local hospital due to possible infection and this man ran out of his house and over to his neighbor's house. He looked deranged. I hid behind our van and well, we caught this image. If you have small children or are a sensitive viewer I advise you to leave the room. This is Graphic content." The reporter was visibly shaking before they cut to the video clip.

A man was running in his pajamas barefoot into someone's house. He ran as if he were not in control of his body, wildly, flailing his arms and head. He came out of the house covered in blood and a cat hanging from his mouth. He was clearly biting into it and chewing. He threw it down, ran back inside, and came out eating a bird. Another cat ran by him, but he quickly snatched it up and broke its neck. He began to eat it too. You could hear the cameraman and reporter getting sick in the background. Suddenly, you heard loud bangs, the bloody man fell, and men dressed in military gear ran in before they were made to stop filming.

"Phil that is just, I cannot even describe how that probably made everyone feel. I feel at a loss for words. My goodness. It is like out of a horror movie. That is so tragic. Do they think the virus is the cause for this man's erratic behavior? Do you know?"

“Vivica, we don’t know much at this point. However, due to the way the military swept in and made us leave I would assume that it could be connected. I would warn everyone to board up and stay indoors. If this virus is making people exhibit this kind of behavior, then we all better take precautions now. Vivica.”

The newswoman had her head down, and looked back into the camera. Her eyes shone with what could have been tears.

“Well, I think we should all take this very seriously and be home with our families and pray. I’m getting reports that the virus begins mildly. It mimics other viruses, such as the flu or cold. You may think it is just a cold until you begin to notice small red bumps on your body that fill with pus. Your skin may feel as if it is burning. The many people who have flooded into hospitals are all reporting the same symptoms. There have been reports of patients attacking staff and other patients. They have locked all the maternity wards down as well as any children into rooms away from the infected. This is so sad. I repeat, if you feel sick at all go to your local hospital. This is Vivica Turner and I ask that we please pray, for all of us right now.”

This is so fucking insane right now! Small red bumps! Burning! Oh my god! No! No! I was infected with...with...some fucking virus! Thanks Dr. Billings! I felt so panicked. I had no idea what to do. My parents! My friends! My dog! I ran to the phone, but every number I dialed was busy or not working. I grabbed fistfuls of my hair and cried until I couldn’t cry anymore. So that is why I sat down and wrote this long account of everything that happened from Monday till now.

I turned the news off as it kept repeating the horrible images of people eating pets, or worse, attacking each other. The president spoke, but he said nothing of comfort. We were all doomed it seemed. How would they manage this virus? They had no idea where it came from or how it could be stopped. The words were just words. Words to make you feel safe when really, we’re not. I know I have this sickness. There is no question. The red bumps spread to every part of my body and my skin burns badly.

Wicket ran by me to his newspapers and then back to my closet. I don’t blame him. He knew I was turning into whatever that man was. He must. I looked outside the blinds, but despite the sound of sirens and helicopters, it looked like a normal day outside. Just a regular Thursday. I knew what I had to do.

I got every available bowl I could find in my meager collection and filled them all with water. I also filled a bucket with water. I poured every bit of Wicket’s food on the floor of the laundry room. I went into my fridge and cabinets; anything edible I put in there too. My laundry room was filled with water bowls and food was scattered all over the place. I left the toilet lid up. I filled the bathtub up, and placed newspapers all over the house.

I have written this long account for my parents, any of my friends that happen to survive, and also for anyone who comes across it. My name is Joshua Rainer. As you know I have a little dog Wicket. He is probably hiding. As you have already read, I left food and water until someone finds this. Please take care of him. To my parents I would like to say I love you very much and I hope you both made it home safe. To my friends; I love you guys. I hope you are all

safe and well. I cannot just wait until I turn into whatever those people are. Please know I would have waited if I thought there were another way. I love you all. Josh.

Joshua Rainer swallowed 12 Ambien, 20 Xanax, an entire prescription of Vicodin he had left over from the dentist, and whatever was left of his Zoloft. He drank a whole bottle of wine and waited until death took him. He caught a final glimpse of Wicket who had come to sit by him after he ingested all the pills. Josh reached down to pet him one last time with tears rolling down his hot cheeks, and Wicket licked his hands until Joshua was no more. Wicket slept by his body for days.

Joshua's hand-written pages were found a couple months later by military members after they had a handle on the situation. They found little Wicket in Joshua's closet buried under his clothes. He came out and let them take him out of the house. He licked them and wagged his tail. He glanced at what was left of his rotting master and whined, then was taken off and put into a vehicle.

The government still had schools closed, but planned to open them again soon. People were trying to pick up where they left off. The virus was never truly named. They said they could not pinpoint where it originated. It came, it devoured, and went. Millions of lives were lost including those of Joshua's parents as well as their whole cruise ship, which was one of many floating ghost ships. Many were still under quarantine. There were of course conspiracy theories. The media was full of experts waiting to lean in on the debate.

Religious cults planned mass suicides, and some were carried out, adding more corpses to the pile of the dead. Political parties took aim at each other. Elected officials pointed out how their states handled the events and ran down a list of things the president could have done better to help. War hung in the air like a dense fog as countries around the world blamed each other for the manufacturing of the disease. The threats were thrown back and forth like a game of hot potato; nobody wanted to be the one caught holding the potato. In the end no one really took the blame, and they all agreed it was just some virus.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — Vivian Kasley is a horror nut who lives in Florida with her two dogs (fur babies) and amazing husband. She was an educator for many years until she decided to leave her job to write, cook, travel, and garden. She plans to continue writing weird tales and filling other's hearts with terror.

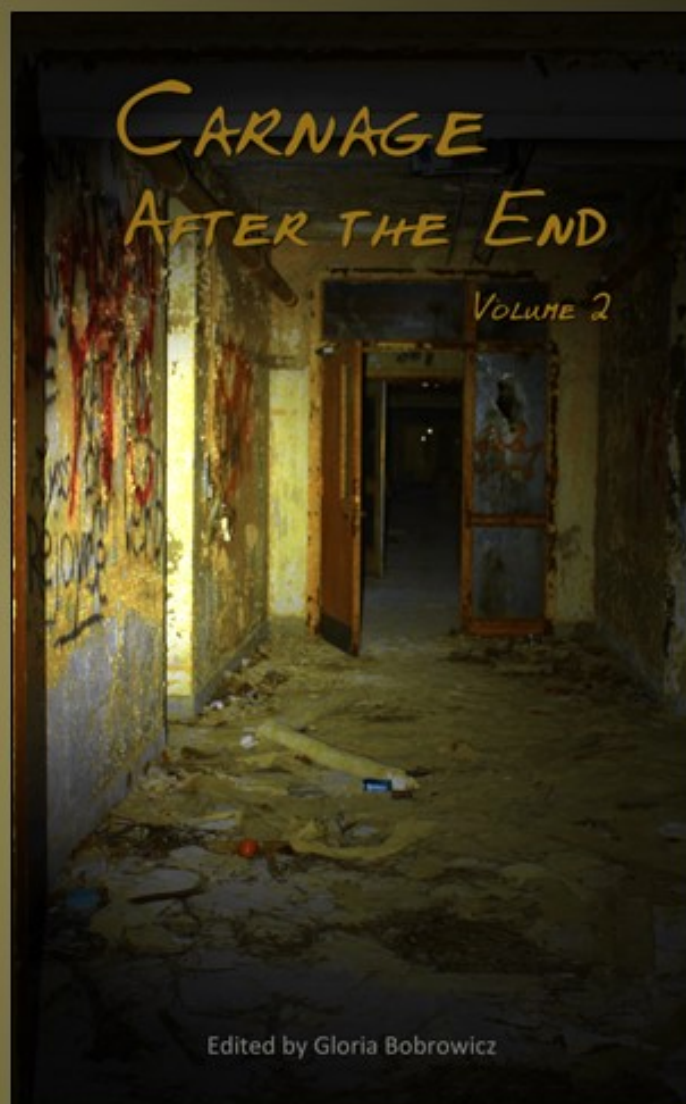
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An Interview with Julianne Snow, Zombie Aficionado

Not only is Julianne a Co-Founder of Sirens Call Publications, but her background in forensics, before becoming a publisher and author, has given her a unique perspective on the Zombie genre. Each of her stories remain true to the science of the Undead and how a body will behave after death, all while making sure to give the reader a good scare.

SCP: Julianne, what draws you to Zombies in Particular? Not why do you like Zombie stories, but what is it about the slow scuffle of Undead feet that makes you want to tell your story about them?

Julianne Snow: I have always been drawn to Zombie literature. I've also been drawn to more psychologically thoughtful horror stories. If I hadn't studied forensics, it would have been psychology. In the end, I found that the stories I was reading the genre were lacking that psychological edge that I had come to crave. Admittedly, it's a hard thing to work into the gruesome, gory filled story that a Zombie work needs to be but it can be done. As I wrote Days with the Undead in my mind, it came from a deeper place for me. Sure, there are Zombies but it really is a story of survival. It's what I was trying to do in reality and a lot of the psychological aspects come from that experience. It wasn't easy to impart some of my deepest inner struggles for survival into the book but I think that is part of what makes it special. When I read it, I feel my own struggle (minus the Zombies, of course) and when others read it, I hope they feel the psychological torment that can exist in a situation like that.

SCP: A decaying corpse has a distinct odor, yet in all the entertainment we see, out heroes or heroines blast/chop/cleave or beat the head off the Zombie, which is of course how you dispatch it. Why is it that no one ever focuses on the horrendous and wretched smell this creates? Are we supposed to believe that Zombies, that have be re-deaded for good this time, who are laying in massive heaps in the sun don't let off a foul stench? Your main character has a background in forensics, are the masses at large just not up to the challenge of dealing with this ugly reality?

Julianne: To be perfectly honest, the smell would only get to you for so long. How do people that live in certain "smellier" parts of cities deal with the stench, or the people that happen to live next to smelting plants or garbage dumps. At some point, your olfactory senses will make you immune to the smell. As your exposure is prolonged, you will find that you can rely on it less and less. The only thing that you'll be able to smell after a while will be the new and different scents, until you get used to those as well. Another factor to explore is this; even though the corpses of the dead Undead are laying around in the streets, rotting away, the chances that you will smell them is reduced. As long as the bodies are not confined to in an enclosed space, the odor will dissipate. Is it going to be hard for people not used to smelling decay? Most definitely. We live in a world that promotes sanitization from odors at every turn. Perhaps learning to live with the nasty smells that can happen around us (in our homes, on the streets) will ultimately help us to survive a Zombie Apocalypse.

There is another factor to take into account with respects to the smell given off during the decomposition process. A clinically dead body will begin to smell during the bloat stage. This occurs when the body purges the build-up of organic gases and fluids that result from the reactions of anaerobic bacteria already present in the body and their metabolism of carbohydrates, fats and proteins. It's the process more commonly known as putrefaction. The

strong and distinctive odor of decomposition remains throughout the stages of bloat, active decay and even into the stages of advanced decay. As a zombie's body breaks down further and further, there will come a point in time where it will likely stop giving off that distinctive odor. Keep in mind that the odor may still remain on any clothing that has been stained with the fluids of decomposition.

SCP: On the topic of necrotic flesh... In older movies where the gore factor wasn't so highly valued, the dusty, dirty, dried out zombie was as acceptable as a mummy, but not anymore. Describe in full detail (and don't be shy about it) how a Zombie's dead flesh and sinew would change with time, and what the slough time factor should be in actuality? How long does it take for the flesh falls from the bones?

Julianne: That isn't something that can be completely quantified as there are different factors that can come into play. The first aspects that need to be understood are the five general stages of decomposition.

Fresh: The fresh stage commences immediately after the heart stops beating. Rigor mortis (the rigidity of muscular tissues that sets in three to six hours after death and starts to dissipate anywhere from forty-eight to sixty hours after death), livor mortis (the pooling or settling of the blood in the lower portions of the body dependent on position) and algor mortis (the cooling of the body after death) all occur within this stage of decomposition. Once the heart stops beating, chemical changes occur within the body which also results in a change in the overall pH level. The resulting change in pH causes cells to lose their structural integrity which in turn results in a process known as autolysis; the release of cellular enzymes which break down the surrounding cells and tissue. Any oxygen left in the body is quickly depleted by the aerobic organisms creating the perfect playground for anaerobic organisms. It's the anaerobic organisms from the gastrointestinal tract and the respiratory systems that begin to transform the carbohydrates, fats and proteins in dead tissues. As they break down into organic acids such as lactic and propionic acids along with gases like methane, ammonia and hydrogen sulfide, it's the spread of these microbes within the body that is more commonly referred to as putrefaction.

Bloat: As the accumulation of the gases mentioned above collect, it causes the distention of the abdomen, giving the corpse an allover bloated appearance. These gases mix with any naturally occurring liquids and any liquefying tissues, making them frothy. As the pressure inside the body increases, these fluids are forced to escape from any orifice or wound they can exploit, akin to a release valve. The purging of fluids and gases is what results in the strong and distinctive odors of decay. In addition, the pressure may also cause the skin to rupture if an easier means of escape is not available. A corpse gets its marbled appearance as the anaerobic intestinal bacteria transform hemoglobin into sulfhemoglobin and other solutions with varying pigments. It's the presence of decomposition gases that aid in the transportation of sulfhemoglobin along with the other pigment carrying solutions throughout the body via the lymphatic and circulatory systems.

Active Decay: This is the stage characterized by the greatest loss of body mass. This loss is mostly in part from the feeding of maggots and the purging of decomposition fluids to the surrounding environment. In this stage, the liquefaction of tissues and disintegration of the body becomes apparent. Strong odors of decomposition will persist throughout this stage.

Advanced Decay: A body in advanced decay usually doesn't go through a huge amount of decomposition as the tissues that would normally decompose are no longer available in large

amounts. The corpse, having already lost a great deal of its mass in active decay, will continue to break down until only dry remains are left.

Dry Remains: All that really remains at this stage is dry skin, cartilage, and bones. Pieces of soft tissue may remain in some cases but they are dried to the point that they will not continue to decompose.

So now that you understand how a body is mostly likely to decompose, let's discuss the factors that will either speed up or inhibit decomposition. The actual speed can vary greatly, so it's best to keep that in mind.

Temperature and Climate: Colder temperatures and climates will decrease the rate of decomposition and conversely warmer temperatures and climates will increase the rate. Humid conditions will help to increase the rate while dry and windy conditions can actually dehydrate a corpse to the point where bacterial growth will cease as there are no nutrients for them to feed on.

Access to the Corpse: This refers to the access that insects and carrion have to the corpse. In conditions where there is restricted access, either by clothing present on the body or by the locale of the body (for example in water or underground), the rate of decomposition is reduced. If insects and other carrion have easy access to the body, either by the fact that it is out in the open or not wrapped or dressed in tight fitting garments, the rate of decomposition is increased.

Cause of Death: Corpses with open wounds will decompose faster. The increased surface area open to insects and carrion is obvious as well as the ability for the body to vent the by-products of anaerobic decomposition. Aerobic bacteria can also act on the body from the outside inward, aiding in the speed of complete decomposition.

Percentage of Body Fat: Fat has high water content which aids in decomposition as well as retaining heat longer after death. The higher the percentage of body fat, the faster the rate of decomposition as a rule.

There are more factors that affect decomposition as the list really is endless. The Undead will inevitably follow some of the observed trends so I'll sum up the Zombie that is likely to decompose the fastest and the one that will likely decompose the slowest.

If the Zombies in your area are larger than most, wearing little or no clothing or with clothing that is loose fitting, in a humid and hot environment with numerous gaping wounds, it's likely they will decompose faster than most. If however you live in a cooler, drier climate where the Zombies are less corpulent and dressed in tighter fitting fashions with little to no gaping wounds, they're going to decompose at a slower rate.

None of this takes into account the mobility factor either. The body mass reduction of insects in the stage of advanced decay is dependent on the fact that maggots have to be able to feed on the body. If said body is in motion, those maggots are going to have a hard time gaining a significant purchase on the surface resulting in a longer period of advanced decay. It's also wise to note that whatever turned the bodies of the dead into the Undead may actually slow down or counteract the natural processes of decomposition.

I guess the easy answer would have been "it's hard to say" but how is that going to help you understand the Undead?

SCP: Guts, and not the bravery kind! As long as the head is attached, the body still moves. Gut or intestinal dragging is a big wow factor in modern day Zombie lore. Do you think it's necessary to go to that level to get the reader to fully feel the impact of the terror the characters are feeling when watching half a Zombie crawl towards them? What makes 'half' a Zombie so much more visceral than a whole one?

Julianne: I suppose there would be some that would say that seeing a piecemeal Zombie clawing its way toward you would be more terrifying but that comes from the perspective that half beings are not supposed to move. Dead things aren't supposed to move but if a somewhat whole Zombie was coming at you, you may be able to process the event faster and react in time. Considering that the half-Zombies have to crawl and claw in order to be mobile, that puts them out of your direct field of vision. Watch your ankles!

SCP: We know what makes your story different and love the journalistic approach you've taken with it, but what sets your Zombies apart in your mind? Not what you've written per se, but in your mind's eye when you are writing, why are your Zombies worthy of the Julianne method?

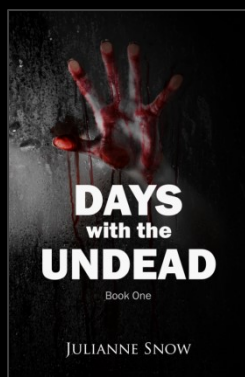
Julianne: That's an interesting question. I don't think my Zombies are any different than those that can be seen in most movies or read about in any number of books. I think what sets my book apart is the fact that I've explored the psychological turmoil of survival to a greater degree. Are there moments of Undead action? Of course, and some of them are quite gory, but there's also a real chronology of flight and survival.

SCP: Describe for us the most horrific Zombie of your nightmares in full detail? Dare we say "spare no parts?"

Julianne: The most horrific Zombies of my nightmares are not the most gruesome one by any stretch of the imagination. It's the Zombie that has just turned. The Zombie that has no readily discernible Zombie features. The Zombie that doesn't have the insatiable hunger in its eyes yet. Those are the ones that scare me the most as they are the ones that will get too close before you realize what they truly are. Oh, and Zombie children scare me. They are so small and tend to escape your notice until it's too late. There's also something inherently sad, creepy and terrifying about lost innocence. Avoid Zombie children; they will break your heart and likely turn you before you have the chance to react appropriately.

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

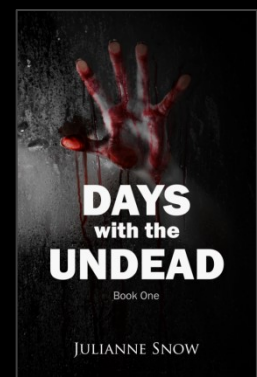
Julianne is the author of *Days with the Undead*, *The Dead of Penderghast Manor*, and *Glimpses of the Undead*. Up next is an excerpt from *Must Love Zombies*, one of the stories in her collection *Glimpses of the Undead*...



Days with the Undead: Book One

Julianne Snow

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



An Excerpt from *Glimpses of the Undead*

Must Love Zombies

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Arnold asked the question as he tightened the blue pinstripe tie around his neck.

“Arn, lose the tie! You kidding me? A tie? Tonight of all nights?” Louis shot him an exasperated look as he checked himself out in the bathroom’s mirror.

“Sorry man, you’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking... Guess I’m just nervous. I’ve never done anything like this before.” With one last look in the mirror over his dresser, Arnold turned to present himself to his best friend. “How do I look?”

“Like a lady killer!” Both men dissolved into nervous laughter and tried not to look at each other. Their anxiety crowded the room with an uneasy feeling akin to the first boy-girl party one would have attended while in middle school.

“Okay, time to get going Arnold. The ladies await!” Grabbing his winter jacket from the arm of the grubby Lazy-boy, Louis made his way to the front door of their apartment, checking his pockets one last time. Not finding what he was looking for, Louis walked back over to the computer and grabbed a piece of paper, folding it before putting it into the pocket of his jeans. Looking back at Arnold, who still stood in the doorway of his bedroom clutching his red parka to him like a stuffed toy, he asked, “ready?”

“Lou, I’m not sure if I can do this... I mean c’mon, how safe is it?”

“The website promised that all safety precautions including background checks have been taken. You’ve got nothing to worry about. People do this all the time. They advertise on the internet for fucksake – it can’t be all that dangerous if it’s on the internet.”

Biting his lip, Arnold continued to stare at Louis, his eyes mirroring the weight of his options.

“Save that for the ladies, buddy. Now let’s get moving!”

With a final doubtful stare, Arnold walked the short distance across the room and out the door. Unsure of what to expect, he decided to at least give it try. Maybe it wouldn’t be all that bad. Things had certainly changed in the past fifteen years...

It all started with the routine flu shot. No one thought anything of it until people started to get sick. Really sick. So many people died in those first few weeks; innocent people that trusted the government.

In the end, it was the government that suffered. They were ill-equipped to deal with an unwanted side effect of the flu strain they had mutated. A mutation that reanimated the dead, causing them to walk among us again.

The problem wasn’t so much that the dead had risen; they weren’t the blood thirsty and brain hungry zombies that we had been raised to believe would plague us at some point.

Instead, they rose with a healthy dose of common sense and a lot of anger.

In fact, it gave rise to quite a few needs on their part and because the government had caused the problem, they had to pay for it. It would have been one thing if they had woken up hungry for the taste of human flesh. But when they could walk and talk better than some of the politicians in Washington, it was another story altogether.

Over the years, those that hadn't been killed in existentially-motivated attacks or who couldn't face life on earth for an eternity were able to petition the government for equal rights under the law. It wasn't an easy road, but many of the interest groups had helped to pave the way for them. Plus there was always the chance they could turn ravenous if they weren't given what they wanted. The government just decided it was best to placate them while figuring out a way to eradicate them.

That sparked a serious debate in itself: is there such a thing as duplicate genocide?

As the years passed, new cosmetic techniques were invented to keep the dead preserved and businesses catering to the existentially-challenged flourished. It was a great time to be an embalmer or mortician; business had never been better!

There were some out there who thought the entire affair was a travesty. The dead should be dead, not walking around or having a meatshake at the local diner. They lamented often and loudly over the fact that the dead should simply cease to exist except in memory and wanted them rounded up, put in concentration camps. It was a horrible time that split much of the nation.

But as time went on, seeing the dead on the street became somewhat normal.

"Do you know where you're going?" Arnold asked the question from the front of Louis' electric car. The silence of the engine unnerved him, but it was better than riding his bike. Certain neighborhoods had gotten a little more dangerous in the past year or so.

Some people said the attacks were perpetrated by the dead, while others maintained it was the living engaged in a smear campaign. Not wanting to learn firsthand which faction it really was, Arnold had stopped going out after dark. It was a small price to pay for safety.

"Yes. It's over on Vermouth, by the Multiplex. You know that club in the warehouse?" Louis spoke while concentrating on the road, his eyes never leaving the pavement rolling under his car.

"Isn't that a dump? I thought they condemned it a few years ago?" Arnold rubbed absentmindedly at his left eye, hating that he was only making the slight twitch worse.

"Nah, someone bought it and fixed it up. Now it's a club again." He turned to smile at Arnold, briefly flashing his perfect white teeth. "Hey, cheer up. Everything will be fine. Besides, you need to get laid man! How long's it been anyway?"

Feeling his face flush at the mention such a private topic, Arnold stared out his window a moment before answering, "three years. Before Jenny left at least."

"Seriously? Man, you do need to get laid!" Louis laughed as he made the comment, thinking to himself he'd be lucky enough to see some action himself. Times were tough these days. With the advent of new preservation techniques, many of the dead were looking better than the living and that certainly didn't help the numbers when it came to dating. Turning the car into

the parking lot, Louis selected a space and then turned off the engine. Sliding the keys out of the ignition, he checked his hair one last time in the rearview mirror. "Ready?"

Getting out of the car was one of the last things Arnold wanted to do, but he'd promised Louis so he did it anyway. Besides, he did need to get laid and perhaps this was his best option.

Walking up to the club, a garish banner told of the event to take place inside – Living/Dead Speed Dating. If Arnold could have crawled inside himself to die, he would have. Around the entrance of the club a few people lingered, holding signs protesting the event. Louis hadn't said anything about this kind of attention...

"Maybe we shouldn't do this? Look at the people! What if there's a riot or something?" Clasping his parka to his chest, Arnold chewed on his bottom lip nervously.

"Watch it Arn, you'll chew that thing off if you're not careful! Look, let's just go inside and see what it's all about. If you're still nervous, we don't have to stay. Deal?"

"Okay Louis, you've got a deal."

As they made their way to the front door, amid the sounds of discourse and strife from the protestors, a large man asked for their names. Louis gave them quickly, hoping to get Arnold inside before he lost his cool and his nerve. Their names checked out and they were soon whisked into the interior of the club. Thankful they had brought the jackets as suggested, they put them on and walked deeper into the event.

A few men lingered around the room, talking to each other and sipping on overpriced drinks. The center of the room was set up with fifteen tables, each of them overlaid with a red tablecloth and set with two chairs. Candle flickered on the tables, giving the dim room a romantic feel. The only thing out of the ordinary was the temperature. It felt like a freezer.

"Louis, where are all the women?" Arnold asked as he blew on his hands to warm them up.

"The site said that they don't let the ladies mix with the men before the event starts. The organizers want all of the impressions to be true first impressions or something like that. They'll be here shortly though, so don't worry." Louis' confidence was starting to show through his own slight anxiety. Neither of them had ever done anything like this before.

Before either of them could speak again, a tall man wearing a long pewter colored pea coat came to stand in front of the bar. He clapped his hands once and waited for the ambient noise in the room to quiet before speaking.

"Welcome to Living/Dead Speed Dating. My name is Hank Azreal and I will be your host. The rules are simple: you will have five minutes to talk to each of the ladies present. In that time, it is your responsibility to make yourselves sound interesting. At the end of the night, each of you will score the ladies out of ten and then mark down whether or not you would like to see them again. The ladies will do the same thing. If there are any mutual matches, you will receive the number or numbers of the ladies that would also like to meet you. What you do after that is entirely up to you. Are there any questions?" Azreal clasped his hands together as he looked about the room, seeking out any questions that may need to be answered. "If there's nothing else, let's begin!"

With a quick clap of his hands, a set of double doors at the back of the club opened and fifteen women entered the room, each of them walking to what Arnold assumed were assigned tables. The women wore party dresses in a wide range of colors and from afar you'd never really be able to tell they were dead. Once all the ladies were seated, Azreal called upon the men to each take a seat.

Arnold was one of the last men to find an empty spot in front of one of the women. It was all he could do not to stare at her. With a clap of the hands, the timer began and Arnold was left to his own devices.

"Hello," she smiled. "My name is Bethany. Nice to meet you." The woman seated across from him was diminutive, almost childlike in stature. She sat there wearing a stunning royal blue satin dress that showed off her shoulders and complimented the milky hue of her eyes. Her copper colored hair was swept up in a loose bun and tendrils of curls spiraled down to splay across the pale, dark veined flesh of her décolletage.

"I'm Arnold. Pleased to meet you ma'am." In his nervousness, Arnold was the consummate gentleman.

"So Arnold, what brings you here today?" Bethany asked the question in an innocent way, so gentle in her request that Arnold couldn't help but answer honestly.

"I'm not entirely sure. My friend thinks I need a woman in my life, and to be honest, I do miss that. But I'm not looking to rush into anything really. My last girlfriend left me for another man, a dead one."

"I'm sorry to hear that Arnold. Before the mutation, my boyfriend cheated on me with another woman. I didn't much care at the time to be honest though; he was as boring as they come!" Bethany smiled again, displaying small white teeth.

Arnold smiled back and his unease with the situation melted away. "What brings you to this event Bethany? Surely, you don't need any help finding men."

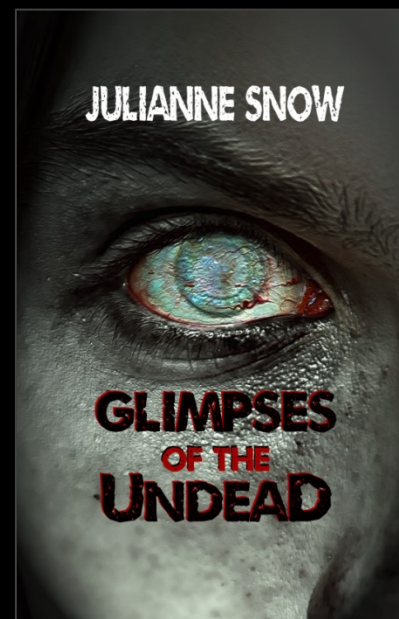
Bethany giggled for a moment, "you'd be surprised. Many of the men out there either don't like the dead, or the dead ones are no longer capable of certain sexual acts. It does break you know, eventually anyways."

Glimpses of the Undead

Julianne Snow

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