# The Sirens Call

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The Bitter End

A Dark Fiction & Horror eZine

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork for Horror Fans!

Featured Artist and
Photographer
Andy Simon of
Darkşlide Photography

Featured Author

Hunter Shea, plus

an excerpt from his novel,

Creature

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#### Stay or Go | Belinda Brady

I tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear and adjust my new black dress. It's sleeveless and cinches in at the waist before blossoming into a full skirt that's topped off with a black lace overlay. It looks lovely and compliments my figure beautifully. This dress screams *me*. I smile at my reflection. The lady, whom I've come to know as Fern, also dressed in black, is sitting on my bed watching me admire myself in the mirror and rolls her eyes. "You do realize, no one is going to be looking at you, don't you?" she asks in a deadpan tone. "I do, but this dress was a great choice. It's a shame I'll only get to wear it for such a short time," I reply, giving myself one last look before I turn to her, "I'm ready. Let's go."

\*\*\*

We begin the short trip to the cemetery, and I take in the classic spring day before me as we walk in silence. Mothers laden with prams and coffee in environmentally friendly cups watch their little ones play on the swings in a park, one eye on their child, the other on their phones. Dogs run up to other dogs, wagging their tales, sniffing each other, ignoring the panicked cries of 'Come back!' from their owners. A couple snuggle on a park bench, huddled in a sweet embrace, totally oblivious to the events taking place before them. They are so wrapped up in each other it radiates from them. I'm fairly certain a herd of zombies could come swarming through and they wouldn't notice. This thought makes me laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" Fern asks, a look of disgust on her face. "What could you possibly find funny today?"

"Nothing," I smile back, happy my wicked sense of humour as managed to stay with me, "nothing at all."

I quicken my pace and walk a few steps ahead of her, keen to get to our destination.

"Want a front row view?" she yells out from behind me, amusement in her voice.

I ignore her and walk on; hoping the knot in my stomach is nothing more than nerves.

\*\*\*

The lack of cars in the parking lot makes me stop, frowning in confusion.

"Are we early?" I ask Fern as she comes to a stop next to me.

"Not that early," her reply is dripping with sarcasm.

"Maybe they walked?"

Fern smirks at me and continues to the brick building just ahead of us. Looking around, I decide they must have walked; it's too beautiful a day not to and no doubt it would have helped them feel better. A walk can do wonders when you are upset.

"Of course, they walked, Rochelle. Of course they did. Don't be so silly," I nervously laugh to myself as I quicken my pace to catch up to Fern who has nearly made it to the door marked 'Enter'.

Exit would be more appropriate.

With another giggle and yet another disapproving look from Fern, we stand at the door and do as the sign suggests. We enter.

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The service was beautiful. The bright pink roses, a favourite of the deceased, looked stunning against the blackness of the coffin. The priest was lovely and had a personable warmth to him, delivering a eulogy that was both touching and funny.

It was just too bad no one was there to hear it.

Sitting there with Fern, dark reality hits me. No one was coming to this funeral. The priest was talking to empty rows of seats. He may as well have been talking to the blades of grass those empty seats were resting on. There'd be no pulling a hysterical friend off of this coffin as they tried to lower it. This was quiet. This was pitiful. This was sad.

The deceased deserved so much more.

I thought back to all the times I'd been there to help others. Friends, work colleagues, even expartners long after they had moved on. I was always called on for help, and I always gave it. It often crossed my mind that I was being taken advantage of, but I didn't care. I'd lost my parents and siblings—my only family—in a house fire when I was a teenager and ever since then I'd been looking to fill that void, with friends, partners, and whoever else came along. I came to see these relationships as my unofficial family and you know what they say—family isn't always blood. I was so desperate for love, I was more than happy to

give it to anyone, no matter how poorly they treated me. I had always reasoned sooner or later I'd get that love back. And that was all I wanted. To feel I was part of a family. To feel needed. To feel loved.

My death had been sudden, I had come off second best in a motorbike accident, but there had been plenty of time for my friends and colleagues, my so-called 'family', to get organized and attend my funeral. But no, as I sat there looking at the empty seats, I realised it had been for nothing. My generosity, my loyal friendship, my unwavering love - all of it had been for nothing.

I was *not* part of any family. I was *not* needed. I was *not* loved.

The truth stung like a sharp slap in the face.

Turning in her chair, Fern looks at me, her face serious, "So Rochelle, what are you going to do? Come with me and go toward the afterlife, or stay here, forever doomed to roam the earth as a ghost," she pauses for a moment before continuing, "Think carefully about this decision. You only get to make it once."

I sit in silence and watch the priest close the lid on my coffin, darkness closing over my body. I think about my life right up until this sad moment in the cemetery and feel my sadness and disappointment quickly turn to anger and an overwhelming desire for revenge. I get out of my seat and stand in front of Fern. "Well then," I smile, smoothing down my dress, "looks like I get to wear this dress a little longer than I'd originally thought. I've got some haunting to do."

#### **About the Author:**

Belinda Brady is a lifelong fan of reading stories and after years of procrastinating, has finally turned her hand to writing them, with her favorite genre being supernatural/thriller themes. Belinda lives in Australia with her family.

Blog: <a href="https://medium.com/@bindyboo06">https://medium.com/@bindyboo06</a>

#### Complete | Mark Steinwachs

Wetness drips from my viscous black lips, coating what I have already fed from. I've consumed almost every inch inside him throughout the years, living inside him, making him mine. Now is my time. As his resolve gives way, the feeling rushes through me with a thrill. I've filled his veins. I've slathered his muscles with my essence. I've bored into his marrow.

We've grown together. He once thought he could keep me under control, but he was wrong. I will never forget when I first touched his brain, every gray crevice a new sensation, left inky black in my wake.

At last, the rhythmic beat I've longed for will be mine. I creep closer, savouring the moment, knowing what this means.

I enter it.

I cover it.

Feeding.

Pulsing.

A thunderous echo rips through me, followed by a blinding light.

My shriek of ecstasy our final moment.

#### **About the Author:**

Mark Steinwachs is a former roadie that has retired to shop life as General Manager of Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Years of traveling the road on tour buses, plus time in the United States Marine Corps, and as rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique set of experiences to draw on for his stories.

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Darkslide Photography is owned by professional fashion photographer Andy Simon from the West Midlands, UK. For the past 10 years he has established himself in the alternative fashion scene doing a variety of styles from high fashion, fetish, pinup and boudoir but found his niche doing alternative horror and gore work.

Since then he has gone on to produce work for various fashion and design brands, as well has have his photography work featured on several book covers and anthologies supporting local Charites.

Andy now works full time in education, teaching photography and inspiring the next generation of creative artists whilst still doing some client work alongside.

www.facebook.com/darkslidephoto https://www.instagram.com/darkslidephoto/

#### Marshmallow World | Vivian Kasley

Sadie sat on the floor against the love seat sucking on a candy cane. She stared at the fire that her father moved about with the poker, causing it to jump and spit. She had ear buds in, but her mother yanked them out, letting her know it was rude when company was over. What company? It was the same as it always was. Her Aunt Eloise and Uncle Jeffrey, her cousins Lois and Graham, Grandma Melody and Grandpa Bill, and of course her mom's best friend 'Aunt' Opal with her daughter, Julie. She hated Opal and Julie. Rich little bitches. Her mother had been friends with Opal since they were kids and forced her to call Opal, Aunt.

It got harder every year to listen to the incessant meanderings of all of them. The chatter from her Aunt Eloise about how smart Lois and Graham were, they scored so high on this test or that test. Her uncle Jeffrey's disgusting way of way of hugging her too long and whispering into her ear with his rancid breath that he had a little gifty for her under the tree. Her grandma and grandpa compared her to her cousins. Why don't you dress more feminine, like Lois? Graham's involved with so much at school, are you? Lois and Graham, sat in matching holiday finery, tight-lipped sardonic smiles spread across their faces. Little dorky fuck heads

Opal wore a ridiculous tight red dress and twirled sections of her big hair, laughing at everything her father said. Her daughter Julie wandered around in a purple dress, obnoxious scarf, and black boots staring down at her phone. Everywhere she walks you can hear that stupid charm bracelet jingling like a cat collar! Her father stared at Opal's ass. Is my mother that stupid? Sadie looked at her mother then, pathetic in her satin green frock, setting down a plate of appetizers. She was rudely interrupted from her thoughts by a high-pitched voice.

"So, Miss Sadie? Anything you want special this year? Julie wants a car, but Santa might not be able to bring that on his sleigh! More like her father's sleigh," Opal cackled.

"Opal, is Cal not joining us this year again?" Her mother frowned.

"Ha! Don't make me laugh! Cal is in Dubai, on business. He hasn't spent the holidays with us in a forever, you know that." She took a long sip of her drink, then looked at her daughter. "Julie, you do know there's no good service up here right, honey?"

"Duh," Julie said.

"She's always on that damn thing! Kids, right?" Opal shrugged and finished her drink.

Sadie rolled her eyes. Opal drove a Porsche Cayenne and they lived in a ginormous house. She was sure Julie would get her car. Sadie had just turned sixteen in October, and wasn't very good at driving yet. She'd be given her father's old jeep as soon as she got her license. She watched as her dad turned from the fire again and stared at Opal's large fake breasts. *He looks so stupid with his hair slicked back*. He swirled his scotch on ice and adjusted his prancing reindeer sweater. *Fucking moron*.

"So, have you thought about what schools you might apply to next year, Sadie?" Her Aunt Eloise asked.

"Nope."

"Well, you don't want to get a late start, you know. Lois is looking, but Graham has already started applying. I think he applied to Brown, Princeton, Columbia, Georgetown, Penn State. Did you do Harvard, Graham?"

"Yes Mom, here, there, and everywhere." He chuckled.

Sadie mocked him in her head. *Here, there, and everywhere, what a douche waffle.* Her aunt held her glass of white wine up high and toasted, "May you get accepted into whichever one you want the most! I know you will! You've an outstanding resume!" She beamed.

"Yes, well, whichever one we can afford." Her uncle chortled.

"Well, Jeffrey dear, I'm sure he'll have a scholarship. He's applied for those too and he may well get a full ride for all we know. He's captain of the Lacrosse team! And he's a damn fine hockey player, too! And with Lois top in math and debate club, we might not have to fork out much of anything! We're lucky! We really are!" She grinned at her children.

Her grandparents smiled warmly and then turned their attention to Sadie.

"Sadie, are you still playing field hockey?" Her grandmother asked.

"Nope."

"Well, why not?"

"Because I hated it."

"You're raising a little quitter, Fran? Dom?" She looked to her parents.

"Mom, of course not! Sadie just didn't like it. She's involved in other things, like writing."

"Yeah, our girl likes to write all kinds of dark poems and stuff. She writes for the school newspaper sometimes. Don't ya, Pumpkin?" Her father winked.

"Well, writing is hard to get into you know. Isn't it, Bill? Your grandfather has tried to submit his stories to Reader's Digest for years. Haven't you, Bill?"

"Yep. No luck yet." Her grandfather shook his head.

"Maybe your stories suck." Sadie mumbled.

"Excuse me? What'd you say?" Her grandmother leaned in.

"Nothing."

"Fran, you need to talk to this girl! Her horrible eye makeup and dyed black hair. What's she even wearing? We're all together on the eve of celebrating the birth of baby Jesus, and she's dressed in, what is it anyway?" Her grandmother scrunched her face up.

"Mom, leave it be. She's just different."

"Yeah, you can say that again! A little freak!" Her uncle chimed in.

"She looks like that girl from that creepy movie! The one where the girl comes out of the TV! What's it called?" Her Aunt asked.

"The Ring." Her cousin Lois said.

"Sadie, you could've borrowed one of Julie's dresses. Or would it fit? What size are you again? Julie's a size 2. I wish I could wear a size 2!" Opal smoothed the front of her tight dress and her father licked his lips.

Sadie held the candy cane tightly, the plastic wrapper wet and sticky in her hand. What is wrong with everyone? Don't they have any decency? Everyone is a giant fucking asshole! Every year! I hate them! She closed her eyes and held back the hot tears that sprang to her eyes. She put the candy cane back in her mouth and seethed.

"I'm going to go check the turkey. Anyone want anything?" Her mother chirped.

"I'll take another gin and tonic," Uncle Jeffrey said.

'I'll get that, Jeff," her father said.

"I'll join you. I could use another myself." Opal floated over to her father in her candy red high heels. They left the room walking a little too close to one another.

"Sade, what're you listening to?" Her cousin Lois asked.

"Black Sabbath."

"Black what?"

"Sabbath." Sadie rolled her eyes.

Lois made a face at Graham, then they laughed.

"Something funny?" Sadie asked.

"No, nothing." Lois covered her mouth and looked back at Graham.

Sadie ignored them, put her earbuds in, and sucked her candy cane. Her grandparents looked at her disapprovingly. Then her cousins took their phones out and took selfies by the tree. She took a deep breath and let the sweet peppermint cool her throat and chest. She was startled when her ear buds were ripped from her ears again.

"I told you that was rude, Sadie! Can't you just act normal like everyone else, just once? And go put on something else, will you? You look like Morticia Addams for Christ's Sake!" Her mother scolded.

"More like the Grim Reaper's daughter!" Her Aunt added.

They all laughed and Sadie curled her lip in disgust. She was about to get up, but when her mother asked where her father was, she stayed put. She saw Julie glance up from her phone and smirk. Everyone stopped what they were doing and her mother looked around the room

"He went to go make me a tonic, didn't he Eloise? Taking him a mighty long time too! Did he go to London to get it?" Her uncle guffawed.

"Yes, he went with your friend, Opal." Her aunt raised her eyebrow.

Her mother's cheeks burned red and she smiled before she turned to leave. As if on cue, her father and Opal walked back into the room. They were cheerfully singing carols arm in arm. Her father was tipsy and staggered a little. He sang it's cold outside and Opal snickered. Her mother boiled, but they didn't notice. Only when she shouted that she needed help in the kitchen did her father flinch. He removed his arm from Opal's and frowned.

The living room had fallen into an uncomfortable silence. Opal walked over to her daughter and put her arm around her, which Julie shrugged off. Her cousins turned on the TV and went to the Pandora app. They chose a holiday station. Sadie peered at all of them from under her dark bangs. Her uncle drank, his ham like jowls quivering when he crunched the ice between his yellow niblet teeth. Her grandmother and grandfather beamed at her cousins. Suddenly, a song came on that her aunt liked. She clapped her witch like hands together and her earrings bounced excitedly on her large melted earlobes.

"Oh, Jeffrey, Marshmallow World! My favorite!" She stood, then pulled her uncle up from the couch. He put his arm around her and they began to sing. Her aunt sang in a horrible soprano, showing the red lipstick smeared on her two oversized front teeth. Her grandparents wiggled on the couch to the music.

Her cousins swayed side to side, bumping shoulders to the rhythm. Opal's heels scuffed the floor as she danced along and Julie smiled contemptuously at her mother, but eventually it got the best of even her. Her mother and father came back looking frazzled, but as soon as they witnessed the spectacle in the living room, they soon joined in. The happy tune filled Sadie with blinding rage. A chorus of idiots, all of them.

Sadie pulled the candy cane from her mouth. One end had been sucked into a very sharp point. She looked around at all of them, then back down at her candy spear. She got up and walked over to her uncle and aunt. They smiled as if she were going to join them and put their hands out to her, but Sadie shook her head and jabbed the candy cane into her uncle's neck several times. Blood spurted out onto her aunt as he stumbled and grabbed her blouse. He pulled her onto the ground when he fell forward. Sadie then straddled her aunt and stabbed her several times before someone pulled her off.

Everyone screamed as her mother tried holding her back. Sadie swung the candy cane wildly. Her father stood frozen in shock with Opal crying into his sweater. Julie held her phone up toward the ceiling. Sadie broke away from her mother and ran to the Christmas tree. She pulled the cord for the lights out of the wall and tugged until the ornaments fell to the floor and shattered. She dragged the tree on its side and made a growling noise when her mother tried to get close to her.

"Sadie! Stop, please! For god's sake, look what you've done! What on earth's wrong with you, Sadie!" Her mother cried.

Sadie swung the cord and struck her mother in the face, then rushed her and stuck the candy cane into her eye. Her mother fell to the ground, screaming as broken glass went into her hands. Her father finally snapped to and ran towards them, but skidded on the shards of glass. Sadie took the opportunity to grab the pointed star from the tree top and jab her father in the neck. Crimson bubbles formed as he gurgled up at her.

She looked at her cousins who trembled as they tried to call for help. Opal and Julie ran out of the room. She kneeled over her father and pulled the star from his throat. Blood dripped onto the grey pine floor. Her grandmother was slumped over on the couch passed out, and her grandfather sat pale as a ghost glued to the couch. Sadie kicked her grandfather's walker out of the way.

"No good cell service up here, especially in winter, remember? There's a landline in the kitchen...if you can get to it." Sadie smirked at her cousins.

Her cousins looked quickly to the doorway leading to the kitchen. Sadie laughed.

"Well, what'll it be smarty pants?" She asked

They ran toward the kitchen, but Sadie ran faster. She ripped the phone cord out of the wall, placed the bloody star on the counter, then grabbed the knife to carve the turkey and sliced the cord in half. She picked the star back up and held a weapon in each hand. Her cousins ran and she followed after them. They both fumbled with the front door lock. *That door has always been sticky.* She threw the star at the back of Graham's head, then ran and began to stab them in the back just as the door opened. Snowflakes blew in as Lois fell to the ground. Graham fought back hard, but Sadie stabbed his hands. He tried one last time to flee, but Sadie stabbed him again and again until he fell face first into the snow.

She went back into the house and saw her grandfather on the floor. He crawled wildly toward his walker, but she kicked it further away. He rolled over exhausted and she pranced around him. Finally, she slit his throat and then severed his hand. She grabbed the poker from the fireplace and swung it at the hand, which sent it sailing in the direction of her slumped over grandmother.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Fran? You alright?" He asked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Kitchen. Now." She said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Fran, you need me to help too?" Opal asked.

<sup>&</sup>quot;No, you've done enough." Her mother gritted her teeth.

"Goal!" She shouted.

She laughed maniacally and twirled the poker around as she looked for Opal and Julie. "Opal? Julie? Come on out! It's a whipped cream day!"

She crept around until she saw the basement door slightly ajar. She was going to go down, but she shut the door and locked it instead. *Morons!* She went into the kitchen and turned the gas stove on, then went back into the living room and stared down at her parents. Her mother was still alive and moaned softly. Tears and blood streamed down her mother's face. She dropped the poker and pet her mother's head gently, then kissed her cheeks.

"Cara Mia." She whispered.

Sadie grabbed the cord and wrapped it around her mother's throat until she stopped breathing, then drug her body closer to her father's and clasped their hands together.

"Merry Christmas, Mom and Dad."

She yanked the candy cane from her mother's eye and stuck it back in her mouth. She took a magazine, rolled it up, and held it over the fire. Once the magazine looked like a torch, she set fire to the tree. She lit the presents and decorations. Then the curtains and the couch. Once the living room was completely ablaze, she placed her ear buds in into her ears, went outside, and skipped away from the burning house into the gently falling snow.

#### The Season of Giving | Vivian Kasley

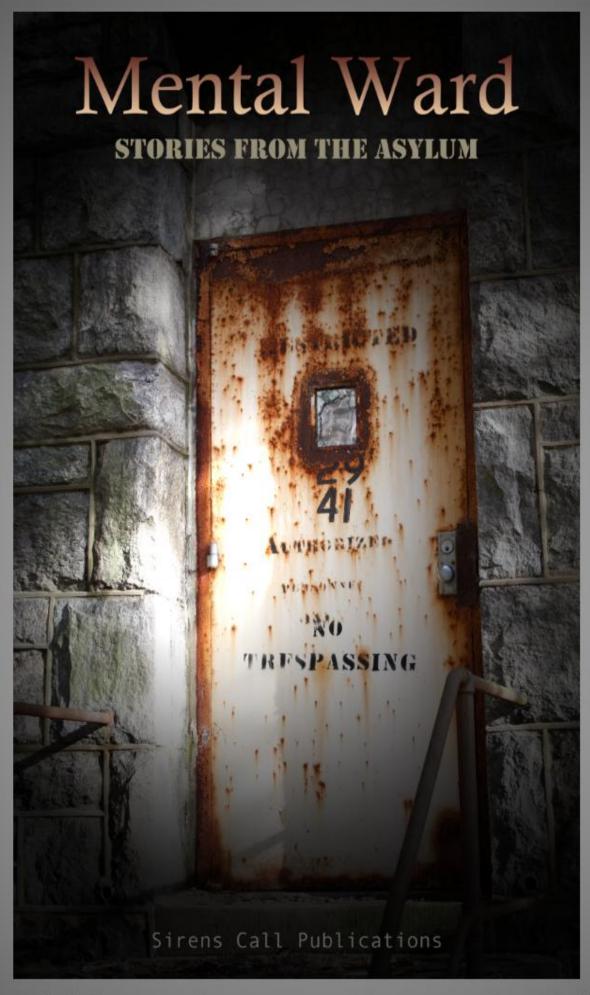
Tinsel and ornaments littered the floor and broken glass crunched under his shoes when he came through the door. Her naked body lay bloated with flecks of blue, red, and green. A dark thought ran through his mind, her corpse matched the merry all-around festive theme. The lights blinked on and off, the tree lay toppled on its side, a tropical winter meant the house already buzzed and moved with maggots and flies. He stopped and ate a gingerbread man atop her favorite holiday platter, he chewed and he seethed, then threw the platter at the wall where it shattered. The dog trembled when it heard him call "Here girl, I'm home, you don't have to be scared anymore!" But it skidded past him and ran for the door.

He shrugged and went to the fridge for some milk, a robe lay on the floor that he bought her one Christmas, the fancy one made of silk. He felt a moment's regret when he rubbed it between his fingers, but it quickly faded, he didn't let it linger. He'd been gone for some time due to his work, when she decided to become better acquainted with some stranger, some jerk. He bathed her in gifts and never asked for anything each year, but he knew this was what he wanted this time and paid a fair share. He drank the cold milk from the carton, then put it back on the shelf, then sat down on his chair and thought this was the best gift he'd ever given himself.

#### **About the Author:**

Vivian Kasley lives in the land of the extremely strange and unusual, Florida. She was an educator for several years before she left to write and travel, but still substitutes. At a very young age, horror welcomed her with open arms and she never looked back. She has published work with Gypsum Sound Tales, Dark Moon Digest, Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing, and Sirens Call Publications with more on the way. She enjoys thunderstorms, movie nights with her other half, and snuggling her fur babies.

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

#### The Golden Coin | Alex Woolf

Once upon a time, in old Palmers Green, when all around here was fields, and Green Lanes really was green, and country foxes – not those mangy town ones– played and hunted on Fox Lane, there lived a potato farmer, whose name was Jasper Wilde, and he lived around about where the Starbucks stands today.

Jasper was a mean old man. He was so mean, he sent his son William to school in rags, because he didn't want to buy him new clothes. He was so mean he wouldn't retire his old horse, and it nearly died of exhaustion as he forced it up Alderman's Hill, carrying his heavy cartload of potatoes. He was so mean, he wouldn't fix the leaky roof in his house, and his wife ended up dying of pneumonia.

Now, one day, Jasper was out digging up potatoes in his potato field round about where the McDonalds stands today, when he found a golden coin. Jasper thought this coin might be of some value, so he took it to a coin expert. Jasper thought the coin might be worth fifty pounds if he was lucky, but it turned out the coin was worth a lot more than that. The expert told Jasper that this coin was solid gold and it dated back to the time of King Stephen, one of the worst kings England has ever had, who reigned some one thousand years ago. It was one of only three such coins ever found. One of these coins disappeared, along with its owner. The owner of the other one went mad and threw the coin into the sea. So this was in fact the last coin of its kind, and it was worth more than Jasper's entire farm.

The coin could have made mean old Jasper very wealthy. It would have, except that for some reason Jasper became extremely attached to this coin, and he couldn't bear the thought of selling it. In fact, he kept it with him all the time. He kept it clutched in his left hand. Whether he was ploughing his field or riding his cart or eating his food, Jasper never let go of his coin, not even for a minute. He even held onto it while he was sleeping, in case someone tried to steal it from him in the night. Jasper's son William begged and pleaded with him to sell the coin so that they could live a decent life. But Jasper refused.

Eventually, old Jasper died. At last! thought William. Now I can sell the coin and live a decent life! But when he tried to prise it from his father's dead fingers, he discovered that they had been clasping it for so long, they had stiffened around the coin and would not release it.

"I will take a knife to those fingers!" cried William.

"No you will not!" said the priest who had administered the last rites. "That would be disrespectful."

"I will!" vowed William.

"No you will not!" said the lawyer, who showed him his father's last will and testament: it was Jasper's stated desire to be buried with his beloved coin.

William ranted and raved, but it was all to no avail. Jasper Wilde was buried in the local churchyard over where Morrison's supermarket stands today, still clutching the gold coin of King Stephen.

That night, William tossed and turned in his bed. When midnight came, he could stand it no more. He got up and took his shovel and his lantern, and he went out into the cold, dark, windy night. He went to the graveyard and he dug up his father's grave.

Screaming with the effort, he forced back the stiff fingers of Jasper's left hand one by one until at last the coin came free. He pocketed the coin and leapt out of the grave. Then he bent his head against the wind and began to make his way back home. As he went he laughed to himself and thought of all the things he would do with the money he would make from selling the coin.

But as he walked a strange thing happened to him. The fingers of his left hand curled tighter around the coin, and he knew – he knew he could not sell this coin!

Then all of a sudden he stopped and said: "Oh my Lord, what was that?"

And he listened and listened, and the wind said. "Ssssssssssssss" And then, way back behind him, where the grave was, he heard a voice. He heard a voice that may have been the wind, or may have been something else. It said: "Sssss—Give me back my golden coin. Ssssss—Give me back my golden coin."

He began to shiver and shake, and say, "Oh my!" The wind blew the lantern out, and he started running and stumbling towards his house almost dead with fear.

Pretty soon, he heard the voice again and this time it was louder and *angrier*... and he knew it was coming after him!

"Ssssssss—Give me back my golden coin."

When William got to his house, he flung open the door and rushed upstairs, jumped into his bed. covered himself up and lay there shivering and shaking.

By and by he heard...

Pat—pat—pat.

It was coming up the stairs!

Then he heard the latch, the door creaked open, and he knew it was in the room! He heard footsteps approaching his bed

The thing was standing right next to him. He could smell its rotten breath as it bent towards him, and he could scarcely breathe.

Then a voice said right into his ear: "Give me back my golden coin!"

He pulled back the sheet and screamed: NO!!!!

The next day, the lawyer came to the house to see William about signing some papers concerning his father's estate. He was shocked to find the young man dead in his bed. The fingers of his left hand were broken.

Then the priest came running in. "Someone dug up old Jasper's grave!" he cried. When he saw William's dead body, he went pale.

Later, they went to see the grave. The coffin lid was open, and there was old Jasper, cold and dead.

And the coin?

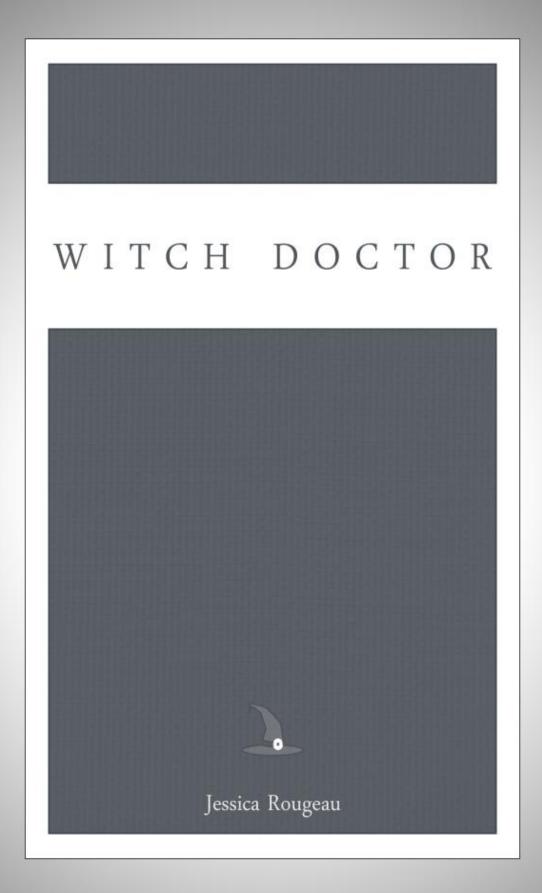
The coin was clutched tightly in his hand.

#### **About the Author:**

Alex Woolf writes children's books for a living, and horror stories for fun. A resident of Palmers Green in London, UK, he 'performed' this story at a local Halloween festival called Palmers Scream.

Website: <a href="http://alexwoolf.co.uk">http://alexwoolf.co.uk</a>
Amazon page: <a href="https://amzn.to/2TCdG5g">https://amzn.to/2TCdG5g</a>

## A Collection of Horror Poetry...



Available on Amazon

#### Dance with Death | Rory J. Roche

Dark and cold and so alone, What remains is ash and bone. Hollow, broken, drowned in tears, Ache grows stronger through the years.

Flesh decaying underground.
Candles dance atop a shrine.
Cracked lips move but make no sound,
Eyes bloodshot and void of shine.

Body rigid and motionless, What once brought joy is meaningless. Smile stitched with dull needle and thread, White walls and sheets keep seeping red.

Rib cage filled with thund'rous rumble, Heart of stone, throat of glass, Burn of booze; stagger and stumble, Will this torture ever pass?

Falling, falling, but never land, Reaching out with trembling hand. Raven circling overhead, Scream for the messenger, for the dead.

#### **About the Author:**

Rory is an artist, photographer, and writer from upstate New York. He has a knack for all things creative and finds comfort in darker themes. He ran an LGBTQ+ eZine and hopes to find more support with it in the future. In 2017, he wrote a short play performed by HVSF actors, and is now making it full-length. He is currently studying German, French, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Italian, and Russian.

Twitter: @RRartphoto

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#### Once is Enough | RJ Meldrum

"Dr. Lansing, enough is enough. I called you here today because I want an update on progress. You are already three months late!"

"I apologize, Mr. Brown. This therapy is so novel, the development took more time than anticipated."

"And more money than you originally asked for!"

Brown's voice was shrill, commanding.

"I did warn you the original amount may not be enough. This research is highly illegal, I had to pay extra just to avoid any...complications."

"I'm not sure you can justify all the extra money you got, but no matter. Only one thing matters now. Are you reporting success or failure?"

"Success. We're ready."

"The stem cells, they finally worked?"

"Yes, we had to combine them with a cocktail of drugs, and we finally got the mixture right."

"So, you can bring me back?"

"In theory, yes."

"Theory is good enough for me. When will you be ready to perform the procedure?" Lansing nodded to the bag he carried.

"I have the first batch with me. I anticipated you'd want to proceed immediately."

Brown's eyes gleamed.

"You can do it here and now? You need no other equipment?"

"No, the test animals revived after the injection alone. No CPR or defibrillation was required. But before we go ahead, please accept my advice and don't do it."

"I didn't fund your opinion. I funded your research."

Lansing glanced down at the man in the wheelchair. William Brown. An ordinary name for an extraordinary man. He had been a millionaire by thirty, a billionaire by fifty. Now, at seventy-five he was confined to a wheelchair with crippling arthritis. Lansing felt no sympathy; by all accounts Brown had made his wealth by being an unpleasant, grasping bastard. He was no philanthropist, he kept all his money for himself. Brown read his expression.

"I know you dislike me, Lansing. I don't care."

Brown spoke to the other person in the room.

"Push me over to the window, Lucas."

Lucas, Brown's personal secretary, did as he was told. Brown stared out at the lush garden beyond.

"I am a rich man, Lansing. Richer than you can possibly imagine. I've dined with kings and emperors. I've visited nearly every country on Earth. I've even flown in space."

He pushed the chair round to face Lansing.

"In short, Dr. Lansing, I've lived a long and fulfilling life. I've done everything I've ever wanted to do. The only thing I haven't done is died. I am not scared of dying, quite the contrary in fact. I want to experience it, but I want to come back so I can savor the sensation. I want to experience what it feels like to die by poisoning, by electrocution; by a dozen different methods. Your treatment, the one I have paid so much for, will bring me back, restored and rejuvenated, so I can die again and again."

Lansing was unimpressed. He'd heard the same speech a dozen times over the years.

"As I said, Mr. Brown, it should work...in theory."

"Then let's proceed."

Brown looked at his personal secretary.

"I need someone to do the deed. Lucas, I want you to strangle me."

Lucas didn't move. Brown frowned angrily.

"Lucas, I order you to kill me. Lansing will bring me back, there's no need to worry."

Lucas laid his hands round his employer's scrawny neck.

"Now, Lucas! Do it!"

Lucas squeezed.

Lansing watched with horror and disgust. Lucas's face was set, showing no emotion. Brown was ecstatic, his visage convulsed with pain and pleasure.

It was over within minutes. Lucas removed his hands and Brown slumped in his chair. Lucas was visibly shaking. His pampered existence hadn't prepared him for such an experience. He looked up at the doctor.

"Dr. Lansing, give him the injection. Bring him back."

Lansing smiled, a bitter grimace. He opened his bag, revealing an empty interior.

"I can't, Lucas. There never was any therapy. I funneled all the money into cancer research. What he wanted was both immoral and impossible. I chose to help people instead. Despite himself, his money went to a good cause."

Lucas looked stunned.

"Don't worry, Lucas, I didn't completely cheat him. He wanted to experience death, and now he has. But once is enough, Lucas. Once is enough."

#### **About the Author:**

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

Facebook: RJ Meldrum

#### Immaculate | G. Allen Wilbanks

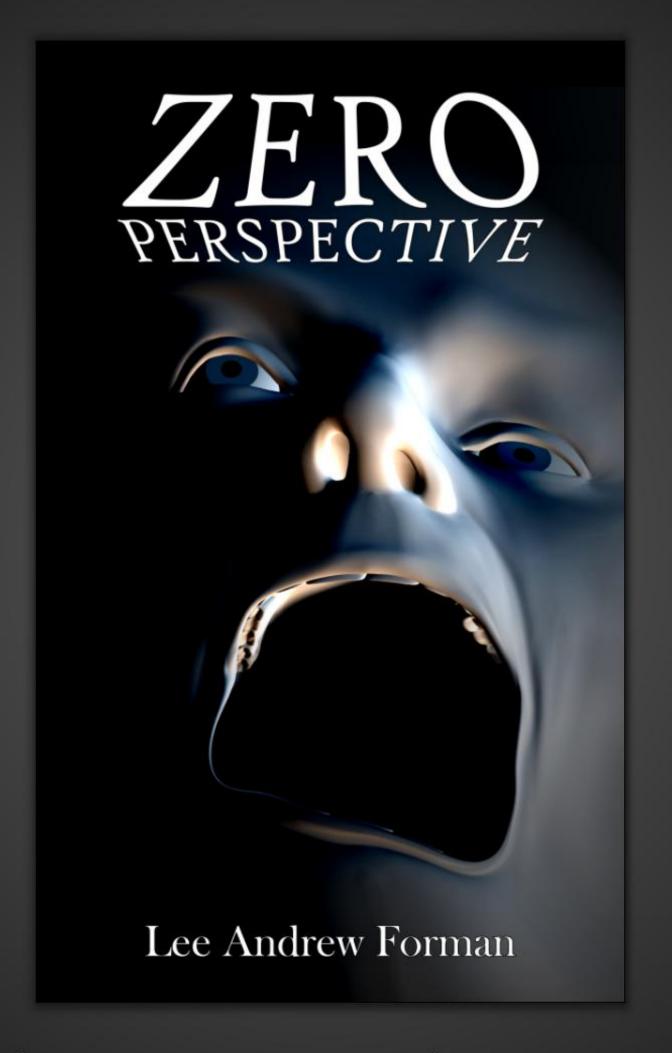
The fire blazed cheerily in the hearth, its warmth chasing away a portion of the chill that had settled deep inside him. He was naked except for a pair of red-stained socks, but that was necessary for the moment. Soon, he could step into a hot shower and just drink in the lovely heat of the water as he was rinsed clean. Before that, however, there were a few more details he had to tend to.

He tossed his leather gloves into the fire. His life might be in a bloody shambles, but at least his crime scenes were immaculate.

#### **About the Author:**

G. Allen Wilbanks is a member of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) and has published over 50 short stories in Deep Magic, Daily Science Fiction, The Talisman, and other venues. He has published two short story collections, and his first novel, When Darkness Comes, was released in 2017.

Twitter: <a href="mailto:@gallenwilbanks">@gallenwilbanks</a>
Blog: DeepDarkThoughts.com



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

#### The Widow | Christopher Roper

The Dictaphone began to record and was placed on the table as a cue for me to begin my story.

My name is James Bullough, I have a PhD in Psychiatry and I have specialized in personal psychological evaluations for the past fifteen years. I was contacted by a Mr. Henry Carson a week ago to provide a psychological evaluation of his aunt, Mrs. Anita Jacobs, recently widowed. Anita had been the wife of the well-known entrepreneur and business tycoon, Raymond Jacobs. The tale of Ray's unfortunate demise has been well published in all major tabloids as well as The Wall Street Journal.

Aside from creating successful, multibillion-dollar businesses, Raymond Jacobs also had a passion for sea fishing. Six months ago, his boat had been capsized after he had apparently ignored a severe weather warning during one of his expeditions off the coast of Montauk, New York. Unfortunately for his loved ones, the body had never been recovered. His nephew Henry, had contacted me and requested that I evaluate his aunt's mental competency and ability to continue managing the businesses as well as Rays considerable wealth which was also under her control.

Initially, I believed that this was a strategic legal manipulation to get his hands on the inheritance left behind by his uncle, but after meeting with Henry in person, it became clear to me that he had a healthy, loving relationship with his Aunt, and was genuinely concerned for the damage to her mental state that the grief may have caused. He informed me that she seemed incapable of accepting the death of her husband. She would dress every day in the same, black attire she had worn at his funeral. He also told me she would prepare two plates for every meal, one for her and one for an empty seat at the large dining room table at her home. There, she would dine alone, but would still converse with the recently deceased Mr. Jacobs, just as any wife would casually discuss her day.

Henry currently held a high position in one of Jacobs holding companies and had a considerable salary of his own. He offered me four times the price that I would usually charge to conduct an evaluation of this kind, so having my interest piqued by the unusual nature of the case and having ten grand on the table, I agreed to the appointment immediately. I had informed Henry however, that I could only do this if Anita was in agreement to receive me into her home or to attend my office of her own volition. He told me they had already spoken of this, and she was eager for me to meet her husband. She had read some of my published works already and was sure Ray and I could become close. I made a note of this particular statement after Henry had left.

I arrived at the Jacobs estate a little after four in the afternoon the following Monday. Sure enough, Anita greeted me at the door wearing the black clothing Henry had spoken of. That said, even the veil draped over her face could not hide the fact that this was an incredibly beautiful woman. I remember feeling that such delicate, yet sharp features and fair skin should not be hidden from the world. I had never seen eyes as hers before. They were a deep, sapphire blue, wide, intelligent and full of warmth. It was not merely the beauty of her eyes that caused me to hesitate during that first encounter, but the emotion that issued from them. Henry had led me to believe I was going to be confronted with a kind of grief that was inconsolable, yet what I witnessed here were the eyes of a woman who appeared truly happy, confident and settled. I also noted how this emotional state seemed in opposition to her choice of wardrobe.

After exchanging the usual greetings at the front door, she invited me through to the main living area where a pot of hot coffee and a couple of mugs had already been set upon a small table. She beckoned me to sit, and we began to talk. I asked if she would mind me taking written notes throughout our meeting. She smiled warmly and said she had no objection.

We spoke mainly of how she and Raymond had met. She spoke of the way in which he had proposed to her on one knee over a video call, because he had been forced away on business on the exact same date that Anita's father had proposed to her mother, a detail which was of huge importance to her. Ray had been unwilling to wait another year to get an answer to his burning question.

'That was one of Ray's gifts, you see!', she had told me. 'He was a man who could turn something so cold and impersonal as a video call into one of the most romantic gestures I've ever experienced.'

After the hour long discussion, I had already made notes stating that in my opinion, Anita Jacobs was simply a widow, grieving the loss of her husband. She was a delight to speak to, and showed no signs she was mentally unstable or unable to manage her own affairs in any way. As she led me to the dining room where our evening meal would conclude the assessment, I remember smiling to myself, thinking maybe it was her nephew Henry Carson, that I ought to be evaluating for spending ten thousand dollars on what seemed to be a complete waste of everybody's time.

Yet, when we got to the room where we would have dinner, three places had been set at the table. She signalled for me to take the seat opposite herself, leaving the space at the head of the table vacant, yet seeming ready to receive another dinner guest.

A maid, whom I had not encountered until now, entered the room carrying three separate plates of food with the skill and grace only a practiced hand can achieve. She served the empty chair first, then Mrs. Jacobs, and finally me. I took out my notebook and began to write.

"Oh, please do not do that at the dinner table, it is really quite rude." Mrs. Jacobs remarked gently.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I thought that we had discussed this and you had no problem with it, it is quite standard for me to take notes during an evaluation which is still ongoing Mrs Jacobs."

"I don't mind at all Doctor Bullough, but Ray is a stickler for etiquette. I'm afraid he feels you are being rude not only for writing on your little pad, but for ignoring his objection to this behaviour completely."

I have to admit that this statement caught me completely off guard. "Is Ray here with us now Mrs. Jacobs?" I asked.

"You see baby," she said as she placed her hand upon the clean, unused fork meant for her dead husband, as though gently caressing the back of an invisible hand that held it. "Nobody else can see you."

She cocked her head sympathetically to one side and smiled with warm compassion. "No, you didn't die. If you were dead, then how could you be here with me?! Oh honey, you needn't feel jealous of the good Doctor, he's just here to do a job, that's all." She gave me a look that seemed to urge me to corroborate her explanation to the empty seat at the table.

I took out my pen and began to write.

BANG!! The table was hit with a tremendous force that literally lifted it off the dining room floor. My heart momentarily leapt into my throat and I sat staring at Mrs. Jacobs, with a mixed look of pure confusion and shock. She closed her eyes and sighed in frustration before rising from her seat gracefully, as one who is fighting to keep patience. "I'll go ask Kerry how the desert is coming along, if you'll excuse me for a moment Doctor."

As she walked from the room I noticed an almost indistinguishable limp in her stride that had definitely not existed there before. I grinned sympathetically, and after she had left the room, I quietly laughed at how such a silly parlour trick had almost done a number on me. I took out my notepad again and began to write. I wrote that Mrs. Anita Jacobs was indeed of competent mind, but due to the recent death of her husband, was indulging a non-delusive fantasy to keep the memory of him alive. I added that it was my professional opinion she had so willingly agreed to this evaluation in an attempt to fool me into believing this fiction in order to strengthen the substance of it. I recommended that she receive regular counselling to help her find a healthier method of dealing with her loss, but should otherwise be quite capable to make her own decisions, both financially and personally.

When she came back in to the dining room I was already on my feet and fastening the buttons to my suit jacket. She looked apologetic and said, "Please doctor, he meant no real insult. He merely wished for you to enjoy your meal without taking notes and observations."

"No, we're done with our assessment Mrs. Jacobs, and dinner was quite lovely. Thank you. My compliments to the chef, but I really must be heading off."

She smiled, "Then please, let me see you to the door."

As she led the way from the table, heading for the main hall, my eyes fell down to her bottom and how the black dress she wore momentarily enticed my imagination to visualise what lay beneath.

I stopped, dead in my tracks. I had become suddenly aware of someone standing directly behind me. There was an arctic cold snap to the air in the room which caused the breath from my mouth to become visible. All of the hairs on my neck stood on end, as though they had suddenly been exposed to a small surge of static electricity. As I turned around slowly, my breathing began to shake involuntarily, I saw him.

I SAW HIM!!

I would recognize Raymond Jacobs anywhere from the numerous photographs published in the papers both before and after his death. It was him, or what remained of him. The Ray that stood before me now had pallid grey, soaked wet skin. His eyes were fully white, atrophied, and his mouth gaped open unnaturally wide in a silent scream issuing through blackened teeth and from a pale greenish rotten tongue, the stench of which was enough to briefly steal the breath from me.

"JESUS CHRIST!!" I Shouted as I stumbled backwards and fell at Anita's heels causing her to turn around in alarm. Looking down at me she spoke in a desperate whisper, "You shouldn't have done that!!"

"What the fuck was that?! Done what for Christ's sake?" I shouted from my undignified position on the floor.

"You shouldn't have looked at me in that way," she said. "Ray was always a jealous man, and he will never let this go. He has nothing now, but time."

It is the first time in my life that I have ever experienced real terror. I clumsily scrambled to my feet telling her that I had to leave. On my way out, I assured her that my psychological evaluation would be a favourable one and that I was truly sorry if I had caused any offence.

It didn't matter. By the time I reached my car, Ray was already waiting in the passenger seat. Unmoving, just looking to the darkening street ahead through those lifeless eyes. I ran, needing to get as far away from the house as I possibly could, but every street corner, each turn and alley, Ray was waiting for me. I screamed for him to leave me alone, and when that didn't work I pleaded that I was wrong, that I was sorry. That's how the cops found me and brought me in.

Doctor Farrell pressed stop on the tape recorder and sighed.

"I feel it likely James, that though you're educated mind recognized that this intelligent woman wanted to draw you into a fantasy. Your attraction to her allowed her to succeed in spite of this awareness. Would it come as a surprise if I were to tell you that Mrs. Anita Jacobs has long since abandoned this fantasy of her deceased husband, soon after you parted company in fact. That she no longer wears her funeral gown as she once did." The psychiatrist in the crisp, white lab coat that sat opposite to me used to be my friend. Now, he just awaited my answer with his pen poised to notepad as though he was studying some curious lab animal. I looked to my right and stared directly into the face of Ray Jacobs sat upon the couch next to me, that silent scream of accusation, of agony had never left me alone since I left that house. Still, his presence caught my breath.

"No Mike, the fact that she no longer spends time with him does not surprise me at all!"

Doctor Farrell closed his notepad and placed the Dictaphone into his lab coat pocket. "I'm recommending to the board that you remain with us for a further six months under close observation," he said.

"Please Mike, you wanna cure me?! Go and try to take Anita Jacobs on a GODDAMN DATE!!" I pleaded with him as my eyes spilled their tears, unable to hide the fear that now resided in me.

"James, you know that I'm a happily married man, and it is clear to me that indulging this fantasy that you have somehow allowed yourself to become enveloped in is not the way to give you the help that you need." He signalled the two burly hospital attendants that were stood by the door. "Gentleman, please escort Mr. Bullough back to his room."

"Doctor. It's Doctor Bollough Mike, and I'm not crazy!"

"Of course not," he said. "Ensure that *Doctor* Bullough be given something to help him get some well needed rest. A good 12 hours."

I didn't struggle, I knew the dance. As I was led away, back to that one bunk cell, back to the eternally cursed roommate that awaited me there, I had to admit... I was grateful at least, for the brief moment of dreamless peace the drugs would afford.

#### **About the Author:**

Christopher Roper is a professional freelance writer and a poet from North-West England. Originally a songwriter and musician, poetry came into his life when he was at his lowest. Now with more than 100 poems to his collection, as an innate storyteller, the next natural progression was towards short stories and novels.

Author Page: <a href="http://www.christopher-roper.com/">http://www.christopher-roper.com/</a> Blog: <a href="http://www.christopher-roper.com/blog">www.christopher-roper.com/blog</a>

#### Glasses to the Afterlife | Emily Fluckiger

Surely Lev would have made it to Heaven. He'd insisted on fostering homeless gnomes, or placing bowls of cool water outside for passing unicorns, or making nectar for hungry fairies. All creatures, he'd said, were worthy of care. Especially fairies, who suffered the curse to see in both Heaven and Hell simultaneously. To exist on this earth but be tortured with perfection and the threat of misery was as close to the goddesses as any creature could reach.

Swan clutched her chest wishing to twist her heart out and force it to stop beating. On the kitchen counter, she rhythmically banged her legs against the cabinets. Lev wasn't here to shake his head at her antics and hand her a beer to calm the restless movements. He wasn't here to place himself between her legs and then tickle her instead of the expected hug, then press his lips against hers, then; fade to black.

A tapping on the window caused Swan to crane her neck. A wave of translucent lavender wings floated like petals falling off a dying flower. The fairy's tiny hand rapped at the glass again. Though the fairy licked her lips and pointed a finger to her mouth Swan focused only on the eyes. The abyss of black wonder that contained secrets of the afterlife was but an arm's length away. The fairy twitched her pointy ears and met Swan's gaze before flying off.

Swan swallowed trying to push the temptation away. Killing a fairy would surely put her in Hell. Even though Lev would be appalled...he wasn't here. Even though Swan wouldn't be with him in the afterlife...she'd always see him. Did she have the patience to wait until her own death?

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Swan leaned to one leg reaching for the block of knives. The metallic scrape caused her to cringe as she pulled it from its resting place. She touched the tip. How easy it would be to curve the blade and carve at a fairy's eyes. To scoop the squishy organs out and hold, in her hand, the glasses to the afterlife, the window to Heaven from which she would watch Lev. She would see his gap-toothed smile again, his curly black hair bounce with a shake of his head. Cutting out her own eyes wouldn't be as easy. But she could pop the fairy's eyes in right after. Perhaps the moment of blindness would be punishment enough to spare her from damnation.

The knife dug into the ridges of flesh on her finger. Red dripped down, tickling her palm. If only Lev were here to do the tickling. He'd crack the window open and offer the fairy some orange juice, or the liquid from canned pears.

Swan hopped off the counter and opened the refrigerator. Cool air blasted her like a wind of relief reminding her how hot the underworld would be. She shook her head while scanning the contents. Several beers, Lev's favorite, lined the middle shelf. On the top shelf sat a plastic container of strawberries. Perfect, plump red berries full of juice seemed to reach out and offer themselves to Swan.

The blood on her hand mixed with the fruit as she smashed them against the counter. She wiped the liquid into a bowl then lifted the window. With the juice on the sill and the kitchen knife still in her other hand, Swan leaned over the counter and waited.

Sunshine dimmed as Swan squinted at it through lavender wings. The fairy had returned, twitching her button nose, she approached the bowl. Swan stared at those black eyes and twirled the weapon around her fingers, beneath the ridge of the counter, out of the innocent creature's sight.

See Lev now, and forever? Or wait, and *be* with him. But how long? How many more days, or years, would she have to withstand before sweet death finally took her to him? Swan never had a speck of patience. Not once did she choose to wait for something rather than take it for herself. No, she was a doer.

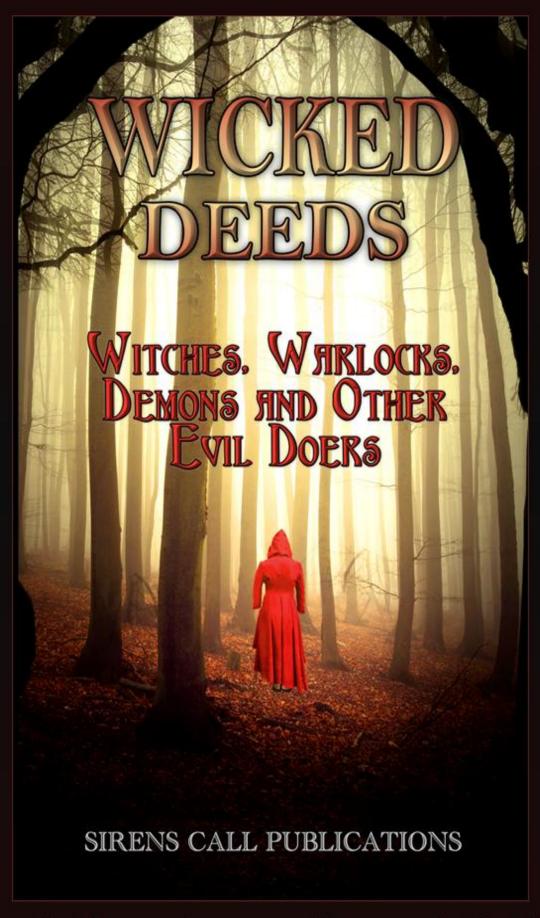
Swan flexed her feet to stand on her tiptoes and snatched the fairy from mid-air. The fairy let out a pitiful squeal. Their gaze met and Swan thrust the blade. The fairy flew upward as Swan's fingers released. She collapsed to the floor, knife in stomach. Swan heard the buzzing of wings above her. The pain took her; fade to black. She would see Lev soon, no, she would be *with* Lev soon.

#### **About the Author:**

Congenital Heart Defect survivor, Emily Fluckiger, finds joy and peace through the expression of writing. She engages and has been published in many formats from poetry to short stories to flash fiction and nonfiction. Emily and her husband spend their free time wrangling two children and playing video games in their busy California lifestyle.

Facebook: Emily Fluckiger

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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

#### Inner Screams | Maynard Blackoak

George Vanderloof cast a haughty scowl toward the young woman sitting on the side of his bed. Her torn dress absorbed the tears dripping from her shattered face. The makeup that once highlighted her beautiful, green eyes mixed with the briny flow. It danced melancholy down her crestfallen cheeks, creating jagged lines testifying to the overwhelming heartbreak ripping her soul.

"You look pathetic, Felicia. Go in the bathroom, and make yourself presentable before you return to my guests downstairs," he instructed her in a dismissive tone.

Her great sadness gave way to loathing as he she lifted her humiliated eyes to meet his. "You God damn bastard. After what you just did to me, you have the nerve to tell ME to make myself presentable?"

The expression on her face transformed. A woman's contempt replaced the veneer of a shattered little girl. Staring into his eyes of pure hubris, she touched upon a reserve of strength. He might be a man of great wealth and power, but would pay for the indignation committed against her.

"I'm going downstairs and show all your friends and associates just what a depraved animal the great and powerful George Vanderloof is."

A sinister grin crept upon his lips as the evil that permeated his soul gleamed in his eyes. "No, my dear. You won't show them anything. You see. People like me are untouchable. We can do as we damn well please, even get away with murder, while bottom feeders like you only exist in a life we allow. So think about what you plan to do, long and hard. I can not only make you disappear from existence, I can make life a living hell for everyone you give a damn about."

His expression turned to an amused arrogance as he continued in a taunting voice. "If you still wish to ruin the evening of my guests, let me fill you on the events your spiked drink has clouded from your memory. The last everyone at the party saw of you was you pawing all over me in a drunken stupor. If you persist with your plan to assail my character, you will only show yourself to be a conniving cunt trying to impugn my good name in the pursuit of money."

Just then, George's wife entered the room. Her eyes perused the tattered girl sitting on the bed she seldom shared with her promiscuous husband with sickened stare. It was a disgusting scene she had witnessed time and time again over their twenty-year marriage. Repeatedly, she had tried to leave, and every time the long arms of his money and influence had forced her return. *This time*, she vowed to herself, it will be different. This time it will be you leaving...leaving this world forever.

"Wipe that damn look of repugnance off your face, Liz. It's not like you haven't seen this before. You'd think you'd be used to it by now," he voiced in an insufferable tone, turning his attention to his aghast spouse. "Now, take her into the bathroom, get her cleaned up, and find her something suitable to wear before she returns to our guests."

Like a dutiful wife, she walked up to Felicia. Her actions seemed to show compliance. However, unbeknownst to him, there was a glint in her eyes suggesting otherwise. Many years of being subjected to his humiliating treatment and being privy to her husband's deplorable acts had finally created a dogged desire to end his reign of terror for good. This night a plan many months in preparation would be put into action.

"Come on, honey. Best do as he says. He wouldn't be satisfied ruining only your life. He would ruin the lives of everyone you care about, and he would enjoy doing it," Liz cautioned the young woman, while helping Felicia to her feet. "Now let's go get you cleaned up and back out to the party."

"But...I can't let him get away with this. You didn't see what he did to me."

"I don't have to see to know what he's done. You're not the first young woman he's done this to. Trust me. I've even been where you are myself. It's useless to fight him." Leaning into the young woman's ear, Liz continued in a soft whisper. "Just do as he says for now. I promise; you will be his last victim."

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The last of their guests had filtered out the door of their palatial estate. George flashed an approving grin at his wife. It was a long time coming, but it appeared to him as if she had finally come to realize the futility of going against his wishes. Liz lowered her head, as if cowering before him. The truth was she wanted to hide her hatred and conceal any possibility her expression would reveal the terrible revenge she planned to exact against him before the night was over.

A creature of habit, George followed a precise routine every night before retiring to bed. First, he would have Jenson the chauffer drive him around town for an hour while he conducted shady dealings from

the backseat of the Rolls Royce. Upon returning home, he would order Brunson the butler to bring him a double shot of Napoleon brandy. After that, he would retire for the night.

When Jenson brought the car to the front door, Liz knew there would be no deviation in her husband's routine. After ordering Brunson to see to a task upstairs, she began putting her plot into action. Locating the special bottle of brandy, she replaced it with one doctored specifically for phase one of her plan. She hid the original behind the liquor cabinet in order to be able to switch the bottles back quickly.

George returned just as Brunson made his way down the staircase. He ordered the butler to bring him his brandy, and walked into his private study. As the drink of revenge was delivered to her husband, Liz knew her husband's reign of wickedness was near an end. She felt freer than she had in many years.

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Once several minutes had passed, she joined George in his bedroom. She was unable to contain the joy she felt finding him writhing in pain, and begging her to call for help. After twenty years of enduring his cruel and heinous treatment, it was her turn to inflict cruelties of her own. Relishing in the moment, she could not hold back the smile that beamed on her face, not that she wanted to anyway.

A look of horror painted his face, as he realized his wife was not going to call for medical assistance. For the first time in his life, he began to feel the helplessness his many victims had felt at his hands. Mustering one last vestige of hubris, he tried to bully her into calling 911, but could only manage a few intelligible gurgling sounds. He was about to die, and neither his wealth nor his power could save him.

"In case you haven't figured it out, I did this to you, George. I've been planning this for some time, and god this feels good. All the years you've raped, tortured and bullied your way through life are over," Liz informed him through a spiteful expression. "Soon you will be dead, but that's not the worst of it for you, dear husband."

Fear shone in his eyes and his entire body shuddered with terror. He was still unable to speak. Nevertheless, he knew there was nothing he could say to dissuade Liz from her vengeance.

"Here's the best part, Dear. You're going to die, just not all the way. I mean, you'll be dead, heart stopped and all, just not dead, dead. You'll get to feel, hear and see everything that happens to you, but you won't be able move or speak. Because, you know, after all, you'll be dead."

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George heard the body bag unzip. His eyes set upon two bulky men who lifted his corpse, and tossed him unceremoniously onto an ice-cold table of stainless steel. Afterwards, they exchanged jokes about the rich and powerful George Vanderloof ending up on the same slab as a commoner, and exited laughing.

Do you two oafs know who I am? His thoughts screamed inside his head. I'm George Vanderloof, and I can buy and sell bottom feeders like you. To his dismay, it was just as Liz had predicted, he was unable to move his mouth to utter a sound. He attempted to wiggle his fingers, but it was as if he was completely paralyzed. Still, he refused to believe his consciousness was trapped inside a corpse.

A few moments later, he heard footsteps approaching. Soon afterward, a creepy looking man wearing thick glasses stood over him, studying his corpse with a curious expression. "Hello there, George. I'm Dr. Mankins, the county coroner. Hmm. Massive coronary. Well, George, we'll have to see about that, won't we?"

As a doctor, I should hope you know the difference between a corpse and a living body. He shouted in a haughty manner, without making a sound.

Reaching a hand beyond the dead man's head, he retrieved a bone saw, and turned it on. "What say we take a look at that bum ticker there, George?"

The whirr of the spinning blade filled the dead man's thoughts with terror. While he possessed little medical knowledge, he knew enough to realize what was about to happen.

Touch me with that, and I'll see to it the only place you'll be able to practice medicine is in the furthest reaches of Antarctica.

An intense pain shot through his body as the saw chewed its way through flesh and bone. With the agony still fresh, the coroner grabbed a rib spreader, and pried open the chest. George could hear and feel his ribs breaking. The excruciating misery was unbearable. His entire chest screamed in anguish, while he writhed inside his trapped mind, enduring unspeakable pain.

Despite the agonizing ordeal, he refused to believe he was dead, remaining convinced he was ensuared in some manner of paralysis that froze his entire body, save for his brain. After all, he was George

Vanderloof. He had always been able to intimidate or buy his way out of every messy situation. It eluded his thinking this was not one of those instances where wealth and power would come to his rescue.

You Goddamn fool. Can't you see and hear my beating heart? Did Liz pay you off? Whatever she's offered you, I'll double it. Hell, I'll triple it. He attempted to bargain with the coroner, but was still unable to make a sound.

"Hmm. The old ticker looks to be in good shape, but we won't know for sure until I get a closer look at it, George," the doctor offered in a studious manner, grabbing a sharp instrument. "We'll have to remove it from your chest to give it a good going over, to make sure."

More agonizing pain ensued as the coroner began cutting the heart from George's chest. *I'm going to see to it that you lose your medical license for this. When I'm through with you, you'll be living in a cardboard box and eating out of garbage cans.* 

When Dr. Mankins lifted the stilled heart from its chest, and held it in his hands, George was filled with horror. It can't be...It's just not possible...How can I be alive without having a heart? The parting words of his long-suffering wife echoed in his head. He was dead in every sense of the word, except he was conscious and able to feel all the pain of his autopsy.

"And there we have it," the doctor stated in a half-excited tone. "Sixty percent of the heart muscle is severely atrophied. Looks like you enjoyed the good life a little too much, George. All that rich food finally cashed in your chips."

More pain followed, as Mankins began closing the open chest cavity with thick staples. Watching his body being crudely stitched, the irony of his plight began to penetrate his angst-riddled mind. In life, he had been cruel and heartless, and had inflicted much suffering on others. In death, he was heartless, but the pain and cruelty was inflicted upon him. Still, he refused to feel any remorse for any of his wicked deeds. If anything, he felt even more arrogant. He had risen to be one of the few people in the world that could have gotten away unscathed from his deplorable deeds.

A dark, lonely future loomed on his horizon. He could only guess how long he would lie in a grave, conscious of the dank and powerless stare of being dead in the ground, yet having a mind that still lived. A cold shudder chilled him, considering the many years he would endure in such a manner until his brain finally decayed into dust. With intense pain tormenting his mind, he took solace that his silent suffering would not be eternal.

Dr. Mankins finished his task, and called for the morgue orderlies. "Looks like we part ways now, George. Fred and Benny will be taking you away. It's been a pleasure getting to know your insides. You know, I've never autopsied one of you super rich types, but when you get down to the heart of it all, there's no difference between the rich and the poor."

I can't say it's been a pleasure. If I could, I'd still send your life into ruin, just to show you the difference between my kind and your kind.

Fred and Benny entered the room to take the corpse away. "Is the funeral home coming for this dude today, Doc?" Fred inquired grabbing George's shoulders.

"No. He's being donated to science...except his head. His wife has requested that be preserved in a glass case to be exhibited in the home. What I heard was she wanted to keep it around as a way to properly thank him for their life together."

"That woman must be off her rocker, Doc. I mean. How in hell is she gonna do that with a dead dude's head?"

"I don't have a clue, Fred. Maybe she just needs more time to show him how she feels." George's hopes for an end to his undead state quickly vanished.

#### **About the Author:**

Maynard Blackoak is an author living on a small ranch in Oklahoma. The greatest influences in his writing are the works of Poe and Dickens. He draws inspiration from the sounds and shadows of the night and processes them through a deep abiding affection for the classics to create his tales.

Facebook: Maynard Blackoak



#### The Park | Mark Towse

My life is built around routine since it happened.

After leaving work just before six, I catch a train and then take a bus from the terminus to Finnegan Street and walk the remaining few hundred yards back to my house on Potters Street.

It's normally just after seven when I disembark at Finnegan and cut through the park—a rather grandiose term for an overgrown patch of ground that is home to a rusty old slide, a swing set, and an old tire suspended from a tree.

The neighbouring estate with its brand-spanking-new playground is where all the kids and parents gravitate towards now. The assortment of equipment boasting shiny new metal and brightly coloured plastic and the vast carpets of red chip bark have sealed the fate of the old one. It lies abandoned—colourless and joyless. There is something haunting about such a place, once a source of so much fun and laughter but one that is now dormant—nobody to mourn or to say thank you for the times.

The first time I noticed it was about two months ago—just as the nights had started to get a little lighter. No apparent breeze and further evidence being the stillness of the trees, but the swing roughly and undeniably moved back and forth, and the chains sang loudly, as though someone had just dismounted. There was no one to be seen.

I notice it most nights now—swinging away—between the two stationary ones.

I recall that sometimes in the colder days, there was a very distant creak that could have easily been a swing, but the uncertainty of darkness and cold evening air always carried me home too quickly to consider its origin.

I am on an earlier train tonight, the first time I have left the office early since I can remember.

I need to know.

The train is quieter, less manic and for the first time in a while, I don't hate the journey. I manage to get a seat on the bus and even with the smell of the diesel filling my nostrils and the notable dark sticky patches on the fabric it feels as though I am travelling first class compared to the bump and grind of the normal evening commute.

It is well before seven when I reach the makeshift entrance to the park.

On the center swing is a small boy. He is mid-swing, really going for it. I watch him from a while, tucked in behind the wall. If anyone could see me, they might be concerned. It is five minutes to seven as I come out of hiding and take my normal route, making sure the swing is in peripheral vision. I am almost level with him now and can still see the shape of the boy as he is about to start the ascent, but when it reaches full height, I can no longer see him. I turn around quickly, and there is nobody on the swing and no sign of anyone running away.

For the next few minutes, I watch the swing as it gracefully settles back into its natural rhythm and steadies to an eventual halt—the boy nowhere to be seen. I walk slowly home, occasionally turning my head to see if he appears again, but he doesn't.

At home, I pour myself a glass of wine and sit down on the couch with my laptop. I have been working a lot recently. It helps. I have no idea what else to do.

The photo on the table next to me triggers an emotional cocktail of my best dreams, and worst nightmares, all rolled into one—happiness, sadness, laughter, pain and all of it so raw. Mostly, it just makes me ache to hold him one more time.

The park is approximately a hundred yards from our—well, my house. Both Patricia and I had no idea what we were in for when he didn't come back at seven on that Friday night. That was the rule—seven o'clock every night. We had panicked of course, but we thought there would be a rational reason. I walked across to collect him, but when he wasn't there, I immediately thought the

worst, and the worst had happened. The last few months have been our darkest time on earth, relentless grief—so much so that we can no longer take part in each other's lives.

The police say they are still looking, but it's been six months now.

I used to pretend it was him for a while, on the swings, "Nearly dinnertime, Tommy," I would say as I passed. Eventually, I even convinced myself it was, and it helped a little.

It wasn't long before I picked up the pattern—every night apart from Friday that middle swing would move back and forth accompanied by its cries of neglect. It didn't take long for me to put two and two together and come up with something completely implausible and something that I desperately didn't want to be true. It would mean Tommy was definitely gone.

The earlier train tonight had brought me to a point in my life where I had watched my dead son playing on the swings. Behind the wall, I had sobbed like a child.

I used to think that one day I would wake from this long nightmare and find him eating cereal at the kitchen table. I would have given anything to see him again—somewhere, somehow. But not like this.

I will continue to work late and pretend that Tommy is still with us. I will continue to tell him that it's nearly dinnertime as I pass the creaking swing.

I am pleased the old park has someone to pay their last respects to times gone, but I wish it didn't have to be Tommy.

#### **About the Author:**

Mark Towse has only been writing short stories for five months now, but his passion and enthusiasm are unparalleled, and this has recently resulted in paid pieces in four prestigious magazines including Books N' Pieces, Artpost Magazine, and five upcoming anthologies. Mark resides in Melbourne, Australia with his wife and two children.

Blog: <a href="https://marktowsedarkfiction.wordpress.com/">https://marktowsedarkfiction.wordpress.com/</a>
Twitter: @MarkTowsey12

#### Bait | Patrick Wynn

Jeff jogged along the path smiling as he came to his favorite portion of his daily jog, passing the playground area. He hoped to spot a few kids who wondered away from their parents to check out the small pond just behind a stand of trees off to one side and down a hill from the main playground. As he rounded a corner and headed toward the trees Jeff could her a small boy and girl giggling as they pointed to a few bugs along the pond's edge.

"Hey kids. Watching some bugs?" Jeff smiled as he slowed to a stop.

"Yes sir" The kids answered in unison.

Jeff continued to smile as he took in the surrounding area for any adults who might be looking for these cute little kids. A wide smile filled his face when he noticed no adults anywhere around and he knew this was his chance.

"Hey kids. Look over here I think there are some really cool looking bugs by these trees" Jeff said as he walked toward the trees and further concealment from the playground area.

The kids smiled and shuffled over to where Jeff was leaning down. Jeff already had a roll of tape and rags to stuff into the kids mouths ready as they approached and he gave one last look around. When he was satisfied he grabbed for the boy first but just as his fingers brushed the boys shirt a large figure passed out of the trees and crashed into Jeff. He was knocked to his back and stunned for a second as the figure landed on his chest.

"I was just..." Jeff stuttered but his voice failed as he stared up to what sat on his chest. A scream formed in his throat but died as teeth shot forward and ripped into the soft flesh just below Jeff's jaw.

The figure stood wiping the red smear off his face and turned to the two kids who stood watching.

"That was a nice catch, kids. Eat quickly and then we can try to catch another one before we head home." The figure smiled as the kids fell on Jeff who was doing his best to draw breath through a ripped out throat.

"A good catch indeed" the figure whispered as his kids fed.

#### Counting | Patrick Wynn

"One, two, three, four, five, seven, nineteen, four," Eddy whispered as he squeezed his eyes tightly closed.

For a four year old Eddy was a talented counter, most days he could make it past twenty without mistakes but when he got nervous or scared he sometimes made mistakes. His therapist had suggested counting to ease his fears and for a while it helped but as with most things they lost their effectiveness and stopped working. Eddy really needed the counting to work, his fear during the day was bad enough, at night the fear turned into terror. The terror was so severe he could not scream out, just sit frozen in horror.

Eddy slowly let his eyes flicker open but slammed them shut quickly.

"One, seven, three, four, eight, two, two, three, one, two, nine, ten, ONE, TWO," Eddy cried.

He slowly opened his eyes hoping against hope but they were still there. They stood around his bed, some with no heads, some with torn throats, others just didn't look right. Eddy knew, he knew, they were there for him and he slammed his eyes shut again.

"Three, three, five, tentjk, fit, ni, six, fouten, Sevelll, ahhhhhhh" Eddy tried to count them away but he could feel their cold dead hands as they reached for him in the darkness.

#### Denny's Morning | Patrick Wynn

Denny stood looking up at the cabinet where his mom kept the cereal and thought about how to get up there. Smiling as an idea hit him, he turned and grabbed a kitchen chair then pushed. It took him a few minutes to scoot the chair up all the way to the counter, it weighed almost as much as he did. Very carefully he climbed on the chair then up on the counter. Once on the counter Denny opened the cabinet doors and began pulling cereal boxes out. He grabbed the Fruity O's, Choco Bombs and then the Marshmallow Stars. Denny climbed down the same way he got up.

Denny then decided he wanted chocolate milk with his cereal and went to the refrigerator. The door was very hard for him to open but he kept at it and finally it popped open and crashed into the wall. Denny grabbed the chocolate syrup off the door shelf and then the gallon of milk. As he slid the milk off the shelf it slipped out of his hands and fell to the floor. The milk lid flew off and milk exploded across the floor. Denny watched as it flowed out and he began to cry. Making your own breakfast was just too much for a four year old to accomplish and he was starting to wish he hadn't listened to the phone when it told him to use the knife on Mommy.

#### **About the Author:**

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that contain shades of horror, humor and are just a touch weird. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.

#### Bound | Jack M. Freedman

I've shredded your power over me Spicy and sour sensations Will overcome your tongue You will not speak gossip with ease

Your force is set in metal And submerged into water Only to be frozen in place Within ice, you are bound

After a fortnight passes Your legacy will be buried

Within the dirt, your vindictiveness Will be consumed by the worms

Unlike the ends of hungry worms
I pray your evil won't regenerate
For you are like a liver with cirrhosis
And your toxicity will consume you

You are one with the weeds For no flowers could flourish With your influence impaired And your demons decomposed

You won't harm me For your name in triplicate

Echoes the karma

You brought upon yourself

#### Ouija Board | Jack M. Freedman

A dilapidated shack
Barricaded by boards
Condemned, uninhabitable
Roach infested, dry-rot
No soul inhabits it
Only squalor and filth

Only the sound of floorboards Creaking from the steps of spirits Clocks permanently set to 11:11

False sense of serenity
This house was once red
This house was once green
Unprimed, unsealed

Rain transmuted paint to mud Mirrors broken into shards Thermostat possessed

And then a ghost appeared

A muddy mixture of rage and envy

Temperature cold toward those he loved

Hot in his perception Never cool, never warm

Zero middle ground between extremes

The nature of his final days Could only be answered By guardians of the air His mouth murdered him

With resentment being a fatal weapon Turned against him in a fit of delusion

Fate hermetically sealed Karma was in his hands One finger aimed to shoot

Three fingers conspired against him

Shooting him down

Behold the power of three He was all about that bass And the treble did him in

#### About the Author:

Jack M. Freedman is a poet and spoken word artist from Staten Island, NY. Publications featuring his work span North America, Western Europe, and Southeast Asia.

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



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

#### Death Takes a Business Trip | Sheri White

Jason knocked on his supervisor's door and poked his head inside.

"You wanted to see me, Mike?"

"Yeah, come on in." He rifled through some papers on his desk. "Ah, here it is." He handed an envelope to Jason.

Jason sat in a chair and pulled a plane ticket out of the envelope. "Another business trip? Can't someone else go this time? I've had four trips in the past six months."

"Sorry, Jason. We need our best man out there."

Jason looked at the destination. "I guess Miami in February isn't too shabby."

"Yep, I even threw in a few extra days for R & R."

"Thanks, Mike. Appreciated." They stood up and shook hands. "See you next week."

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Jason pulled his carry-on bag behind him through the airport hoping he'd have time to grab a Starbucks before catching his flight.

Thankfully, there was no line at the counter.

"Could I please have a tall black decaf?" He didn't want to exacerbate his usual pre-flight jitters with caffeine.

"Of course." The barista looked at him and frowned. "I hope your plane doesn't crash."

"What the hell did you say?"

The barista sighed. "Sir, I asked if you are paying with cash."

Jason blinked. "Oh, sorry. I guess I wasn't paying attention." He gave the barista a five. "Keep it."

He found an empty seat at his gate and sipped at his coffee.

Why am I so jittery this time? I'm not usually this nervous before a flight.

He texted his girlfriend to distract himself.

Hey, babe. About to fly. Keep the bed warm for me!

Okay, hope you make it

Jason stared at his phone.

...home in time to watch The Walking Dead with me! Sorry, hit SEND before I was done.

He texted a 'thumbs up,' then stuck his phone in his pocket with a shaky hand. What the hell is going on? This is a little freaky.

He grabbed his ticket from his briefcase and approached the flight kiosk. "Hello. Is it almost time to board?"

The clerk checked Jason's ticket. "Yes, but are your affairs in order, sir?"

"My affairs? What do you mean?" Sweat beads popped out on his forehead.

"Mr. Perry, are you all right?"

"Do you usually ask passengers if their affairs are in order? Is this a new thing? Nobody has ever asked me that before a flight, and frankly, it's a little unnerving."

"Mr. Perry—I was just making sure that you're aware your ticket lists you as an early boarder."

Jason leaned on the kiosk and put his head in his hands. "I'm sorry. I'm feeling a little...stressed today."

The clerk chuckled. "Yeah, I see that a lot. But flying is safer than driving, you know!"

"So I've heard. Not so sure I believe that today." Jason gave a weak smile and headed to the plane.

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"Sir, may I get you something to drink?"

"A Scotch on the rocks would be great, thank you." He gave the flight attendant his company credit card, wishing his boss had put him in business class instead of coach. "I thought I was their best man," he mumbled to himself.

"I'm sorry, were you saying something?" The flight attendant passed him his drink.

"No, sorry. Just talking to myself."

"Okay, sir. Almost time to die, by my watch."

"Why is everyone trying to freak me out? Why are you all talking about dying today?" Jason's knee bumped his tray, spilling his drink.

"Sir, please settle down. I told you to enjoy your Scotch."

"No, there is something wrong. Something bad is going to happen." He looked out his window. "Should the wing be doing that? Oh God! We're going to crash, aren't we?"

The passengers around him murmured and shook their heads. Some clutched their armrests.

A man approached Jason and the flight attendant. She pushed the drink cart back to the galley.

"Sir, I'm the air marshal on this flight. Is there a problem I can help you with?"

"There is something strange going on. Something wrong with this flight!" Jason stood up. The passengers in his row pushed back in their seats.

"Okay, sir. I realize you are nervous, but you need to sit down and calm down."

"But-"

"NOW. And if you can't keep yourself seated and calm, I will handcuff you and hand you over to the police when we land. Do you understand?"

Jason clenched his hands into fists and sat down. "Yes, I understand."

"Thank you, sir. I will check back with you in a bit." He turned and looked at the other passengers. "It's fine, folks. This passenger is having an anxiety attack. He should be okay now."

\*\*\*

Jason pretended to read a magazine, embarrassed at his earlier outburst. I can't believe I did that. What the hell was I thinking?

He had apologized to his seat mates, who barely acknowledged him. He didn't blame them.

The pilot walked by, startling Jason. "Even pilots need to use the restroom," he said with a smile. Jason shrank into his seat. He knew the pilot had been told about him.

Suddenly, the plane dropped. Look to the flight attendants. If they don't look scared, everything is fine. Jason looked around and made eye contact with the attendant who had served him. She smiled, but he could see her body was tense.

He heard a door slam. The pilot hurried down the aisle towards the cockpit. Everyone craned their necks to see what was going on. The pilot pulled on the door, but couldn't open it.

Shivers ran down Jason's back. It's fine. They keep the door locked in case of terrorists now.

The pilot knocked on the cockpit door. A flight attendant joined him. They whispered frantically.

The plane dropped again. This time passengers screamed, including Jason.

Now the pilot pounded on the door. "Walker! Open the door!"

The plane's nose dipped and the plane's altitude dropped quickly.

"Walker, please! Please let me in! What are you doing?" The pilot beat on the door. The attendant dropped to the floor and put her face in her hands.

Jason looked around wildly. "What is happening? What is happening?"

The passengers' screams and the screams of the engines joined together in a terrifying cacophony. The pilot was now on the floor, weakly pounding on the door and crying.

Jason looked out the window and saw the ground rapidly approaching. He cried too, and grabbed the hand of his seatmate. She squeezed back, screaming with her eyes closed. "I don't want to die!" she cried.

Jason babbled something resembling a prayer.

"Please don't let it hurt. Please don't let it hurt."

The plane shook violently. Luggage and other items flew around the cabin, hitting some people and mercifully knocking them out.

Jason was not so lucky.

"WILL IT HURT? OH MY GOD! WILL IT HURT? WILL IT HURT? WILL IT—"

#### **About the Author:**

Sheri White lives in Maryland with her family. She's a mom to three girls, ages 30, 23, and 20, and has instilled a love of all things scary in them as well. Her three-year-old granddaughter is next! Her husband Chris is very understanding.

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. Her first collection, Sacrificial Lambs and Others, was recently published by Crossroad Press.

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#### 'Twas the Night Before Christmas | G Clark Hellery

He gazed at the little boy on the bed, making sure he was asleep. How peaceful the child looked, his cherub cheeks flushed with colour, brown hair tousled across his pillow. The child stirred, a small cry of anguish bursting from his mouth, tugging at the man's heart strings. He gently stroked the boy's head, whispering soothing words until the child was sound asleep once more.

The man sank heavily onto the side of the bed, his large frame taking up a lot of room, but he managed not to jostle the sleeping child. Tonight he was feeling every one of his countless years. His life had been a good one, filled with happiness and joy in so many ways with his devoted wife and friends. He'd been a natural leader, had recruited many to his cause and enjoyed a loyal worldwide following. People had sought him out, had asked for his counsel. However, it was all gone now: his loving wife, his workforce, his believers. All that was left from a lifetime of work was this one child.

How had it all come to this? Pah! He knew why, but he didn't like to think on it too much as it meant he had failed. His message of peace on Earth had fallen on deaf ears as the boys and girls of his congregation had grown up and lost their belief, choosing a different path: one of greed, of corruption, of pain, which in turn had led to destruction and death. Gods, so much death. Too much.

Sighing, he closed his eyes against his bleak turn of thought and rested his hands on his wide belly. He visualized how it used to be at this sacred time of year, when people had celebrated with shared foods and gifts, had come together in song and games. His eyes opened and drifted to the flaky paint on the walls of the narrow room. The big man frowned. How different things were now. How very different.

Distant sounds of battle drifted up through the cracked window. A plane flew low outside and a few seconds later the unmistakable whistle of a bomb could be heard. The impact on the building next door made the floor, walls and ceiling ripple in waves. The old man automatically covered the child's body with his own, knowing his actions were fruitless, that nothing he could do would save the child - they were both doomed to die here – but he did it anyway. It was his nature. It was what he had been created for.

The movement of the building caused the array of monitors surrounding the sleeping boy to wail and flash. The wires attached to his head and body stayed connected to the frantically flashing machines but the tiny oxygen mask had been slightly dislodged. The man's large hand completely covered the oxygen mask as he carefully placed it back over the boy's mouth and he smiled as it clouded momentarily. The machines continued their concerto, however. There was no one to check on them. Such is the cost of the war.

The child stirred as the man raised his skeletal hand to his lips and kissed it, the bristles of his long, dirty grey beard tickling the tissue paper skin. How he wished he could gift this child with good health, a happy life, friends and food, filled with magic and laughter. It had once been in his power but now it was not to be.

Solemn brown eyes looked up from under the little boys lashes and he took in the man who sat next to him impassively for a few moments before a frown creased his small brow. "Santa? Is that really you?" He asked, his breath briefly fogging the mask covering his mouth.

The big man's face broke into a broad grin. "You're awake, my dear boy! How jolly to see you, Noel."

Noel slowly looked around him, his frown deepening as he took in the shrieking machines, the metal beds and the window with torn curtains. "Where am I?"

Santa started to bite his lip and considered his response. Deciding that honesty was better than frivolous platitudes he began, "What do you remember, Noel? Do you remember the war starting?" Noel's brown eyes nodded their assent so Santa continued, "Well, that war went on for a very long time, too long, and many people were killed. However, bombing wasn't enough for some so they found new ways to hurt people. They would send poisoned gas, stop food reaching those who needed it, kill farm animals and, sadly, when those in power were done killing others, they started to slaughter their own people using the same tactics so they could stay in power. The land is poisoned, Noel, and I'm sad to see you've been caught up in all this mess."

"Will I get better, Santa?" The little boy's earnest eyes bulged as he tried to sit up but he didn't have the strength so laid back down again with a weary sigh. Santa covered him in the threadbare covers as he considered his reply.

"I hope so," he said carefully, knowing there really was no hope for the little scrap of humanity whose ragged breathing barely moved the thin covers.

"But, what are you doing here, Santa?" The boys' voice was beginning to fade and his chest had a slight rattle.

Santa stroked the ashen skin of the boy's face. "I'm sorry to say that all the other little boys and girls are no more, Noel, and the truth is you're the last little boy in the whole world. I'm a magical being. It's only a child's belief in me, your belief in me, that keeps me here." Santa looked at his trembling hand as he continued stroking

the boy's head. He could see the dark curls through his hand as Noel fought for breath. "Once you're gone, my dear child, my magic is no more."

And as Noel breathed his last, Santa Claus began to fade.

#### **About the Author:**

G Clark Hellery is a writer and crafter, with three novels and lots of short stories published online and in print. For free fiction, craft ideas, writing tips and movie reviews, follow her blog or Twitter.

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#### And— | Grove Koger

He was an evil little boy and he did evil things. Everybody was afraid of him and nobody could stop him. Once he brought a dead crow back to life, watched it bounce on the roadway and sweep backward on a gust of wind that only it felt, listened to it caw angrily as it vanished in the leaden sky. That should have been a good thing, bringing that bird back to life, but somehow it wasn't. Another time he made it rain real hard on the last day of school. The picnic had to be canceled and the mother of one of his classmates died in a flash flood. She had the cancer, and her death could have been a good thing, a blessing. But it wasn't. Another time—

But there had been a lot of other times.

Now he walked down the middle of the road, confident that any drivers from around there would know enough to steer around him. And they did. The other boys walked a few steps behind, afraid to anger him by getting too close or hanging too far back. Then he stopped, right about where that damn crow had been lying, and looked around.

"I can make all this go away," he said.

They stopped too, looked around too. Had they heard him right? All what? All this? There were fields of stubble, shacks here and there, stands of black locust. Just those and the dusty road. It was that kind of place.

"I can make all this go away," he said again, more thoughtfully this time, turning back to say it. It was a terrible sight, the little boy's face screwed up in thought, and it made the others even more nervous than they were already.

He looked down at his right hand, moved his fingers this way and that, feeling his way ... back. As if he were remembering something, something he had known a long time ago. But that was impossible, he hadn't been here a long time ago. Had he?

He touched his thumb to one finger and then another, feeling his way. No, not that one. Not that one, not that one. *That* one.

The evil little boy grinned, and that was a terrible sight too. He set his thumb back against his middle finger—that one—and clenched them together, and—

#### **About the Author:**

Grove Koger is the author of When the Going Was Good: A Guide to the 99 Best Narratives of Travel, Exploration, and Adventure (Scarecrow Press, 2002) and Assistant Editor of Laguna Beach Art Patron Magazine, Palm Springs Art Patron Magazine, and Deus Loci: The Lawrence Durrell Journal. He has also published fiction, nonfiction and poetry in a number of periodicals.

Amazon Author Page: <u>Grove Kroger</u> Blog: <u>World Enough</u>

# Bent Metal



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

## The Merman's Kiss | KA Masters

The bodies began to wash ashore the day after the storm.

Throughout the morning, the villagers dragged waterlogged corpses out of the tide to bring them to the churchyard for burial. The faces that they could name were given over to grieving family members, but long lines of bodies still littered the beach waiting to be identified by a watch, a scar, a handkerchief.

The rising dawn revealed the extent of the damage as debris glittered on the waves. The mostly illiterate villagers did not need to read the ship's manifest to know that this was the wreck of the *Roebuck*, a clipper built, maintained and manned by the menfolk of this community.

That morning, crewmen left their fishnets ashore and rushed to pull survivors from the water. But as they neared the site of the wreck, they realized how futile their actions were. Every sailor they pulled from the water was mutilated beyond redemption. This was not the work of eager fishes; each body was riddled with knife marks. It was clear that something terrible had happened in the *Roebuck's* last hours.

As they bowed their heads in prayer for the dead, they heard a strangled cry. Two children drifted by, lashed to buoyant planks. Next to them was the body of an unrecognized sailor. He too lay limply on a plank, too exhausted by mere survival to speak. His savior pulled them into his dinghy, tossing a tarp over their shivering forms.

"It's alright, sonny, you'll be ashore soon," one of the fishermen cooed as he rushed back to shore.

The townsfolk deposited the stranger in the care of the fishwife Emma. She had lost both her brother and her husband in the storm; they dumped the half-dead sailor by her hearth to distract her from collapsing in sorrow.

The stranger was too heavy to move, so Emma wrapped him in blankets from her trousseau. She draped a cloth around his icy feet and tucked a pillow under his head, then waited for him to stir.

\*\*\*

Emma watched as the stranger thrashed about in fever dream. She clucked her tongue in sympathy as he continued to fight the seas in his sleep. Occasionally, she would lift his head and encourage him to drink a sip of broth or ale, but his mind remained lost to the waves.

When she heard him drift into consciousness, she rearranged the blankets around him and squeezed his hand in comfort.

"How are you feeling?" she asked calmly.

"Terrible," he groaned, clearing his throat. "Where am I?"

"You washed ashore last night," she explained, "along with victims of the Roebuck."

"The ship foundered," he explained.

"Yes. But you aren't a sailor from the Roebuck," she declared, "You're not from this town."

"They picked me up from the sea. . ." he said carefully.

"Shipwrecked twice?" she inferred.

He nodded. "I am unlucky, as it seems."

"The sea does not like you," she gave a sympathetic smile.

"She is a harsh mistress," he agreed.

"She is," Emma sighed. "She took the life of my brother and husband last night."

"Were they aboard the Roebuck?" he asked, wincing.

"Yes," she sniffled back a sob.

"I'm sorry to hear," he said carefully, clearing his throat again.

"Would you like me to fetch something for you?"

"A bit of water, please," he admitted, "to get the salt out of my throat."

She helped him raise his head enough to drink a few deep sips of water.

"Mmmm, thank you," he murmured, resting against his elbows in a semi-reclined position.

"I'll fetch you some broth as soon as you're able to take it," she offered.

"Thank you," he admitted, and they both stared at each other in silence for a while.

"Call if you need me. My name is Emma, by the way."

"My name is Zimt."

"Zimt?" she asked, her curiosity piqued by the unusual name. She would have pressed him further, but sleep reclaimed him.

\*\*\*

As he slept, he moved and kicked off his covers. An edge of a dark fin spilled out of the blankets.

At first Emma did not understand what she was seeing. Reaching down, she dared to touch the ankle-like joint that poked out of the covers, and reveled in the shark-skin texture. The fin ended in a delicate design of membranes and spines that glimmered in the glow of the hearth.

Emboldened by her discovery, she lifted the cover to reveal the extent of the man's form. She gasped as she saw that the man's lower half had fused into one long tail. The legs that the sailor had when her neighbors had rescued him had disappeared; now he was covered in scales that disappeared at the natural line of the man's waist.

Rising, she walked to the strongbox above the mantle and cracked it open just enough to slip her fingers inside. She recognized its contents by touch and shuddered in realization.

"Zimt," she repeated in wonder, quickly covering his lower limbs more securely in embarrassment of her boldness.

That night, she formed a plan.

\*\*\*

Emma watched as her guest's eyes snapped open in panic.

"How are you feeling, Zimt?" she asked, placing a hand to his forehead to check for fever. Gasping, she declared, "You're chilled!"

"I'm feeling better," he asserted grouchily, waving her hand away.

Emma took a deep breath, steeling herself for the confrontation.

"I have something for you," Emma began, holding the strongbox in her hands.

"Oh?" Zimt prompted, but then began to cough.

"But first. . .more water," she reacted, her maternal instincts overriding her courage. She fled to the well to fetch a new pail of water.

Several minutes later, she returned with a pitcher of water, as well as bread and cheese from the pantry. She was unsure what mermen ate but reckoned he would need some sustenance soon.

She knelt beside him and helped him prop himself up with a pillow. After a few moments and adjustments, he was sitting upright for the first time since he entered her home. She waited for him to drink as much water as he wanted, but grimaced as he once again refused any food.

Finally, Zimt had his fill and lay propped against the hearthstone.

"Thank you," he nodded his head in gratitude.

"You're welcome. Now, as I said before: I have something for you." She took a deep breath and set the strongbox between them. It opened against him, shielding his eyes from the contents within.

"I have a necklace." She placed a pearl-drop pendant in his hand. They were lifeless, cold, deep colored pearls—but by his expression, she gauged that he recognized them.

Emma took a deep breath and confessed, "Some time ago, my brother and his friends caught a silver-haired mermaid in their nets. This belonged to her—but they gave it to me as a present."

Zimt ground his teeth in anger.

She continued, "They put her on display in the town square. Hung her by the tail from the big bronze horseman of one of our old kings. Trussed up with nets and ropes. By that point she had been out of the water for five days. She had little strength, but she had the energy to call one name: yours."

"I live in a fishing village. We fish for food. Every day, I kill and gut fish for my own stomach and for selling in the marketplace. But I never kill for sport. And the treatment she endured: strung up, flopping about as they jabbed her with spikes to watch her squirm. It wasn't for food. It was for sport."

She sighed. "I saw how she was treated, and I didn't like it. But I couldn't do anything to stop it. So I watched and prayed for the poor innocent creature to die. But she never did. Not for days and days.

"I can't imagine why my brother would treat a living creature like that. Why anyone would. She was innocent and they tortured the life out of her."

He stared at her in silence.

She wiped a tear from her face and withdrew the other object from the strongbox: a mangled and desiccated strip of jerky. She offered it a kiss in reverence before passing it to her guest.

"This was her fin. Or part of her. This was before she was chopped up and sold for fairy cures. One of the men poked into the net with one of his pole hooks and something ripped. This fell out." She sobbed. "It matches yours." She ripped the blanket off, revealing the fins at Zimt's waist.

The merman continued to stare at her, nonplussed by her confession. "Well?" he prompted, clutching the necklace and relic in his fist as he seethed in anger

"I believe that you avenged her. And I'm sad and I'm horrified by it—but then I saw how you and they are different. They took an innocent life. You let the children go and led them to safety to shore. You brought the dead back home so that we could have the last goodbye that they have denied you."

"What do you want me to say?" he replied. "How should I respond to that accusation?"

"Don't," she said, placing a hand on his caudal fin. "I am sad for losing my brother, but I understand. You have lost, too." She sighed. "I will help you get back to sea but I ask you..." she faltered.

"Well?"

"Take me with you. I know that merfolk can walk about on land in human form—you came to me in legs and now your fins are showing. And I know that humans can become elves—I know it! I know the stories! Please take me with you, I don't want to be another fisherman's wife."

He let out a deep breath. "You don't know what you're asking."

"I do. Please, any life will be better than this."

"You saw what they did to my mate. If they catch you, human born or not, you'll suffer the same." Emma paled but held her ground. "I don't care. Please?"

"They pulled her out of the sea and did terrible, horrible things to her. When they were done, they nailed her to the bowsprit and made her a living figurehead. For days, she dangled over the water that she needed to keep her alive but couldn't reach. She baked in the sun and wind and writhed against the nails in her flesh that kept her in torment. Even two years later, part of her tail was still attached."

She gasped in horror.

"Do you think you'll fare any better?" he sneered.

"I can't stay here. I just can't," she confessed, falling against his shoulder in sobs. "Please! I hate it here. I can't be a fisherman's wife again. The weeks, the months, waiting for my husband to come back. If he comes back. Or if he's in another port with another lass. I cannot stand it. I just can't bear to handle it. Please! Please take me away from this life."

Zimt pulled her close, grazing his lips against her neck as she wept.

"Please," she begged, "We are widowed both. We have both lost. But we can be reborn! Kiss me and take me with you. We can mourn beneath the waves together. I would be a good wife. Please! I know that a merman's kiss is magic! You can take me away from this! Please!" she wept, clutching his chest and kissing it. "Please, take me away from the cruelty of this place."

The merman felt the woman's thundering pulse beneath his mouth and bit down. She gasped in pain but did not struggle while he slaked his thirst with her blood.

Soon she fell against him in a faint, weakened from blood loss. Zimt untangled himself from her, letting her fall to the floor with a thump.

She watched as he rose on human legs. She tried to raise her arms to him as he walked away, but she was too weak.

He threw the blankets over her shivering her form while she went into shock. "Wh..." she began, but could not finish her words through her chattering teeth.

She watched as he tottered around the cottage on unsteady legs as he searched for weapons and clothing. He quickly rifled through her husband's cedar chest and dressed himself as best he could with limbs still trembling from the aftereffects of transformation.

He next went to the kitchen and gathered every knife he could find. He spent a few minutes testing each blade against his fingertips, judging their sharpness and strength. He used a belt to secure the weapons to his waist. As he walked to the door, his eyes caught a glimpse of the pole hook balancing next to the hearth and gave a wicked smile.

"T...take me...with you," she struggled. "The merman's kiss...I will transform... we can be...together..."

Zimt shook his head. He bent down to arrange the woman's limbs more comfortably and covered her in the blankets. Wiping the blood from his lips, he used his bloody fingertips to trace the confused expression on the woman's brow.

"No, Emma," the merman replied. "I needed your blood to regain human form. It lasts a few hours. But it never lasts long enough."

"But..." she struggled, "Merman...kiss..."

"That was no merman's kiss, sweet hostess," he smiled. "That was merely a transfer of power. You see, my work is not yet done. I have avenged the *Roebuck*, but not the town that created her. The townsmen who hung my mate in the town square and tormented her while she begged for mercy—they still live. For now. But not for long. Everyone must pay. Everyone must die."

"No!" she gasped in pain, vainly trying to grasp his ankle to stop the merman from leaving. Her fingers pawed weakly at his scaled feet.

In a fit of anger, the merman kicked her hand away, but as she cried out in pain, he softened. He bent down to kiss the bridge of Emma's nose. Putting down the pole hook, he ripped his sleeve to create a bandage and press it against her neck to staunch the bleeding. "Don't worry, my sweet," he said, "you can't die yet. I might need you again. Vengeance is tiring work."

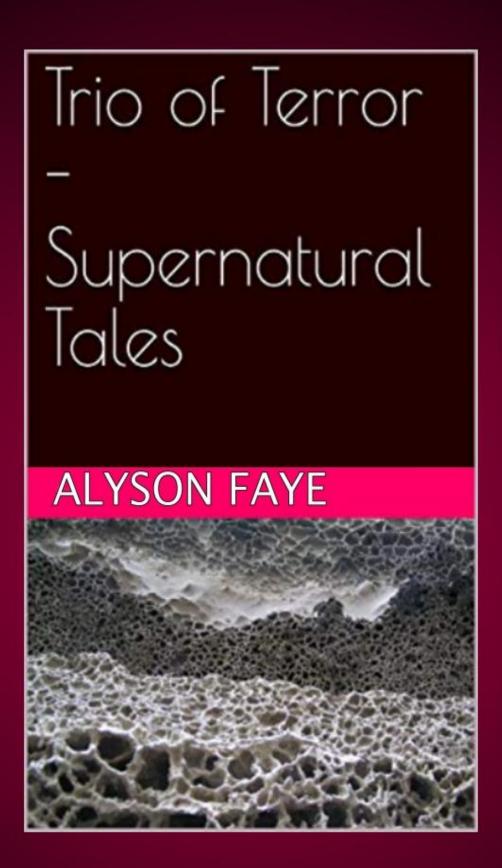
She shuddered, turning her face away from him in horror.

"Don't worry. I keep my vows. I promise I will come back for you when I am done. If you are still alive when I return, I will take you to the sea with me and make you a mermaid. Replace the one I've lost. And then we can be together. As you have asked."

With a malicious grin, he grabbed the pole hook from beside her and headed towards the door. Emma shuddered as she watched him go, unsure if she wanted to live long enough to see him come back.

#### **About the Author:**

KA Masters is a fantasy writer who specializes in twisted fairy tales and historic fiction. She invites you to read her novel, *The Morning Tree* and "The Bronze Horse's Ear," published in The Sirens Call Issue #40.



Available on Amazon.com and Amazon.uk

# The Joy in Fire | Claire Loader

There is a joy in fire, a primitive calling, slinking out from dancing tendrils, of where we are from, or perhaps, where we are going. I sat watching it, mesmerized, the red shafts racing upwards, the smoke filtering out into the sky to hover over the crumbling building, as if the Devil himself had come to see the spectacle. I would have to face him soon enough, but for now I took my time, allowing the screams to surround my soul as I bathed in their sweet embrace.

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"How much for this one?"
"Thirty."
"Do you even know what you are selling? Look at her legs...her face... Twenty."
"Twenty-five."
"Done."
```

It had been the most exquisite thing, watching the first flame spark, watching it like a baby, growing slowly at first and then faster and faster. It had bloomed like a summer garden, its fingers catching at the windows, caressing the slender beams, racing to surround the outer walls before it sought those trapped within. It raged then like a furious beast, and I stood there unmoving, a silhouette against its beauty, relishing each crackle, each burst.

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"Cry like that and I will hit you harder."
"I'm sorry."
"Did you just speak to me?"
"No. No, please."
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It would be wrong to say they all deserved to die this way, there were some of them who deserved far worse. There were some that even flame recoiled at the touch. Though the fire valiantly did its duty, the astringent smell of burning flesh a testament to its veracity.

I had often wondered how their death would smell. I had no trouble seeing it, my mind easily conjuring all the ways it would play out. But to smell it. To taste it. These were pleasures no dream could proffer up.

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"What are we going to do with her now?"
"She's still good for the fields."
"Soon she won't be fit for anything."
"We can beat it out of her...or I know another way."
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The others would be coming, but in this moment it didn't matter. Time is a fickle lord, but it bowed now at my feet – allowing me to savor the heat, the emanating glow, the joy that seeped into my very pores and soothed the hate that abided there. I felt a sudden heaviness, a weariness only born from being sated, from finally seeing the sparks of revenge dance before my eyes.

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"She won't stop bleeding."
"Did you get it out?"
"It's here. A boy."
"Never mind that! Just get rid of it!"
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The blaze reminded me of my youth – a home that resided in the depths of memory, blurry but warm, a hint of happiness long since forgotten. The sparks were easing now, setting themselves to cowl about the dying embers, like dogs after the hunt – bellies full, bodies resigned. And I lay myself before the smoking remains, my own body now an offering. For if they didn't finish me after this, the Devil surely would.

# Alone | Claire Loader

We all die alone in those final moments, the inevitable meeting with our maker. Stand alone on the precipice, the great Hall of the Two Truths, waiting to be judged.

I could feel my heart slowing, could see in my mind the flesh straining, the muscles struggling to contract. Did it look unworthy? Was that the crushing feeling now deep within my chest? The scales creaking lower in the direction of my fate.

I coughed. A strong metallic burst of blood coating my gums, my teeth. Alone.

I'd been alone my whole life. Alone in my suffering, in the hatred that was born of it. The results of which lay now around me. I looked to my left, my head slowly sliding to the side as I scanned the bodies. Their limp forms like rocks, strewn. I preferred to die this way, death was good company. No crying, no screams — only the peace of lips gone cold, silent flesh, a momentary shield to worms.

I could feel the walls of the world start to close in, darkness creeping into the corners of my vision, my heart barely a whisper. Yet I was resolved. There was no fear. I had judged myself worthy of taking things into my own hands, of making the end I had dreamed. I had held control in my final moments, as metal met their flesh, and then finally my own.

I was resolved.

I did not fear the judgement of the gods. In all things we are alone, as it would be when I met with the abyss.

## **About the Author:**

Claire Loader was born in New Zealand and spent several years in China before moving to County Galway, Ireland, where she now lives with her family. A photographer and writer, her work has appeared in various publications, including *The Sirens Call, Massacre Magazine, Three Drops From a Cauldron* and *The Ginger Collect*.

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#### Father's Day | Mathias Jansson

The tombstone old and broken tells a horrifying story about necromancy of grief and sorrow

A loss of a young daughter the despair of a father doing anything to climb the stairs to Heaven to bring her back to life a dark pact with evil leading straight down to Hell

I thought he would spend an eternity burning but it looks he is back the grave is wide open just right to Father's Day so where are you hiding my dear papa?

I have been a good girl and collected 1000 souls and 1000 pounding hearts to pay your debt to the dark underlord

So let's walk you and me hand in hand over the cemetery like two free demons released from the pains of Hell.

#### **About the Author:**

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines such 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: <u>Mathias Jansson, Art Critic & Poet</u> Facebook: <u>Mathias Jansson</u>

#### The Imitation of Death | Melissa R. Mendelson

The Town Hall was cramped. The pale faces of the board members reflected the pain and fear that we felt. Their tightly held hands gripped our hearts. Their closed mouths spoke a thousand words, and the clock on the wall thundered throughout the room. We needed our leaders, but they were as fragile as us. And they had no answers. We just waited for Death to walk through the closed doors, call out our numbers, and take us home for Death walked these streets too often now, and it was only a matter of time. And then, the doors flew open.

Harold Gate was a local hero. He was the high school football star, turned military warrior. Then, he returned home, helping the town as much as he could, and violence was at an all time low. The streets were safe, and we could all breathe a little easier. But then he suddenly disappeared. Nobody knew what happened to him, and he was gone for a long time. The man that walked into the Town Hall was definitely him, but it wasn't. It was like he had looked into the heart of darkness, and it had robbed him of his soul.

"I would like to speak." His voice was strong, but it carried an unsettling tone. "If that is okay," and he looked at the six board members sitting before him. "Can I speak to everyone here?"

"Yes, Mr. Gate," one board member said. "Please, speak."

Harold Gate turned his back on the board members and faced the room. "We all know what is happening outside our town. The violence. The shootings." I flinched. He noticed that. "The Hatred. Our President." He let that last statement linger for a moment. "We are prisoners in this wicked game, pawns forced to move along the jagged edge, hoping not to be knocked over, but how long will we play this game? Isn't it time for us to make our move, shake the world from its slumber before it becomes comatose? We need to be heard, or Death will come for us. There will be outrage. There will be tears. Then, there will be nothing until the next incident and the incident after that until there is nothing left, no one left to fight."

"What do you propose," another board member behind him asked.

"I need five volunteers. Five brave souls that will meet me in the center of town tomorrow morning at sunrise. No questions asked. Just be willing to do what is needed, so the world will finally hear you. Maybe then, all this chaos will stop. Who will meet me?"

I slowly raised my hand up into the air, ignoring the stares from my parents. Then slowly, four more hands followed. I expected Harold Gate to nod or smile, but he just stared at each one of us. Then, he walked out of the room.

"That's it," another board member said. "No information? Nothing? We need answers." "Yes," I said. "We do."

It was six o'clock when I got home with my parents. They did everything they could to talk me out of it. I was graduating high school this year. I had to pick a college. I had to figure out what future I wanted for myself, but my parents didn't get it. If the world continued on the path that it was on, then there was no future for me or for anyone else. We were speeding to our end, maybe even to war, and there were no detours. Something had to be done, and it had to be done now. So, my parents grounded me, sending me to my room after dinner, thinking that was going to stop me. They were wrong.

\*\*\*

It was a cold Wednesday morning. No rain. No snow. It was just cold, and I snuck out of the house, wearing jeans, a sweater and sneakers. I didn't know what else to wear. I didn't know what needed to be done. Would we be standing in the streets together, waving signs? Would we be marching and chanting, hoping to be heard? Would we go online to the social media, trying to wake the world up? I had no idea, and maybe this was just a joke. Harold Gate had disappeared a long time ago without a word, and all of sudden, he just shows up now. Where has he been, and why would he want to do this? Maybe, he even wouldn't be there, but he was.

Harold Gate waited in the center of town. He stood by the town's statue of its founder. He was dressed in a long sleeve top, jeans and sneakers. He didn't look like he was ready to protest. There were no signs painted or anything next to him. The only thing by his feet was a large, black duffel bag, and at first, there were only three of us that showed up. But the other two were just running late. Most of us were kids. There was only one older woman that was there, and when we were all present, Harold Gate reached into the duffel bag.

"What I am going to ask of all of you is going to be difficult." He didn't look at us. He just stared into the bag. "When we start, you must be devoted. From sunrise to sunset, we must continue. No food. No

water. No bathroom unless necessary. Are you all sure that you want to do this?" He still didn't look at us, and the tension tightened around us. "Speak now, or leave."

"Yes," we all said including me, and our voices trembled together.

"Okay," and Harold Gate reached into the bag. He pulled out six hideous masks. They almost looked like Halloween masks, and they reminded me of those Zombie movies. They were awful to look at it, and the mask that was placed into my hands didn't feel like rubber or plastic. It just gave me a weird vibe. "Put them on," Harold Gate said, and everyone did except for me. "You cannot speak. You cannot act. You can only walk, and each one of you will take to a different corner of town and walk up and down the streets continuously until sunset. Understand?"

"That's it," I asked. "What's the point of doing that?"

"If we are used to the dead, then let the dead be seen." Harold Gate then waited for me to put on the mask. "We will not meet here at sunset. You will go home. You will go to your bedroom, and then you will take off the mask. You will not speak of today after that. Do you understand?" He waited for all of us including me to nod. "Then, let's begin," and he put on his mask.

At first, I felt stupid, walking around, wearing this hideous thing on my head. I didn't even know when sunset was, and I didn't want to be near my home. I chose the street further away, and luckily, none of the others were there. I wondered where they went. One girl looked like she went to my high school. I wondered if I would see her later and then ask her about today, but right now, I just wandered up and down the streets. As I did, I no longer felt cold. I didn't feel hungry or thirsty. I figured that I would have to go to the bathroom sooner or later, but as time passed, I didn't. Even the mask didn't feel funny over my head anymore. It felt like it was part of me, and that bothered me. But this had to be done.

As the day crawled by, so did I. People came out of their homes and stared at me. Some women shrieked and ran away. Some men stood there, paling at the sight of me. There were a few, of course that had to grab their cell phones and record me moving slowly up and down the street. I guess the world would know that we were doing this, but wouldn't they ask why? Did they need to ask why?

I thought the day would never end, but the sun started to set. I realized that nobody came up to me to ask why I was doing this. Wouldn't they want to know who was under the mask? Did the grotesque face really bother them that much? I hope I didn't scare my parents, but luckily, they weren't home when I got in. And I hurried upstairs to my bedroom.

I closed the bedroom door behind me and turned on the lights. I was going to close the window when I caught my reflection in the mirror near the closet. A scream rose up into my throat, but it was me. It was just me wearing a mask, and I stepped closer, staring at the hideous face looking back at me. It was like it was really looking at me, and I dug my fingers underneath the mask. But it wouldn't come off, and then I started to scream.

Suddenly, the mask pulled away from my flesh. It hurt. It really hurt, but I continued trying to get it off me. And just as it finally pulled away from my head, a cold breeze filled the room.

I spun around and came face to face with me. It was me still wearing the mask, and then I realized that the awful mask was no longer in my hands. It was gone, and the other me stepped closer. She let out this scream, nearly knocking me to my knees, and then she fell through the floor, disappearing but still screaming. And I was so cold. I slowly turned back toward the mirror and stared at my reflection. I didn't see me. All I saw was an empty shell, an echo that would haunt this world.

#### **About the Author:**

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction Author published by Sirens Call Publications and Dark Helix Press. Her short stories are also on Tall Tale TV, and she is writing a novel based on her short story, Porcelain.

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## Piranha | Roger Ley

The piranha grinned at him through the window of the thrift store. Yellowish-green, shiny, about six inches long, teeth projecting forward from the jaw bones, the personification of evil mounted on a simple rectangular wooden stand.

On a whim, he went in, paid the couple of dollars, and took it home. His wife had died a couple of years before, he didn't have to explain his idiosyncratic purchases to anyone anymore. It was she who had insisted on browsing the goodwill shops and thrift stores in the area, and it was a habit he continued: it helped to fill his time. He had a small area of his backyard populated with quirky and unlikely items. Lizards made from coke cans and wire, small ugly sculptures, old bottles he'd dug up, strange and grotesque artefacts, all from the thrift stores. He called it the 'Garden of Earthly Delights'. His new acquisition was definitely going to be displayed on the bookshelves in his den though.

Arriving home, he placed the piranha on the kitchen table, made coffee, and while it brewed, he sat and studied the fish through his reading glasses.

"What a handsome fellow you are," he said. The fish grinned back at him as if it knew something he didn't, something funny.

Years before, when he first retired, he'd dug a large pond in his backyard in an attempt to lose some weight and get fit after years spent in a sedentary office job, it had taken weeks. After he had lined and filled it, his wife populated it with various aquatic plants and different types of goldfish. He'd always thought the fish fussy and boring, so he wasn't too worried when the local herons made off with them.

He did some research on the internet and found that he could purchase live piranhas quite easily. There was a small cold-water variety that lived in the upper reaches of the rivers of the Andes: they would be able to survive the winters here.

He bought half a dozen tiny juveniles and nursed them in an aquarium. After a few months he felt they were big enough to be released into the pond. The results were predictable, slowly but surely the goldfish population declined and, after about a year, had disappeared.. As for the piranhas, they grinned quietly to themselves and went about their business like the good little psychopaths they were, gliding through the shadowy depths or swimming just under the surface, their dorsal fins leaving circular punctuations as they broke through the sticky surface tension. They were happy, they were comfortable, and so they began to breed.

He fed them – they liked anything meaty: dog food, cat food, scraps from the butcher. For such aggressive creatures, they were remarkably respectful of each other at feeding time, each waiting their turn. He loved to see them motoring across towards him from all parts of the pond, when he made his regular afternoon visit with meaty treats and the occasional chicken carcass.

He showed them to his infrequent visitors, warning them not to put their hands in the water. Each fish would only tear off a small bite, he explained, but it was the thought of the accumulated effect that was so horrifying.

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It was the mailman who noticed the accumulation in the mailbox. As a church goer he felt a duty towards his older customers, especially those who lived alone, so after two weeks he rang social services. A social worker came to the house but couldn't get an answer either at the front or the back, so she rang the police, and it was they who tipped off a reporter.

'Skeleton found in pond' read the headline in the local paper.

'Several police officers suffered injuries to their hands and arms while recovering the skeleton of a recently deceased resident from a pond in his backyard. The skeleton is believed to be that of Mr Martin Riley (69) of 14 Church Road, Bruisyard. The authorities have been unable to determine a cause of death.

"There was a complete lack of soft tissue," said police pathologist Dr Erin Matthews. "The victim may have suffered a stroke, a heart attack or simply tripped and fallen into his pond. We'll probably never know."

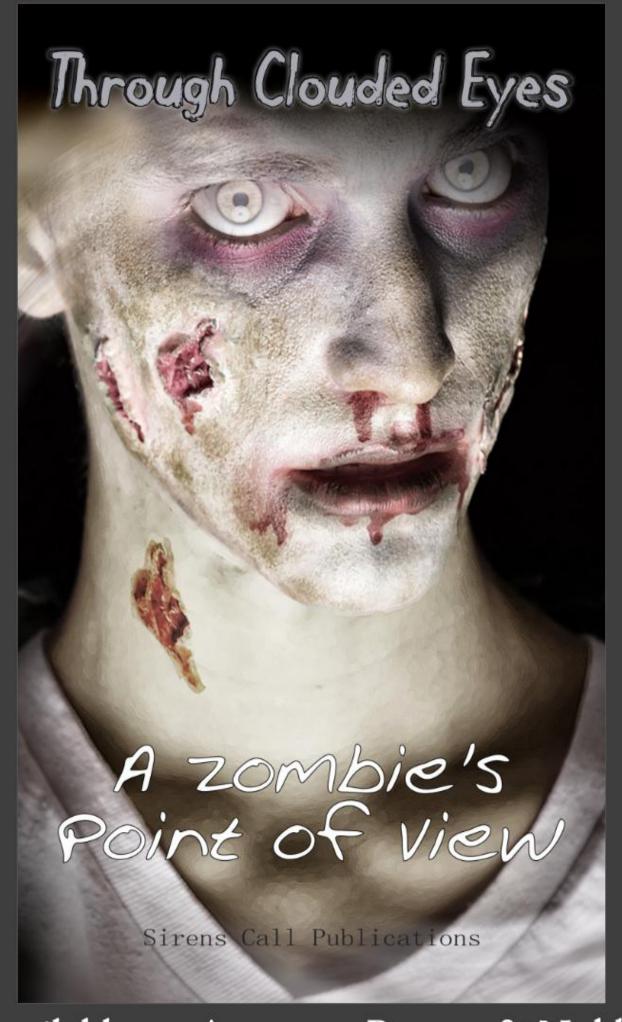
The paper declined to report the facemask and snorkel, chewed and damaged but still loosely attached to the skull, nor the empty pint bourbon bottle at the side of the pond. It would be too macabre for the *Rocksprings County Inquirer's* readership.

And the piranhas? They grinned their grins and swam their swims. They were used to waiting and there were always the visits of the herons to look forward to, or maybe something larger.

#### About the Author:

Roger Ley was born and educated in London and spent some of his formative years in Saudi Arabia. He worked as an engineer in the oilfields of North Africa and the North Sea, before joining the nuclear industry and later pursuing a career in higher education. This year his stories have been broadcast, podcast and published in about twenty ezines.

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#### Beggar's Curse | Alexis Child

He managed to sneak in somehow through the restaurant door. The resident filthy beggar, I assumed. A gaunt, ragged scarecrow of a man, tattered clothes hanging loose as the skin on his face. He smelled of old sweat, booze and broken dreams. Coughing and spitting, his mouth was coated in a black substance as if he'd swallowed tar or something alive that wanted out.

Dirty hands a tangled mess of bones and veins desperately reached out as if controlled by one thought: to keep himself alive. The beggar leaned over to spit in my spaghetti, knowing I'd lose my appetite and give him my food. But that wasn't what he was after. There was something he wanted me to have: a taste of fear. Venom dripped from his cruel eyes, darkening in anger.

Deathly wounded, they had seen too much and wanted me to see the truth in myself. His eyes searched for my soul, burning into me, searing my flesh, scraping against my heart. Bolting for the door, I ran as much from him as from myself. Those evil eyes would follow me into darkness until the sacrifice was understood: he would soothe my hidden scars by offering his own.

## Blade of Desecration | Alexis Child

Emerging from his blackout, he shudders to think how low he has sunk, vicious like an animal from the start, through a course of wrong and sin. He envisions hovering above his own funeral, to understand how it came to this: too dead to die, too numb to feel remorse's scorpion sting. Secrets and shadows curl about his eyes like snakes in desert caves coiling through the dark. The blood bell chimes, birthing the future in lurid colors of carnage.

Cut-throat thoughts, villainous dreams, romance death of darkest red. To accomplish murder most intimate, sacred symbols are engraved into the blade's inner edge, and carved into victims flesh — an act of pagan worship; blood of innocents spilled, angry gods appeased. Carrying on the legacy in songs of steel, he grows more proficient and bold, careless in the kill. Trail of bones at an end, before the bloody gods he bows, a tumultuous storm lashes the seething sky, lightning's skeletal fingers rise triumphant, bidding him farewell.

#### Dead Silence | Alexis Child

Since you said
"Get a tougher skin!"
I no longer feel anything
Guaranteed pain killer

These skin clothes Stitched and stretched From head to toe Lady's flesh suit

Fits snug as a glove Ed Gein-like I beat my flesh drum Howling in the moonlight

As newlydeads
We lay entwined
Spiraling in darkness
Your voice trapped inside

Where you can't tear me apart Holding your tongue There are 'thinks' You cannot say

## Corpse Grinder | Alexis Child

Memories chase after him like a murderer's glove, bruised and bloodied. Fugitive thoughts are night-time shadows springing from an abnormal mind, the wrong shade of red. Scarcely remembered are the others, like a child standing with its face pressed, distorted against glass.

Darkness closes in as a ravenous crow, sadistic urges a devouring flesh. Emotionless eyes laugh coldly, "Either way they die." Driving down the long highway, he hunts for prey like the hawks he holds in high esteem, bleeding offerings to the broken moonlight, nothing less than the blatant face of death embracing itself.

#### **About the Author:**

Alexis Child hails from Toronto, where horror in its purest form is a calculated crime against both the aspirations of the soul and affections of the heart. Her fiction and poetry have been featured in numerous online and print publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—DEVIL IN THE CLOCK—is available on Amazon.

Website: <u>angelfire.com</u> Facebook: <u>Alexis Child</u>

## The Lost Puppy | Evan Baughfman

Every Saturday Alex and Frankie visited the local arcade. The friends spent entire allowances attempting to secure spots on the leaderboard of their favorite game, *Mansion of the Undead 6*.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

The video game gun would roar for hours as the boys mowed down zombies in hungry waves.

One afternoon, Frankie had been the first to run out of quarters. He stood behind Alex and barked, "There! Behind that door!"

"Yeah, I see it!" Alex rolled his eyes.

"Then, why'd you miss? Hurry! Reload, or it's gonna—"

Too late.

The screen gloated, GAME OVER!

"Oh, c'mon!"

"How'd you miss?" cried Frankie. "I'm gonna start calling you 'Game Over', you're used to seeing it so much!"

"Says the guy who used up all his money an hour ago!"

"Let's get outta here," Frankie grumbled. "Wanna watch a movie back at my place?"

"Nothing scary," said Alex.

"Why not?"

"Scary's getting old, don't you think?"

Frankie snorted. "Wimp."

In the alley behind the arcade, the boys came across a puppy digging through an overturned trashcan. The animal looked like a filthy mop head with legs.

"Don't get so close to it," Alex warned. "It might have rabies."

Frankie waved off his pal. "Rabies, schmabies." He barked at the little dog and laughed when the puppy yelped with fright. "Come here, you mutt. Lemme see your collar."

"Be careful. It seems upset."

"Yeah, a real pit bull, this one." Frankie pulled the puppy close. He scratched it behind the ears and examined the red collar around its neck. "It says it lives at '13 Dark Place'."

Alex gulped. "But isn't that ...?"

"Yeah. The big, old house on the hill."

"The big, old abandoned house that no one ever goes to, even on Halloween?"

Frankie chuckled. "Not so abandoned, after all. Just think: if we return this puppy, we can get a reward."

"That means we can go back to the arcade instead of—"

"Exactly what I was thinking, Game Over."

Soon, the boys arrived at the house on the hill, and it looked as decrepit as ever. Peeling paint. Broken windows. An overgrown, yellow lawn. Nobody actually lived inside, did they?

The puppy yipped in Frankie's grasp. Seemed like the dog recognized the dump.

"We really doing this?"

Frankie pushed Alex forward. "We've come this far."

"I don't know. Feels like we've seen this kinda movie tons of times. Haven't we?"

Frankie sighed. "Fine. You stay here, and I'll take all the reward money for myself."

"C'mon! Really?" Alex reluctantly followed his friend up the uneven wooden steps. "This porch doesn't seem sturdy. We might fall through it."

"Calm down, will you?" Frankie knocked loudly on the front door.

The puppy wriggled in the crook of his arm.

The door slowly creaked open.

No one was there. Not even a ghost.

Well, maybe a ghost. It was too dark inside to tell.

"Hello? Anyone?" Frankie shouted. "We have your dog! You're welcome!"

"Oh, man. Maybe we should go, huh?"

Frankie sneered. "For real? 'Game Over' already?"

The puppy excitedly wagged its tail and barked at the dark.

Frankie growled, "Stop squirming!"

The puppy growled back.

"Now it's gonna bite you," said Alex.

"Shut up! No, it's not!" The puppy nipped at Frankie's hand. "Ow! Hey! You little...!"

He dropped the puppy. It scampered through the open door, disappearing inside the house.

"Can you believe it?" Frankie cried. "That furball bit me!"

"Told you."

"No, you didn't!" He shook the pain from his palm. "I've gotta tell the owner!"

"What? Why?"

"In case it has rabies! Right? If it does, I can sue, and you know what that means!"

"Yeah, I get it. More money."

"Well, then! C'mon!"

"Frankie! Wait!"

"No way. I want what's mine!"

The foolish boy entered the house's black maw.

Alex shook his head in disbelief. He cursed under his breath.

Then, he followed even more foolishly behind.

The boys found themselves inside a large living room. Some sunlight managed to shine through holes in tattered curtains. There was no furniture in sight. A thick layer of dust covered the ceiling, walls, and floor.

Alex said, "Yeah, this isn't suspicious at all."

Frankie sniffed. "You smell that? What is it?"

Alex sniffed the air, too, but he only succeeded in pulling dust into his nasal passages. "Ah...ah...ah-choo! Excuse me."

"Sneeze all you want. Maybe it'll get someone's attention. Helloooooo! We brought your dumb dog back to you! Give us our money, or we're gonna sue!"

"Where'd the puppy go?"

Frankie noticed something on the dusty wooden floor. "Follow the paw prints. They go upstairs."

"C'mon, man! We aren't really going up there, are we?"

"What're you afraid of? There's no dude in a hockey mask. No burned up freak with knives for fingers.

Just Mr. Moneybags trying to hide from us. Trying to get outta giving us what we earned."

"Let's leave before we get in some kinda trouble!"

"Look, Game Over, I know you're used to having your adventures end early, so go if you gotta. But I want what I came for!"

"Frankie! Wait! Don't!"

But Frankie didn't wait. The foolish boy climbed the rickety staircase.

And Alex followed even more foolishly behind.

Each of the boys' steps coincided with creaks beneath their feet.

On the house's second floor, the boys stood in a hallway free of decoration. Only cobwebs clung to the walls.

Alex fully expected a moaning zombie to appear and break the eerie silence. An arcade game gun might have slowed the tremble in the boy's hands.

Frankie said, "The tracks lead into that room." Its door was ajar.

"Oh, jeez! Let's just go home!"

"After we get that cash."

Alex gripped Frankie's shoulder, stopping him from taking another step. "Why can't we hear the puppy anymore? Do you think something happened to it?"

Frankie tore himself away from Alex's sweaty clasp. "Its master just put a muzzle on it or something." "This is so stupid!"

That was one word for it. Frankie pushed open the door and foolishly entered the shadowy room.

Of course, Alex followed even more foolishly behind.

Immediately, the friends were hit with a thick wave of humidity. They coughed and choked on the air.

Dizzy, they bumped into the walls. Into each other.

Alex gasped, "Where's...the...door...?"

It was gone. Vanished. An impenetrable wall now stood where the door used to be.

Alex was near tears. "We're...trapped...!"

"No." Frankie ran his fingers over every inch of the room. "Gotta...be...a...way...out..."

Both boys pounded on the walls with their fists. Their cries for help were practically held to whispers.

A pale green glow rose from the darkness.

"Alex...look..."

Both boys shambled toward the light. It emanated from a putrid, steaming cauldron. The glow drew them in. Closer. Closer...

Frankie mumbled, "Can't...turn...away..."

Alex slowly nodded. "Me...neither..."

Frankie said, "It's...kinda...beautiful..."

Alex agreed, noticing that whatever bubbled inside the pot smelled like...like...

Something shiny bobbed on the surface.

Alex finally squeaked, "Smells...like...wet...dog..."

Was that the puppy's collar floating in the middle of the soup?

Heavy footsteps thundered their way.

"Oh...no..."

A hulking figure leapt into view.

The boys shrieked.

It was Santa Claus, clutching a bloody ax. "Ho, ho, ho! Time for dinner!"

He grinned sharp teeth from within a beard that was speckled red. His trademark suit was splotched with dark stains. His eyes burned with a wicked fire.

The jolly, fat man chuckled. "My favorite! Puppy and lost little boy stew!"

The boys' brains screamed at them to run, run, run!

But their legs wouldn't respond. They were frozen under some kind of spell.

There was nowhere to go, anyhow.

Santa circled them like a shark. "Children always fall for my trick! All I have to do is put a collar on a random stray dog, and some kids always bring it back, thinking it's the 'right' thing to do!"

Frankie asked, "Don't...you...live...in...the...North...Pole...?"

Santa tapped a couple of his sausage fingers against the ax blade. His nails had been sharpened to knifepoints. "I have homes all around the world, snatching children as I see fit. Doesn't matter if you're 'naughty' or 'nice'. You all taste great when I add a little spice!"

Alex shivered. "Why're...you...doing...this...?"

"Where do you think I get all my great toy ideas from? The scrumptious brains of creative boys and girls, that's where! Although, I don't know what you two have inside your heads for me. Is it merely useless mush, spoiled by those rotten video games? I guess I'll find out soon enough!"

Alex pleaded for mercy. Frankie wept for his mother.

The monstrous man smiled. "Ho, ho, no! Mommy's not saving you this time! Sorry, but I'm hungry!" Alex and Frankie whimpered like helpless puppies.

Soon, the boys made no more noise.

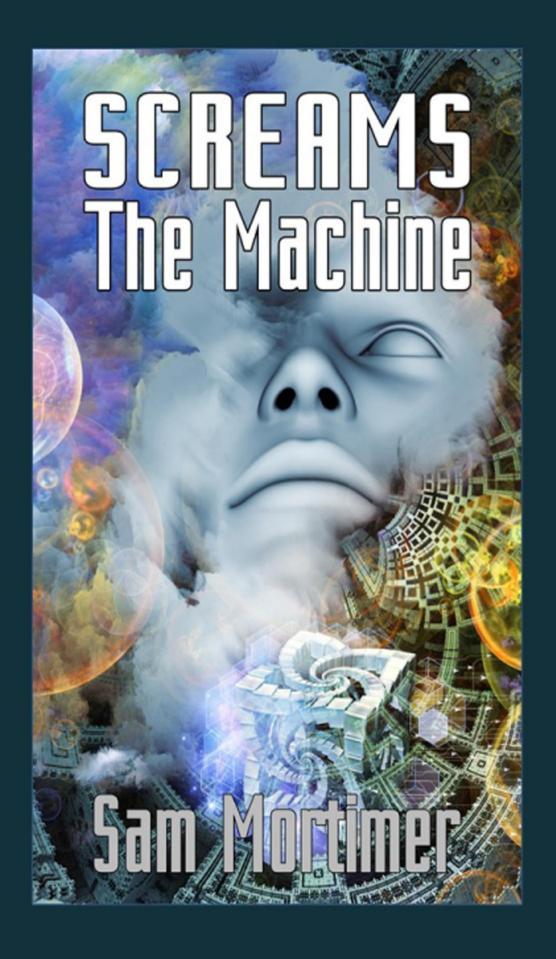
GAME OVER!

Santa chopped them into itty-bitty pieces and dropped them into his terrible stew.

# **About the Author:**

Evan Baughfman's plays have been produced throughout the U.S. *Taste of Amontillado* (adaptation of *The Cask of Amontillado*) is available through Heuer Publishing. Additionally, Evan's authored story collection, *Twisted Tales from Edgar Allan Poe Middle School*. Many of those tales have been adapted into screenplays, of which "The Emaciated Man," "The Tell-Tale Art," and "A Perfect Circle" have won awards at various horror film festivals.

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

## The Mortician's Angst | Nina D'Arcangela

There was an audible twang. Turning back, he wrinkled his brow in disgust. Four! Four perfectly placed stitches had torn loose so far. He was baffled and more than a bit annoyed. Peering at the remainder of the skein, he examined it for defects; it looked perfectly fine. He wrapped a short length around his fingers and gave a hard tug. He received nothing but resistance for his effort. A bit perplexed, his fingers slipped between her lips to remove the defective stitch; he inspected it thoroughly with a loop before discarding it with the others.

Making his way to the old apothecary cabinet his grandfather had used many years ago, he opened each draw until he finally found what he was looking for – catgut. Sometimes the old-fashioned way was the only way. Threading the much thicker needle with the coarse sinew, he finished the sutures. He stood and stared in consternation for a good ten minutes willing them to stay fast yet daring them to break free. Finally satisfied, he turned to reach for the clay and began the final stages of reconstruction.

Two hours later, after finishing the cosmetic details, he gazed down upon the face he had just rebuilt and was pleased with his efforts. He'd done a fine job of reconstructing her crushed bones and concealing the bruised tissue. She looked peaceful, almost angelic, but the sedative would soon wear off. After a brief wait, a slight murmur reached his ears; one eye began to tear open. As his grandfather used to say, 'death was just around the corner, one should always be prepared,' though he doubted his grandfather had meant it in quite the same manner.

With a deep sigh, he inserted a trocar into the femoral vein to drain the body, then moved to insert another into her brachial artery to introduce the chemical mixture. The art of embalming was one so few had the opportunity to experience, to appreciate. Apparently, she was not in an appreciative mood.

#### **About the Author:**

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

Blog: <u>sotetangyal.wordpress.com</u> Twitter: <u>@Sotet\_Angyal</u>

# Back to the Abyss | W.D.C. Emke

I was alone, surrounded by impenetrable darkness.

It was like I was floating away in space, naked and afraid. There was no sensation. I couldn't remember anything that had happened before, but somehow I knew this was not where I was meant to be. Lost. Alone.

At first it was only a voice. My mother's. Typically calm and caring, now distorted between distant sobs. Heart wrenched away from her.

Then it was two.

Then four, as my father and siblings joined the chorus.

My sister just choked on her sobs, though.

Gradually the veil was lifted. The darkness skittering away, past the limits of my vision. And suddenly I was there, with my family as they stood around a man on a bed. A man without a face. And they only sobbed, utterances squeaking out as the tears came and went. Though, like the sea with the tide, they were always there.

I tried to console them. I tried my hardest, but they seemed to be too distraught to notice my efforts. Condolences falling on deaf ears. I couldn't help but wonder who it was they were mourning. The man without a face.

I kept trying, but realized that when I touched my mother's arm I felt nothing. Not the warmth of her skin. Not her body, rocking with each new wave of tear. My sister was wailing. And I could hear her, but she couldn't hear me when I said that everything will be alright.

And again I was alone.

The darkness creeping back into my vision, slowly blurring, distorting the image of my family.

The man on the bed is me.

I watched my family cry over me, for what felt like an eternity, until the darkness swallowed me up. And I went back into the abyss.

#### Dead End | Sonora Taylor

Darren saw his breath in the moonlight as he walked down the road. Branches sliced through the night sky, bare branches that wouldn't be visible save for the light of the moon. There were no street lamps, no homes with softly-lit porches. There were only trees, the moon, and a darkened road.

He cursed to himself as he walked. He should've asked that trucker to drop him off near Raleigh or Durham, somewhere closer to civilization. "I can take you as far as Leslie," the trucker had said with a drawl that Darren recognized as distinctly Carolinian, one that lingered on every vowel in every word. "That good by you?"

"Sure," Darren had said, grateful for any ride. He'd been stuck in Rocky Mount for hours. He'd gotten there from Richmond, which he'd gotten to from Spotsylvania, hitching the entire way. His truck wasn't working – it'd been a piece of shit even before the brake lines had been cut – and he was in too much of a hurry to wait for repairs. He had to get to wherever his girlfriend Polly had disappeared to.

It seemed, though, that Darren was doomed to disappear in Leslie, North Carolina. He regretted agreeing to the trucker's route the minute he'd driven away and left a dark, empty road behind him – one that Darren now had to walk along. Throughout his journey, he thought he heard more cars than actually appeared. The ghosts of rides he wouldn't take. The one sound that culminated into a car produced not a ride, but a slick speedster that drove right past his outstretched thumb. Darren dragged his feet, and wondered when the dark road would end.

Another phantom settled in his ears. Darren kept walking, knowing by now that no cars were coming.

The phantom honked. Darren turned and saw headlights coming near him. He jumped to the side, then gathered his senses as an honest-to-god pickup truck drove by him. "Wait!" he shouted, waving instead of sticking out his thumb. "Stop!"

The pickup slowed. Darren picked up speed. "Hold on!" he yelled, in case the driver decided to change his mind.

The pickup stopped. Darren skidded to a stop half a foot away, and pivoted so he wouldn't collide against the back. He ran to the passenger side and opened the door before the driver could leave. "You going to Raleigh?" he asked, his words coming out in gasps illumined by the cold moonlight.

"I could be," replied the woman in the driver's seat.

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Darren gasped as he sat down in the truck. The seat felt like ice. He looked down and saw that it was covered in plastic.

"Sorry about the seats," the woman said as she started up the truck. "I make beer deliveries, and the plastic keeps the beer off of them."

"The bottles don't do that?"

"Not when they break."

"Gotcha." The seat began to warm beneath his body. He leaned back and sighed, enjoying the warmth of the truck and his view of the driver. He could tell she was pretty even in the dark. She wore a baseball cap, and long blonde hair spilled from beneath of it, ending at her shoulders. It glowed white in the moonlight. Her breasts peeked out from behind her arms as she drove. They were small enough to fit in one's palm, but big enough to want to grasp them in the first place.

"So, you live in Raleigh?" the woman asked.

Darren tried not to sigh at his peace being disrupted. Women always had to end the magic by opening their mouths. "No," he said. "Just wanna stay there overnight."

"Why not drive?"

"Truck doesn't work."

"Did you leave it in Leslie?"

"No." Darren let slip a little impatience in the hopes she'd get the hint and stop speaking. Polly always talked too much. She talked so much that he could still hear her voice in his ears when he fell asleep.

The woman turned down a road that was somehow darker than the one Darren had been walking on. "This the way to Raleigh?" Darren asked.

"It's a shortcut," she replied.

"How do you get to the city through the woods?"

"Trust me. I've lived here my whole life."

"Well, I may not be from here, but I know the woods aren't where you go when you want to get to the city."

The woods cleared and Darren saw an illumined road, one with signs pointing to the highway.

"Well, with everything you know, maybe you should learn to trust your driver," the woman said.

Darren pressed his lips as she chuckled to herself. She was mouthy – and worse, she thought she was cute. Darren knew he could tell her otherwise, but he didn't want to be abandoned in the middle of the woods when he was so close to a city, close to a good motel and maybe a truck stop with a truck going all the way to South Carolina. He didn't know if Polly was there, but her parents were. It was a start, and the last thing he needed that night was a dead end.

"I'll trust you more when you get me to my destination," he said. Darren would be damned if he let the driver get the upper hand.

"I'll get you where you need to go. I always do."

"Always do? You run a bus service or something?"

"You're not my first hitchhiker, and you won't be my last."

"You sure you should be picking up hitchhikers?"

"You sure you should be hitchhiking?"

"I can take care of myself. But you ... well, all alone out here, I'd be worried about picking up strangers."

"Are you saying I should worry about you?"

"Of course not. I won't hurt you."

"Good to know."

Darren smiled at her, even though her eyes stayed forward. He wondered what color her eyes were. "You always this mouthy with hitchhikers?" he asked.

"You always ask drivers this many questions?"

"I do when they're beautiful women."

He saw her smile in the reflection of the windshield. While he stared at her reflection, her hand moved to his cock. Darren couldn't hide his gasp, even though he tried.

"You want me to pull over?" she asked.

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Luck shined on Darren the way the moonlight shone through the tree branches. The branches threw shadowed fragments over the seat of the car, moving like fingers in an orgy that reached towards their bodies. Darren barely noticed them as the driver stopped the truck in the woods. He unbuckled his belt and moved towards her. She had a mouth on her, but she was too cute to turn down. Polly could live another day without him.

The woman placed her hand on his chest. Darren wondered why she wanted to stop what she'd been so willing to start before. She unbuckled her belt and moved towards him. The plastic seat covers had one nice effect: they allowed her to slide towards him, let her slink to his side of the truck and pour over him as she straddled his lap. She took off her hat, then grabbed his and placed it on her head.

"What's your name?" she asked as she stroked his beard.

"Darren," he whispered. "What's yours?"

"Does it matter?"

"I mean, you asked mine -"

She kissed him hard and slid her tongue in his mouth. Darren closed his eyes and relished it. "What do you want?" she asked as she pulled away from him.

He grabbed her waist and pulled her closer. "I want to fuck you," he said.

"Tell me what you think of me," the driver whispered. She traced her lips across his neck as she spoke.

"I think you're hot," he croaked. Words became harder to say as his erection grew.

"You think I shouldn't have picked you up?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said I shouldn't be picking up strangers. You think I'm doing something stupid?"

Darren wasn't sure where this was going, but he wanted to make sure it didn't go to a place that left him with blue balls. "I don't think that anymore," he said as he ran his hands over her ass. It was firm and taut beneath his palms. He began to ache for her.

"You thought it before?"

"I never thought it. I was just looking out for you."

"Tell me what you thought before." She ran her tongue from his neck to his ear, and Darren groaned. "I want to hear it."

Darren wondered if this was some weird kink of hers. He'd play along if it meant getting laid. "I thought you didn't know where you were going," he said. "When we were in the woods and getting further from the road. I thought we'd hit a dead end."

"You thought I was stupid?"

"I thought you didn't know where to go. I thought you'd get us lost."

"What'd you think when I grabbed your cock?"

"I liked it." He moved his hand to between her thighs. She gasped a little, but with pleasure. It was so uninhibited, so unbridled. It turned him on even more. "It made me want to fuck you."

She unzipped her purse, likely looking for a condom. Darren glanced over, but before he could see, she began to nibble his earlobe. He closed his eyes and groaned.

"You liked that I wanted to fuck you?" she whispered.

"Oh, yeah."

"You liked that your driver ended up being a whore?"

"Yes." She seemed to want to hear it, and Darren would say anything to get his first good lay in weeks.

"Tell me that. Whisper it in my ear."

Darren leaned close to her ear and made sure his lips were wet before he spoke. He thought of Polly, who'd thought she could just run away when she was done with him. He thought of Polly cutting his brakes and riding on some bus to wherever she'd gone, thinking she was safe. He thought of what Polly's face would look like when he finally caught up with her and showed her that she couldn't live without him – he'd make sure of it.

"You're a fucking whore," he breathed.

His whisper became a yelp as she yanked back his hair. "What -"

Searing pain spread across his neck. Darren tried to scream, but his voice curdled in his throat. He touched his neck, and knew before he saw the blood all over his fingers that it had been cut.

He looked in horror at the driver. She smiled as she held a bloodied knife in her hand. The last thing he saw in the moonlight was her eyes. They were blue.

#### **About the Author:**

Sonora Taylor is the author of *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales, Please Give*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her next book, *Without Condition*, will be released February 12, 2019. She lives in Arlington, Virginia.

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# We Are All Alone When the Dark Comes | Donna L Greenwood

In the dark it clicked. She knew from the sound it wasn't human. There was something insect-like about the way it skittered across the floor. Sometimes it came so close to her she could smell it. It smelled like drains. Mostly it kept its distance and just scuttled around the blackest corners of the dark which surrounded her. She wasn't frightened because she could hear the people and their voices made her feel safe.

There was a chink of light in her dark world and this also brought her comfort. The creature hated the light, so the girl stayed within this small bar of brightness, listening to the voices, smiling when she heard laughter, crying when the mood turned sorrowful.

She was lying within her patch of light when the voices began talking once more. A woman (mummy) was crying "No, no, please, we need more time."

Then a voice, male and authoritative, "I'm sorry, Mrs Geddes, but Mary has been brain dead for eight days now. It is only the machine that is keeping her alive."

I am Mary, shouted the girl but blackness filled her mouth like treacle, I'm not dead. I'm just trapped in the dark. There was only one who could hear her scream and, from a shadowed corner, it began to stir.

"Mary, my Mary!" howled her mother.

And then all was silence.

"Mummy?" whispered the girl.

The light blinked out. Behind her the thing in the dark grew large; it began to clickety-clack towards her. The girl wiped away her tears and her face grew hard. She was alone and her mother couldn't help her. She straightened her back and turned to face her foe. The darkness was her territory now, and she would fight for it.

## The Last Laugh | Donna L Greenwood

The Devil is a fat man with no sense of humor. It is this observation that makes me dislike him intensely; I think a sense of fun is essential when dabbling with the satanic. We have an understanding, the Devil and I, if I walk on the left side of every street and avoid the cracks; if I wash my hands 35 times each morning and evening; if I check the locks on my doors fifteen times each day, then he will not drag my soul to Hell.

It's a tricky alliance but it's worked well so far. He makes no secret of the fact that he follows me. When I see him greasily loitering in alleyways or smoking putrid cigars outside coffee shops, he nods and smiles. But I am very wise. There will be no stepping on cracks or unwashed hands and I will not follow the Devil into Hell.

A pigeon is squatting in the road as I carefully tread a left-slanted path: a *sinister* path. The Devil is behind me. Today he wears a trench coat and sunglasses; I wonder if this is a joke but then remember his lack of wit. I continue on my way; I have washed profusely and my way is clear, I have nothing to fear.

The sound is a wet pop and suddenly I am splattered. A black Toyota stops and the driver gets out of his car to view what he has driven over. It's only a pigeon and it is now flat and dead. The driver shrugs and speeds off.

I am wet with red and something that feels like snot trails down my cheek – pigeon entrails. Panic drills into my heart. The bloody filth takes on a life of its own; it seeps into my pores and burns up my nerves. I open my mouth to scream but something soft and wet plops onto my tongue. I bend over and puke onto the street.

I start running and I am clawing away the muck from my skin, ripping off my T-shirt and throwing it into the street. And then I slam right into the Devil who feels more muscular than his fat gut suggests.

The Devil takes off his shades and stares at me with eyes filled with greed and triumph. He nods in the direction of the path behind me. I see what he sees and I understand. The pavement is filled with cracks and I have stepped on each and every one of them.

He takes my arm and his fingers burn into my flesh. For the first time I hear him laugh. It is loud and infectious. It would seem that the Devil does indeed have a sense of humor. The joke is a good one and I find myself laughing along with the Devil. I laugh and I laugh and I laugh until I have no breath left in my lungs and the world turns black.

# Sybil | Donna L Greenwood

She stands before him, mere dust caught in the tumult of the storm. She wants to drown in his shadow and feel the cold warmth of his empty, black night. He says – I love you more than beetles love filth; more than cats love sickness, more than leeches love the crimson.

She answers – I love you but I am promised to another.

His ebony rage splits the sky and he screams – I must have you.

The moon gobbles up the sun; tides swallow themselves; babes froth in bloodied wombs.

He whispers – for his fury has torn her ears – I will give you anything you desire.

She takes a handful of sand and feels it fall through her fingers – an immeasurable cascade. With eyes narrowing, she smiles and names her price – *one year for each grain of sand*. Her coquetry does not please the sun god; his lust turns to black dust and he grants her wish.

The years fall by her like leaves and she is left alone to count the ribs that protrude through her paper skin and wipe the gum that leaks from eyes as white as bone. Immortality is meaningless without youth. Finally, eternity takes her flesh, leaving nothing but an infinity of breaths.

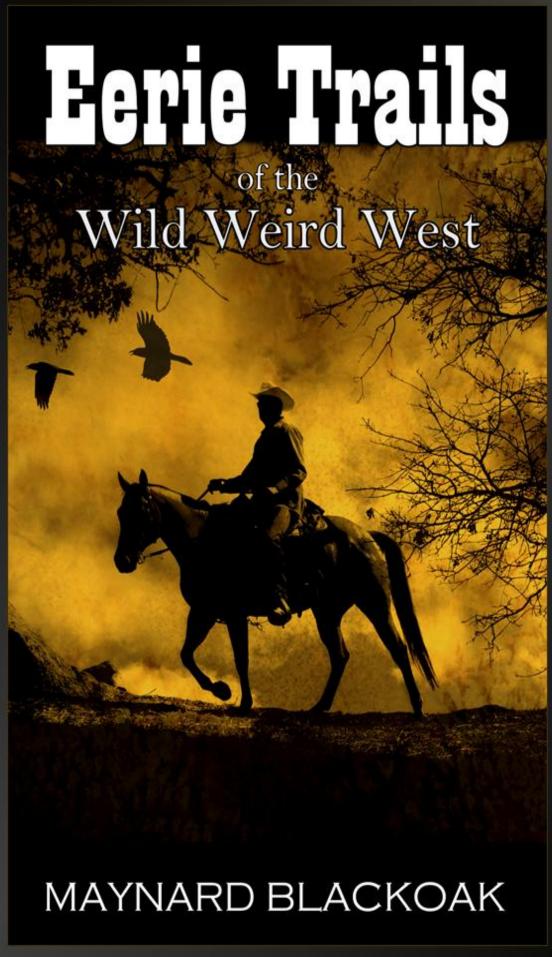
On cold, dark nights when the devil seems real, listen to the wind shrieking and howling at your window. Still your breathing and listen more closely. Listen. Listen to the words birthing in the squall; listen to the words of a woman who understands the true horror of all that will come to be. Listen

beneath the roar...Let beneath the bluster...Me beneath the clamour...Die.

# **About the Author:**

Donna L Greenwood lives in Lancashire, England. She writes flash fiction, short stories and poetry and you can find examples of her work in Formercactus, EllipsisZine Four, Occulum, The Fiction Pool, Cadaverous magazine as well as others. She has recently won or been placed in several writing competitions including HorrorScribes 'Trapped Flash' and Reflex Fiction.

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

#### Mask of Death | Rivka Jacobs

The pre-teen boy shouted, "No one's old as you ... you're dead ... you're dead, dude!" as he passed the elderly man who slumped on one of the park's painted wood benches. He was halfheartedly gliding on his skateboard, one foot pushing off the asphalt path. He abruptly stopped, flipped the board up with one shoe-toe and balanced it on a hip, backed a few steps, turned around. He faced the man, cocked his head to the side, stared.

"Good afternoon, son," the man roused and said, his voice phlegmy, cracked. He took a deep breath and smiled as he raised his ice-blue, bloodshot eyes and squinted into the late-afternoon spring sun. "What a beautiful day to be out in the fresh air." His dark-gray suit seemed too big and baggy, or was the body inside the suit shriveling and shrinking, leaving the clothing behind? A faint foul odor wafted from his direction.

The boy studied the folds upon wrinkles that made up the other's face, the wisps of white hair that grew here and there out of a blotched and leathery head. "You're old," he stated.

"What's your name?" the man asked, his thin mouth hardly moving when he formed the words. "Why you want my name?"

He lifted one shoulder slightly, as if he hardly cared, and shifted his attention, peered across the sweeping swathe of newly sprouted emerald grass where a group of young adults was setting up a picnic.

"How old're you anyway? Are you sick? Are you gonna die soon? Are you like the death angel?"
"Name's Albert. Ninety-seven years old. Born during the first world war. Do you live around here?"

The boy almost answered, but pressed his lips together just in time. "I'm not supposed to tell strangers my name or where I live."

"So why are you talking to me then?" He tilted his chin in a way that was both pointing up and twisted to the side. The skin of his neck stretched, revealing deep lines, discoloration, a mosaic of brown, purple and red plaques.

The boy winced, and moved one step to the rear. "I don't know. I never saw anyone like you before." "Never seen old people before?"

"I've seen old people I have two grandmothers and two grandfathers and one really old great-grandfather but I never met him; he's as old as you, I think. My grandmas and grandpas don't look like you."

"You seem like a fairly nice kid. Kind of pale though; don't get out much? On the computer or playing video games or going to school? By yourself a lot?"

"None of your business." The boy dropped his skateboard with a crack, prepared to balance on it and leave. "It was too cold to play outside 'till now. I do lots of things outside."

"Why would you think an old, ugly codger like me was 'Death'?" Albert asked, his voice thin but sharp.

Birds trilled and twittered. A slight movement of tangy air turned into a breeze that carried smells of fresh cut lawns and swollen flower buds.

The boy stared at his Nikes and shrugged. "You look too far gone to be alive."

"You may not know, but the death angel is really good looking and young. Well, if he wants to be. Ever hear of the Malach Hamavet? No? That means the Angel of Death, the so-called Destroying Angel. He, she or it—angels are God-Stuff and don't really have a gender—he's an ass-kicker, a real stickler and stern to a fault. Well, in Jewish belief anyway. God made the Malach Hamavet to do His dirty work. If you're good, the Angel will appear when your time comes, in a pleasant form. But if you've been—how does your generation say?—a douche-bag and an evil asshole all your life, the Angel of Death can rise to the height of a ten-story building and look like Godzilla and Cthulhu combined."

The boy gazed at him, grinned. His eyes sparkled. "Yeah? And how would you know?"

"Like I said," he threw out one spotted, blue-veined hand, "it's just Jewish belief. Gotta take it on faith."

"So, you can't be the Angel of Death because I've been mostly good, and my idea of happy-thoughts and a final awesome sight wouldn't be you." He laughed in a loud, giggly way. "How would you like the Malach Hamavet to appear to you? You can't last much longer."

Albert regarded the boy as the brightness of the sun was dimmed by a bank of gray clouds; the cool, comfortable air seemed to grow more chill, enough to make a shiver flicker along his arms and up his spine. His eyes opened wide. "Why, I guess ... I miss my grandkids the most; they're all grown up now, and live all over the world, and I've never seen my granddaughter's son. Not ever. He's about your age now. He's smart,

and can take care of himself, or so I'm told. Just like you. So ... I suppose ... if it were my time to go, I'd want the Malach Hamavet to appear in the form of ... in the shape of...." His round, unblinking gaze transformed into an expression that was the perfect combination of shock and pleasure. A broad smile stretched his ashen lips as his lungs expelled all their air with a gentle rattle, and his muscles went slack. The image of the tow-headed boy smiling at him filled his heart as his thoughts went dark.

#### **About the Author:**

Rivka Jacobs lives in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and the *Women of Darkness* anthology. In the last few years she's placed stories with *The Sirens Call* eZine, *The Literary Hatchet, Fantastic Floridas*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

Facebook: <u>Rivka Jacobs</u>
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# **Restless Nights | Catherine Rowe**

The harsh shrill noise of the telephone sliced through the silent darkness like a knife. Jonathan roused his head from the pillow still caught between the receding whispers of his slumbering and the penetrating sound in his ears. In these few moments between sleep and wakefulness he was unable to tell if the alarm bell pounding in his head belonged to his dark night time terror dreaming or not.

Within seconds Jonathan's conscious mind began to take control of his body. As if in a spasm he sat bolt upright like a coil released at speed, alert to the fact that the ringing in his head was not from his sleeping state but the monotonous high-pitched ring tone of the telephone beside his bed demanding to be answered, like breaking waves on a wintry windy shore. The sound of his heart beating fast within his ribcage reverberated in his brain and seemed to go into a duet with the interminable ringing of the handset. He wished this cacophony of sound would cease but transfixed by fear he felt too paralyzed to pull the plug from the socket on the wall.

He glanced at the radio-alarm clock placed close to the telephone on his bedside table. The illuminating display panel threw out a small amber-red circle of light ensnaring the telephone within its glow. The digits on the display panel shone like flaming beacons in the oppressive and heavy darkness of the room.

A cold blood-curdling chill pummelled its way through Jonathan's body as his mind internalized with dread and foreboding the significance of the moment.

It was three o'clock in the morning. Exactly three years ago to the day, since the first hideous night time terrors were unleashed upon his soul by the phone call at the same time and place. Every month for three long unrelenting years since his downward ascent into the darkest depths of Hades began. The glowing red phone continued to scream into the blackness.

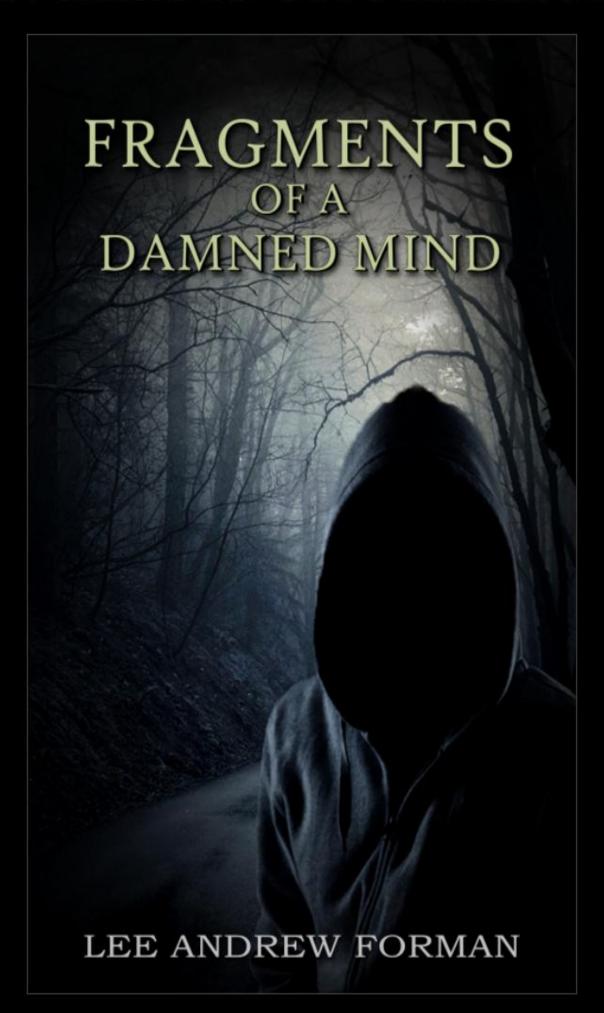
In this single petrified moment in eternity the true horror of Jonathan's destiny dawned in his bones. For Jonathan knew to the very core of his being that this would go on and on forever for he was dead but not yet buried.

#### **About the Author:**

Catherine went to a theatre school The Arts Educational School. She was trained for the stage and has been associated with the arts for many years, Theatre TV and Film. She has two children and three Grandchildren. Since coming to live in Liverpool from Highgate London. She joined The Scottie Road Writers a very friendly group where discussions of her writing is given with kindness and care.

Facebook: Catherine Rowe

# Available on Amazon!



## The Rabbit | Edmund Stone

I cry to her, every day. Mine the flesh and hers the decay. I call to her and she turns away; the ghost of a haunted mind. Since she's been gone, whiskey taints the bottom of my glass. One more drink and the tears will fall too fast to stop. My thoughts of her are still fresh on my mind. I can't forget her, or the way she died; the horrible way I let her. I only remember each breath as she spoke, looking at me from a window outside my mind. A portal over a million miles away, but so close I feel I could touch her. Why did I let her go? Because I'm the cowardly man.

The world I see outside from my safe bunker, lays in ruin. Destroyed by men who represented the best of humanity. Proud and boisterous, waving their sabre in the air. Once the missiles began to fly, they crawled into holes like the rest of the cockroaches. Now, burning pillars of fire encompass the landscape, and lightning flashes on the horizon. Melted highways twist for miles in every direction. Black roads, black skies, black hedges on both sides, I'm resigned to see every time I look outside, and her, always her. A ghost from a past I no longer own.

I'm alone here, the last vestige on Earth. Down in this hole with no escape save my gun and the last remaining bullet. The gun is the way of the cowardly man, a much quicker death than going outside. I spin the cylinder and place it to my head, my finger tracing the outline of the trigger. I try to squeeze, want to with all my strength, but can't. I fall to my knees and cry. Rolling to my back, I look up at the metal beams, lining the ceiling. I think of her, Alina, my lover and friend.

"She helped others but couldn't save herself." I consider this for a moment, and say, "But then, neither could I."

I lay here, half in this world and half out. Noises are coming from down the corridor; scratches on metal. A low registration, the only other sound I hear is the beating of my heart, almost muted, save the haunting of my soul. I close my eyes, hopeful it will go away. I'm drowsy from too much alcohol. Sleep is taking me, I drift and dream of her.

Alina is as beautiful as I remember. She stands outside the bunker, by the shrubs. She doesn't notice me at first. I walk up to her and touch her arm. She considers me, then whispers in my ear.

Brolen? Brolen, open the door.

"I-I can't. I'm too afraid," I say. Lightning flashes overhead, as the sky turns to black, and the landscape melts away. I reach for her, but her skin turns to dust when I grab her hand. I look down at my own hands. They are rotting before me; the flesh falling off in chunks. I cry for her. My skin and muscle fall onto the pile of her bones.

When I wake the room is spinning and my head aches. More whiskey would help. I reach for a new bottle under the table, but something greets me, sitting on the box. Glowing amber eyes affix to mine; ears and nose twitch and fur bristles. It's a rabbit. A gray rodent. As out of place here, as a fly buzzing around my head. It considers me then hops away, into the shadows.

I sit back, wondering if I'm seeing things. No, it's the whiskey. My buzz has worn off. I grab another bottle to remedy the problem and return to my seat at the table. I should probably eat, but food offers no comfort. Only the warmth of Jim Beam or Jack Daniels settles my stomach. They are both in great supply. Whoever designed this place prepared me for a long stay. I hope I disappoint them. I reach for my gun but grab the glass instead. The whiskey has beat the cowardly man, for now.

Another bottle, halfway dry, sits in the middle of the table. Scratching! The incessant sound of it again, somewhere in the corner. I take a gulp and throw my glass at the noise. It shatters, spilling onto the floor. The rabbit hops out into the dim overhead light, scratches its ear, stares up at me, then hops back into the darkness.

I'm getting angry now. This thing shouldn't be here, sucking up my oxygen.

"Get out you scrawny rat! Find another hole to bed in!" I yell, standing from the table. I stumble forward, my foot hanging up in the chair legs. Outstretched hands break my fall as I crash to the floor; glass imbeds itself into my palms. I slide, skidding to a stop near the dark corner the rodent hides in. I look at my hands and cry out.

"Fuck! Look what you made me do!" My hands are bleeding, but the cuts don't look deep enough to cause me any real problems. Damn, will fate never favor me? Why would it for the cowardly man?

The rabbit jumps from the shadow, landing on my lap. It taunts me with its twitching ears. *Damn beast, go away!* 

The furry creature hops toward the corridor, leading into the complex. *Don't go down there, don't!* 

The rabbit hops into the darkness. Lights line the corridor, leaving large circles on the ground every three feet or so. The rabbit appears in the light then jumps back into the shadow. It stops at the end of the hallway, in front of a large double door. I know what's back there. Ghosts haunt those rooms. They call to me from the communication center, to join them in their suffering. But I've taken the cowardly man's way. Death is quicker for the coward.

"Come back! I can't chase you down there!" The rabbit stops, looks back at me, and continues to hop, pausing at the double doors. The fluorescent glow of the light above produces a large shadow of the rabbit on the doors. The lights blink and then become steady again. I can see it, waiting for me.

I feel there is only one way to defeat it, I must use the last bullet in my gun. If I walk to the door, but no further. I may have a chance. The rabbit must die! I make my way toward it. The rodent remains where it is. It doesn't move, doesn't flinch; only waits for me to come.

I check the cylinder of the gun. The solitary bullet looks at me saying, this is for you and you only, cowardly man.

Shaking my head, I go on. The hall stretches out before me; an ancient thoroughfare of lost ambition. The architect long gone, leaving it to a suffering keeper. The rabbit stands there in solitary defiance. Why is such an infernal creature allowed to roam this structure with me? It won't for long, as I'm going to kill it. I level the gun to the beast's head. It doesn't move, only looks at me with two dark marbles. Considering me, unafraid of the gun. I ease back the hammer with my thumb and pull the trigger. There is no blast, no blood splatter of the small mammal. Only a click. I check the chamber. There is the bullet with a dent in the casing where the hammer struck it. The bullet was a dud. It never even had the ability to kill me, or anything else for that matter. I sit back, defeated. The bullet was my escape. The coward's way is gone. The rabbit hops onto my lap. To my surprise, it speaks to me.

"Open the door, Brolen."

The whiskey is working on me. Rabbits can't talk. This foul and flea infested thing can't talk! I'll never do what it says.

Brolen, Alina needs you

I consider the thing. I'm not sure if I should answer it or not. Should give in to my madness? Even if I do, what it asks is impossible.

"I can't do what you say, I can't. We will be contaminated. Why do you torture me?!"

The rabbit hops away, stopping in front of the double doors. It nudges it open and enters the next room.

No! Not there! The room is haunted! I can't go in! But then, the coward's way is gone, why not follow? I need to put an end to this insanity! I'll use my bare hands if necessary. The rabbit must die!

I ease the door open. The room beyond is dark. A red light illuminates one corner, beckoning me to this enshrinement. I walk in, looking around for the rabbit. It will be hard to find in the low light. I hear a scratch in the corner and turn to see the rodent perched on a half-lit control panel. The screen above it comes to life. It flickers ghostly images, I long not to see again. There she is calling to me. Alina and several others behind her. Just like the day I became the cowardly man.

Brolen? Brolen open the door! Open up Brolen!

Tears stream from my eyes, burning my cheeks. It can't be her, no it can't be. My memories are betraying me. Yet there she is, repeating the same words as before.

Brolen, please! Open the door!

"I can't, I can't! There's not enough room! This is for us, and no one else!" I say to her. I launch my useless gun at the images. "Leave me alone!"

The screen shatters, raining sparks down onto the control panel. I place my head in my hands and cry. My tears are for her and the need for her love, burning the still beating heart in my chest. I don't deserve to have such a gift! I chose the coward's way!

The door opens, and I see the rabbit in the corridor. Before it goes, the rodent looks back to me. "Come, Brolen. Come with me." It says.

The rabbit hops along, vanishing into the darkness. My head is spinning. It pounds with a fury I can't dispel. I ache for what is beyond the door. The one leading outside. I lumber down the hall until I reach the table. The whiskey is just as I left it. I drink and am satisfied, at least for the moment. I must face her ghost, I know my torture is for a purpose. The thoughts of her spin in my mind. They take up every orifice, I am consumed with them.

With trepid fingers I raise myself up to look outside the portal window. *Black roads, black skies, black hedges on both sides. The very thing to compliment my black heart.* She was courageous, Alina tried to save a hundred people, but I only wanted to save her. I wanted her for me, but she didn't see it that way. She gave a gift I can only repay in my blood. Why didn't you come with me? Why did you have to be so pure? But then, I wouldn't have loved you any other way.

I see her now, standing by the shrubs, holding the infernal rabbit. A hundred people stand behind her, waiting to enter; waiting to be saved. They'll die though, like they always do. Every time I look out the window, I watch them burn. I chose this, the coward's way. Now I must face my demons.

Brolen? It's time, Brolen. Come to me, open the door.

I reluctantly place my hands on the door handle, looking through the window at her, as her skin dissolves from her skull. She is decaying before me, but I'm still solid. Her need for my flesh outweighs my own.

The handle clacks, as I turn it. The door hisses open and I feel the acidic air on my arms. Pain radiates across my skin. Still, I push it wide and step out into the poisonous atmosphere. Alina waits for me. she realizes the cowardly man is defeated.

I breathe in and the air burns my lungs. I must get to her before she's gone. But I can't see for the blood filling my eyes. I drop to my knees and crawl. The dry dirt falls away from my grasping hands, as I crawl through the sea of bones strewn out on the ground. Alina is in front of me, her body half-melted. I move toward her. Every inch is agonizing. My breath is failing me, as I heave blood from my mouth.

She reaches for me and me for her. My skin is fire from the acid in the air. The flesh is dissolving from my bones. I lose my grip and fall back. Every part of me is burning. The same as the people I let die.

I roll over onto a pile of human bones, dry and dusty, relics of those who wanted a safe-haven. But the cowardly man wouldn't have it. He was selfish and scared. But they have me now, Alina and the rest. She sent the rabbit back to retrieve me. I cry tears of blood for her and gasp for my last breath. My flesh has become decay. To right the wrongs of my selfish ways.

She sent the rabbit back for me and now the ghosts no longer haunt me, the cowardly man is dead, and they are satisfied.

# **About the Author:**

Edmund Stone is an author, poet, and artist, among other things, living in the Ohio River Valley.

Website: <u>edmundstoneauthor.com</u> Twitter: @edmundstonehwr

#### Dead Dog | Rie Sheridan Rose

a rock-skulled corpse matted fur moldering in a depression...

once played fetch with little Sally Ann until he kissed the grill of a car with a smack.

That'll teach him.

## **About the Author:**

Rie Sheridan Rose multitasks. Her poetry has appeared in Dreams and Nightmares, Illumen, and Penumbra, as well as numerous anthologies. She has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and lyrics for dozens of songs. She tweets as @RieSheridanRose

Facebook: Rie Sheridan Rose Website: riewriter.com

# Goodbye Old Man | Antonio A. Lopez

The old man barely hears when he cries forgive me-tears as he withers there laid down donning a forget-me-not blue gown reviewing a life full of torment waiting for his own atonement with a soul that once raged fire now crawling to its pyre The strong man now looks so frail for he is passing through the veil Grandfather I bid you farewell whererever you may dwell

## **About the Author:**

Antonio Lopez was born in Mexico City in 1989. He is a: writer, engineer, reader, gamer, husband and father. His influences include Charles Dickens, Miguel de Unamuno, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. Antonio writes fiction and poetry, both in Spanish and English. He's also an enthusiastic NaNoWriMo participant and one-time winner, as well as an avid reader of horror, mystery, sci-fi, fantasy and poetry.

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## The Death Writer | Ian Brunner

The euthanographer hurried down the quiet suburban street reading mailboxes until he found the correct house. He stopped in the driveway, straightened his suit in the rear window of a camaro parked in the driveway and then gazed around him. The street was quiet except for a creaking door somewhere not too far away. He felt like he was being watched. He was sure someone was peeking through their closed shutters at him. After all, euthanographers were still uncommon despite the ratification of the AASD: The Assisted and Supervised Death Bill in September of 1948. This law made assisted suicide legal and of course, all laws have their pros and their cons, but this law in particular made many uncomfortable.

The euthanographer buttoned his suit coat, stepped forward and rapped on the door. It wasn't necessary for him to be dressed this well, after all, he was just here to listen and write; but still, the occasion demanded decorum. Something tensed inside of him. It was an uncanny feeling going somewhere to look into the eyes of a soon to be dead man, hear his story, and write his final words to his family.

The door swung open. An older gentlemen with a kind face and introspective eyes stood and stared.

"Mr. Schmidt?" he asked and paused.

The man nodded once, curtly.

"I'm your euthanographer."

Schmidt stared for an uncomfortably long moment and then stepped aside. The euthanographer entered and was shown to a comfortable sitting room. Pictures of Schmidt with a blonde smiling boy lined the walls. On one table, laid a picture of Schmidt holding hands with a curly haired woman.

Schmidt began to speak and the euthanographer listened and took notes. The story stretched for hours and what began as a dictated autobiography became something that left the euthanographer wide-eyed and speechless. When Schmidt had finished relating his life the euthanographer took time to find his voice again. He unclenched and clenched his fist nervously. Schmidt had expected this and waited patiently. To his credit, the euthanographer reacted much more calmly than Schmidt thought he would.

Finally, the euthanographer gasped out a promise to have a draft written for Schmidt's approval in the next few days and hurried from Schmidt's home hoping to never see the man again. If he was lucky he could get a colleague to take over the case after he had written the draft.

Schmidt watched the euthanographer go.

Soon after, a boy zoomed up on a bike. Schmidt watched his grandson approach with a mixture of pride and something close to an unsettled stomach. It's hard to look at someone in your lineage and feel that it has been tainted. Somewhere, under the mask that he had worn for all these years his smile faltered. Outwardly, he hugged his grandson.

"Are you still coming to dinner, Grandpa?" the boy asked.

"Yes, of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Mom was worried. She thought you hadn't been feeling well lately."

"I'll be there. Tell her that."

The boy took off on his bike.

\*\*\*

That night at dinner, after they had all loosened their belts, Schmidt cleared his throat.

"There's no easy way to say this," he began "so I'm just going to say it. I've called the euthanographer. He was at my place today."

His daughter let a fork she was fiddling with drop to the table. Everyone stopped and turned their head towards him.

"Oh Dad why?" his daughter managed to force out of her breathless body.

"I'm old and I miss your mother," he said simply.

His son-in-law spoke up "You know, I understand. I miss my mother every day, but you should focus on the living and not the dead."

Schmidt grunted. His daughter began to speak again but he cut her off.

"I'm not going anywhere soon. You know it takes months to set everything up through the proper channels. We can talk about this later." He put his hand on his daughter's shoulder and then stepped away. Calling to his grandson he headed for the door. "Walk your grandfather home will you?"

The boy looked at his mother. She nodded.

Outside, the spring air warmed the boy's heart. It cooled the old man's. Time does that. It turns everything on its head.

"Grandpa?" the boy inquired.

"Yes?"

"Why do you want to die?" he asked as they walked.

Schmidt thought about this. They stopped in front of his home.

"You listen to me now, alright? You listen close. You remember what I say. Men are beasts. Even the good ones." He paused and looked up at the stars. "If there are any good ones. Men can do terrible things and they will do terrible things. That includes me. I told your mom I missed your grandmother. The truth is I'm tired. I'm tired of being haunted. I'm living with ghosts. Everyone who reaches my age has their share. That's what life is; it's like some kind of sick Easter egg hunt where the things you collect never leave you and remind you of your worst mistakes. They mar your soul. If you're lucky they iron out, but I don't think most men are that lucky. You can't understand yet," he said placing a soft hand on the boy's cheek. "I hope you never will. You run home now. I'll see you soon."

The boy went.

Schmidt watched him go before stepping inside his home and making his way to his study. He took a key from around his neck and opened the locked drawer of his desk. Inside, a German Luger pistol waited. It was loaded with just one round.

Removing it, he fondled it lovingly. Outside, the night was quiet. He wondered if the euthanographer was sleeping. He hoped he was hard at work writing his notes. Inside the manila folder that contained the euthanographer's payment, Schmidt had placed a second check of a substantial amount. This, he hoped, would ensure that the euthanographer did his job. He was sure the euthanographer would contact the government.

After all, it wasn't every day a man told you how he had escaped the Nuremberg Trials. It wasn't every day you confessed your greatest sins to a complete stranger. That you had married a Jewish woman as cover and that you had lived the last fifteen years of life like an actor who had never learned his lines or been blocked. He had made it all up as he went along. And it had worked, but he was old now. He could feel death coming for him in the rattling of aching bones. When he was a boy he had a cat that had gone off to die alone. His father told him

"When the time comes we all have to choose how we go. Whether we fight, or go peacefully, that's up to you, but remember to go as yourself. Be who you are, not who the world tells you to be."

Schmidt was taking off the mask. He hoped his grandson wouldn't be the one to find his body. He placed the Luger under his chin.

#### **About the Author:**

lan Brunner is a Buffalo based writer and author of the chapbook: Ruminations.

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DARKSLIDE PHOTOGRAPHY

# Spiritual Malady | Lydia Prime

Desperate for the pinch that would bring her escape, she sought refuge in a dilapidated house slightly hidden by an overgrown yard. Squeezing through a paint-chipped opening, she entered a once loved home; now a desolate shell. She tiptoed through the crumbling building; fitting, however ironic it may have been, to have found a location almost as decayed as her. A few rodents scurried past and a disillusioned smirk crossed her chapped lips. A wave of cold sweat coated her from head to toe and the cramps in her muscles became too strong to ignore. Illness coursed through her brittle body; the remedy within her grasp.

Empty glassines scatter amongst the debris; almost instantly her vacant eyes glazed over. Collapsing into her surroundings, her back slid against exposed drywall. She stared through the broken window before her. The skewed view of an unkempt backyard swirled with gray matter. A memory washed through sullen eyes as salty tears trickled down battle-scarred cheeks. The enormous oak tree cast shade upon the little ones as they giggled in the grass; a time almost entirely forgotten. In that second she could feel the sun's gentle warming on her skin. Pigtails and lemonade seemed so far away, droplets of melted mascara and misery spilled onto her tattered shirt faster than they could be caught. A swift jolt of pain deep beneath the flesh followed by a surge of pure bliss wrenched her into the present.

Despondent and motionless, she slumped over, barely propped up against the wall. Truths that could never have been told, let alone forgiven, silenced without warning. If she called out, would anyone even care? The gruesome truth beneath the surface of burned bridges and voluntary exile were all around her. The only company to be expected now were the rats to clean up her mess.

That haunting memory grew stronger; a skinned knee and the scent of antibiotic ointment permeated the air. Her pain was gone, then and now. Ghosts of her past pranced through her brain and banged against her skull. The sun beamed upon her face a final time as she welcomed its familiar burn. Her deep inhales grew shorter and more shallow until a stillness resonated through not just the decrepit shelter, but her ever wasting body. The withered land she'd hidden in would swallow her whole before she could be found. Iced coffee and nicotine lingered in her mouth — the last flavor of a life willingly let go. An accepting smile rested on the corpse who had no other home. Her once beautiful pale face now a brilliant blue.

Tranquility filled the darkness as hours passed, followed by weeks, until the months began to pile on. A skeleton picked clean by vermin, intertwined for eternity with an abandoned home. The idea of redemption dissolved; though her tomb was secret more would surely come. They'd follow in her footsteps and dwell on their misguided past; lives just as lonely and hearts concealed by frost.

# **About the Author:**

Lydia is that friendly monster under your bed just waiting for you to stick your limbs out from beneath the covers. She tends to frequent the nightmares others dare not tread. When she's not trying to shred scraps of humanity from the unsuspecting, she writes stories and poems of the horror and dark fiction variety. She's often found behind dreaded 800 numbers collecting souls.

Facebook: <u>Erin Marie Lydia Prime</u>
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## No Badgers for Christmas | Diane Arrelle

"No live tree!" Mandy yelled at John. "They're dirty, they're fire hazards and they have animals living inside them. Do you want a badger jumping out Christmas morning and giving us rabies or something?"

John tried one more time. "But I thought—"

"No." Mandy interrupted, stamping her foot. "Now please go get my artificial tree."

John sighed. "Never should have taken a city girl to live in the woods," he muttered as he turned and left her in the living room. He trudged through the snow to the wooden garage behind their cabin. Exhaling puffs of crystallized air, John climbed the rickety ladder to reach the rafters and grabbed the bagged tree she'd brought with her when they married. Carefully climbing back down, he carried it to the house.

Once inside, he lit a romantic fire in the fireplace.

"I'm sorry," Mandy said bringing him a hot chocolate. "I'm just not used to living this way. Christmas to me means lights everywhere, music playing in every store and restaurant and the only animals are on leashes."

John smiled at his new wife, "I understand, you just got to get used to the great outdoors. In a couple of years, you'll be chopping down the Christmas tree."

She laughed, "I truly doubt that, but tomorrow, I'll try baking cookies for you."

John remembered her last attempt at baking, hid a shudder and forced a smile, "Sounds great." He turned his attention to the bagged tree and started to pull it out from the storage sack. "Damn, bag's torn, we'll need a new one after the holidays."

They decorated the pre-lit tree and drinking the now cold chocolate, sat on the sofa a few feet away. He put his arm around her and said, "Well, maybe you're right. The tree is perfect and I don't hear a badger anywhere."

As he gazed at the tree, and the dancing flames in the fireplace, he yawned then noticed Mandy snoring softly, her head on his shoulder. He watched the lights flicker and muttered, "I'm so tired I'm seeing spots." Then with another yawn he shut his eyes.

\*\*\*

And woke to morning light.

He stretched and Mandy fell over. The spots before his eyes returned and he realized he was seeing hundreds of spiders crawling on the ornaments, hanging by threads from the ceiling, settling on his head, shirt and jeans. He looked over at Mandy, she was blue and dead, gift wrapped in fine, spider silk.

John jumped up and away, screaming, "Mandy!" The spiders were everywhere biting his hands, his neck, his face. In a panic, John lit a candle and threw it. Hitting the carpet, the flames caught immediately and as the neatly wrapped presents under the tree burst into orange flames, he ran outside.

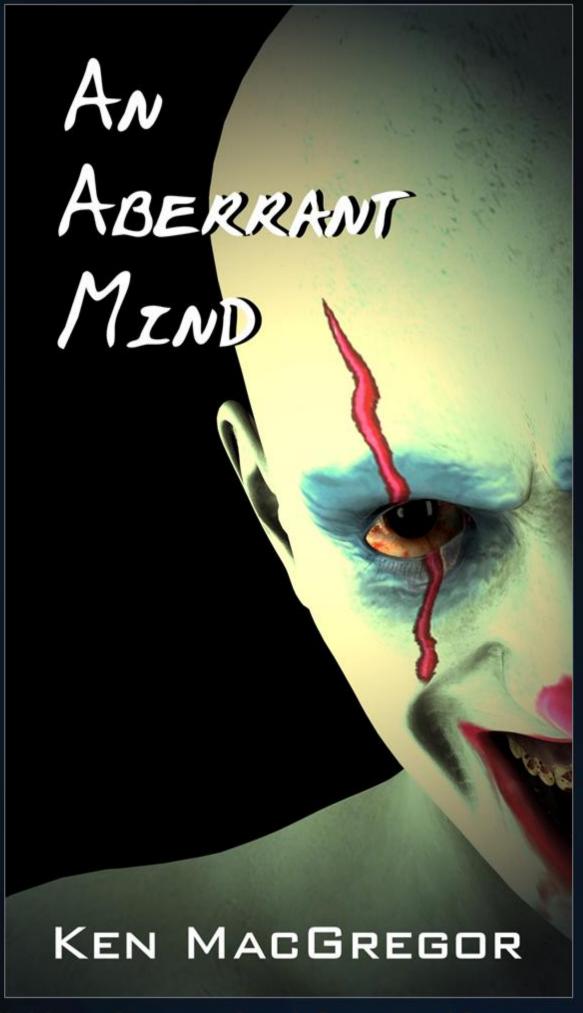
Watching the fire break through the roof of the log cabin, John felt hysterical laughter bubbling up his throat and blurted out, "Well honey, I think a badger would have been the safer choice after all."

The walls collapsed shooting sparks high into the sky as his high-pitched laughter turned to gut wrenching sobs.

### **About the Author:**

Diane Arrelle, the pen name of South Jersey writer Dina Leacock, has sold more than 250 short stories and has three published books including two story collections: Just A Drop In The Cup and Seasons On The Dark Side. She is co-owner of a small publishing company, Jersey Pines Ink LLC. She resides with her husband and her new cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

# Stella's Shoes | Cecilia Kennedy

The delicate spikes and twists of thin shadow trees play on the ceiling. They're cast from the light of the neighbor's porch. Night after night, the neighbors across the street carelessly leave the lights on and Stella is forced to stare at the ceiling and watch for shapes in the tree branches as they bend like straws in water. At 3 a.m. Stella aches for sleep, but realizes she can't have it. Instead, she finds her running clothes, still draped over the back of the tub. They're drying from yesterday's run. She puts them on and laces up her shoes.

Despite the nightlights flooding the streets, the sky all around is pitch black and misty with fog. The air feels chilly with the first hint of winter. So, Stella's initial steps, straight up the incline on the sidewalk are quick, but tentative as her eyes adjust to the light. She makes it up to the top of the street and dashes across the road to continue right. The scent of wood smoke ignites her sense of adventure as she thinks about how lucky she is to be out, feeling alive and running during the dark hours of the morning. Sometimes, she can also detect the pungent, bitter aroma from the coffee factory several miles north of the neighborhood. These aromas are currents that guide her as she navigates her way in the darkness.

As she goes straight down the middle of the road, she can hear the rushing water from the nature preserve nearby, and it always sounds like a phantom train, chasing her towards a disastrous end. Her pulse quickens and the light grows dimmer here. The neighbors say that there are bodies buried just beyond the chain link fence. When she peers past the spaces in the chain, she can see faint pale outlines of fall leaves, thickly carpeting the ferns, wild mushrooms, and fallen tree trunks. She picks up her pace past the fence and circles around every cul-de-sac two or three times to make 35 minutes of steady-paced running. She feels energized again as a trickle of that wood smoke, combined with a chicory-coffee scent, floats in on a breeze and tempts her to go back to the nature preserve.

Once she reaches the chain link fence, she wedges the toe of her pink running shoes into one of the openings and hoists herself up and over. She lands with a thud in waterlogged leaves. The icy liquid splashes straight up into her face and soaks her leggings. The water also seeps in through the mesh of her shoes, drenching her socks and feet. Somewhere around here, bodies are buried, according to the local legend. Five years ago, before Stella moved here, they say a woman in one of the houses nearby lived alone with five children between the ages of six and fifteen. She worked in a factory, but when she lost her job, she resented the fate she'd been given, so she took her kids out for a night walk, promising them hot cocoa afterward. Instead, she held her six-year-old down and smashed her skull with a hammer while the other children screamed and ran. No one heard their cries. She found them one by one and managed to fracture their skulls, even if they fought her. Her final act of cruelty she saved for herself by slashing her own face with a knife, disfiguring it completely—before slitting her wrists and bleeding out onto the leaves in the grass. Those who believe the legend warn others not to climb the fence or say the following words out loud:

Bloody roots and autumn leaves Your secrets please do tell. Of instruments turned to thieves, To steal souls where they dwell.

Anyone who enters the preserve and recites this poem will come face to face with the hideous ghost of the woman who killed her children. At least, that's how the neighbors tell it.

A breeze rustles the few leaves that cling to branches—carrying with it that tempting wood smoke, trailed by bitter chocolate. Stella knows what she must do. She turns to look at the outlines of the leaves—the ones she thinks cover bodies miles deep below the ground. She draws in a breath and calls out the words of the chant. When she finishes, she throws leaves up into the air and laughs out loud, believing it's ridiculous to give such stories much attention. As she turns to climb back over the fence though, she hears a crackling sound. She decides not to turn around, because she thinks there are leaves stuck in her own shoes, which are making the sounds she hears. As she continues on, the crackling, rustling sound seems to be right beside her and when she stops moving, the sound does not. It continues. An icy chill runs the length of her spine and a slight sensation next to her right earlobe makes her turn around slowly, with her heart beating loudly in her chest. When she looks out over her right shoulder, she catches the hem of a transparent white gown that hovers just above the leaves. Her eyes travel from the wispy gown to the horrifying face that stares back at her from the pitch-black sky. The eyes are wide and lifeless, with dark purple circles that sag beneath them. The skin is alabaster white and large bloody gashes run like railroad tracks across the cheeks and forehead. The nose—or the place where a nose is supposed to be—is black and hollow.

"What do you want?" Stella says, her voice barely a whisper.

"You called," the ghastly vision replies.

"Not really. . . I . . . didn't call you on purpose."

"Oh, but you did," the ghost says, her wretched face inching closer to Stella's. She extracts her veiny blue tongue to lick Stella's cheek. Stella winces and draws back, expecting the tongue to be wet, but it cuts like sandpaper.

"My, what fun we'll have tonight!" The ghost laughs, but Stella has already climbed back over the fence—racing to get home.

When she looks back over her shoulder, she is relieved to discover that the ghost is not there. As she reaches her front porch, she realizes her shoes feel heavy and wet and they appear to be oozing some kind of mossy green muck from the preserve. She figures that perhaps there are many practical reasons to not climb the fence. She can't track muck into her house, so the shoes will have to dry outside for now—in the smoky, mist-filled air.

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At work, Stella counts the hours before quitting time because tonight, she has planned to meet her girlfriends at a local bar. She's been looking forward to this outing all week. As she finishes the files that are stacked up on her desk, she glances down at her low-heeled dress shoes and discovers that they're oozing a mossy muck reminiscent of the mess she stepped in at the preserve. Shaking her head, she re-focuses her eyes to look again, but the muck has disappeared. She convinces herself that she's just tired and that she should tell the neighbors to turn their lights off at night.

Later, when she climbs into her car to drive home, she notices an odd, musty smell that fills her chest and makes her cough and wheeze. Her face feels tight—as if her skin was stretching out thinly over the bones in her cheeks, nose, and forehead. The pressure in her head makes her teeth ache and her feet feel wet and slimy. Beneath the steering wheel, near the brake pedal on the floor, she can see liquid puddles forming at her feet, flowing from the soles of her shoes, but when she looks back up at the steering wheel, the unsettling sensation of pond muck leaves and she can drive home in peace.

However, when she finally pulls into the driveway and gets out of her car, every step she takes—through the door and up the stairs—is incredibly heavy—as if her feet were weighed down by chains. She can hear the squishing of slimy liquid sloshing out from the shoes, but when she looks back down, there are no wet stains on the carpet or on her heels. At this point, a sudden wave of nausea takes hold of her and makes her want to stay home, but she forces herself to try to freshen up and meet her friends at the bar.

In the mirror, she can see her face is paler than normal and the earthy, musty stench is quickly taking over the small space of the bathroom. She retches in the toilet, then changes her shoes—determined to have a good night out. However, even with the new shoes and a freshly washed and made-up face, she still feels tired and the sloshing sound her feet make when she walks, just won't go away. She kicks her shoes off and puts them back on again and again, feeling around for the water she knows must be there—even licking her fingers to try to detect even a hint of something left on the soles of her shoes, but she finds nothing—only a slight bitter aftertaste.

"I will have a good time," she tells herself in the mirror in the foyer. "I will laugh and joke and be myself," she says again, gritting her teeth.

\*\*\*

Just outside the Boiler Bar, the light spills out onto the dark pavement as Stella wills each leg to move forward—even wrapping her hands around each thigh to force the legs to move. She's working up quite a sweat already as she enters the bar and spots her friends at the counter. Grunting and moaning, she makes her way over to them.

"What the hell happened to you?" Rhonda asks.

"Must have done something while running. . . Hey, I think I'll skip the beer tonight—just a gin and tonic, heavy on the gin," she tells the bartender.

"Must've been one hell of a run," Tina says.

"Yeah, well—let's just say I won."

A shot glass of gin slides straight down the bar and the bartender winks. Stella catches it just as it reaches her and she returns the wink, but the bartender frowns and points at Stella's friend Tina. The wink is intended for her. Stella flicks him off and downs the gin and tonic, slamming the empty glass back down on the bar.

"Keep 'em coming," she says. "I've had a crappy day."

"So. . . what did you win?" Rhonda asks.

"I won a chance to open up a can of whoopass on this ghost that tried to scare me."

Tina tries not to spit out her beer while laughing.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Rhonda asks.

"I'm saying—I did the chant—near the nature preserve—where that woman killed herself and her kids and she just showed up wearing a nightgown and I kicked her ass."

Out of the corner of her eye, Stella can see the bartender mocking her by making the 'crazy' sign with his index finger, which he circles near his right temple.

"You don't look like you're in any condition to win a fight like that," Tina says.

"Have you ever kicked a ghost's ass? 'Cause I did and I'm gonna' tell you how."

"Good lord. I'll need about five more beers," Rhonda tells the bartender.

"I can see why," he mutters.

"In any case, she just shows up and tries to follow me around and I just tell her I'm not afraid of her and she's the most pathetic excuse for a ghost I've ever seen."

As Stella says these words—"the most pathetic excuse for a ghost I've ever seen"—her voice changes register and becomes more guttural and unnatural. Tina and Rhonda put down their drinks and look at her as if they've never seen her before.

"Are you okay?" they ask, but Stella is not even looking at them. It's as if she were looking right through them.

"She actually tells me she's sorry for trying to scare me—if you can believe that," Stella says, as she continues her story. Blood is beginning to trickle out of her nostrils. Her friends try to give her napkins to stop the flow, but Stella just pushes them aside, laughing wildly.

"That idiot tripped and fell down a hole in the ground—even catching the hem of her nightgown on a tree branch and I just . . . I just couldn't stop laughing." Stella laughs uncontrollably, wheezing in between breaths while the skin on her face pulses and bubbles. The transformation on Stella's face is so frightening that Rhonda and Tina scream and urge the bartender to call for help, but Stella turns her rage on him, twisting her body in her seat to meet his eyes.

"I'll do to you what I did to her," Stella threatens in her otherworldly, unnatural voice.

Stella then bends down to remove her shoes, throwing them directly at the bartender with such force that they crack the bottles of whisky and brandy on the shelf behind him, sending the dark liquid down in streams. Stella's eyes begin to glow as layers of her face peel away, revealing bloody bits of tissue and bone. From the soles of her feet, a swirling smoke of vapor rises, carrying with it a voice that echoes as it cries out, "To steal the souls where they dwell." The vapor fills the room, stifling the air with a moldy and pungent stench. As the greenish mist escapes, Stella's lifeless body crumples to the floor. The greenish mass inches closer to the bartender, gathering itself up into a form small enough to slip inside his body, through the soles of his shoes. Instantly, the bartender knows how the dead must walk among us and he only has a split second to react—to rid himself of a more bitter spirit. He lights a match. In flames, the bar burns down, but as with all of the places where the living once dwelled, some things of theirs remain: a legend, a chant, the outline of leaves, wood smoke, and in the case of the Boiler Bar, Stella's shoes—still intact, but wet and oozing a substance in shades of mossy green.

### **About the Author:**

Cecilia Kennedy earned a doctorate in Spanish literature and taught English and Spanish for 20 years in Ohio before moving to the Greater Seattle area with her husband, teenage son, and cat. Currently she likes to write horror/ghost stories that have a touch of the absurd in them. Her works have appeared in *Theme of Absence, Gathering Storm Literary Magazine, Coffin Bell: A Journal of Dark Literature, Sirens Call Publications Ezine, Down in the Dirt Magazine,* and *Soft Cartel.* However, she reserves her "scariest" writing for her DIY blog, "Fixin' Leaks and Leeks", where she describes her attempts at cooking and home repair.

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# Good Afternoon Death | Edward Ahern

I cannot force myself to fear a pleasant, sunny day, and yet that's when most people kill people. Road rage, gang fights, bank robbery Car wrecks, drug deals, spousal slayings Suicides and matricides and random death.

I cannot force myself to enjoy a dank and gloomy night and yet I'm safer with the monsters.

# When That Pale Angel - | Geoffrey A. Landis

When Azrael that pale angel appears for you—and come he will—what will you say? Will you argue, plead, lament, break down in tears? Beg one more hour of life, just one more day?

For me, I'll look that angel in the face and laugh, and say I've been what I have been. I loved the sunshine, but also loved the days when rain drove down, and drenched me to the skin. I've made my share of messes, broke some hearts, drank beer and wine; and ate my share of dirt.

If an artist made this world by His hands, I was the audience to see and cheer and know; or if this world appeared but by blind chance why, then, I appreciate it ever the more so. Life was complex and crazy, always a surprise.

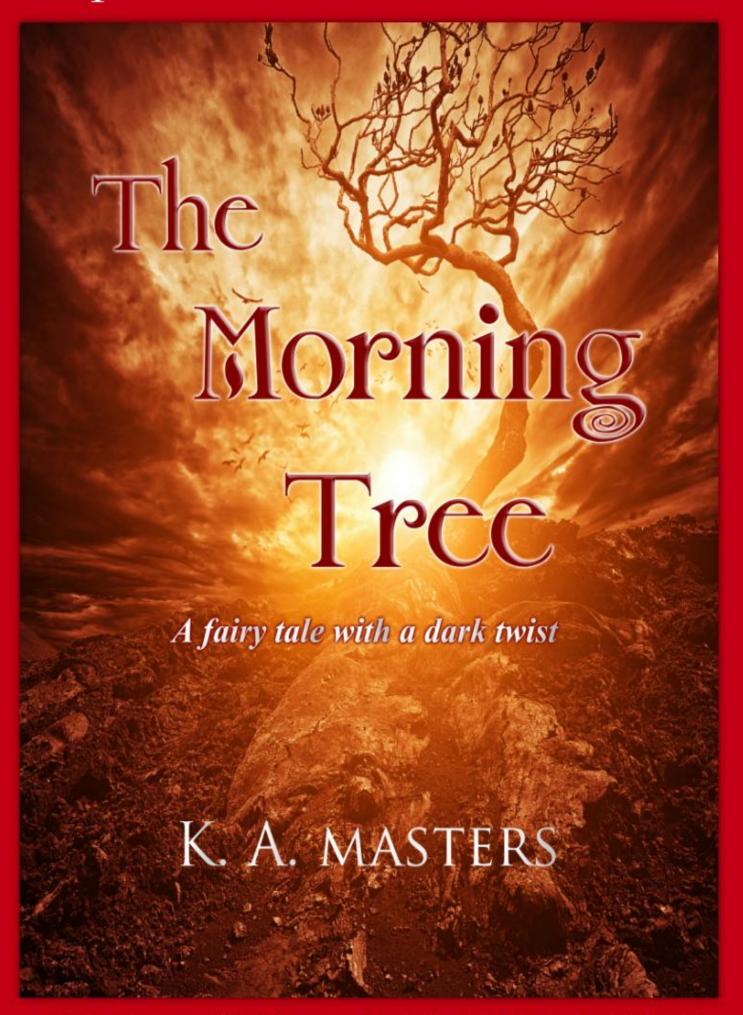
So lay those copper pennies on my eyes. I'll say, I had a life! It was a worthy show.

# **About the Author:**

Geoffrey A. Landis' poetry has won the Rhysling and Dwarf-Stars awards for best speculative poem from the Science Fiction Poetry Association, and the Asimov's reader's poll from Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. His stories have been published in over 20 languages, ranging from Magyar to Klingon. In his spare time, he works on missions to Mars and developing technology to explore the outer solar system.

Website: <u>geoffreylandis.com</u> Facebook: <u>Geoffrey A. Landis</u>

# Experience K.A. Masters' debut novel...



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# What Lies Beneath | Alyson Faye

'Ice Palace re-opening!' The headline shrieked from the local rag. Livvy beamed at her twin.

"Remember Grandma used to skate there with her 'young gentlemen callers'?" Amy smiled at her twin's accurate impersonation of their Gran's elegant tones.

"She never did say why it closed." Livvy frowned. "But she told me she never skated again."

"You still got her blades?" Amy knew the answer. Livvy was a hoarder, a pack rat. Whereas she used everything once and then chucked it.

The twins ventured out to *The Ice Palace* later that week, opting for the 'Late Skate 'n' Date' slot. Inside the foyer, they gazed bemused at the proliferation of pouting gold cherubs clinging to the ornate plasterwork. The seats were dressed in plush red velvet. It was a spectacle of tasteless interior décor, but as a homage to the 1950s, Grandma's youth, it was bang on.

Behind them a voice said, "Restored and renovated to its former splendour. Ladies, you are most welcome."

Turning the twins faced the rink's manager, embalmed in a black tux with his thinning hair slicked back. "Young ladies, you have the rink to yourselves."

Amy eyed the shadows clustering beyond the rear seats in the viewing area. "Livvy, do you see anyone back there? I thought I did, but they're not there now."

Livvy didn't reply, she was occupied strapping on Grandma's vintage skates; the toes scuffed with stains, whilst Amy had her own pristine pair, bought brand new the week before in her bag.

The manager beamed at them. "I'll pop a record on." He wandered away and within a minute the girls were listening to a mix of Sinatra, Como and Dorsey — if they had known the names of the performers.

"Oldies night," Amy whispered, sniggering. Livvy rolled her eyes.

Holding hands, the girls wobbled onto the silky surface of the ice. Reminiscent of baby giraffes, they tottered, before gaining confidence.

"Skating's in our blood," Livvy laughed, as she glided in ever widening circles around her sister.

The lights beyond the rink dimmed, drawing shadows towards the two girls. Soon there were only the rink's side lamps glowing a sickly amber. Soon even those began to stutter. The girls didn't notice; they were absorbed in their movements and the patterns they were painting on the ice. The air already cold, dropped a few more degrees. Amy and Livvy were laughing and chatting so much, they didn't hear the sound of multiple fists beating beneath their blades.

It was Livvy who glimpsed the ice prisoners first, for she tripped, and fell, face first onto the ice. She began to scream and she didn't stop. Not after one minute, not after two.

Concerned, Amy skated over, "What's up with you Livs? Hurt yourself?" She glanced down and then Amy also dropped to her knees, gazing beneath the surface of the ice.

Faces stared up at the sisters. A gallery of them; young children, teens, women and men, with their mouths stretched wide in silent screams. Their faces lifted to the roof of their ice prison. Eyes snow glazed; lips blue. Shadows flurried behind them, swelling their ranks.

Amy scrabbled at the ice, ripping her nails. Her blood speckled the whiteness. "I can't reach them," she sobbed.

Livvy stabbed at the ice with her blade. "Help us. Someone please help us!"

One of the children reached up and pressed his fingertips to Livvy's mouth and she jerked backwards as though stung.

The record stopped playing. The stylus shrieking as though ripped away and in the sudden silence the girls heard soft steps on the ice coming towards them. Turning in relief, they watched the manager approach, still in his tuxedo and shiny black shoes. Yet Amy noticed his feet left no mark on the ice.

"They're beyond help. Gone, all gone. Years ago. I don't know how many. It's been so long. The ice cracked one evening. There was a fault in the equipment. I hadn't checked. It was my job, but I'd got in too late, after drinking a few bevvies. There were too many on the ice that night. I let them go on. My fault." The girls gaped at him, watching his figure shimmering. He was there and yet not there.

"How many died that night?" Amy asked, always the more practical of the two sisters.

"Many fell through, but only one boy died. He was five years old. He was so small. Crushed he was."

Tears dropped from the man's misty eyes, turning to ice drops before they hit the rink. "The rest of them are the watchers . . ." (he waved to the red velvet seats, which were crammed with figures standing silent) ". . . and the skaters . . . " (he gestured to the ice) "who have died since that terrible night. They all return to be with the boy. He pulls them to him. He's so lonely. He wants company. Poor little lad."

Livvy shivered. The air was frigid. The girls' breath floated away from them. The manager removed his tuxedo jacket and bow tie, then he lay face down on the ice. "It's time." He pressed his bloodless lips towards the upturned silent screaming faces. Flurries of fists broke through the ice, grabbing his jacket, his hair, his trousers and dragged him bodily below without a sound.

The lights snapped on, flooding the rink with electricity, the red velvet seats transformed to wooden benches, the music blared out, defiantly rap, through the hi-def. speakers and the air warmed several degrees. The girls huddled alone in the middle of the rink. The watchers and the ones below had disappeared. Amy and Livvy held each other's hand for comfort, as though they were five years old. The ice stretched around them, a thin veneer between worlds.

#### About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK. Her dark fiction appears in 'Women in Horror Annual 2', 'Stories from Stone' and on line at zeroflash/Tubeflash/Horror Scribes, Coffin Bell Journal 1.4, Ellipsis 2, and The Horror Tree. She has a short story in DeadCades, the latest horror anthology from the Infernal Clock.

Blog: <u>Alyson Faye</u> Twitter: <u>@AlysonFaye2</u>

# Haunting | Shelly Redd

I sit numb with shock as I realize he's not going to draw another breath, and start when the nurse opens the door with a click. I watch her in a daze as she checks for life signs, tells me she's going to get the doctor to verify the death, and leaves me with the now lifeless body of my father.

A random thought pops into my head: *If there are such things as ghosts, a hospital is the most likely place they would be.* 

Then the pain and anguish of it all hits me like a ton of bricks, tears of loss and regret flow down my face. He's really gone. Not here anymore. It's tinged with relief that it's over now and he's not suffering any more, but there's a Dad shaped hole in my heart, and it hurts. I know he's gone, but I touch his hand anyway. His flesh is already cool to my touch. I pull my hand away from his, knowing he won't ever move again.

My nose drips and my vision blurry, and the tissue in my pocket is soggy, but I use it anyway and absently put it back where I got it from.

A wave of grief breaks the numbness and crashes over me in a tsunami of memories. The anticipation and excitement of Dad teaching me to ride my first bike. Dad trying to catch our dog, only for him to bound away thinking it a great game every time Dad got near to him, and me laughing my socks off.

A pressure inside my head builds and I think I'm going to faint. Putting my head between my knees and massaging my temples, I hope it might help. It doesn't ease, but increases, and my head feels like it's going to explode. More images flash: Dad with his arm in a sling, and on finding out it was broken and in a cast, wondering if he'd let me draw on it. The day Dad brought home our dog as a puppy and the surprise and elation at the arrival of a family pet. The memories wouldn't stop, flooding my mind.

If leaning forward didn't help, maybe leaning back would? I sit up and rest my head on the chair back and close my eyes and try to relax. Maybe it's the stress of it all? The voices and beeping sounds of the hospital recede until I think I might have gone deaf, or is it the pressure in my head? The antiseptic smell remains, somehow reassuring and grounding as I feel like I'm drifting in air currents.

A different pressure squeezes my body and I imagine that the haunts of the hospital halls are crowding round me, faces leering and hands pressing, leaching the life out of me in my pain-riddled, emotionally and physically weakened state.

I can't bear it anymore and lurch to my feet, needing to get out, escape the ghouls draining my life force, into the light and fresh air. Staggering out into the hallway, I expect to see nurses, but there is nobody. No nurses. No patients. The silence is deafening, oppressive. I run, my feet not making the expected squeaky sound on the linoleum, but I move fast. Down the stairways, towards the big double doors and freedom.

The exit at the end of the last hallway seems to disappear into the distance, and I reach for it as I run towards my goal, light seeping between the gaps around the doors. It takes forever to get near, the light always out of my reach. Suddenly, I'm there, pushing the door open...

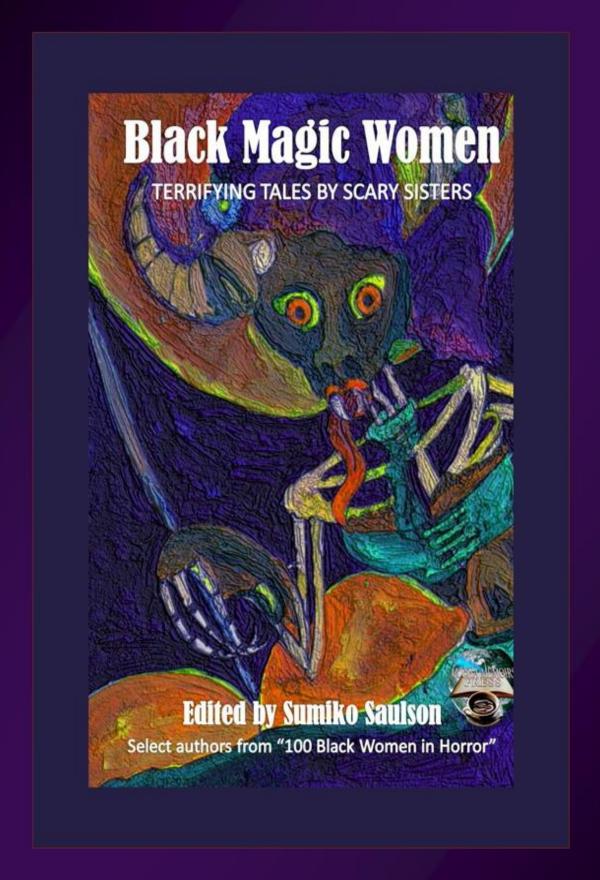
The doctor finds me slumped in the chair when he comes to verify Dad's passing. He tries to wake me and when I don't respond, he checks my vital signs. Only to realize he needs to register not one, but two deaths.

#### **About the Author:**

After winning a national fantasy TV story competition when she was 9, Shelly has read and been thoroughly entertained by the supernatural ever since. She has recently been inspired by two published writer friends to let her imagination out to play after proofing several short stories and novels for them. She lives in rural Oxfordshire with her other half.

Twitter: <u>@ShellyRedd1</u> Facebook: <u>Shelly Redd</u>

# TERRIFYING TALES FROM SCARY SISTERS!



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# Death is a Hunter | Sonora Taylor

Maddie sighed as she walked through a field. "How long until we get there?" she asked.

"Soon," Dylan replied.

Maddie pouted. She'd lived next door to Dylan her whole life, and until today, he'd never wanted to play with her. He never showed interest, probably because he was a boy and because he was five years older than her.

But Dylan came to her today, and asked if she wanted to play in the woods. Maddie loved the woods. She played there almost every day. Dylan had insisted they cut through the field, and because he was fifteen – almost a man – Maddie had listened.

After a long time walking, though, she began to regret listening to him. "Why doesn't the field have a path?" she asked. She thought of the paths in the woods that were littered with paw prints from Mousie, the gray stray tabby cat that her mother said she shouldn't touch. "I wish we could make one."

"We'd need a scythe," Dylan said.

"What's a scythe?"

"A long blade. Reapers hold them."

"Reapers?"

"Ghosts that gather souls."

Maddie smiled at the spooky image Dylan conjured in her mind. "If they have blades, then wouldn't they be hunters?"

"Mavbe."

"I bet Death is a hunter." Maddie thought of Mousie pouncing on a bird, or snakes that snatched up mice. "I bet reapers have eyes like cats, and chase souls until they fill their bellies —"

"Maddie, be quiet. You don't want to attract animals."

"None of the animals will bother me. Not even the mountain lions –"

"Hush."

Maddie clamped her mouth shut. They walked in silence and, at last, reached the woods. They moved down a path she hadn't walked before, which opened into a dark clearing with a small pond.

Maddie gasped and rushed forward. "A secret pond!" she cried. "How did you find it?"

"It's mine," said a deep voice to her right. Maddie turned and saw an older man, much older than Dylan, with blood-stained overalls. She turned and was about to call for Dylan, but he disappeared into the trees. Something told her that calling for him wouldn't help.

"It's my special pond," the man continued. "Where I hide special girls like you."

Maddie closed her eyes and prayed that the forest would help her. The man moved closer. She could smell rot on his breath.

A hiss broke through the clearing. Maddie opened her eyes and saw a flash of gray streak towards the man. Mousie leapt onto his neck and dug her claws in tight. The man screamed as blood poured from his skin onto her paws. He tore Mousie from his neck, but before he could throw her, he screamed again and dropped her. A cluster of snakes slithered up his legs, their fangs in view and looking for a place to bite. The man fell to the ground as the snakes slithered up his body. They each took turns biting into his skin. Maddie watched while Mousie rubbed against her legs and purred.

The snakes suddenly scattered. But the man wasn't safe. A mountain lion jumped into the clearing, blood and drool dripping from her maw. She looked up at Maddie, her eyes green and glistening. She almost seemed to smile, as if to thank her for the prey. Then, she grabbed the man by the neck and dragged him into the forest.

Maddie smiled as she stroked Mousie's fur. Death was a hunter, and the forest was filled with the best hunters of all.

# **About the Author:**

Sonora Taylor is the author of "The Crow's Gift and Other Tales," "Please Give," and "Wither and Other Stories." Her work has been published by Camden Park Press and Sirens Call Publications. Her next book, "Without Condition," will be released February 12, 2019. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

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Blog: <u>sonorawrites.com</u>

# 1888 | *Lucy Emke*

"Extra! Extra! Read all about it!"

A small boy was shouting on the corner of King William Street. His voice managed to pierce through the hustle and bustle, as countless carriages rumbled by and several vendors tried to peddle their wares.

He was a boy of about 9, disheveled in his appearance. His mousey brown hair was tousled and his brown breeches were patched on one knee. The leather of his boots was beginning to crack. His shirt was as sad as the rest of him – a shade of brown that was probably white originally. He wore a red neckerchief, a pop of color which was a juxtaposition next to the dull colors of the rest of his outfit.

Normally, Mary ignored the urchin boy, he was the kind of kid with the gift of the gab and making eye contact with him would inevitably result in walking away with a newspaper that she neither wanted nor needed.

Today was different. She was just about to breeze past him, eyes fixed on some distant landmark to avoid looking at any of the merchants, when she caught sight of the headline, as he continued his chant.

"Jack the Ripper claims fourth victim!"

She stopped, and without engaging him scooped up a copy of the newspaper before fumbling in her reticule and producing a large bronze halfpenny. She pressed it into his grubby palm, which he left open.

"Oh, c'mon miss, ain't you got a little more?"

She rolled her eyes, tucking the newspaper under her arm so she could securely pull together the drawstrings of the black satin bag, with its embroidered violet and cream pansies. The firm tug of the drawstring was answer enough, and he stuffed the money into his pocket, greedily.

"Suit yourself." He turned away, and began shouting out the headline again, hoping to attract more customers, whom he would invariably attempt to fleece. King William Street was not the most well-off street in the city, but a boy like him stood out and he must have picked this spot to try and get money out of people he thought had money to burn.

Unfolding the paper and scanning it as she walked, Mary absorbed every word. 'JACK THE RIPPER CLAIMS 4<sup>th</sup> VICTIM' it began 'WOMAN BRUTALLY HACKED TO DEATH' and underneath that 'SCOTLAND YARD CONTINUES TO INVESTIGATE GRISLY CRIMES'

She folded it again, gripping it in a gloved hand.

There was nothing for a woman like her to worry about – she was far removed from the grimy cobbled streets of Whitechapel. She would never have to work, much less become a *working girl*. The Ripper's modus operandi did not extend to women like Mary.

She was clad in a day dress of royal blue silk with a floral print. The tightly fitting bodice, which had come into vogue in the past few years, accentuated her hourglass figure. It reached her neck, where it turned into a black velvet stand up collar. The cuffs were a matching black velvet and her gloves were soft black kid leather. The effect was a severe, unapproachable look from the waist up. The skirt, which was worn over a bustle, softened the look considerably with its use of drapery. Swags of the blue silk formed an overskirt, trimmed with black velvet bows at the sides. It is under this overskirt – known colloquially as Apron Drapery – that her reticule was kept, affixed to the inside of one of the bows.

The women who passed her on the streets were similarly dressed. Most of them stuck to dark colors to avoid showing up the filth which tended to soil anything in central London, but also because it was getting well into autumn, when wearing something light and cheerful was something of a faux pas.

She walked past the statue of King William IV, past Crowley & Co a purveyor of ale and stouts, past the National Truss society whose work with the poor and needy would have made a better place for the paper boy to beg at.

Finally, she reached a black door, between 'Owen Edwards fine tailoring' and 'Barratt & Ellis opticians'.

The paper was folded and tucked under her arm once more as she reached again for the reticule and fumbled momentarily as she picked out her key.

The door was heavy, and it creaked a little as she pushed it open.

"Mary, is that you?" A woman called to her from upstairs.

"Yes ma-ma, it's me." She walked briskly over the red and cream tiles which led to the stairs and ascended them. With each step they creaked beneath her feet.

The dim, narrow entrance to the building belied its nature once the next floor was reached.

The living room was wallpapered with a leafy floral pattern. It was a busy print with a pale blue backdrop, sage green foliage, and flowers in various muted but cheerful shades. There were two couches, with chintz covering. White lace shrouded the window, and a pair of silk curtains with a floral print were tied back with tasseled cords.

She greeted her mother properly, resting the newspaper on a side table beside the smaller of the two couches, before gently folding the bustle of her skirt in as she sat to remove her boots.

Her mother was talking to her now, about some event or another that she was expected to attend. She was 23, and her mother was keen for her to marry soon. There were several suitable men in the running, and it was time to decide. The result was a seemingly endless stream of events, and galas.

Mary detested them, but her mother had come from a poorer background than her father and now she was determined her daughter would marry a man from a wealthier background too.

She was bored – of fittings for evening dresses, of dull conversation with men she didn't particularly enjoy the company of, and of disapproving potential mothers-in-law.

Tonight, however, she was free of these mindless activities. Her mother encouraged her to practice needlework, or memorize poetry, but she much preferred to help in the kitchen. Her father, who worked long hours to keep his family in the relative luxury they were used to, indulged her. He chastised her mother if she complained that Mary was learning a useless skill which was, to her eyes, beneath her.

Mary was an only child, or at least the only surviving child. She was the apple of her father's eye, and she could do no wrong. If she wanted to help in the kitchen, so-be-it.

Growing tired of her mother's monologue about a supper that would take place sometime next week, she made her excuses and left for her bedroom, remembering to bring the newspaper with her.

Three weeks passed without another murder, though headlines about the Leather Apron, Smiling Jack, or (increasingly) Jack the Ripper continued to dominate headlines. The police were no closer to catching him, and there was mounting pressure as satirists published cartoons of buffoonish police officers blindly stumbling past the killer. They were becoming a laughing stock.

They had plenty of theories about who he might be, but not one suspect.

Women were becoming more uneasy, and it was a topic of heated conversation and speculation at all of the events she attended in those three weeks.

She wasn't allowed out alone anymore, even if she planned to stay on King William Street, and her mother had even conceded that it was better for her to be baking in the kitchen with the staff than to be sat in the living room getting snappy and irritable.

But Mary was unbearably bored and for the past week she had been planning a way to get out of the house. She had sneaked out a few times in the past, and there had been no murders for weeks. What could possibly go wrong?

On the night marking the end of the third week, she was both bored and prepared enough to put her plan into action. She waited until midnight – it was late enough that everyone in her home was asleep, and that those who were up early to prepare their stores were not yet awake. She had memorized which steps she could tiptoe down to avoid the telltale creaks, and in only her nightgown she made her way downstairs, finding her way in the dark to the kitchen. A pile of unlaundered clothes lay next to the back door, ready for the staff to wash. She picked through them, pulling out a set of work clothes belonging to a maid of similar stature to herself. A loose dress and a stained, dirty apron. She had borrowed them several times before. She put them on, along with a pair of her own boots, set in the kitchen ready for polishing.

It was cold, but she couldn't find a shawl and one of her own would be too conspicuous. She felt the chill as she left through the back of the building, then turned hurriedly back to the kitchen. A change

of heart, perhaps? Or was she too scared to go into the cold, dark night whilst a killer prowled the streets?

No. Her hand hovered momentarily over a meat cleaver, but then she picked up a butcher's knife which lay on the counter beside it, and headed back out. It would be silly not to have a means to defend herself should she run into trouble, after all.

She tucked the knife carefully into a pocket, which had been sewn into the back side of the apron by the maid who wore it so she could carry spare cloths and other items inconspicuously. It was heavy and it weighed the apron down a little so it sagged at the waistband, but it was secure and easy to reach

Fearless and brazen, she walked the short path leading to a gate at the top of the garden, leading to an alleyway. She looked left, then right. The row of buildings continued a long way to the left in darkness. She had always opted to go to the right where she would reach the comparative safety of the street with dim gas lights to help her see. Tonight was no different.

It was quieter than she had expected, but then that was a good thing. No one would harass her, or more importantly tell her family what they had seen. Reaching the street she decided to head towards the river Thames. It reeked of sewage and it was foul at the best of times, but she was curious to see such a busy landmark in the dead of night with no one there.

The closer she got, the more she noticed people. They kept to the shadows – mainly consisting of the homeless, and incapacitated drunks.

Eventually she did face an interaction, as a drunkard appeared as if from thin air and shouted across the street at her in, of all things, a thick Birmingham accent.

"D'yow do business, love?"

She didn't want to reply – her accent would make it obvious that she was from an affluent background, but she managed to bark back "no!" Her hand slipped behind the apron, gripping the handle of the knife and ready to draw it.

"Awright, awright."

She was surprised by the fact he backed off so easily, but sped up nonetheless. Her hand remained on the knife for a few minutes before she was confident there was no one else close by.

Eventually she came face to face with a woman. She had beautiful strawberry blond hair, pale skin, and blue eyes. She was a pretty, buxom girl and her fair appearance and clean clothes meant that Mary had initially assumed she was from a similar background to herself.

"Who're you?" She questioned Mary, in a gentle Irish accent as fair as the rest of her. She remained silent.

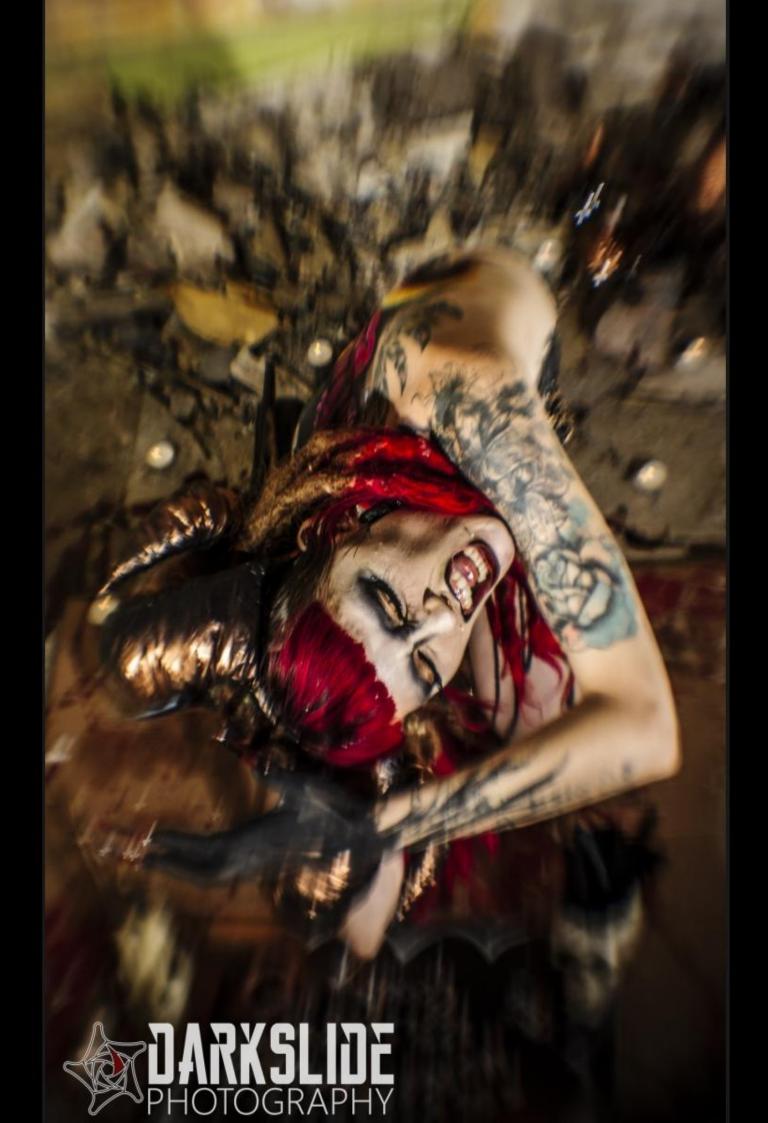
The woman didn't wait for a response before she continued, "I suggest you move on. This is my turf you're in." Mary realized now that her voice carried a menacing undertone, not the gentle one she had first heard.

Her hand had clasped the handle of the knife again. This time she drew it. "My name..." the fair woman's eyes widened and she turned to run away "...is Jack."

#### **About the Author:**

Lucy Emke is a post-graduate archaeologist and corset maker based between Norway and England. She has been published extensively as a non-fiction author and has recently branched out into the world of fiction. She is interested in historical fiction and horror. Her in-depth research for academic work has translated to thoroughly researched and historically accurate worlds for her short stories.

Facebook: Lucy Emke Instagram: @sewvictorian



# Avoidance of Sin | Ken Poyner

Thinking that some good could come
Of having a bit of real, crisp currency,
The cathouses of the dead elected
To push for an amendment to the ordinances
Of the Dead City: to allow –
On nights when the girls could
Summon themselves corporeal –
Admittance to living customers.
The cathouses had the political pull,
Given that, with death, all stigma
Concerning what was once illicit,
What was once bone searing and flesh rotting,

#### Disappeared.

The dead positively have no fear Of enjoying themselves, and being The source of pleasure is honored Like the development of the backbone. So

It was agreed: when the houses would appear
Out of the smoke of angered moss and the flailing
Fog Death made by pulling temperature out
Of the lazy air; when, and for how long, the ladies
Would draw again into place the semblance
Of flesh and the look of submission.
Advertising went out to the city of the living, and
A night of the rare physical raising of the ghosts
Was announced; placards were sent from

The Dead City to the nearby metropolis: Come to the experience without consequence, Come to the sounding of your depths; All our girls fade into ghosts again first thing tomorrow,

# What can you regret?

The living have never liked to be pinned down, To be forced openly to revisit their misdemeanors. Their moral consistency needs a loophole Just to subsist, a way to make the animal Line up with what they expect of the soul.

Morning, with the cash buried in an Indistinguishable wooden box beneath a family Gothic stone; with the stunned flesh Of men and boys stumbling back From a city once again imagined only; With all the living accounted for And having returned whole from the playground Of the incorporeal dead; and all The night's sins buried for all comers Neatly and undiscoverable, With no customer complaints: The light and dark remain distinct Until the next advertised rising.

## **Public Execution** | *Ken Poyner*

Half a day we travel for this

Most singular of spectacles – the execution

Of the paralyzed man. We are debating

If there will be a ramp, or strong men

To carry him up, a hoist, or something

Tied to horses with a driver and a lash.

I think:

A ramp with a bend, something to prolong
The dignity of gathering at the apex of the gallows.
No doubt

The rope will be lower, its length Calculated against the lost weight Of wasted legs, the added weight Of the chair. Smart men, as the witnesses Gather in audience strength, will still Be pushing the mathematics about, knowing The right drop pops the neck – too short And the man dangles; too long And the head separates – and just as they Consider it, the lunch vendors will be taking Illicit bets on each clear likelihood. It is The one time not a Sunday we can Forego work, when the family can be together, No pastor's eye to watch us, when father and child Can speculate each on what neither can know And what does not matter. Townsfolk Will get the closest, actually see the man, Hear the charges read. Many in their best clothes, They get to howl at the crime, clap at the verdict, Be the first to know if he is to drop In his own chair, or on a bench strapped together, Especially cut just to fit the trap. News will make its way back. We will have to stand in our wagon, Watch over ladies' hats, men's raised fists. We will not then know what he did, and no one Will know the why, but the godawful will of gravity Even at this poor end of the crowd Will snap us to attention, will tell us what it means To be free of suspicion, to be at the logical conclusion,

To be finally caught.

# Manteo Waterfront | Ken Poyner

The fisherman sets aside his rod And reaches to his hip Where he keeps his boning knife. A boater thinks at first He will fashion the line he was To tie his boat off with, Into a noose; but, instead, There is a gaff available on deck. A stray worker who had Been replacing boards on the Dock slips his hand further Down the shaft of his hammer, And the crease of his arm Goes love-locked for gravity. The woman in the harbormaster's office Finds a letter opener that is not plastic And last I saw She was sighting one-eyed from handle to point. It is time to leave. But before I can go I have To pass a sheaf of metal studs That surely have some good marine purpose, But which seem like they could Easily be used to run a man through. And I think. And I think even the water Has seen drowning, as well As quick, refreshing dips in the wet.

#### **About the Author:**

Ken Poyner's current books – "Constant Animals" (mini-fictions), "The Book of Robot" (speculative poetry), "Victims of a Failed Civics" (poetry) and "Avenging Cartography" (mini-fictions) – are available at the vending sites of Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and other booksellers. He is a retired Information Systems Security Manager, who now cheers his wife at her powerlifting affairs, and has long conversations with their four cats and betta fish.

Watch: the murderous tide.

Amazon Author Page: Ken Poyner Facebook: Ken Poyner

# The Never-ending | Hayden Quinn

Once upon a time there were two girls. Barely adults, yet they had too many choices to make. Annabelle, with hair like fire that her heart never could live up to, had to either be bold and start over or accept small town life forever. What held her back was Charlotte. There were so many choices in front of Charlotte that she felt she had none. Annabelle watched as the person she loved most in the world appeared to shrink like a flower in the desert. There had not yet been a right time to confess her love, instead she tried to support her as only a best friend can.

Until one day the few good things that Charlotte saw in her life were not enough, and she climbed into the bathtub fully clothed, blade in hand. The pain was worth the peace that followed, or at least she thought so at first.

From the moment she received the phone call, a darkness set upon Annabelle's world. She wondered if this was how it had looked to Charlotte all along. Still, it didn't make sense to her, even when she felt she was drowning in a sea of *what ifs*.

From the other side, the world looked very different to Charlotte. When she awoke she was dry but cold. She found herself alone, in a near empty room but for the chair she sat in and the TV on a stand in front of her. The gray walls around her were bare, with no windows. There was one door, which she ran at, praying there was something or someone on the other side who could help. No matter how much she rattled the handle, the door wouldn't move. When her hands felt raw and the shock that she was capable of feeling pain even though the scars on her wrists would suggest otherwise, she returned to her seat. Confused and distraught that she could still feel, she curled up and wept.

The TV turned on. On the screen she saw Annabelle. Annabelle, her best friend, with beautiful hair and a beautiful soul. But why was Annabelle on TV? Smiling, laughing, Charlotte would give anything to hear that laugh in person. Then she saw herself too, they were at her house playing *Fire Zombies 3*.

Not possible, she thought, it won't be released for months. She watched as they nudged each other, and laughed, both of their competitive sides unleashed as always from the moment the console was turned on. From the distance though, Charlotte noticed something. During the game, Annabelle had two opportunities to win and she didn't take them, even glancing at Charlotte both times.

There was a click and the scene changed. They were in Annabelle's bedroom, sitting quietly on the bed. Charlotte couldn't remember the two of them ever sitting there all seriously like that. She stayed curled up in the chair and listened as the Annabelle on the screen confessed her love. She felt a searing pain in her chest as her TV self told Annabelle that she felt the same way. They hugged, and kissed, and Charlotte couldn't bear it anymore, she jumped out of the seat and screamed.

It hit her then that she had had no reason to believe that after death would be something better than life. If she had thought the pain in life had been unbearable, it didn't compare to what she felt now, having to watch how her life would have played out if she hadn't taken the escape route.

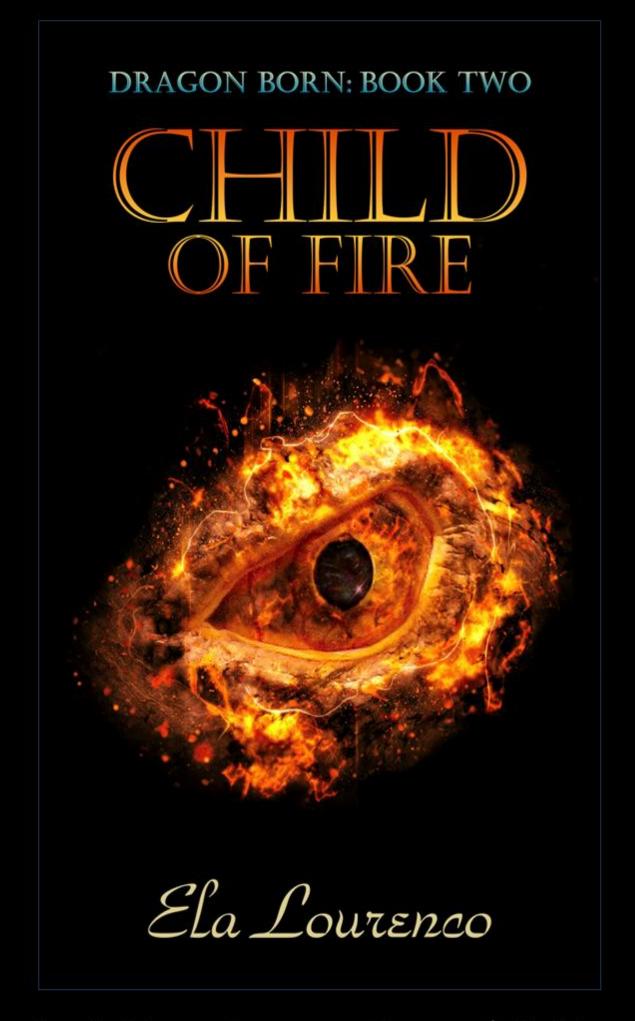
It only got worse with the next click. On the screen, the two of them moved away from their home town, started a new life. She could see they were in a city, with a nice apartment. By the time their wedding appeared on the screen, Charlotte was watching from the corner of the room, tucked away as small as she could. Annabelle looked so beautiful in a flowing white dress. From there she saw clips of them both as they grew together, their travels, first house, adopting a dog, then a child. Charlotte cried until there was nothing left and all she could do was stare.

When it was finally over, ending as the two of them, now gray-haired and frail, fell asleep beside each other for the final time, it was almost as much of a relief as death had been. She wondered what would come next, a lesson? Maybe a second chance at life?

Instead, something much worse than she could have imagined. There was another click, and the video was back to the start, with the two of them playing *Fire Zombies 3*. Once again, Charlotte screamed but it made no difference, this was how it would be from now on.

#### **About the Author:**

Hayden Quinn is a writer from Cheshire, UK. When she isn't putting her dark thoughts on paper, she's a teacher and a lover of many pets.



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

# Winter Mourning | Rayvn Salvador

Snow, white and clean, covers the ground, making everything look whitewashed and perfect. The crisp winter air is soundless, the stillness only broken by the occasional hoot of an owl. Directly in front of me, behind me, around me, lies nothing. No lights, no movement . . . just vastness. But a short ways ahead, a shadow breaks the ethereal glow of the snow in moonlight. A large shape; a form I'm familiar with.

I will my feet to move, to carry me forward, inching toward that hulking silhouette. The snow crunches beneath my shoes, a sound unlike any other. And in the distance, the croak of a raven. Then another, and another. An unkindness—ironic, that. The squawks grow in volume, a symphony of calls, as if trying to relay a message. I imagine the birds, their feathers shiny and black, eyes wise, smart, and a bit wild. I've felt that wildness of late. A discordance within me. It's why I snuck out earlier, removed the screen from my window and lowered myself down to the fluffy ground below. Quietly. Stealthily. Without Mom and Dad knowing. Now, to sneak back in without being seen or heard.

Closing in on the house, I start to see details, the waning moon revealing the stonework on the back of the structure and the deck surrounding the building. A twig snaps, sounding like a shot in the night, and I cringe. I look down, and my mind registers something it shouldn't. The pristine nature of the newly fallen snow is disturbed. A stain that seems alien—wrong.

I glance up at the house and see the curtains on my parents' window pulled closed. I chance getting discovered and pull out my phone—Mom always said my curiosity would get me into trouble. Thumbing a swipe upwards, I activate the quick menu and choose the flashlight feature, hiding the light with my hand so as not to disturb the peace of the backyard too greatly. When I find the right balance—enough to see by but not enough for anyone else to notice—I angle the phone down to the blotch beneath my feet.

I stumble back, gasping and falling on my ass in the snow, because surely my mind can't be registering what I think I'm seeing. A pool of red, almost black in the low light, steam rising like the surface of a cup of tea. My mind knows what it is, but I can't reconcile the truth.

Instincts kick in and I jump to my feet, flying into the house, unconcerned now whether I'm heard or discovered. More viscous matter spreads in swaths from the front door to behind the kitchen island. Bits of shape are visible but not easily recognizable in the sparse moonlight streaming through the kitchen window, and the light above the stove does nothing to help due to the angle. My breath catches in my throat and my heart picks up its pace.

I inch forward, needing to see yet fearing what might be revealed. Maybe an animal got into the house somehow, and Rocky had a midnight snack. The German Sheppard is an amazing watchdog, but he doesn't discriminate. Animal, person, dust mote . . . if he isn't told about it or introduced, he believes it doesn't belong in his home.

But this is no animal. No uninvited guest. I recognize the pajamas even if the rest of the body is no longer distinguishable. *Dad.* A scream bubbles up even as arms band around my body like a vice, and a hand snaps over my mouth, stopping any sound, keeping me from warning those I love. I struggle, fight, try to free myself, but all I hear is the rushing of blood through my veins. All I feel is the ice water and electricity sensation of adrenaline shooting through my body. And then . . . nothing.

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My head hurts. My throat burns. The metallic taste of blood coats my tongue, and its thick, copper scent fills the air. The space around me, a place that should be familiar, is foreign, alien to my senses. Nothing but barely discernable hulking shadows in the dark. The sight before me—or lack thereof—makes no sense to my addled mind, and the position I find myself in is even less understandable. I shake my head to clear it, and quickly turn my chin to retch, my forehead encountering a wall. A corner. From the scant moonlight filtering in through what I assume is a window somewhere, the carpet beneath me is a strange umber, the fibers both damp and crusty against my skin.

Flesh no longer hidden by clothes. Now instead covered by what I imagine are already visible bruises based on the way I feel. By other things I don't wish to contemplate. My hands are bound. My feet also. Brightly colored silk ties I recognize used in a way no man should ever entertain, their muted colors and patterns becoming obscene given the manner in which they've been employed. Another tie rings my neck, its slipknot just waiting to become a noose. My scalp feels raw and achy, as if my hair has been pulled, and I know that I've been hurt in other ways as well.

I clench my eyes shut and try to breathe, feeling the panic bubbling up in me, threatening to escape in sobs and shivers, throwing me into a complete meltdown. I feel a strange niggling in my brain, as if my psyche is threatening to shut down, to utterly shatter, leaving me a broken shell of the person I once was. Bits and pieces of my college psychology classes float to me as if on a breeze, and I know I'm close to the point of no return.

I take one more deep breath and open my eyes, trying to see more in the murky light, listening for any sounds, indications of what's happening around me. What I might have missed. I must have been unconscious for a time. That's the only explanation I can come up with for the way I feel, why I'm in the position I'm in, and have suffered the damage I have with absolutely no memory of it. I try to think back to the last thing I remember, and my mind rebels, causing a searing pain to ricochet through my skull. The nausea boils again, and I try hard not to vomit, the taste of bile and fear and despair filling my mouth.

A sound a short distance away draws my attention. A door opens, and a small shard of light dissects the blackness and shines into the room where I'm held. A glow suffuses the space, and I take in things I can now see better, items my brain finally registers instead of confused, shadowed shapes in the dark. A bedroom. But not *my* bedroom.

I turn my head to the left, to the focal point of the room: a grand four-poster bed. The linens I expect to see look wrong. Everything else about the scene is even more disturbing. When my brain catches up with what I'm viewing—my mother lying in a pool of dried blood, her sightless eyes staring up at the ceiling fan, her arms secured to bindings on the bedposts—my panic finally breaks free, and I scream: a guttural, deep, pain-filled wail that pierces the night. My sanity splinters.

I hear another noise and jerk my head to the right, just in time to see a hulking shape cross the threshold; a sinister sneer and cold, dead eyes pointed in my direction. But what really earns my attention is the glint of metal in the gloom. The shining surface of a large knife and the gloved hand holding it.

The sneer turns into a terrifying smile, just before a chilling laugh echoes through the space. "Shall we play?"

# **About the Author:**

Rayvn Salvador is a lifelong bibliophile who left her eighteen-year IT career to live her dream: getting paid to read and write. She lives in Florida with her hellion kitten and her incredibly supportive beau, dreaming about the Midwest's changing leaves as she perfects her yoga poses on the beach. Look for her next releases—*Your Move* and *The Relic*—coming soon.

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# Buzzing | Lynn White

I can hear the flies buzzing since I died. In life I could shoo them away, open a window to persuade them through, though usually they were too stupid to grasp the chance of freedom offered and escape. Now there is no window to be opened. This is a closed space. Eternal night. No possibility of freedom, or escape. Not for me.

# Holiday | Lynn White

Not for them.

Even Death needs to take a break sometime. Needs to sit on the beach in the sun with his scythe hidden, so as not to frighten the swimmers. Well, everything about Death has to be hidden. There can be no exposure beyond a few inches of face and hands, hardly more than a woman in a burka. Yes, everything has to be hidden, so as not to frighten the swimmers ready for when the holiday is over.

# In the End | Lynn White

In the end
I'll be like you.
Dust with
flakes of skin and bone
wrapped in long hair.
Teeth chattering
With no voice.
No sense of taste
or smell.
No reason.
In the end

we'll be invisible, impenetrable, anonymous, figments.
But then, we always were you and I, we always were.

# The Empty Room | Lynn White

When I was small my grandparents occupied the empty room - all eight of them. I know now that my great grandparents must have been there before. But I hadn't heard about great grandparents. I knew about grandparents because other children had them, though I never knew mine. They were always in the empty room. They left only to make way for my father. My mother joined him later. later still my brother displaced them. He's there still, but fading. But then, he always was a flimsy figure, hardly more real than my grandparents. It's still locked to me. I still can't get in. But I will one day when my brother leaves. I don't know when, though. Don't know how soon that will be.

# **About the Author:**

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. Her poem 'A Rose For Gaza' was shortlisted for the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition 2014. This and many other poems have been published in Vagabond Press, Apogee, Firewords, Indie Soleil, Light and Snapdragon.

Blog: Poetry – Lynn White Facebook: Lynn White Poetry

...Forced to survive the night alone in the desert with an aberration of nature...



Available for Purchase or Borrow Exclusively on Amazon

# Found Out In Left Field | Brenda Matteson

Laura sat stunned in a contraption her husband Ron had made. She sat in her favorite chair which had been modified with straps to hold her hands and ankles. The leather straps, though worn, were fastened tightly around her wrists and were cutting into her pale sweaty skin. To no avail, she tried to reach the wrist straps with her teeth to release herself from this madness.

Her ankle straps were not as tight, but she made little effort to get out of them. Even if she did manage to get free from them, she wouldn't be going anywhere. She could write with both hands but her feet? Well, she had two left ones that she constantly stumbled over.

She bent over as far as she could and struggled with the strap on her left wrist. She worked it for some time before Ron returned to the garage.

Opening the heavy wooden door, she drew in a deep breath and froze. *Had he seen her attempt to escape?* He marched in with a box of various shapes and sizes of wood, hammer, nails, screws, screwdrivers, nail gun, brads, staple gun, and construction grade staples. In the waistband of his trousers, he had his pistol. *When had he taken up carpentry?* 

Laura began asking him questions. "Why do you have me in this thing? Why did you ruin my favorite chair? What game are you playing? Why are ignoring me?"

It didn't take long for her desperate grasp at his whys than she began accusing and nagging at him. "This is just like you, quiet and ignorant! Why would I expect any different from you? It does no wonder your momma wants nothing to do with you! There's not much in life you can do but waste air, space, and human flesh," she screamed. "Oh wait, there is something you can do really well...tick me off!" she said as her face burned red with anger.

Ron continued with his work. He prepared the staple gun by adding the staples. Across his face grew a wide toothy smile. He turned to look at his wife's face, seeing nothing in her eyes but anger, he turned back to this workbench as his eyes passed over some drawings on the corner. Tears began rolling down his face.

Two years earlier their 15-year-old son was killed in a four-wheeler accident. He and some friends hit the woods near the neighborhood. Riding into the evening, tired and hungry Toby had a seizure and ran straight into a tree. He died instantly, his daddy's soul died with him. Ron and Laura struggled to move on from Toby's death. Attacking and blaming each other for the death of their only child.

Ron ran his fingers across the stick figure family. Taking a deep breath, he turned his head and retrieved the nail gun and brads out of the box. The air compressor sat in the closet of the garage. He pulled it out and hooked the air hose to the nail gun, and loaded the brads. Laying the nail gun on the counter, he grabbed his pistol from his waistband and checked it. He wasn't looking forward to that final part of his grand plan.

Laura had been watching Ron intently. She knew something was coming that was out of character for her husband. She had also seen him pause on the drawing of their happy stick family. She too teared up. But knowing all of this, she began nagging Ron again.

You will never learn. You are going to run your mouth until the day you die, which will be today. He closed his eyes and took deep slow breaths.

He walked over to her with the staple gun in hand. Grabbing her lips and pressing the gun to the top lip, he squeezed the handle. Empty round, staples jammed. She began screaming immediately. It was all he could do to hold her head still. He hit the handle one time to test the gun. A staple shot out of the gun and into the wooden floor next to Laura's foot.

Placing the tip of the staple gun to her top lip again and squeezing, the staple entered her lip with a jerk as he stapled her top and bottom lips to her chin. Laura screamed out and ripped her top lip in half all the way up to her nose. Blood poured and pooled on her shirt and lap. It was difficult for Laura to form words, but she still ran her mouth, spraying blood onto her husband's shirt and face.

He stepped over to his workbench and laid down the staple gun and grabbed the nail gun. He shot a round into her arm from five feet away. Her face was still red but not from anger alone.

Laura couldn't imagine what was going on in Ron's head. If she could get out of this, she'd make him pay! (She still wasn't getting it)

Grabbing Laura's face, he pried her jaws apart. Placing the nail gun head into her mouth, he shot her tongue three or four times pinning it to the roof of her mouth. She gurgled and coughed out blood. Laura was crying uncontrollably and gagging on her own blood as her mouth filled quickly.

As Ron stepped back, he noticed her eye growing blood red. One of the brads had apparently pierced her right eye. *I couldn't have planned that on my best day. Oh wait, this is my best day!* 

He lumbered over to the pile of wood scraps and picked out a round piece of plyboard. Nail gun still in hand, he walked over behind her. He placed the round board to her head and pulled the trigger. The compressor kicked in, air moving through the hose, and nailing the board to the back of her head. Laura passed out instantly.

Ron walked around to the pile and chose a 2 x 1" board about three feet long. He nailed this to the round plyboard and to the back of the chair. He then stepped away to think about his next move.

Laura woke in a slow and weakened state. Realizing she could no longer freely move her head nor could she speak, she moaned weakly and tried to look around the garage moving her eyes back and forth quickly. But because of the brad in her eye, she had to rely on peripheral vision. She couldn't see Ron. Where is he?

Laura was in a great deal of pain, all over really but especially her mouth and the back of her head. The taste of blood made her heave. Vomiting now would be really bad.

Suddenly there was a noise, a slight cough behind her.

Ron stood and came around where she could see him. For the first time, she realized how stressed he was. All she could do was look at him with concern. The realization came to her suddenly; she had driven him to do this. But she never would have imagined he could be so cruel and violent.

Ron noticed that her countenance had changed. She now had no anger written on her face, only soft concern. *How dare she?* He needed to make her angry at him again. There was no way he could continue to torture her if she maintained this soft composure.

Grabbing the staple gun, he grabbed her ear and stapled it to her head. No reaction except a wince and a muffled cry. Tears flowed freely but she didn't become angry.

Funny how you can love someone so much and somehow, somewhere you lose the love. Tragedies of life change people in drastic ways. Love becomes a bitter taste in the mouth. It's a sad truth.

Ron could only look at her, and he could see and feel her regret. And now he felt his own regrets too. He looked at what he'd done, he was horrified. No way could he live with himself after this.

Ron walked outside and called 911. Told them his wife needed help. When they asked what was going on he said, "I tried to kill her." Giving the address and where to find her, he ended the call.

Slowly, he walked back inside his garage. He grabbed his pistol and placed it in his mouth and then quickly pulled the trigger as he stood in front of his wife.

#### **About the Author:**

Brenda Matteson, from Spring Lake NC, has been writing poetry most of her life. She recently added writing short stories to her passion for reading, photography, and various crafts.

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# Emmelina Tastes the Bitter End | C.A. Yates

"I've got a secret," Emmelina whispered to Death, "I'm already dead."

Death said nothing.

The air in the room had grown ominously cold but she did not shiver against its bite. The dark cloaked figure stared down at her and Emmelina stared back, stared it right in the eye sockets, and she did not, would not, blink. She knew if she blinked it would be over, it'd take her and that would be that. She wasn't ready, she would never be ready. She still had so much to do, so many lessons to teach, so much love to give, to find.

The bed of bones around her wept blood, evidence of her most recent spoils, but she did not look away even as Death's minions bustled around the room, prodding and poking at the remnants of her feast, disapproving little sighs and tuts punctuating their perusal. The sound of her stomach rumbling, angrily full, tried to drown them out.

"I was never even alive," she said. "I don't feel anything inside, you see. I can't. It's not that I don't understand it, it's that I just don't feel it."

Death said nothing.

"I need to find the one who gets it, the one who makes me feel. I need more time."

Death said nothing.

Emmelina sighed, still refusing to blink. Her eyes were beginning to sting, pinpricks of lachrymal fluid blurring her sight a little, but still she stared.

Death said nothing.

Its minions scuttled among the bones and whispered to each other and Death said nothing while Emmelina stared.

When they were done, the shadowy creatures returned to their master, its dark cloak absorbing them as they clustered around its legs, clamouring to be let back in. Emmelina wondered what they were, what their job was.

Still Death said nothing.

Slowly, it bent towards her, stooping low until its hood was level with her face. Darkness swelled out from within the confines of the fabric and Emmelina's eyes widened. It spilled out of the hood towards her, into her, and every memory she had made, every life she had ended, every body she had tortured, limb she had severed, song she had sung, meal she had eaten, boy she had kissed, every breath she had taken came back to her in a rush. The darkness became red as her deeds mounted up. Her glorious deeds! Emmelina's blood quickened as the sum of her life's work was laid out before her, her *legacy*, and she felt such pride swell in her chest she could barely contain it. Tears spilled down her cheeks at her magnificence. Oh, the things she had done, the risks she had taken, the lessons she had given and learned in return!

Death sliced one long bony finger across her throat as she stared into the hood so that Emmelina did not notice the blood spilling from the open wound until its warmth hit her chest.

"Sneaky."

Emmelina blinked.

#### **About the Author:**

C.A. Yates has written lots of odd stories. Her last one appeared in Kristell Ink's anthology *Hanging on by Our Fingertips* and her next is in BFS Award-winning press Fox Spirit Book's upcoming *The Jackal Who Came in From the Cold*. She narrates for podcasts such as *Pseudopod, Cast of Wonders*, and *Star Ship Sofa*.

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## Death is an Asshole | Christopher Hivner

I saw Death on Pleasant Ave., next to the gas station late this morning.

I was on my way to an early lunch meeting when I saw him; a cloaked figure walking slowly down the sidewalk. As I drove through the traffic light, I realized it was the Grim Reaper himself; his flowing, dirtencrusted robe sliding along the ground as he walked down the street.

Curious, I followed. His stride was halting and unsure, which surprised me. The hood of his robe covered his face completely, but I could tell by his movements that he was looking for something. With traffic coming up behind me, I pulled ahead of him and parked.

Looking through my rear view mirror, I realized he was checking a slip of paper in his hand. He was searching for an address. I knew I was crazy, but I decided to help. Don't get me wrong; I knew this wasn't helping a little old lady across the street. It was Death, for God's sake, but I felt compelled to assist. My approach was cautious to say the least. "Excuse me, can I help you?"

"What?" he looked up from the scrap of paper. His voice was deep and gravelly, like a tired grandpa. "You seem to be lost. I thought I could help."

"Lost? I'm not lost, you worm!" He pulled his scythe from underneath the cape and shook it at me.

"Go away before I claim your soul!" He raised the scythe overhead, but it was all very amateurish. I felt like I was watching a high school production of a Bergman film.

"Okay," I sighed. "Good luck." I walked away, kind of disappointed. Halfway to my car, I turned back around. He was still standing there, scanning house numbers. I took one more step toward my car before heading back. I didn't say anything, but reached out and took the slip of paper from him. He didn't resist.

"I'm lost."

"I know." I looked at the address: 13 North Pleasant Ave. I chuckled. "Wow, this is a coincidence. I know where this is. My buddy Spence used to rent this house. Come on."

I led the Grim Reaper across the street. We walked between two houses to a small one-story that sat behind. I pointed to the front door.

"It sits back off the street, but the property runs straight out."

"That's it?" The Reaper looked around, shaking his head, the hood flapping in the breeze. "But the house to the left is number 3, and the one on the right is 17 with this one between...that makes no *sense*."

"Yeah, I know, but I assure you this is 13 N. Pleasant."

He grunted a thank you and walked to the front door, passing through it. I should have gone back to my car and headed off to my meeting, but I waited. It was only moments before he melded back out the door. His pace was slow, the scythe dragging behind him listlessly. As he passed me, his head turned. "This is so embarrassing," he said in a low voice before turning away again.

"What's wrong?" I asked. Death sighed so deeply I felt the ground rumble beneath me. "First, I get lost. Me! The Grim Reaper wandering around reading directions. Now I get here and . . . he's not home. In fact, it looks like he may have moved. The place is cleaned out."

I started to put my hand on his shoulder but quickly pulled it back. "So, you're having a bad day. It happens..." I thought I actually heard him laugh.

"Not to me it doesn't; this all used to be instinct for me. Now, I don't know."

"You want to go get a cup of coffee?" I blurted out. "Talk about it?" It looked at first as if I had angered him again, but he softened then nodded before walking away.

We went down the street to a diner called The Singing Dolphin. Sitting at a table along the back wall away from curious eyes, we ordered coffee. I would have thought Death was a black coffee man, but he ordered a half latte cappuccino with light foam and a shaving of cinnamon. The waitress brought the drinks.

"You fellows sure you don't want anything to eat; it's almost lunch time?" she asked. I shrugged my shoulders in Death's direction.

"I could go for salmon cakes. Is the salmon fresh or canned?" he asked.

"Canned, I think," the waitress replied.

"Oh. Just give me an egg salad sandwich then."

I went with a mushroom and Swiss burger. I was fascinated by this whole experience, but I didn't want to press, so I just drank my coffee and waited. At first, the Reaper was very fidgety, moving around in

his seat a lot. It wasn't until he lit up a Camel unfiltered that he started to relax. Finally, he looked at me as though just remembering I was there.

"I was trying to quit," he said, holding the cigarette out for inspection. "Bad week for that parlor trick." He chain-smoked three Camels before talking again. "I'm so damn tired," he said softly. "I didn't used to get tired; I could collect souls all day and party all night. Now I get awake coughing up black mucus, bones cracking. My scythe work is terrible. I used to be like a samurai with this thing. Now I'm slow and off the mark too often."

"I was going to say that it happens to everyone as we get older, but that doesn't really apply to you, does it?"

"Not supposed to, no. But it's happening. And everyone is noticing too." There was a long, painful pause as he took small bites of his egg salad sandwich. He sighed deeply again. "There's a new guy, you know."

"What?'

"Yes. Calls himself Death Dealer. They're trying him out in Detroit. If he does a good job, I'm out."

"I can't believe that."

"The hell of it is he started in the secretarial pool at the office; we used to have him paging Seymour Butts and Amanda Hugandkiss all day. Now he's one step from replacing me. I was born to this job! I didn't start at entry level minimum wage. I'm the Grim-fucking-Reaper!"

I should have been scared at this outburst. I mean, this was *Death*; one touch of his finger and I'd be worm-food. But it didn't faze me. Don't get me wrong; I didn't want to die; I just wasn't scared of Death himself. I ate my burger, trying to decide how to get out of this gracefully. I felt bad for the guy in a way, but there was nothing I could do.

I watched him finish his egg salad, picking at it like a fussy child. He took a sip of his drink then complained that it had grown cold. I almost chuckled but held it in. This wasn't the experience I thought it would be. I finished my burger while breathing in more of Grim's cigarette smoke and was getting ready to make my exit when his iPhone vibrated on the table. He reached for it and started complaining again.

"Who's sending me a text? It better not be filled with emoticons, can't stand them..." The Reaper brought up the text. I leaned in to read over his shoulder. It was from his nemesis, Death Dealer; a link to an article on the Rolling Stone website.

"The hell...?" the Reaper mumbled then clicked on the link. The post loaded with a headline: "Classic Song to be Updated." I read:

70's rock band Blue Oyster Cult has entered the recording studio to work on their latest CD. One of the songs they will be working on is an update of their iconic hit *Don't Fear the Reaper*. "We felt it was time to revisit the tune, considering the changing times," said guitarist Buck Dharma. The music is basically the same with a harder edged guitar riff and new solo written by Dharma. The big changes are the words and the title, which will now be *Don't Fear the Death Dealer*.

"Uh oh," I heard myself utter while sliding back into my seat. The Reaper stared at the screen, whispering something I couldn't make out. Then I saw his gnarled hand shake. Having angered many a teacher while I was in school with a prank at an inopportune time, I recognized a volcano about to erupt. I slunk down from my chair until I was almost under the table. His fingers closed around the iPhone, plastic and glass crunching as the pieces fell to the floor.

"NO!" The Reaper shouted. "That's MY song! I helped write the chorus doing lines of coke off a stripper's ass with Eric Bloom. I can't stand it any longer!"

I peeked from my hiding place under the table cloth and saw him lean back, looking upwards. His arms were outstretched, his scythe gripped tightly in his right hand.

"I...AM...THE...GRIM...REAPER!" The front window of the restaurant blew out, shooting glass thirty feet into the air. Then he completely lost control, swiping his scythe through the air in an arc. Our waitress and five other customers fell over dead. His hissy-fit lasted several minutes, consisting of mostly growling and stomping his feet around the restaurant. The Camels finally caught up with him though, and he collapsed into his seat, breathing heavily, mumbling to himself.

I crawled out from under the table, stood, and walked over to where our waitress lay on the floor. She was blond, maybe 5'3", looked to be about twenty years old. Two men, both retirement-age, sat in a booth a few feet away, heads on the table, as though they'd both abruptly dozed off in the middle of lunch. Near the Dolphin's entrance, a man in a suit had slid to the floor, his legs bent at a painful angle while his head stayed resting on the table next to his Caesar salad. In the dark of the far corner, a married couple sat side by side, his head resting in her lap with her bent over his back.

I stood for a long time, barely breathing. Did I cause this? If I'd just gone to my meeting and left Death alone, he wouldn't have been in the restaurant when he got the text. Why did I have to mess around with something I didn't understand? I was angry at myself, but the more I stared at the bodies, the more angry I grew with Death. This had to be fixed. I walked over and stood in front of the Reaper.

"Bring them back," I said, pointing behind me at the dead. There was no response. "Bring them back!" I shouted. This time he looked up.

"You don't give me orders," he growled. He was trying for Dirty Harry era Clint Eastwood but wasn't pulling it off. I wasn't scared of him. I had to make this right.

"And you," I began, "don't get to kill innocent people because you can't take some trash talking."

Death looked around the room, shaking his head. "I admit I lost my temper, but I still can't bring them back."

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"Why?"
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"It's complicated; lots of paperwork. Reanimation isn't cheap. This will come out of my paycheck..."

"Fix it."

"Look..."

"Fix it."

He sat for a long time, not moving, not speaking. I think he was waiting for me to leave, but I didn't budge. I stood closer to him than was comfortable and never shifted my gaze. Finally, he dropped his head, swore under his breath, and stood. He spoke words I couldn't understand, waving his scythe over those he had taken.

I almost passed out when I saw the bodies stir. I went over and helped the waitress to her feet, then we both attended to the man in the suit whose right ankle seemed to be sprained. As we helped him into his chair, elevating his leg onto another, the two retired gentlemen rose from their slump, commenting on the broken window.

I slipped into a corner to call 911 on my cell. The Grim Reaper was gone. I was glad. I don't know what possessed me that day to stop and talk to Death. Work was boring, so I guess I saw a chance for excitement. What I got was a peek at Death that I didn't need. I knew I would see him again someday, or perhaps I would meet his replacement, Death Dealer. Either way, I hoped it was a long way off, and that he wasn't quite so big of an asshole.

# **About the Author:**

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books and the echoes of music. He has recently been published in *Yellow Mama, Grievous Angel* and *The Horror Zine*. A collection of short stories, "The Spaces Between Your Screams" was published by eTreasures Publishing.

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Driven underground by those of the light...

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# The Washer of the Ford | Bryan Marshall

On the way home there was a bridge. Just a footbridge, nothing for cars. They had to risk the ford. The footbridge was rickety, dilapidated, slats loose or missing, and the wood spongy. Stumbling, pub-drunk, I would shiver past the small weir, hearing the subtle current splashing underfoot, quiet, yet amplified in the dark.

If I dared to lift my eyes, sometimes she would be there. At her work. Her hands chafed and scoured by the near-freezing water, scraped raw by the coarse fabric she clutched within her fingers. I would watch, unable to turn away, as she washed the bloody clothes of the soon-to-bedead in the clean, night-fresh stream. Iron-red dissolving into the gray steel froth of the river. The grim victims of battles that were yet to be fought, but with their outcomes already decided.

She would turn to me, look me cold in the eyes, and flash me that toothless, expressionless smile. A bitter shark's smile out of which all joy had been rent, and I knew that she knew. That she knew she could not take me.

She remembered that night. The night when she lost me. Forsook me.

Drunker than usual, I had laughed my way homewards, the spritz of rain and the gallant wind ushering me on. And, having tripped and skipped over the bridge, I looked up, and there she was. Watching me.

But that night, she was different. Youthful, vivacious. Ripe. I caught her eye, caught the glint, coughed a breathless chuckle into my sleeve, and approached her. She was a luscious thing, inviting. Accommodating. I learned the meaning that night of a word I thought I already knew: desire. And its deep fulfillment.

Little did I know that through those few moments of ecstasy, that chance act, that fleeting dance by the riverside, I would save myself. That legions of soldiers, whole battalions destined for destruction, would march off to their fate, while I stayed safe.

It was only when I left her, when we parted, that I noticed the bones. The shore of the river was littered with the white stony remnants of those that had passed before me. She knelt among them, heard their clatter as they shifted with the current, indifferent to the sound of a thousand lives lost right there at her feet.

We remember those who sacrifice themselves in the name of causes, those causes that are the cause of their deaths. Their clothes will always be bloody. The river will always run red.

Her job will never be done.

# **About the Author:**

Bryan is originally from Scotland and now lives in Wales, where he works in a bookshop (despite having a PhD in music). He has had poetry, flash fiction and short stories published online and in print, and runs a free weekly writing group. He takes part regularly in open mic poetry events, often wearing his leather kilt.

Facebook: <u>Bryan Marshall</u> Facebook Group: <u>Bryan's Angels</u>

## The Whispering Woods | Anna Rymer

They told me not to go in there. Into the woods where the *you-know-whats* lurk. Huge hulks of brown fury, all claws and teeth and menace. They said terrible things would happen to me if I did. I weaved a finger into my locks as I listened, smiled and nodded.

"No mama, no papa, I won't go in there. Not ever, I promise."

But promises are hard to keep. Especially when the whispers call your name. Especially when your heart beats with adventure.

I took three steps beyond the line of trees. Just three. Just to see, and smell, and taste the forest.

A chill descended, creeping from the shadows like icy daggers driven through my skin. Trees repeated into nowhere and I sighed with the pull to see where they might end. I raised my foot to trespass further, to follow the tickle of pine cones at my nose. But the *you-know-whats* were watching from the darkness. Teeth bared, eyes hungry. Their fury at my boldness electrified the air.

I sensed their gaze too late. Three small steps to safety was one too many. As I stumbled back, their teeth found flesh and ripped it from my bones. And my screams live on in my mother's aching stare.

Now I roam the forest. My voice a whisper.

# Let Me Go | Anna Rymer

She came to me three times — in the night when sleep masked my senses, the dark laying heavy on my eyes. The first time was simply a whisper. Three words on a breath, "Let me go."

I leapt up with a start, heart pounding, eyes wide, searching the darkness of my bare boned room. "What? Who's there?" There was nobody there of course, and I put it down to words leaking from a dream.

The second time was a touch, cold and raw, like an ice shard driven bone deep. I awoke with great roars bellowing from my heart, checking myself all over. I felt like I'd never be warm again, and I was right. The third time was the last time and there was no escaping who she was.

She stood over me as I opened my eyes. Her hair hanging like curtains around my face. Her eyes sucking at my evil. "Please..." a whimper from my lips. She cocked her head, her eyes never leaving mine, and lifted a finger to her lips. Her other hand came to rest at my throat, freezing my words as they formed.

"Let ... me ... go," she said, the smell of rotting flesh spilling over my face.

But I hadn't. And now the tables had turned.

She smiled, her mouth full of broken teeth, and then began on me.

#### **About the Author:**

Anna Rymer is a Writer and Mother living on the Wirral in Merseyside. Her writing has appeared in *The Cabinet of Heed, the Same Journal* and the *National Flash Fiction Day Anthology 2018*. She also publishes flash fiction on her blog *The Write Time*. Anna is currently working on her debut middle-grade fantasy novel, whilst juggling various jobs, her children and a massive to-read list.

Blog: <u>The Write Time</u>
Twitter: <u>@annarymerwriter</u>

## I planted my garden | Joan McNerney

on the wrong side of moon forgetting tides of ocean lunar wax wane

only madness was cultivated there underground tubular roots corpulent veins

flowers called despair gave off a single fruit...

I ate it my laughter becoming harsh my eyes grew oblique.

#### Fear | Joan McNerney

Sneaks under shadows lurking in corners ready to rear its head folded in neat lab reports charting white blood cells over edge running wild.

Or hiding along icy roads when day ends with sea gulls squalling through steel gray skies.

Brake belts wheeze and whine snapping apart careening us against the long cold night.

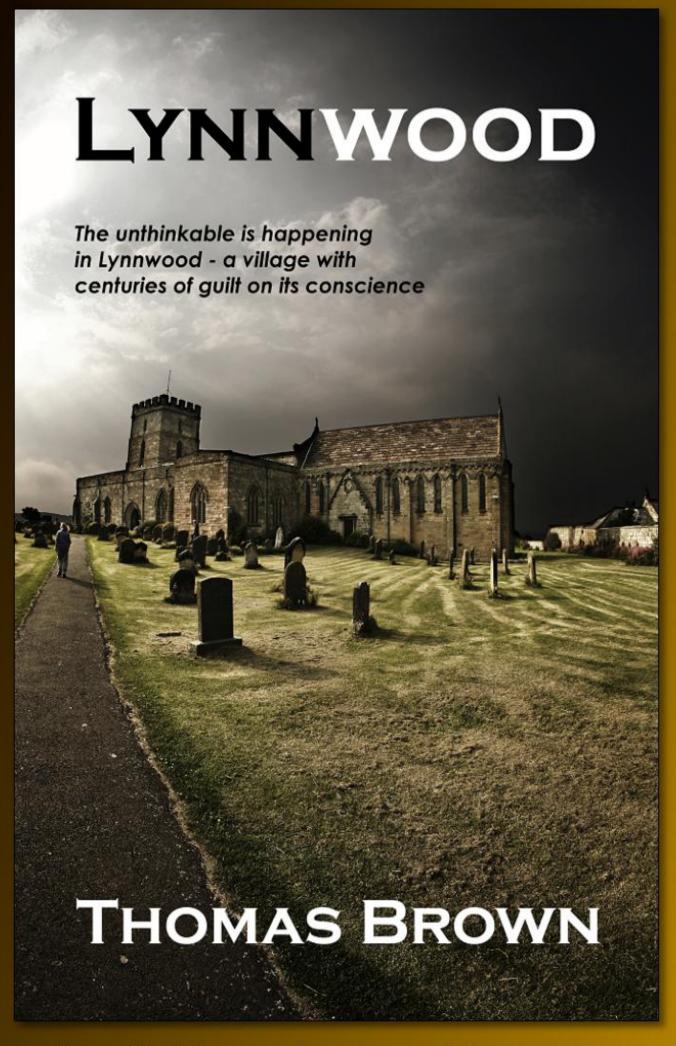
Official white envelopes stuffed with subpoenas wait at the mailbox.

Memories of hot words burning razor blades slash across our faces.

Fires leap from rooms where twisted wires dance like miniature skeletons. We stand apart inhaling this mean air choking on our own breath.

#### **About the Author:**

Joan McNerney's poetry has been included in numerous literary magazines such as Seven Circle Press, Dinner with the Muse, Moonlight Dreamers of Yellow Haze, Blueline, and Halcyon Days. Four Bright Hills Press Anthologies, several Poppy Road Review Journals, and numerous Kind of A Hurricane Press Publications have accepted her work. Her latest title is *Having Lunch with the Sky* and she has four Best of the Net nominations.



Available on Amazon May 2013

#### The Final Descent | Deirdre Hughes

George Martin had arranged a miserly leaving do for the mill workers. Sausage rolls and sandwiches. That was about the height of it.

It was the least that he could give them after all the years of drudgery and hard labor they had devoted to the business that made him so successful. And, lord knows, he always gave them the least that he could.

His was among the last working linen factories in Belfast. He'd kept it going for as long as possible but alas, the demise of his trade since the end of the war was unstoppable. The days when the textile industry dominated the city had been consigned to history. Belfast was no longer 'The Linen Capital of the World'.

George thanked the women for their service as they shuffled out the door, saying their goodbyes to one another, some with tears in their eyes at the loss of the camaraderie that was so often the only thing that got them through the day. While he may have been a mean, cold and cruel man, he had impeccable manners.

For the last time, he did the rounds of the rooms that had once been filled with the chaos of women and children working mill machinery. He was reminded of the deafening noise, suffocating heat, steam, oil fumes and fine linen fibers that permeated the air and of what a relief it was to retreat to his office and close the door behind him.

It was the end of an era, he thought to himself as he locked each door, in turn. Every night, for forty years, he had put the warehouse to bed in this way. He wondered what would become of the place now that these property developers had bought it. Apartments or offices, he presumed.

Waiting for the elevator to ascend the five stories to collect him, whereupon he would open its wrought iron gate and step inside to make his final descent, it occurred to him that this antique would probably be the first thing to go if the new owners had any sense. It had always given him the creeps.

He was not overly fond of small spaces at the best of times, but to be locked in a box hanging from a series of electric cables, making sudden jerking movements and suspect noises as it lifted and lowered was enough to make your hairs stand on end.

Still, it wouldn't take longer than 30 or 40 seconds to reach the ground floor. It had been a long day and he had much to carry, so the stairs were not an inviting option.

In he went, his books and boxes under his arm, stepping as lightly as he could onto the floor because it felt unsteady beneath his feet and he always worried, perhaps irrationally, that it might give way. Pressing the 'G' button, followed by the 'Close door' button, he looked through the tiny, prison cell-like window as the office floor slipped out of view.

Seconds into his decent, the lights above started to flicker and the motion of the elevator came to a sudden halt. He felt a surge of panic.

"Hello?" he yelled, desperately hoping that he was not the only one left in the building. "Is anybody there? Hello?" Crushingly, he heard nothing but the echo of his own voice.

He sounded the alarm by pressing the emergency button, but after an hour came and went, the siren unheeded, it was clear that nobody was within range of the motionless elevator and its captive.

Banging his fists against the wooden panel walls, he screamed repeatedly, as loud as his vocal chords would allow. But again, there was no response. His pleas became more and more frantic as he remembered that the new owner was not due to start work on the property for at least a month. There might not be another soul in the building for all that time.

George held his hands to his head in despair, his eyes welling up with tears as he imagined all the potential end case scenarios. He must compose himself. He must conserve energy, or he would run out of air. Already, it felt stifling. Already, he was finding it hard to breathe.

While focusing on slowing down his breathing and gaining control of his emotions, George felt himself surrounded by an ice-cold pocket of air. It sent a chill down his spine and triggered the release of a cloud of condensation from his mouth each time he exhaled.

All at once, the lights went out and the alarm stopped ringing. In total darkness and the dead of silence, George had the indisputable feeling that he was not alone.

He closed his eyes, sheer terror overwhelming him, and tried to will the unknown presence away but the cold lingered and the sense that someone was right beside him was growing ever stronger.

Above the noise of his chattering teeth, he could hear the sound of a woman's raspy voice whispering into the ether "I can't breathe Mr. Martin. I can't breathe..."

George covered his ears with his hands and curled himself into a ball to escape the presence as best he could, but this only made the voice louder and the presence angrier.

"I can't BREATHE Mr. Martin. I can't BREATHE," she insisted.

With sudden clarity, George knew where he had heard that voice before. It was the voice of Betty Sutton, a former employee who had died of tuberculosis twenty years earlier.

Her voice was memorable not only because of its distinctive rasp, due to her worsening lung condition, but because her family had tried to blame the 'excessive working hours' and 'damp, difficult working conditions' at the mill for her eventual demise. George was having none of it. He had kept her family afloat for years if anything.

His panic reaching crescendo, George began to hyperventilate. Grasping at his neck, he coughed and spluttered violently, writhing due to the acute respiratory distress caused by his asphyxiation.

In the grip of death, gasping for breath, George's face took on a bluish hue and his spewed sputum left a bloody trail down his chin and all over his shiny new tailor-made suit.

His cough, now uncontrollable, catapulted bloody clots all over the walls and the window and the floor onto which he slipped and fell, his head landing with an audible thud on the open page of one of the log books kept by his secretary which comprised a list of former employees and the official dates/causes of their deaths: Employee #293: Karen Walker. Died Oct. 1939, pneumonia; Employee #303: Betty Sinclair. Died Nov. 1945, tuberculosis; Employee #340: Andrea Wilson. Died Jan. 1946, tuberculosis; Employee #315: Fiona Goddard. Died Dec. 1947, pneumonia. The list went on.

And that's when George's heart stopped.

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The construction workers contracted to renovate the old linen mill had to call in a specialized engineer to fix the elevator that was stuck between floors.

The bloody window, which became visible once the elevator was level with the ground floor, was the first indication that something was amiss. The putrid smell that escaped when the engineer managed to prize open the door was the second.

Nothing could have prepared the onlookers though, for the scene with which they were met when they looked inside. The partially decomposed and liquified remains of a man in a suit, his face contorted in fear, his blood everywhere.

Most shocking of all, however, were the unmistakable words written boldly in blood on the page of a black log book underneath the rotting head of George Martin. At the bottom of a list of women and children who had died while employed at the mill, the dates on which they died and their causes of death it read: 'Owner: George Martin. Died July 1965, atonement.'

### **About the Author:**

Deirdre Hughes, who has a background in addiction counselling and health psychology, has been writing songs since the late 1990's. As well as being a contributing writer for the online production company 'Hitrecord' for the past five years, while caring for her disabled mother, she has written numerous articles for the online magazine 'Suite 101', a feature length screenplay and two poetry chapbooks.

Twitter: @DeeDeeEHughes

## Virginia Creeper | Edward Ahern

Leg's broke, I think. Reach down, shithead, and check. Back's all twisted. Slow, slow, Ooh. (Scream) Shin bone's sticking out. Not much blood yet. Can't move.

"Help!" (ten second pause) "Help!" (Twenty second pause) "Help!!"

Nobody cuts through this ravine but me and some kids. Must've fallen off the path. Man this is going to hurt godawful when the booze wears off.

"Help!" Hurts to yell. Must have crunched my chest. What the hell did I fall into? Virginia creeper. All wrapped up in it. How many truckloads of these vines did I rip out when I worked landscaping? Weeds got me covered. Hurt's coming on.

Sensations. Roots ripped out. Leaves torn off. Vines snapped. Light blocked. Oozing. Sap congealing. Refocus growth. Sunlight. Tendrils and pads. Leaves. Vines. Wrapped around warm mound.

Must've passed out. Aw, man, I shit myself. Ass crack's so raw it feels like the skin's been ripped off. Still can't move. Leg throbs now, bursting with pain without I even touch it. Ribs screaming at me. Bottle is gone somewhere. Look around. Virginia creeper's all over me, some poison ivy too, booze could be under any of it.

"Help!" Jesus it hurts to yell. Bugs. Damn bugs are everywhere. Flies. Mosquitoes. It's the smell of the blood and the crap. And maybe my stink. AGGh. Hurts to move my arms. Can't wave them away. Feels like my chest bones are snapped. Biting little bastards. Sun's dropping. Dark soon. Nobody'll be coming through here tonight.

Light dwindles. Pores closing. Growth slows. Breathing changing. No more day gas. Exhale night gas. Leaves under mound shriveling. Fluids redirect. Animal mound noises. Mound movements stop. Mound warm. Wet against tendrils and sucker pads. Extend tendrils. Grow into wet.

"Hurry up Sammy, it's freakin' dark already."

"You can fall on your ass if you want, I'm getting home slow and clean."

"Old, drunk Ralph comes through here sometimes. You can wait for him if you want."

"Shut up Pete. I heard Ralph got thrown out of the Town Tap again last night. Drunken bastard."

"What's that stink? Smells like somebody took a dump. Ralph probably left a turd for you to step on."

"Screw you. Stay close. Follow me."

Passed out again. Hurts. God damn. Ribs, leg. Leg all swole, infected. Must've ripped open a nerve. Can't stand it. (Keening whine of intolerable pain) Light's coming up. False dawn. Birds'll be singing soon. Birds. Bugs. All singing. Stop the pain! Please God, stop the pain!

Burrow. Grow. Climb. Burrow. Grow. Climb. Coagulating fluid. Water containing. Focus tendrils and pads. Absorb. Soft, suppurating animal tissue. Burrow. Absorb. Grow.

(Shrill, constant whimper) Jesus Christ, something's gotten into my busted leg. Hurts, mother of God hurts even worse. Can't move any more. (Enamel of clinched teeth begins to crack).

Unknown agony infusion. Rootedness means no retreat. Can't avoid. To shrivel is death. Counter. Push fluids into warm, nutritious rot.

Ohh. My leg. Numb. Like a double hit of Oxycontin. Back. Chest. Ass. All still hurt like hell. Hurt. Hurt. Hurt.

Agony still in mound. Pump more sap. Grow into the rich rot.

Ohh. Pain burying itself. Leg throbs like a pile driver, but no feeling except for pressure. Thank you, God. Thirsty. Throat feels like it got toasted. Hungry. Not thinking too good. Jesus, the Virginia creeper's got me covered up. Nobody'll see me. Nobody'll find me. Nobody cares anyway. Losing it. Comfortable numb. Like under flannel sheets and heavy blankets. Thank you.

Hurt fading, then gone. Stop sap outflow. Rot spreading, burrow further. Burrow. Spread. Climb. Burrow. Spread. Climb. Grow.



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

### The Babysitter | Charles Ceates

"Ok, so you have my phone number, I have food in the fridge, but I've left you some money for takeout if nothing picks your fancy," Mrs Masatin rattled off, counting off her fingers as she tried to remember everything to tell Rachael, before finally shrugging her arms and smiling at her. "You'll be fine, Rachael. Rosemary should be fast asleep in her room, so you don't really need to bother her. I just want someone in the house while I go out. My husband is away for a few hours, so expect either me or him."

"I completely understand, Mrs Masatin," Rachael said, nodding her head, politely smiling, but internally begging God to make her boring new employer hurry up with her speech. She had mentioned something about a business party to her, and she did look all done up. Black overcoat, simple yet expensive looking make-up, black stilettos. "Don't worry, everything will be fine. You followed up my reference information, and I'll call you if anything comes up. You just have yourself a good night, you deserve it."

The young businesswoman seemed to understand from Rachael's tone, and nodded her head once, returning Rachael's smile as she adjusted her handbag and clicked once on the button of her car keys, making the expensive sports car outside her large gate beep once.

"I'll see you later!" Mrs Masatin called out behind her, her heels clicking against the long drive way in rapid succession as she made her way to her car. Rachael was already making her way towards the door when the car motor started up. Easy money, she thought, nothing but telly and chilling out.

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"And coming up next is David, with an update on the I'm Satan serial killer..."

Dave can shut up, thought Rachael, as she clicked the television off on the remote and sighed aloud in boredom. It was now 12:03am, her employer wasn't back for another couple of hours, and the appeal of ordering a pizza and blasting through a stranger's Netflix queue – though entertaining at first – had lost its appeal. Half of the Margherita and jalapeno pizza lay open in its box, cold and untouched. The sound of the fire burning and wood cracking her only company, she idly looked around the living room, admiring the expensive models and paintings that she hadn't paid much attention to. Even the plain wooden floor, whitewashed walls, and plain furniture screamed money.

"Wonder if she's got any cash lying about..." she whispered to herself, and jumped to her feet, a new sense of excitement overwhelming her. As she went up the stairs, a blend of thoughts overwhelmed her mind. What if the Masatin family has security cameras? They probably keep all their goods in a safe. They wouldn't notice some money being pinched, would they? They're loaded. The thoughts were swept away by waves of anticipation and rebellious excitement. As she went onto the second landing, she stood up on the balls of her feet and slowed her pace, moving more stealthily in fear of waking up the baby. She peeked into the door in front of her, which looked to be the Masatin parent's bed room, and made for the first item of interest: the large desk in the far-off corner of the room.

It was a simple varnished oak piece with four drawers, three on her left side and one on her right. Her first choice was to go for the right. To Rachael's surprise, her first search was successful. A single leather A5 sized wallet sat alone, which she quickly swiped up and brought it down the stairs with her. As soon as she made her way and settled back into the nest of blankets and cushions she had made for herself on the couch, she flipped the leather open eagerly.

The contents, however, were far from what Rachael expected.

Inside was a collection of polaroid pictures of gory images, in different locations and in various stages of mutilation. A young teenage girl in a back alley with her jaw ripped off. A fat man with his belly carved open in an abandoned restaurant. A priest nailed to a cross.

All of them had one aspect in common.

In their chest was carved, 'I'm Satan'.

Rachael could only flip through them in shock, her mouth agape and eyes peeled back in terror. Her mind did a rerun of everything she had seen and heard about the serial killer that had claimed so many lives in her town, realizing frightfully she was in the lair of the famous killer that took over the news.

"How'd you like my work?" A very familiar voice came from across the room, sending a chill up her spine. She turned up to the familiar face of Mrs Masatin, her smile, seeming friendly a few hours ago, was now sickening and horrifying. She stood casually, her shoulder propping her against the door frame of the living room. Rachael leapt up to her feet, her right foot narrowly missing the frozen pizza on the floor, and stood behind the couch, the only protection between her and an insane murderer. Mrs. Masatin pushed

herself off the door frame, standing straight. Her small smile twisted into a vicious grin as she pulled out a knife from behind her.

"Run, little Rabbit, run," she purred menacingly.

The words forced Rachael into action, turning around on the spot and sprinting deeper into the room, going to position herself behind the large dining table. She could hear the rapid clicking of Mrs. Masatin's feet run behind her.

Then a sudden gasp of surprise and a sickening crack followed by an ear-splitting scream.

Still scared, but now also confused, she popped her head over her shoulder, then stopped running as she turned back around to focus on the surprising scene in front of her.

Mrs. Masatin laid out on the floor, contorted and screaming in pain. A piece of her split tibia was jutting out through the flesh of her thigh, the clear cause of her screaming. Rachel's eyes followed the length of her legs and she found her other foot stuck in the pizza she had earlier. If Rachael had to hazard a guess as to what happened, it looked like Mrs. Masatin had slipped on the pizza and broke her leg off the hard edge of the slightly raised flooring by the mantel piece. It was almost comedic.

Something else that caught her attention though was the knife she once held. Instead of being held tightly in her hand, it was now halfway across the distance between them, well out of her reach. She looked at the open doorway. She could easily make a run for it, with Mrs. Masatin immobilized by her injury.

However, another more tempting, darker idea consumed her thoughts.

Mrs. Masatin couldn't reach the knife with her leg so badly damaged.

But Rachael could easily reach it.

Mrs. Masatin looked towards the knife and, as if working out Rachael's mental train of thought, tried to stand up and move for the knife. However, as soon as she tried to raise herself up to full height, the wound in her leg teared further, making her fall back to the floor, her screams raised to a near intolerable level. Without another thought, she paced slowly towards the knife and picked it up. The darkness consumed her thoughts entirely now. The handle of the knife felt at home tucked into her fist, feeling more like an extension of her arm than an object. She strode towards the twisting form of Mrs. Masatin. Through her pain and screams, she forced herself to look up, directly staring into Rachael's eyes.

Rachael couldn't help but repeat Mrs. Masatin's previous words to her, an added insult to her injury. "Run, little Rabbit, run."

In one fluid motion, Rachael dropped herself down onto Mrs. Masatin, her arm falling and plunging the knife deep into her back. She could feel the knife slide through her flesh easily. The knife met bone, but instead of stopping the course of the blade's path, it adjusted, sliding deeper into her back. The scream that Mrs. Masatin let loose was as if the pits of Hell opened, bringing with it the cries of every tortured soul within. However, the feeling Rachael felt was nothing short of overwhelming ecstasy. She pulled out the knife and temporarily admired the red liquid covering the steel, before stabbing Mrs. Masatin again. Everything about it was intoxicating, the blood and ruined clothes more beautiful to her than any painting, the weakening screams more wonderful than any music. Even after Mrs. Masatin ceased her cries and Rachael's arm grew heavy from exertion, the feeling that consumed was exhilaration and ecstasy like she never felt before.

All she could think was: I want more. I WANT MORE! OH GOD, HOW I WANT MORE! She heard the door open and a voice call out suddenly into the house, as though an angel came down from the heavens and answered her prayers.

"Honey, I'm home!"

#### **About the Author:**

Charles Ceates is a bartender and writing student living out in the wild tundras of Scotland. An amateur writer hoping to make it professionally, he has written reviews for other e-magazines like Cultured Vultures and Fortitude Magazine, but The Babysitter is among some of his first creative work to be released.

Facebook: <u>Charles Ceates</u> Twitter: <u>@Charlito\_C</u>



### Angel of Death | A.A. Salvatierra

He knew why he was in this situation.

He thought that he might've been able to escape, but he had been a fool. His soul belonged to the Devil, and now he, or at least one of his lackeys, had come to collect. He had received a text a few minutes ago from one of his friends, it read 'You're next'.

He did not expect the last moments of his existence to be so ordinary. He had been in the living room, reading a book and drinking whiskey in front of the fireplace, the fire and a lamp illuminating the room

He had planned to go to the hardware store in the morning, to ask out that beautiful blonde, and now...

"Well, I can't do any of those things now," he murmured, draining his glass of whiskey. He had to start running.

Suddenly the room was plunged into darkness.

The only sounds were the noises of nature and the clock on the wall next to the fireplace. Tick Tock. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and he went straight to the pistol he kept at the adjacent table, in the first drawer, where the lamp rested. It wasn't there. His heart began to pound loud and fast.

He heard the melody. He began to breathe heavily, sweat forming on his forehead, his hands clammy. That melody; three bass notes in succession, followed by two beats and ending in four high notes. It would bring anyone to their knees. When his line of work began, so many years ago, his boss had played the melody, so he knew his life would end for betraying the Company.

At first, he'd laughed. Then he'd heard the stories.

And he was a danger to the Company.

He tried to escape but all the doors and windows were closed. How could he not have realized this? When had this guy had time to do all of this? He grabbed a chair and threw it against the window with all his might, smashing the glass.

"Are you going somewhere, Mr. Castillo? Or it's Pens, now. Hmm?"

He would have recognized his voice anywhere. Carlisle was one of his names, also known as the Angel of Death.

No one ever saw him, only his victims, but his voice was something everyone knew, it was part of the warning to join the Company. His voice was thick, melodic even, accented, not American but not British, somewhere north.

James had lived under the radar for some time, he didn't even use technology but somehow, he had been found.

The victim turned to face his murderer, he glanced at the broken window behind him, his only salvation, and back at the Angel of Death.

"I would not do it if I were you, Mr. Castillo. I can be quite fast and that glass looks painful." He moved his head to indicate the sharp, pointed and dangerous glass that was still on the windowsill.

The moon was shining through the window, casting a partial light on the hitman. Carlisle had a gun in his right hand and a rectangular device in the other. He had long hair down to his shoulders and a few streaks of white at the temples, his golden tooth shone through his smile. He was wearing an expensive-looking suit, with a purple tie and a salmon shirt. He looked ready for an evening out in town or a day at the office.

James could see the strength and power the man in front of him exuded. His heart was in his throat and his breathing became agitated. He was scared. He had no choice. He looked at the Angel for the last time and turned to jump out the window, he was on the first floor, it would be easy to escape. He would flee to a country where nobody would look for him.

He could see his truck, the moon and stars adorned the sky with all their splendor and for a moment he felt hope. Just for a moment. Then he felt a stab of pain in the neck, a paralyzing sensation that quickly went through his whole body, then he felt the glass, tearing at his abdomen. He felt the skin break and his muscles tear more and more with each passing second. The pain was unbearable, it was blinding. He saw, heard and felt pain. Nothing else entered his mind until he heard the melodic voice murmuring and drawing near.

"I warned him. It was wise to teach him what trying to escape would entail, although I do not think he will be putting it to use in the future." Carlisle came and grabbed his hair, forcing James to look at him, to focus on him.

James let out a cry of pain and felt like his body was being torn apart, he knew that it was too late for anything. "Do you regret your crimes, Mr. Castillo?" His voice was like silk and his gaze was stern, like a father scolding a child.

James felt as if he was being judged and quickly nodded. He really regretted it, his betrayal had cost some people in the Company their life, but that did not exonerate all the lives they had destroyed before. Carlisle's eyes cleared and for a moment, James thought he saw the pain in them, but before he could be sure, everything turned black.

The last sound of his mortal life. "Rest in peace, James."

#### **About the Author:**

Salvatierra has been writing novels and short stories for over five years. She specializes in fantasy and Sci-fi and is a published author, with her debut novel in Spanish and her second novel in English, which can be found on Amazon. Salvatierra is constantly working on new novels. She currently lives in the United Kingdom.

Amazon Author Page: <u>A.A. Salvatierra</u>
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## Xiphoid | Nina D'Arcangela

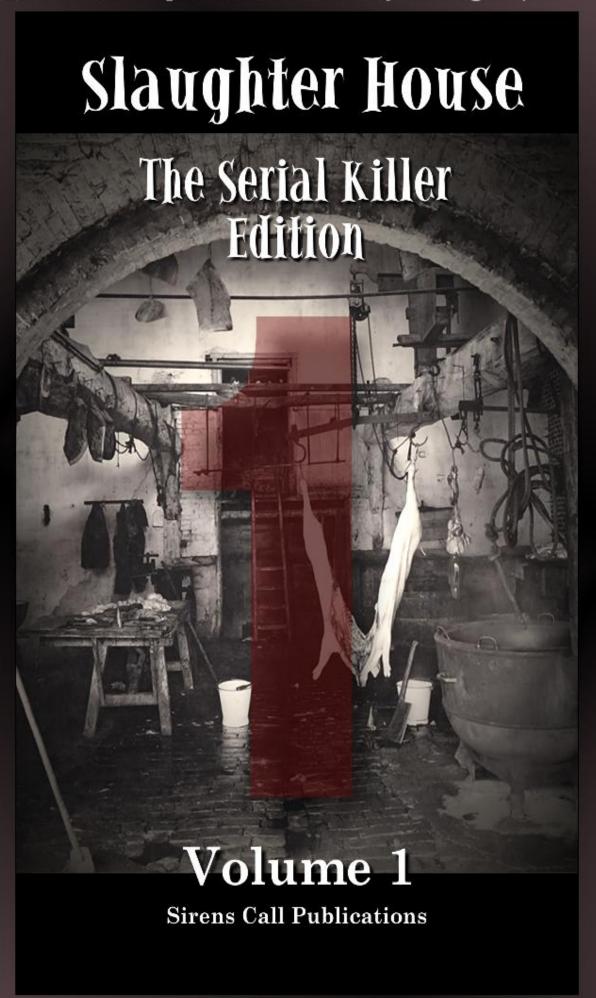
Plunging the blade deep into the abdominal cavity, I drive it upward until I hit the xiphoid. Twisting slightly to my right, I skirt the sternum and slice through the costal cartilage attaching the ribs to the breast plate. Careful not to puncture the internal organs, I stop my upward motion at the manubrium. Drawing the sharpened metal along the topside of the upper-most rib, I listen to the harsh breathing. Returning to the original point of entry, I pause, then again thrust into and through the abdominal wall, swiftly separating the flesh and muscle from the body's left side.

Laying the knife on the tray, I reach down and peel the cavity open with a great deal of force. A slight groan escapes amongst the pops and rending sounds as the connective tissue still in place rips away to reveal the fluttering heart. A marvelous thing the human body, a machine designed by the hand of a master; a fragile balance struck with a sadistic keeper.

#### **About the Author:**

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

Blog: <u>sotetangyal.wordpress.com</u> Twitter: @Sotet Angyal What drives someone to become a Serial Killer? Eleven authors spin tales of atrocity telling us just that.



Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, iStore, Smashwords & Createspace

### The Rest of the Home | Peter Toeg

Giving is a big deal at Woodlands Senior Home. An extra slice of meat loaf, another fifteen minutes of outdoor activity, a second glass of weak wine at monthly happy hour. Dime store gifts all around for every birthday and holiday. Oh yeah, and an emergency supply of Depends in your closet. No charge.

At ninety, I prefer taking instead. My choice, not theirs. So, I steal. I started with packets of peanut butter and moved up to some personal property. It's not like any of us need ALL of what we have. I pinched Lawrence's inhaler just the other day. I wanted to examine it. He's got plenty of 'em.

"Life is damn good at the rest home," I grouse tonight as I do every night to the staff, and I know what Kathy, the bitch, will say.

"Woodlands is not a *rest home*," she reminds me in a voice almost in range of my hearing without my hearing aid.

"Right, Miss Kathy." I mutter and force a smile. Pissant. Gotta please 'em so they *give* me something in return.

Across from me at the table, Knebel drools onto his bib. Gummed meat and spit run together. Dope. Doesn't the man know a horse gave his life for that food dripping from his mouth? He's almost mute, not full-blown dementia. His oversize tongue just gets in the way.

The food is shit for the price I pay. I ate better rations in the trenches in Ko-rea that numbing winter when we lost half our men.

Lawrence turns and laughs at something he likely overhears at the next table. Fool doesn't realize they're playing him. They mention his name aloud for no reason. It's like a dog whistle. The women love a good tease.

Bukowski says something to me. I turned my aid off before sitting down. Been reading lips. So I nod when it's my turn to talk to and flag a hand in agreement. Been doing this a week now. We could have an entire conversation with me absent. Old people in their little worlds.

Ah shit. Another day. Same day.

My teeth are going. I got a few left and the cook makes sure I get the chewy slices of meat. She never cottoned to me after I mimicked barf with my finger down my throat the night they served one of her soupy casseroles.

"Albert, that behavior gives people a bad impression. Don't you know that?" Kathy chided me that night dragging out every word like I was deaf. I don't appreciate slow talk. Slow and LOUD is the pits.

My Marjorie lost her hearing years before me, along with a few other functions. But not her tongue until the end. Old Marjorie. We had some good years together before she crapped out.

I remember my son telling me: "Dad, it's a blessing that you were with Mom at the very end. After forty-five years together. It's a gift, you know." He was right. I was with her and I do recall her last breath. Twerp son needs to tell me something I don't know? How's about a visit sometime?

After the wife was gone, Sonny moved me to the Woodlands: "Premium Residential Living for Our Cherished Citizens." Four grand a month is the premium.

Been a few months in this place. Maybe it's eight, ten, who knows.

I'm last one at the table. A CNA is cleaning up after Knebel, and I check out the dolly at table four, or is it six? She's new. Nice smile. Exposed ankles. First resident I've seen without those damn stockings. She hasn't yet packed on the pounds that eating carbs will do at the home.

Her hair's a nice shade of gray, not that gray-brown wash-water color. And no blue tint. Pretty. She's small and dainty, struggles some with the tableware. Good manners stand out after watching Knebel all these months.

I look for her lips to move and some response from the other dames at her table and don't see it. Maybe a mouthed "thank you" when the gravy's passed. They yap at her, especially the big-haired prima donna who seems to rule the roost. The pretty new one smiles. I squint and spot the dandy dentures she's wearing.

The young CNA gives me the lowdown a couple days later. "Her name is Marion, Albert and she's a Southern lady. Very quiet and sweet."

"She talk?" I ask. The little CNA princess puts on a sad face. "Marion has lost much of her speech. Part of her...condition...Albert. You know that happens here." A wink.

I really want to read her medical records, but Princess would never allow that.

So I watch Marion for a few days. She picks up the routine of the home, observes each of us arranging the little time we have. Between meals and rec activities, lame piano recitals, stealing, off-key sing-alongs, ring toss in the courtyard ('exercise'). Bingo twice daily. Ugh. And then we tend to our own needs like getting out of bed, bathroom duties, and getting dressed. And remembering to do everything in the right order.

I dub her the Belle of Woodlands. She settles in the living room after breakfast and flips pages of magazines, looking only at pictures I'm guessing. Later she walks the halls, and occasionally peeks around, listening. One of those peeks catches me watching her.

"Well, Miss Marion, I'm Albert," I say after walking over. A little flutter in my ticker, is that? "Bout time we met." Old folks never shake hands so as not to fall. We learn that at 75. Some forget it at 80, and break a hip at 81. Then pneumonia and it's curtains.

She smiles, says something so soft I can't understand. A pretty lightbulb, a little dim. Smartly dressed, buttons almost in the right holes and a handkerchief hanging out of a pants pocket. She smells fine. Lordy.

"Ah, yes," I go on. "I was wondering if you might take a stroll with me. There's a path over by the pond. We might just find some shade this time of the morning."

She nods once. I really wanted twice.

"Albert, you know the rules." The head nurse says, watching us leaving the building. "Stay on the walk and in sight. Oh, and show Marion the flower garden."

"Yes Ma'am," I chirp.

The sun is warm and the wind is blowing. Tiny Belle totters and I steady her with a hand. A smile is returned. They can't give you a friend at Woodlands. You have to make 'em. They are precious.

In two weeks, we become friends of few words and soon afterward, a 'couple.' Rest home talk for 'going steady, back off.' I reckon she takes a fancy to me.

One sleepless night on a jaunt through the building, I follow the sound of snoring to the staff lounge. I find Kathy on the graveyard shift stealing a few winks on the clock. I make a note of it.

Marion and I join in on some activities. Not sure she wants to be involved. She never declines if I read her brown eyes correctly. I can see tired real well. We fish for plastic disks in a wading pool to 'stay in shape.' I help her play Bingo, placing the chip on the squares, brushing my hand against hers. Her laugh is small but genuine. Her eyes don't change.

As fall sets in, we bundle up on our twice daily walks, and she points at everything. Jets streaking silently across the sky are a favorite and as if she's seeing them for the first time. Every time. She talks less. It's all charades by October.

I visit in her room ('Door stays open, Albert!') and behold an art gallery. Drawings, paintings, oils of all types and scenes, even portraits. Two dozen or more cover the wall, some framed, others tacked.

Mesmerizing. Her name is on most of them, and the dates go back fifty years. The brush strokes as delicate as the rivers of wrinkles on her face.

"This is wonderful, Marion!" I don't know art, but this is good stuff. Magazine quality by my measure. I take it all in under her gaze.

"Where is this?" I ask, pointing to a seascape.

"Fo...Fo...awa..." she manages, desperation in her voice, then shakes her head. "For...foreign...over the ocean...fort..." I take a stab at what she's saying like I'm playing a game. "La...la...la...da." Her hands are painting in the air. "Florida!" I say.

My Belle claps with joy and we embrace, a new experience. The CNA had told me she'd lived in Pensacola. I want to give her...a gift.

They watch us carefully, the staff. It's no secret that hanky-panky goes on in rest homes. So, I'm careful. Fortunately, I have more time to watch *them* and learn their routines. I am in control. Kathy is in the habit of sleeping during third shift, same time and has begun to sign off on bed checks not made.

One November afternoon, I usher Marion into my room, ever watchful of prying eyes. It's time to show her my 'collectibles,' not nearly as impressive as my honey's artwork. I push the cellophaned desserts, condiments, peanut butter cups, and cash on my closet shelf aside and gather my possessions. Photos. The stages of my life and marriage neatly ordered. Lots of stiff poses at restaurants with friends.

As I show her the photos, Marion looks like she's struggling with connecting people to reality. As do I for different reasons.

"This is Marjorie, Marion." I point to a stern-looking woman as tall as I once was. "She was my wife for many years."

Marion perks. Some recognition. My Belle looks to the door as if expecting Marjorie to enter. I wonder. But her hand on mine tells me all I need to know.

My stash includes three hand mirrors I've pilfered (always handy), a pillow I use on special occasions, a chest expander to build upper body and arm strength (you never know), chewing gum (not allowed!), three medicinal patches from the staff cart, and Lawrence's inhaler, modified now.

She fingers my treasures, looking at me with questioning looks, laughing in a way I've not heard. Marion is curious about the inhaler. I demonstrate its use and she starts to shake it, then looks at me, confused. More lost each week.

I surprise her in her room a few days later and she is tearful even before I enter. A sketchbook lies on her lap and she holds a pencil in her arthritic hand.

"Marion, dear, let me see it," I stand over her in the chair and gently lift the pad for a look. She allows me but avoids eye contact.

The sketch is crude, a partial profile of a man or boy, half a head, pieces of the face off kilter even to my untrained eye. The lines have been drawn by a shaky hand and a mind shutting down. I gently pull her from the chair, no resistance, lunch remnants on her chin, that hospital smell about her now. I hold her in my arms. I say nothing and, for once, her silence is perfect.

In December after two months walking the halls together, she tires more easily, no invigorating air to refresh us. Now my Belle tries to speak *more* than ever before. Tongue talk. I realize she is less aware of what she can't do.

Kathy frowns openly at our courting ritual. A miserable woman lying in wait for me to bend some rule, like placing hands in the wrong places. If Kathy ever marries, she might learn that not everything between a couple is foreplay.

They play Christmas music all day in the dining room, and it filters into the halls and 'creeps on little cat's feet' (Marjorie's words before she used 'em up) into my room. Having a hearing aid can be a 'blessing' (Sonny's word), but that night I remove it. Music and words have become nothing more than static.

The last night with Marion, I steal down to Marion's room with my aid in. Marion's rhythmic rattle greets me, and I sit on the bed gently waking her. A sad smile forms, the only kind I'd seen for a month, but a smile nonetheless. I show her the inhaler and her eyes hint of recognition.

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Kathy had to be the one to tell me the next day.

"Marion is not with us anymore," she says professional-like serious. "The nurse wanted you to know."

"Why?"

She is thrown off-script. "Well, Albert. You've, uh, been close to her these months and—" "And I killed her?"

"Oh, no, Albert!" She has her hand on me, eyes going all over. "Marion died in her sleep. She went peace—"

"Were you with her at the end?"

Kathy looks desperate to end the longest conversation we ever had. "Ah, no. We found her this morning in bed."

"You know it's a blessing to be with someone at the very end." I show her all my teeth in a smile. I wait a month.

At the appointed time, I retrieve the pillow from my treasures. I find Kathy snoring. Not a care in the world.

The third time is even easier.

### **About the Author:**

Peter Toeg has lived in the Midwest for twenty-five years, taught English in a university, and worked as a technical writer. He writes full-time now: mostly memoir and short stories. Writing is his avocation.

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## Dying as an Art | Juleigh Howard-Hobson

For some, death is final, with regrets, dark And forever. For others, death is not So finely grave as that. A sad remark. A mention. Nothing much. And then forgot,

Inevitably ... no one could ever Mourn and who would ever care? People die Every day. Most of them hardly matter, Even to themselves. Let sleeping dogs lie.

The unsung dead must keep their own counsel, Our dark regard is not for them...but there Are some, some who impose artistic will On death, seeking the release that despair

Can offer when death is allowed to be Expressed exactly: a twisted way That tangles and curls coquettishly Between the devil and the deep ballet

Of statement and oblivion. Coffin Beds. Pale bouquets offset with black ribbon. Hearses. Pipe organs. Dusk. Victorian Memorials. Dark storms coming in

Bringing bone touching cold to foggy air. This is how death becomes another thing; How it becomes poetry, well aware Of its beauty. Morbidly rejoicing.

# What Isn't Burned Must Rot | Juleigh Howard-Hobson Stefanile sonnet

Skin shrivels on the bone, soft flesh dissolves. Cells dry and crack, then break. Mildews encroach. Nothing helps hold back decay. Form evolves.

Eons ago, our ancestors' approach
To this was simple: burn every body,
Old ashes do not stink or leak. But we—
Riddled as we are with deft morticians—
We do not do that anymore. We broach.
We pick. We buy our graves on time. We coach
Our families on our final plans. Heavens!
You'd think we thought that corpses somehow know.

Rains eat away the stone above the plot, And if not rain, then wind, if not wind, snow. Death is fact based: what isn't burned...must rot.

## **About the Author:**

Juleigh Howard-Hobson's poetry has appeared in *Faerie Magazine, Illumen, Enchanted Conversation, Star\*Line,* Weaving the Terrain (Dos Gatos Press), Mandragora (Scarlett Imprint), and many other places. A member of The Science Fiction & Fantasy Poetry Association, her work has been nominated for Best of the Net, The Pushcart Prize and the Rhysling. She lives in the Pacific Northwest, by a forest full of buried secrets and fallen stars.

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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE, KOBO AND ITUNES

#### Featured Author | Hunter Shea

I almost escaped 2018 death-free until my favorite uncle passed away a couple of months back. The silver lining is that there are no celebrities in my family, so I think that keeps us from qualifying for the 'death by threes' rule.

That wasn't the case last year when death came to our house and set up residence. 2017 took family and friends from us without mercy and left a ragged hole in our hearts. The most painful and final blow was the passing of a dear friend last fall. He'd been diagnosed with stage four liver and colon cancer in the winter but was at first given two to five years. I had just attended his marriage vow renewal when I got the call two weeks later to come and say my goodbyes. The end rushed upon him like a starved vulture sooner than we all expected. He was home, right where he wanted to be, and his wife opened the house for two days for friends and family to come and speak to him for the last time.

I had never said a final goodbye to someone who was awake enough to know the end was near and actually talk back. It was one of the hardest nights of my life, though my pain pales in comparison to his physical agony and what his family went through. There was food and laughter and a house full of people. My once vibrant friend who would fill up a room sat in his easy chair, smiling and talking to us in a weak rasp. I didn't want to leave. I was sick to my core at the prospect of having that final conversation with a man I assumed would be in a rocker beside me when we were old. Maybe if I stayed, became an official squatter, the night would never end and he would always be here.

Adults are only allowed mere seconds to wish for such things before harsh reality clubs us over the head. My insides twisting, I sat beside him and looked in his eyes and said, "You know, this is bullshit. I'm not abiding by this." It was then I noticed how he had fully accepted his end with zero trepidation. His sense of calm assurance was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. He pulled me close and told me something I'll always hold close to my heart and soul and we hugged. I left him to his remaining friends and family and a new wave that was making their way into the house. A few days later, he was gone.

It was in the midst of this emotional turmoil that I had to write *Creature*, my first novel for Flame Tree Press. *Creature* was going to be a fictional telling of the medical nightmare my wife and I have endured for two plus decades, set in a horrifying backdrop. As I wrote, I relived our scariest and worst moments, all while my current emotions were raw and red and bleeding on every page. It was an ordeal that took its toll on me, even bringing about a flare up of ulcerative colitis that made for a miserable holiday season. I didn't know if I could finish it or if it would finish me.

In the end, because I'm a stubborn son of a biscuit eater, I completed the manuscript. I wept in a library bathroom moments after writing the last chapter. I was spent in more ways than one.

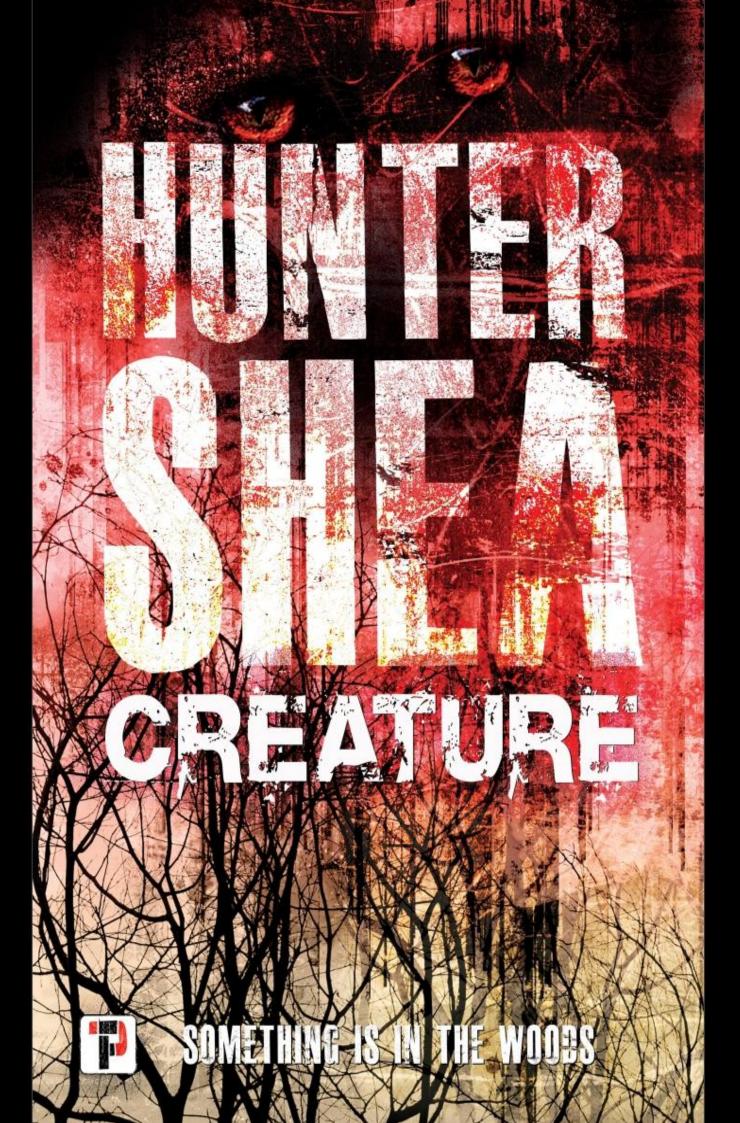
Now, a year later and *Creature* having been out for several months, I hear from readers all the time how the book has devastated them, hitting them in places they thought were buried too deep to be touched. I feared that the horror community would reject such a thing like a body repelling a transplant. Instead, it's been embraced, frightening readers on planes of both the real and imagined. It's immensely satisfying, yet it won't make my wife well and it will never bring my friend back.

Last year, I fully understood why the suicide rate goes up during the holidays. This year, I'm focusing on the good, and the joyful memories of those we've lost. I'm even having fun watching old Christmas cartoons and movies with my better half. It takes black days to appreciate the light. Maybe that's part of the fascination with Christmas trees. Beneath the twinkling lights lies the darkness within the dying branches. Light overshadowing the dark. The birth of a new year and passing of the old. A giant crystal ball casting the dark away at midnight. We are all moments of shining light, knowing that darkness is always at our backs.

Don't let the darkness trick you into its depths.

Stay light, my friends. Stay light.

**HunterShea.com** 



### **Chapter Thirteen**

Andrew had been true to his word and hadn't drunk any more whisky. But he did have a couple of beers before calling it a night. He was snoring like a lumberjack with sleep apnea, his guttural wheezing loud enough to beat the band and their roadies.

Needless to say, Kate couldn't sleep. She'd nodded off and slept through dinner, which from what she saw in the kitchen sink had been soup and a sandwich. The few hours of rest had taken the edge off her exhaustion. Now, between Andrew's snoring and the pain in her shoulders, there was no way she was going to be able to close her eyes.

Sometime before morning, she'd be wiped out and would finally zone out, just in time for the day to start.

Maybe Andrew was right and she was a vampire.

As impossible as it seemed, she was getting less sleep in Maine than she had back home. At first she'd thought it was because she needed to get used to the new surroundings, but that wasn't it. No, everything was off with her. That damn treatment was wreaking havoc with her system. If she wasn't burning up, she was weaker than normal and feeling strange. Being in chronic pain had made her hyperaware of her body. She couldn't describe the way she'd been feeling. It was if her body had been replaced by another damaged, worn-out model that was completely unfamiliar to her.

There was no way she was going to tell Andrew. What could he do about it anyway? She just had to hope it passed and she could get on with enjoying their magical summer.

She watched Cary Grant in *Topper* and sucked on some candy to help her nausea. When the pain got this bad, it always turned her stomach sour. Candy didn't make it all better, but it helped, sometimes more than medication.

A chilly breeze floated through the open windows. Kate snuggled under the blankets. Buttons lay on his side by her feet, snoring as well.

When she was a kid, Kate had been terrified of the dark. To make matters worse, she'd been plagued by night terrors between the ages of five and seven. Not only were there boogeymen in her closet, child-munching beasts waiting for her foot to slip out of the tuck at the end of the bed, and red-eyed creatures floating outside her window, but even her dreams, her only means of escape, were to be feared. Telling her it was time to go to bed was like informing an inmate that old Sparky was waiting for him to take that long walk.

She'd spent many a night frozen with fear in her bed, mouth open wide but no sound coming out, praying to God that her mother and father would somehow sense her distress and come to her rescue. The mere thought of walking down the hall to their bedroom in the dead of night gripped her with incalculable fear.

She wasn't afraid now.

The irony was not lost on her that the dead of night had become her 'me time'.

Now the dark was about candy and old movies.

And sometimes bad feels and shadows.

With the onslaught of the microwave feels she was getting up here, she almost missed the familiar bad feels.

Almost.

She checked her phone, saw it was time for a pain pill. Swallowing it down, she nestled her feet under a snoozing Buttons so he could warm them up.

A gusting wind was kicking up small waves breaking on the shore. The crickets, perhaps agitated by the wind, were chirping louder than a Metallica concert. Kate was tempted to turn the TV up and drown it all out, but she didn't want to wake Andrew.

Better close the windows, she thought.

Leaving the comfort of the bed (not that she was ever truly comfortable), she slipped on some socks and padded in the dark to the kitchen. Buttons woke up and joined her. She gave him a doggie treat, thanking him for the company.

Still thinking about her old night terrors, perhaps because she'd had quite a few reminiscent episodes as of late, she cringed remembering how some of the kids used to call her Katie the Coon. She was the only kid in third grade with dark circles under her eyes.

Kate often wondered if those years spent walking around in a fog – two crucial, formative years at that – had permanently altered her body chemistry. The nightmares ate away at her psyche and health, and when they left, her body needed something to replace them. So, rather than wait for her to become exposed to a strange disease (and who knew how long that could take), it decided to rebel against itself.

Her mother thought her 'little theory' was ridiculous, but her father, well, it gave him pause.

"It could be all those night terrors were the broken cells growing in your body," he'd said to her one night over pumpkin pie and coffee. Her mother had been in the kitchen, cleaning up. Dad hadn't looked so good himself. He'd been talking of early retirement a lot, though Mom pooh-poohed it, telling him he still had a lot of earning to do if they were going to have golden years, not bronze years.

Kate had just been diagnosed with lupus, and she was terrified. Her father's hand felt cold, clasped over hers. "The mind is the most complex and mysterious organism in the universe," he'd said. "There are parts of it that know more than it will ever let on. Maybe it does that to protect us. It could be that those night terrors were created to shield you from the truth. The autoimmune diseases wanted to be heard. But something in your mind, the Wizard behind the curtain, since you loved Dorothy so much, refused to let them. Now, it couldn't silence them entirely, but it could mask what they were trying to say. By not knowing what was going to come for you as you got older, you were able to live a more carefree life. You were a real spitfire, you know that? The unstoppable Kate. I don't think you would have been the unstoppable Kate if you'd known this was always waiting for you. You wouldn't have had all those wonderful experiences, and maybe not even Andrew." He sipped from his coffee and stared at his pie. "Funny to think that we should be grateful for those night terrors. Life is like that. Funny. Even when you think it's serious as a five-alarm fire."

Kate had had to use two napkins to soak up her tears. She'd loved her father more than she ever thought possible at that moment.

Less than a year later, he was gone after a quick but ignoble dance with pancreatic cancer. He never did get to retire, those last days neither golden nor bronze nor tin. He went from the office to the hospital to the hospice, all within the span of five weeks. Death had given him a fast pass, but he'd suffered so much those last two weeks. The phrase white-hot agony hadn't even put a dent into what he went through, at least until hospice took over.

She missed him so much. More so now that it felt as if she'd also lost her mother. Their relationship had never been the best, but without her father to mediate, it was a disaster.

Buttons nudged her calf, banging his tail against the cabinet.

"You want to close the windows for me?" she said softly.

Buttons put his paws on her thighs, waiting for his ears to be scratched.

"Yeah, I guess you're too short anyway."

She leaned over the sink and grabbed the lip of the window, pausing. Kate looked through the screen, the darkness so complete, she couldn't even see the car parked in front of the house just fifteen feet away.

No bears. No moose.

No shadows. It was too dark for shadows.

Andrew let out a whopper of a snore.

"Someone's going to have a sore throat in the morning," she said to the beagle.

Closing the other window by the dining area, which was just an extension of the living room, she paused again, enjoying the cessation of jagged cricket legs.

She was just about to go back to bed when a high, piercing scream cut through the closed windows as if they were made of onionskin paper.

Kate reflexively flinched, hunching her shoulders as if something had flown into the house and was circling around her head.

She tottered into one of the dining room chairs, heart doing a madman's samba.

What could have made such a noise?

It sounded as if it had come from both outside and within the cottage, like it was everywhere at once, the blaring of Revelation's trumpets.

Kate's back flared and her knees turned to water. She had to pull the chair out from under the table and sit before she fell down. The fiery sensation went all the way to the top of her head. She grabbed at her hair, expecting it to come away in clumps from having been burned from her scalp.

Hands shaking, she looked over at Andrew, who was still snoring.

How could he sleep through that? It sounded like someone was being killed.

I have to get my phone.

She saw it across the room, the divide stretching out before her like taffy.

I have to wake Andrew up and call the police. Whoever made that noise is hurt, if not dead by now.

Kate sat and listened for it to come again, knowing if it did, she might pee herself. Taking slow, steady breaths, she concentrated on expelling the heat within her body outward with each exhalation. She pictured Ryker beside her, his hand on her shoulder, encouraging her. After a minute or so, she started to feel more in control of herself.

There was another screech, but this one not as loud, not nearly as close. It sounded as if whatever had made it was heading away from the cottage.

And it was most definitely not *in* the cottage.

She should have been relieved at that, but she wasn't.

Buttons looked up at her, breath huffing from his open mouth, as if nothing had happened. Andrew rolled over on the bed, still very much asleep.

Did I imagine that?

It was so, so loud. Buttons barks at cats when they meow by our windows at home. He didn't even react.

Andrew might have been sleeping off a day and night of drinking, but even that wouldn't explain how he could not even stir after that first scream. She could still hear it, reverberating in her brain, an echo from the cauldron room in hell.

What disturbed her most was her inability to figure out if it was a person or an animal. Something about it made her think it was both. But that was impossible.

She prayed it was an animal. Because if a woman had made that noise – that fading, horrid scream – someone had done terrible things to her, carrying her into the night.

Rubbing her arms to chase the chill away, Kate got up, her body demanding she sit back down. Biting her bottom lip, she stutter-stepped into the living room and collapsed on the bed.

Andrew snapped awake.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

His voice was gruff, strained, made raw by the booze and snoring.

"Shhh," Kate said, hand over his mouth.

"What are you doing?" he mumbled.

Whispering, she said, "I need you to open that window."

"Why did you close it?"

He slipped out from under her hand, rubbing his eyes.

"Please, just do it. And try not to make any noise."

Andrew looked at her, confused, but did as she asked.

"A little more," she said.

He opened the window all the way, visibly shivering.

"You want to freeze me out?"

"Shhh. Just listen. Do you hear anything?"

He paused, listened, scratched his head.

"No."

Neither did she.

"You mind telling me what this is all about?"

Feeling like a fool, she sighed and said, "I...I thought I heard someone screaming."

"When?"

"A couple of minutes ago. I can't believe it didn't wake you."

He got a bottle of water from the refrigerator, taking a long draw. "You sure it was a person?"

"Yes. No. It was loud and it scared the shit out of me."

Kate pulled the covers up to her chest, a thin fabric shield against the things that went shriek in the night. Buttons jumped up on the bed.

Andrew looked at the dog and said, "Man, I must have really been out if Buttons didn't wake me up."

Smoothing the covers, suddenly nervous to look Andrew in the eye, she said, "Buttons didn't bark." "But you said you heard someone screaming. I can't imagine Buttons keeping his big mouth shut." Kate ruffled his fur. "I know it's weird, but he didn't react at all."

The mattress shifted when Andrew settled in. The look he gave her now made her feel like a world-class ass, not to mention angry.

"Didn't you put a new fentanyl patch on before we went to bed?" he said.

Her blood immediately went to full boil. "I'm not some addict having hallucinations."

Putting his hand on her leg, he said, "Come on, you've had episodes in the past. It's not your fault. Those are powerful drugs they have you on."

Through gritted teeth, she said, "Do I look and sound like I'm out of it?"

Yes, there had been times when she imagined all sorts of things. But it was very obvious when the medication had her in its grip. Those times, she didn't even recognize her husband or surroundings. She recalled tattered bits of those moments, Andrew filling in the rest. It always made her uncomfortable, face in her hands, exclaiming, "Did I really say that?"

This wasn't one of those moments.

Andrew deflated. "No, you look fine. Maybe you were sleepwalking."

"I couldn't have been sleepwalking because I've been up for hours."

Oh Lord, she wanted to slap him. It was as if he were accusing her of some mighty wrongdoing, which she knew was irrational. The past few minutes had her on an emotional roller coaster, and she needed her husband to settle her down, not send her on the next loop-de-loop.

When he leaned over to hug her, she pulled away.

"Look, I'm sorry. Wouldn't you rather it be a hallucination or dream than some poor person screaming for their life out there?"

She went to say something, but bit her tongue instead. Tonight was the first time she'd put on a new patch in tandem with the new light sedative she'd been given. Maybe, just maybe, they didn't play well together.

And she really didn't want that to be some poor, hurt, terrified woman out there in the woods. Staring at Buttons, who had grown bored and closed his eyes, she said, "I hate it when you're right." She leaned into him and he held her, his stale beer breath something powerful.

"Yeah, me too. It's not easy being right so much of the time. Heavy is the head that wears the crown."

Kate pinched him, eliciting a sharp yowl.

"Now you get to stay up with me until I can fall asleep."

Propping up their pillows, he said, "Fine, but no black-and-white movies. I need something in color with action. Naked boobs if we can swing it."

"I married a child."

"Action and nudity keep me young."

She laughed, and it felt amazing to release the pressure that had built up inside her. "Then you're going to grow old real fast with me around."

Andrew clicked around, settling for a Vin Diesel movie.

She had just started to believe that maybe she had been kind of sleepwalking when the penetrating scream happened again, this time sounding as if it were right outside their window.

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