

The Sirens Call



December 2019

issue 48

*Death Comes for
Us All!*

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

*An interview with
Featured Artist
Kent Burles*

*Spotlight on Author
Anthony Avina,
plus an except from
his upcoming novel
'Identity'*

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Tyler took his hot pretzel and cheese sauce from the kiosk cashier. When he turned to leave, he saw his friend a few customers behind him.

"Hey, Billy! I didn't know you'd be here today."

"Yeah, my mom wants to get a picture of my little sister with Santa."

"She still believes in Santa?"

"Well, duh," Billy said, like Tyler was stupid or something. "She just turned three."

"Oh, right. Can you hang out with me? There's a laser tag place on the other side of the mall. I'll share my pretzel with you."

"Let's go ask my mom."

Billy got out of the line, leaving weary and hungry shoppers laden with festive bags waiting for a quick snack before further damaging their bank balances.

Jingle Bells played over the tinny mall speakers, mixing with the excited shrieks and tired cries of young children. Babies cooed, mesmerized, at the blinking lights on the tall Christmas tree that stretched up to the globed skylight.

"HO HO HO!"

Santa's laugh rang out into the crowd of impatient children and exhausted parents waiting their turn. Billy and Tyler found Billy's mom and sister in the middle of a line that snaked all the way back to Macy's.

"Billy, where have you been? It's almost our turn. Hi, Tyler."

"Hi, Mrs. Norton."

"Our turn? I'm not sitting on his lap—I'm nine years old! Santa is for babies!"

"I'm not a baby, Billy!" Erin protested from her stroller.

"Billy didn't mean it, Erin. Billy, your grandma asked for a picture of you and Erin on Santa's lap together, so you're going to do it!"

"But, Mom—we wanted to play laser tag! Please?"

"Not tonight, Billy! Now stay here so I don't have to look for you when it's our turn."

"Hey, folks!" One of the elves stood on a stepladder with a microphone. "Santa is taking a short break to feed his reindeer. He'll be back in about 20 minutes!"

A collective groan rose up from the crowd as the elves escorted Santa through the mall.

"Now can we play laser tag, Mom?"

"No! I just want to get this done and go home. We haven't eaten dinner and it's getting close to Erin's bedtime."

"Okay," Billy sighed. "Can we at least go get a soda?"

"Actually, yes. And get a cookie and juice for Erin." She pulled a twenty from her purse. "But come right back!"

"We will. Thanks, Mom!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Norton!"

The boys ran off towards the food court.

"Wait, Tyler. I need to take a piss."

They ran to the men's room, bumping shoulders and laughing. Billy pulled the door open. Tyler ran in ahead first. "I get the big stall!"

Tyler stopped suddenly and Billy ran into him.

Santa and his elves were in the bathroom. One of the elves stood on a stool in front of a mirror, admiring his razor-sharp teeth.

All three turned towards the boys.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?" Santa roared, his eyes as black as coal.

"I...We need to pee," Billy whispered. He grabbed Tyler's hand and backed up towards the door, opening it with his shoulder. He glanced out, hoping to see someone who could save them, but saw nothing. No people, no stores, no sounds—*nothing*. Just a vast, blinding whiteness.

"Oh, you can't leave now, boys." A second elf grinned, showing teeth caked in blood and gore.

Santa chuckled, shaking his belly like a bowlful of jelly. "Sorry, kids. But we're still...*hungry*."

Billy then saw two small denim-clad legs covered in blood sticking out of a stall. He screamed and yanked his hand away from Tyler's. His outstretched hands pushed the bathroom door wide open, not caring if he ran into nothingness. The stores were back, and *Here Comes Santa Claus* played joyously through the mall. Before the restroom door shut completely, Billy dared to look back.

Santa held Tyler, laughing maniacally at the boy's terrified shrieks and kicks. He opened his mouth and tore into Tyler's throat, ripping tender flesh with shark-like teeth. He tossed the lifeless body to the elves and chewed.

"Mommy! Mommy, help!" Billy crashed into his mother, almost knocking Erin out of her stroller. He clung to his mother's legs, sobbing.

"Billy, what's wrong? Did someone hurt you? I knew I shouldn't have let you go off by yourself."

"Santa was in the bathroom! He had big sharp teeth and he bit Tyler on the neck! I think Tyler's dead!"

"Oh, for god's sake, Billy. I don't want to deal with your ridiculous fantasies right now. Save it for your notebooks."

"But, Mom! Tyler—"

"Tyler who? Never mind, it's your turn." She lifted Erin out of the stroller. "Hold her hand on your way there. And you had better smile!"

Erin grabbed her brother's hand and pulled him towards the twinkling lights and animated penguins surrounding Santa's throne. Billy shuffled on numb legs and looked back at his mother.

Just go, she mouthed, shooing him with her hand.

The elves smiled at the kids and opened the gate for them. Billy sighed with relief when he realized their teeth were normal.

"Come on, kids! Santa's waiting!"

Confused, wondering if he had somehow dreamed the bathroom incident with Tyler (*wait, why didn't they remember Tyler*), Billy hesitantly smiled back.

Elf One grabbed Billy's arm and pulled him down to whisper in his ear. "It wasn't a dream, Billy." He let go and winked.

"HO HO HO! Come on, children!" Erin squealed and ran to him. She climbed on his lap. Santa looked at Billy. "Let's go, big brother! Santa is very busy."

Billy looked around desperately for his mother but couldn't find her in the crowd.

"Billy, hurry up!" Erin called, waving a candy cane in the air.

He can't hurt me with all these people around, right? Feeling a little better, Billy joined his sister on Santa's lap.

"Oh, you're wrong, Billy," Santa said with a smile, his eyes turning black. "And I'll bet your Christmas wish is that you never went into that bathroom."

Before Billy could respond, the nothingness surrounded them again, and Santa leaned over and tore out Billy's throat with his pointy, impossibly white teeth.

Little Erin screamed, squeezing her eyes shut just as the camera flashed.

"Hello?"

"Valerie, dear—I got the picture in the mail today. Thank you for sending it"

"Hi, Mom. I'm glad. Do you like it? Erin's dress was really cute, wasn't it?"

"Of course it was—I picked it out, remember!" Valerie's mom chuckled. "I do wish Erin had smiled, though."

"Yeah, I did too. But a lot of toddlers cry on Santa's lap. I guess it's stranger anxiety; it's normal."

"Cry, yes. But, Valerie, the poor child looks like she's screaming—like something terrified her."

"Well, who knows—maybe she'll remember one day when she's older and can tell us what was going on. Listen, Mom, I have to go. Erin's up from her nap and I can hear her crying. See you on Christmas Eve?"

"Absolutely!"

"Good. Love you."

Valerie hung up, hurrying to Erin's room, wondering why her little girl recently started screaming in her sleep.

About the Author:

Sheri White's stories have been published in many anthologies, including *Tales from the Crust* (edited by Max Booth III and David James Keaton), *When the Clock Strikes 13* (edited by Kenneth W. Cain), and the upcoming *Tree Lighting in Deathlehem* (edited by Michael J. Evans and Harrison Graves) and *New Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (edited by Jonathan Maberry).

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"We'll use the skin from his back for the book's cover."

Janice waved away his patter and interrupted. "I think I've got it. You're going to grind up Sam's body parts and make a memorial book."

Bosworth was a seasoned undertaker, but his expression flickered into annoyance before settling back into unctious. "Yes. As I was saying, the hair and bones provide the fiber substitutes for the pages and the cover boards, the body fluids and soft organs provide paper binders and glue, and the best skin provides the cover vellum. Does Sam have any tattoos you'd like us to incorporate into the cover design?"

Janice leaned forward in the leather chair, wondering if Bosworth had used excess skin to upholster the funeral parlor furniture. "No, no tattoos, just aberrations. How does the cost compare to old-fashioned cremation?"

"Surprisingly, not that much more. We use a digital printer and automated binding. The additional cost is in the preparatory work—"

"Hacking up his body."

"Um, we refer to it as funeral surgery. So, consider that instead of a nondescript urn with ashes you have a luxuriant coffee table book commemorating Sam's life and your love together. And there's the positive environmental impact. Instead of a polluting incineration we recycle Sam for future generations. It's become quite popular."

Janice flipped through the book Bosworth had handed her. "The pages are kind of gray."

"We refer to that as antique vellum. Only the finest paper and our own timeless organic material achieve that shade. Notice how sharp the color reproductions are— you could have portrait quality pictures of Sam in your book."

She snapped the book shut. "Sam was ugly. Out of focus would be better."

"Ah. The paper takes ink extremely well, the result of its complex proteins. You could write a beautiful tribute or dedication by hand."

Janice nodded. "That is a thought. For sure I'd want to write something."

Bosworth interlocked his fingers. "If you're concerned about having to write up a biography, we have several templates available, targeted at various ethnicities and social stratum. You just fill in a questionnaire and add some anecdotes, the computer does the rest."

Janice stared at him. "Tell me, Bosworth, do I have client privilege?"

He stared in turn. "Um, so long as it's nothing illegal, I think I can assure you that whatever we discuss does not go beyond this room."

"Good. Sam's a jerk. I've kept a diary on the son of a bitch, and that's what would go in your book. Some of it has to do with deviant behavior. Do you have a problem with that?"

"Oh. I see. Um, in speaking ill of the dead, there's little chance of a suit for defamation unless family members bring it. Do you have children by Sam?"

"No, thank God."

Bosworth had begun to sweat. "Um, we would probably ask you to sign a disclaimer that you would not sue us for any repercussions."

"No problem. So, how much extra for an embossed cover title?"

"That would depend on the number of letters."

"It would read 'Good Riddance'. There's also some rather explicit pictures I'd like to incorporate in the book."

"That would be approximately a hundred and fifty dollars for the embossing, perhaps another two hundred for the pictures. Um, Mrs. Stiltworth, I wonder if you might not want to also evaluate other funeral houses, just to get comparative quotes—"

Janice waved her hand again. "No, no, Bosworth. You need to go on a monster diet, but other than that I like you. Just prepare the quote for me."

Bosworth pulled an estimate sheet from a tablet on his right and took out a pen. "We should get the larger items decided first, the number of wake times, religious services, choir and organist, and so forth."

She laughed. "He's lucky he's getting time on your slab. Just the butchery and the book, please."

"Oh." Bosworth did some calculations. "With the tax, fourteen thousand five. I've included the cost of up to ten pictures. Would that be acceptable?"

"Yeah. Anything to put him in bad memory status."

"Thank you for calling us yesterday, after he passed."

"You got it wrong. He died this morning, right after I fed him breakfast."

About the Author:

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had over two hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and five books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of six review editors.

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None of this need have happened. It could all have been avoided. If only he had genuinely apologized, been contrite, shown some inkling of empathy. But he didn't. If only I could have found it in me to forgive, forget who was to blame, put the past behind me and move on. But I couldn't. I wouldn't. Don't tell me it's better to have loved than not or that I should accept what I cannot change. Seriously? I've run through every cliché consolation I can think of, and believe me, it's not that easy. Maybe you've been there yourself and you know. Grief is a powerful weapon, especially when fuelled with guilt. Don't judge me for what I did. I did what needed to be done. I'm not generally a believer of an eye for an eye or the casting of the evil eye. Retribution rarely brings true satisfaction to the victims. What I needed was justice.

In retrospect, I wonder if justice is synonymous with revenge. I had convinced myself I wasn't really out to hurt anyone with my actions, but things escalated out of my control. Friends and relatives told me, "You can't change what's happened. It won't bring her back."

"Let it go. Get on with your life." "It is what it is. These things happen. Move on." I probably should have listened, but I couldn't. I wouldn't. I had no closure. Expecting something (I don't know what), some form of consequence, some type of compensation, where none was forthcoming, I decided to take matters into my own hands. Very simply, I had a choice to make. I could accept that what was done was done, or I could force a day of reckoning. We all have choices to make - choices we have to live with and die with. At the end of the day, we make our bed and lie in it. I made my choice and I sleep soundly through the night. It's the daytime nightmares that continue to haunt me. You can't bring back the dead, they say. No, but you can most certainly bring back the ghost of the dead.

Once the decision had been made, a great deal of thought and time was needed before I could execute my intended course of action. The last thing I needed was to be caught out in the middle of the act. Not considering the consequences, I forged ahead, rashly but carefully. I researched the topic of murder through paranormal means. I focused my energy on his demise. An eye for an eye. I knew no one would understand, not even those who had been as affected as I was by his life-altering deed and lack of remorse. Unlike me, they were able to accept what they couldn't change. And the idea that his family might seek retribution against **me** for my carefully orchestrated plan, well, I couldn't risk that. There would be no justice in that. So I covered my tracks well and if they do come to suspect what I've done, there will be little proof to incriminate me. Culpability is difficult to prove. It's even more difficult to prove with no physical evidence. Magazine in one hand, ammo in the other, weapon ready, I set out to nail my target.

It was spring when he killed her. I will always remember as it was her favourite season as well as her last season. Ironically, T. S. Eliot's line, "April is the cruellest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land," has always resonated with me. That cold wintery April day we laid her to rest covered in her favourite roses, blood red against stark white, I vowed to never forget. Not that I ever could forget anyway. When someone is a part of you, you always carry them with you. The memories remain. What made the memories so difficult to deal with was how it all happened, and the fact that it didn't need to happen. I could have prevented it. I held the power.

It happened during one of those crazy spring ice storms that cause destruction and darkness. Hydro out, winds howling through doors and windows, limbs breaking and roofs losing shingles, roads unsafe for travel. A calm, beautiful crystal wonderland when it's done, but deadly as it rages. With a wood fireplace and a small generator plugged in, we were hunkered down for the evening, thinking we were immune to the effects of the storm's fury. I let down my guard.

"How about a game of Monopoly?" asked Ben. Setting aside our books and newspapers, we helped him set up the game. I went to get snacks and drinks ready, my husband stoked the fire, and the kids bickered about who would be banker. We tended to enjoy the hydro outages as they gave us an opportunity to think outside the TV and our other electronic devices for entertainment. It actually provided more 'family time' for us to connect. The five of us, tucked in our cocoon in the basement family room, speculated on properties and laughed as we strived to bring each other to bankruptcy. A night of rolling the dice, picking up chance cards, sending people to jail and paying fines. How fitting.

As usual, Ben won the game. We're pretty sure he cheats somehow, but culpability is difficult to prove. As we were packing up the game pieces, Abby suggested, "Can we read a ghost story?" It was 10 pm by this point. Since it was not a school night and our kids were barely kids anymore, we agreed. I searched the shelves for our copy of **Ghost Stories of Ontario**. My husband replaced the floor lamp with oil lamps and candles to set the ambiance. Blackie was curled up by the fire, green eyes darting around the room. I opened the book and started to read aloud. As promised, the stories brought us chills. As the flames flickered, the tales came to life. A lady in white haunting, conversations with the dead, life after death. I should have seen it coming. Death...

Suddenly, the lights came on, flickered for a moment, then went out again. "Aw..." cried out Lily, our youngest. She wasn't ready for the lights to come on just yet. She would have preferred to spend the night together by the

fireplace, couches and floor a makeshift bed. I was concerned about running out of gasoline for the generator should the outage continue. So when the lights came on again permanently, I was relieved and said, "Okay, fun's over. Time to get some sleep. Everybody to bed."

Things happen when you least expect them. We were sound asleep when it woke me. The phone on our night table rang, but only once. I listened for it to ring again. I picked up the receiver to make sure it was working. The clock read 1:11. My husband hadn't heard the ring. I thought that was strange as the phone is on his side of the bed and he's a light sleeper. I waited for some time, but there were no further rings. I thought I must have been dreaming and went back to sleep.

I believe in premonitions. Both my husband and I have had so many, it would be impossible to not believe. The problem is, in spite of being forewarned, there is often little you can do to change the inevitable. It's more of a taunting than a warning. A warning implies there is something you can do to prevent an occurrence. A warning is meant to keep you safe. A premonition hints at something elusive. Something you need to know, but most likely out of your control. So when the phone rang for real about an hour later, I guess I kind of expected it.

"This is St. George's hospital. There's been an accident." That was all I heard before my world crashed. My husband took the phone and listened as I crumpled to the ground. "Okay, we'll be right there," he said before hanging up. Adrenaline coursing through us, we quickly dressed and drove to the hospital. I prayed everything would be okay.

She was awake when we first got there. They had sedated her and treated her for shock, but she was moving, talking. Alive. We felt such a surge of relief upon seeing her. I felt something more, though. Guilt. Guilt for telling her how much I missed her and would love to see her. Guilt for asking her if she could come for a weekend visit. Guilt for not calling her and telling her to stay put when I knew a storm was coming. Guilt for not checking on her, for not knowing she had set out to come home, for not sensing how close to home she was when it happened. I had closed my mind to my sixth sense when I needed it most. It was my doing. Guilt, guilt, guilt.

We were told Mom should be fine, but did require some surgery. She's always been such a strong woman, so I knew she would be fine. I never expected any different. But the unexpected has a way of happening when you least expect it. "I'm just going to pop over to the coffee shop," I told my husband. And I left. Just for a few minutes, but I left. I should have been there for her. Once again, I wasn't.

"We're so sorry, but there were complications," they told us. Complications? What does that even mean? How can there be complications? She was fine, wasn't she? What happened after that was so surreal, I'm still not really sure it did happen. Seeing her like that, the funeral arrangements, the funeral, the relatives, the aftermath. I knew I had to be dreaming.

Shortly after this, we learned that the accident that took her from us was not caused solely by icy road conditions. There were two vehicles involved. The driver of the other vehicle crossed the centre line and caused a head-on collision. He suffered only minor injuries. His blood alcohol was almost three times the legal limit. We were stunned. How could this have happened? It's hard enough to deal with losing someone by natural causes or as a result of an accident, but when you find out it was caused by someone's deliberate choices, your grief becomes mixed with anger. A lethal combination. Something snapped in me. I tried to get over it. I don't see how I ever will, though. When I look back at the last two years, the counselling and support haven't really helped. Sometimes I think I'm feeling better, distracted from my anger for a time. I joined MADD, and I'm grateful for their help, thankful to know that something is being done in an attempt to prevent further senseless deaths. But I'm still mad.

The day of the trial, I armed myself with my grief and bitterness and braced myself to face it all over again. They say time heals all wounds. Crock of shit. I know better. With time, the wounds fester and reek, becoming infected with poison. Band-Aids fail to hasten the healing or provide relief from the pain. Evil grows. It grew in me. I was armed and ready. When I saw him in the courtroom, I said to myself, "Guilty as sin. I hope they give him the fullest sentence possible." Perhaps that would be enough, and no action on my part would be necessary, I thought. He was unkempt, with a scruffy beard and hair down to his shoulders. His clothes looked like they hadn't been washed recently, and he gave off an air of nonchalance, as though he had not a care in the world. When he glanced in my direction, we locked eyes briefly, and I'm sure I saw it. The lack of remorse, the indifference. It made my blood boil. That was the instant in which it happened. I did what my ancestors have done for ages to set things right. My dark Balkan eyes set on his cool blue irises and the curse was cast.

I pride myself on not being prejudiced or discriminatory. Fairness and equality, I live by and preach these qualities on a daily basis. I'm not a bad person. Don't judge me for abusing the power I was born with. I'm only human. But I judged him, oh how I judged him. His appearance led me to believe he deserved whatever punishment life might have in store for him. Had he been clean shaven and neatly dressed, with a stance and expression suitable to the

occasion, would I have thought differently of him? Perhaps. I can't really say. In any case, I judged, condemned, and sent him to Hell long before the evidence was presented.

What really bothered me was the fact that he admitted it freely, that, yes, he was intoxicated and crossed the line. Case closed, right? Not quite. There was a question of causation. His lawyer contended that the accident was caused by bad weather and poor road conditions, rather than his client's state. When the judge ruled in our favour, I should have felt some satisfaction, but I didn't. "I sentence the defendant to 18 months in jail, and a driving suspension of 36 months," I heard him say. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He got 18 months and we got life. I could have sworn I saw him smirk as he glanced in my direction after hearing his sentence. Justice isn't always just.

That brings me to this moment. Justice or revenge, call it what you will. Things have to be made right. Accidental death or murder? Maybe there's a thin line. We all have choices to make. I've made mine. Once again, I imagine the magazine in one hand, the ammo in the other, set to carry out my plan. I focus my energy on the accidental killer.

In my mind's eye, my weapon is loaded, aimed, safety off, finger ready, waiting as I once again lock eyes with my target. No going back now. In an instant, the surface will be penetrated on impact, sending fragments throughout the body. No accident this time. In this moment, my mind is shattered, my vision fragmented by tears as I face my demon head on and visualize pulling the trigger.

I can only hope for forgiveness, hope that you will understand. The method may be unorthodox, but the end justifies the means. I've done what I needed to do, what needed to be done. Killing the source of my anger with a crazy storm of destruction and darkness in my mind's eye. Leaving no clues to the mystery of his death. No weapon, no bullets, no fingerprints, only the body inexplicably collapsing on the cold courtroom floor, blood flowing from its cool blue iris.

And yes, bringing closure, closure at long last.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Ontario, Canada. She holds a B.A. and B.Ed., majoring in English and French literature, from Western University. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Spillwords, Commuterlit, Canadian Stories, October Hill, Adelaide Literary, Scarlet Leaf Review, The Sirens Call, Utopia Science Fiction, Bewildering Stories, Aphelion, Polar Borealis, Lighten Up, Wellington Street Review, and The Literary Hatchet.

Game Time | Alyson Faye

"Incoming! Breach on the south side!" Jasper, twelve-years-old, yelled from the dizzy heights of the abandoned crane in the scrapyard. "Game time, guys!"

A platoon of helmeted children surged south, armed with kitchen knives, hammers and extinct fire extinguishers. Their faces grimy, and grim. Even the preschoolers carried a weapon.

Beyond their barricades lay miles of urban sprawl, lit by random fires, in which infected adults staggered, loped or hunted for fresh food; young flesh.

The scientists had named it, *The Osiris Virus*, finding this witty whilst safe in the laboratory. The virus took them first. It was ravenous, insatiable.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK; her fiction has been published both in print anthologies - *DeadCades*, *Women in Horror Annual 2*, *Trembling with Fear 1 & 2*, *Coffin Bell Journal 1* and in ezines. Demain have published *Night of the Rider* in their Short! Sharp! Shocks! series and her 1940's set crime novella, *Maggie of my Heart* this year. She performs at open mics, teaches, edits and hangs out with her dog on the moor in all weathers.

Author Blog: [Alyson Faye Wordpress](#)

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The Sullen Family Christmas Letter | *Robert W. Hazel*

From the outside, the home of the Sullen Family looks in need of considerable repair, and a couple of clunkers are parked in the driveway and front yard.

Inside the house, Grandma Sullen sits at the kitchen table, writing her annual Christmas Letter. The room is spotless and shines from recent cleaning. Nothing is out of place or seems amiss, except for the dead goldfish floating on top of the water in a nearby fishbowl.

She looks up from the paper in front of her, deep in thought. Then, returning to her letter, she writes:

Well, it's been such an eventful year for the Sullen Family, I really don't know where to begin.

Herbert Senior was laid off at the distillery again for 'excessive sampling.' They've already paid for twelve treatment centers, so they really might mean it this time. He's promised to cut back.

Ethyl, Herbert Junior's new wife who's living with us, went out one evening to get a pack of cigarettes and stayed gone all night from car trouble. There's still good people in this world, because one of them came along and helped her out. Ethyl said she didn't know who he was, but we haven't had to pay the paper boy since.

And speaking of Junior, even though he did go away this time, his parole looks promising. His lawyer says we can expect a Christmas homecoming, just not this Christmas.

Cheryl, Herbert Junior's daughter who also lives with us, is turning into quite the entrepreneur. She's dropped out of school to concentrate on her business. She's got a new car, new clothes and everything. I didn't know you could make that kind of money babysitting.

Ralph, our pet goldfish, died last night, and it was real, real sad. I cried and cried and cried some more.

Grandma looks up from her Christmas Letter and glances at the dead goldfish and towards the couch, where Herbert Senior, Ethyl, and Cheryl are enjoying coffee and cake.

I'm sorry we won't be able to be with the rest of the family this Christmas, but we're just can't get away.

Even so, I'll be visiting Herbert Junior in jail. I got permission to bake him a chocolate cake, his favorite. I'm putting a little something extra special in the icing. Sure hope no one tastes it before they give it to him. The family's having theirs right now.

Grandma glances up from her letter and looks in the direction of her family, who are sprawled and slumped on the couch and floor, surrounded by cake crumbs, their tongues hanging out of their mouths, twitching.

As the last of their tremors subsides, she returns once again to her letter.

I'm getting a new goldfish for Christmas, so this year has been a good one. But next year looks like it will be even better. All my problems are solved. Ho! Ho! Ho!

About the Author:

Robert Hazel's feature script ("Illusions of Cyn") was produced and released this year, and he's published some recent flash fiction and poetry. Since being diagnosed two years ago, he's been keeping a cancer survivor (so far, anyway!) journal, "The Great Cancer Adventure". His best work, however, is yet to come.

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WICKED DEEDS

WITCHES. WARLOCKS.
DEMONS AND OTHER
EVIL DOERS



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Suzanna kept cramping up, her body fighting against the locked fetal position it endured for hours. Drenched in sweat, embedded in darkness, she strained to maintain calm. But the thumping of her heart wracked her chest in a tight knot of pain. Perhaps her heart would deny her kidnapper his gratification?

The truck bounced, hinting to Suzanna that the road might be unpaved, thus rural. She tried to keep clear details of her peril fresh to help the police find her. If given the chance to do so, but the sharp twinge from her chest signaled that might not happen.

She sobbed recalling the night the widowmaker took her father at forty-two. He always told her that they shared the same heart. At half his age, she believed him.

A sudden lurch slammed Suzanna against the padded side. Without her phone, Suzanna had no inkling of how much time elapsed since her kidnapping. She relied on her body's mounting hunger and fatigue to guess that a day had passed. As the vehicle never stopped, she could be anywhere.

The clear heavy slam of the driver's door vibrated the truncated space. A sudden flash of light blinded Suzanna's sensitive eyes. A massive hand seized her shoulder, ripping her from the enclosure and thrown into the cold November air. She fell into the truck's bed, slamming face-first into the broken torso of a deer, her hands crushing through rotting flesh and aged slime.

Suzanna screamed, but the tightness in her chest prevented its dreadful release. She flailed about the broken carcasses of animals until reaching the edge of the truck. A feral surge of strength allowed her to escape, and she landed on the hard dirt road.

"Nothing like cold Appalachian air to get the heart going." The gruff voice bellowed above her. Heavy black steel-toed boot stomped in front of Suzanna. She struggled against painful breathing to look up at her kidnapper. "Best get this over before it's too damn dark."

He hefted her off the ground and onto her feet, towering over her by a head and a half. Built like a hulk of a tree, all she could focus on at the moment were gray overalls and a camo hat. His bearded face was remarkably calm, which terrified Suzanna.

"Please." Her voice strained.

"Damn, you look like shit." Somehow he carried off a genuine sympathy towards her. He reached out to steady Suzanna from falling. "This will be quick."

She made an instinctive grab for her captor's vest. Her hands locked on the inner rim of the overalls. "Don't do this to me."

He took her hands, clasping them together, "I have an eye for character. Honestly, you don't deserve this, but it has to be done."

The pain enveloped her right shoulder deep into her bone. "I'll do anything."

"Sorry kid, I'm not a pervert." He guided her forward, going behind the truck.

The mixed forest of barren gray trees with groves of green pines condensed around them. A building fog gathered among the branches, slowly growing denser as the light deserted the valley. A long shrill caught Suzanna's attention, a momentary distraction from her plight. Perched on scattered branches was a gather of Barred Owls, their heads turned to keep their large black eyes on them.

"Would you look at that?" His voice rose in surprise. "Never see them bloom this late in the year."

Bright red poppies filled the clearing, crafting a sharp contrast against the brown remains of the fall foliage. He pushed her towards the clearing's edge to a barren spot. A damp soiled odor lingered over the area when they reached the rim, Suzanna recoiled.

A massive pit scarred the earth was filled with blighted bones piled upon by the carcasses of animals held by weathered shells of skin. The Man shoved her a fraction closer.

"You have to undress." He said.

The pain descended down her right arm, bringing a strange sense of numbness. The heat within her caused sweat to soak through the clothing, causing her to feel the cold air. Suzanna struggled to breathe, so she could beg.

"Don't do this."

He held her shoulders as if trying to comfort her. "This has to happen. We need to keep the myth alive. Look into the fog."

There was a long pause, enough for the silent wilderness to manifest. She saw the lights darting in the fog, although she couldn't tell, they seemed distant and close.

"Those are the ghost lights of Batstone Mountains. Some people believe that the lights are ghosts that wander the mountains, while others claim it's aliens." He stressed that out. "Personally, it's just lights from cars, homes, and such bouncing around in the air. Of course, that doesn't matter, people visit this area because of them. They come for the mystery and scares along with the beauty. The problem is that they want more, a living myth. So we took a part of that myth to keep interest alive."

Suzanna felt colder, worse than anything she felt before. She wanted to scream, but couldn't. This was simply the end. "Going by the story, there are mountain spirits take one or two people a year. I've lived here all my life, and I'll tell you honestly that was bull. Until we started this myth-building. Thanks to us, it is true."

A slow calm eased her pain, a sense of light-headedness came for her.

"You would think people going missing would deter visitors. Nope. It created this weird fandom. They come here to stomp around looking for what is taking people. There were a couple of suicides here. Of course, we keep away from those ones. The ones we want are people like you that hike these trails alone. That was stupid."

Suzanna regained a measure of focus, "My dad walked the trail while in college. I wanted to follow him. He died last year."

"Sorry." There was an honesty to his tone. He began to pat down her clothes. "I'm not feeling you up, but I need to empty your pockets."

There wasn't much on her, as she left the phone and wallet in the backpack. He did find other things, pulling from her jacket's top right pocket her medication. "You have a heart condition?"

"Dad had a chronic heart condition. It killed him. I inherited it."

From the left pocket, he found the coins causing him to whistle, "Damn. I collect coins too. These are a real find. Two 1865 Liberty Seated silver dollars."

She turned around to face him with directed ire she said, "Been in the family for years. An ancestor fought in the Civil War, he got those coins on the day of Lincoln's assassination."

"According to the legend, coins like these covered his eyes." She found his tone annoyingly pleasant. Maybe if he was more threatening or monstrous it would be better. Instead, it felt like business.

"It started the tradition in the family, the oldest child gets the pair after the funeral of the parent. I took these off my father's eyes."

He visibly tensed up, as if crossing a taboo. Slowly he placed the coins in the overall's top pocket. She saw the change in his demeanor and sensed his displeasure to go through the act. But her fate ends here, she crossed the threshold and fell into the darkness.

Suzanna vomited from the cold soundless blackness landing on hard ground. She crawled away at the mucus shell, bursting through it to enter the open air. Looking up at the shimmering grays of the sky, she began peeling away bits of fleshy scabs off her skin. As each strip ripped away, it flaked away like ashes from a fire. After a few minutes, she cleared the remains from her body.

She stood surveying the same forest, but now with a shaded grayness embossed into it. The fog, the trees, the ground, all had a heightened texture. The air tingled her bare skin, teasing with an endless lashing of feeling. It all had the impression of a double-exposed photograph where the over-layered images created a blurred and smudged muted world.

The ruby red of the truck had a dull sheen to it. Slowly she walked around to find the Man putting her clothes into a large black trash bag. He stood up, proceeded to the passenger side to place it in the truck. Beside the pit, Suzanna's pale gray body lay straight. To see herself prone created an odd sense of disconnection.

As a passive observer, she watched him return to her body. He carefully lifted it and placed it in the pit. The Man stood over her for a time. Then he removed from his pocket the coins to place in the palms and closed them into fits.

Suzanna's palms burned, causing them to tighten. The Man proceeded to the truck, entered it, and backed up to the edge of the pit. The bed rose, dumping the animal carcasses over her body. As the burn continued, she kept focused on the grave. Her grave, but she wasn't the only one. The broken animals covered the remains of people. She saw the human skeletal bits and pieces as bold outlines among the animal shards. There were eleven human skulls mixed within.

The Man exited the truck and headed back to the pit. After reviewing his work, he got back in and drove off, thundering down the road.

The burn faded, her palms relaxed and opened to reveal the coins. Suzanna touched them, feeling the edges and raised areas of the seated figure of Liberty. They were solid and real. She noticed the markings along the length of her arm and spread across her skin. A jumble of symbols and letters she never saw but could read.

Suzanna raised her right arm to read a moment of her life that surfaced the memory of the first Christmas with her younger brother, John. She was three, he was one, both playing around a giant kangaroo doll that Dad placed next to the tree. She kept trying to place John into the pouch. Suzanna only remembered the day through videos, but this time she relived the emotions and sensations. The heavy scent of the apple candles burning, the smell of the ham cooking, and the aroma of grandma's cookies she enjoyed and missed.

Suzanna spent the night enthralled by the reminiscence of her life. She foundered on the shoals of Dad's death. The angst exploded as he died between words locking her into the helplessness of a daughter.

Without her phone's clock, Suzanna had no clue to the time of night, save the intuitive sense it was late. Layers of shadows and fog interlaced among the trees and rocks creating a feeling she was trapped between curtains.

Save for the lights that grew brighter. A line of lights approached, rising from the side of the mountain towards Suzanna. She saw figures, dark outlines each illuminated by an orb imbued with a unique color. As the figures closed in, becoming distinctive persons. The first, potent in its dread, had the appearance of a medieval monk complete with black flowing robes crowned by a hoodie. In his right hand was a long staff that curved at the top where it held the bleached light.

Suzanna stood, coming from a family of morticians she knew who he was. Yet, she had to ask. "You come to reap me?"

He stopped near the pit, allowed the cortège to spread out into a semi-circle around her. Eleven men and women of all sorts bathed in the light stored in their staff. Suzanna noticed that their skin bore marks as well.

"Long I've traveled these mountain paths, seeking and collecting forgotten souls. From this barrow, I collected eleven, now twelve." He pulled back the hoodie, revealing a strained face worn thin by age. His creamy hair resembled a colonial wig. "Come, now, Suzanna Janna Sexton. Join us."

Uncertainty crept close to Suzanna's soul. The coins still burned, but eased off the heat, feeling like a tight pair of gloves. "What are you? Where is this place? How do you know my name?"

"We walk the dark pathways, gathering those who are newly emerged in the borderlands, protecting and guiding them. Now go to that oak tree, remove a branch for your staff." The Monk stretched out his arm and extended his finger towards the tree.

For a second, Suzanna felt heavy in the head, like being underwater, but the warmth from the coins pushed that feeling away. Something from the Monk tried to compel her into obeying. If it weren't for the coins, Suzanna would have done as told. That she knew was totally bewildering. She felt the Monk was off, and dangerous towards her. For the first time, since she arriving in this shadowland, Suzanna was afraid.

Yet, she did as told. She would play along until discovering the truth. The Man said spirits existed in these mountains that took people, now spirits were claiming her. Maybe The Man was unknowingly right about it all?

The oak was massive with age, its branches thick at the trunk and bony at the edges. Drawn towards one unique limb, twisted and gnarled, she stroked the rough fragmented wood.

'Suzanna.' She paused as the voice drifted from above. Looking upwards, perched throughout the tree were silhouettes of hunched owls. She knew otherwise. With a single solid jerk, the branch broke away.

As she held it, the branch crutched and turned, shaping itself into a staff with a bulge at the top. It burst into a flame, blazing into a deep red, shifting into dark luminous blue to settle in a solid white.

"What have you done?" The Monk's voice rose in astonished rage.

The parliament of Owls erupted from the tree, scattering about the others, crying out, 'Run, Suzanna, Run!' Suzanna ran.

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is an enthusiastic writer and photographer who draws inspiration from the Western Pennsylvania region. He resides outside of Pittsburgh with his wife Nicole, mother-in-law, three cats, and a host of stories to tell.

Facebook: [Gregg Steighner](#)



Aside from the rumble of traffic from the interstate, she was alone. The smoke from her cigarette warmed her lungs. Until she began to cough. Lorna flicked her cigarette into the woods behind the diner.

The back door opened.

"Lorna, girl, we got the evening rush startin'. You 'bout done out here?"

Hardly a girl. Not anymore. She reached into the pocket of her apron and ran her fingers over the medal tucked there. The medal she'd won when she placed first in the regional championships for the 400-meter hurdles, and she was on her way to the Nationals. Her ticket out of this small backwater town, and her chance to qualify for the Olympics. It was also the day she'd stopped running. It was the day the police were waiting for her in the locker room. Waiting to take her to the morgue to identify her father after he'd been hit sideswiped by a long-haul trucker who'd fallen asleep at the wheel.

And here she was, waiting hand and foot on the long-haul truckers that drifted into the diner from the interstate. Dodging their attempts to help themselves to more than just coffee and pie.

I'm sorry, Daddy.

Yellow light splashed over her, again. Her boss glared at her from the open kitchen door.

"Lorna, get yourself in here before I fire you. Ain't like nobody else gonna give you a job at your age."

So much for being a girl. It didn't really matter whether she was surrounded by truckers with wandering hands or if she was out here in the darkness with the crickets and an occasional hungry raccoon, she would always be alone. Alone, and safe.

"Coming, Paul." She retied her apron and went inside.

"Hey, Lorna, where you been?" A customer at the counter smiled at her, showing off a mouthful of stained, rotten teeth.

Jack. Of course. She refilled his cup with coffee that smelled a little burnt.

"You gettin' your usual, Jack?"

"Unless you're on the menu, sugar."

"You're the sweet one, Jack," she lied.

She went back into the kitchen to put in his order.

So tired, and my shift isn't even half over. She poured herself the rest of the coffee before starting a new pot. It'd been sitting on the burner too long. Just like her. Barely turned forty but her age hung on her like a weight. Nowhere near the end of the line, for her, but she realized her life had been over for years.

Just killing time. Waiting until it was just her and her daddy, again. *Hurry it up,* she sent a prayer skyward to forces she didn't even believe in.

"Lorna, hurry up. We got customers waiting. What you doin' just standing there lookin' off into space?"

She made the rounds of the truckers: Benny, Raul, Ethan—all wanting their usual with a side of Lorna.

Except for the last booth. Someone new. A suit, slightly rumpled, and kind eyes behind glasses. Staring out the window, looking for something. Waiting for something.

Like her. She shook her head. *You're not waiting for anything except to go home to your trees and stars and quiet.*

And then he looked at her. Quiet, just like the pond by her cabin. A clear, still pool that encircled her. For the first time in years, she felt like running. Running, and yet held in place by that stillness.

Then he smiled. None of his teeth were broken, or stained.

"Might I have a cup of tea?" He paused.

Here it comes. With a side of Lorna.

"With honey, if you have it."

"Sure thing," she said. "Be right back."

She ran out a few more plates, dodged grabby trucker hands, and brought the stranger his tea with honey.

You're not from around here. "You're not from around these parts, are you?"

"On my way to a conference next weekend. I'm a forensic biologist. My specialty's forensic botany. I started to get a little weary, so I pulled off and booked a room at the motel. Can't be too careful, you know. Especially at this hour of the night."

Just conversation, kinda boring, even, but even then every word of his shimmered, wrapped themselves around her like a protective bubble.

Safe, she thought.

"Lorna, baby, bring me some more coffee, and a slice of that delicious pie."

Ethan. Here it comes.

"If there's a scoop of Lorna with that there pie, I'll tip extra." Ethan laughed. The whole diner laughed with him.

Except for the stranger. He just looked away from her, out the window.

Her cheeks burned. Something crawled its way up from deep in her stomach. Red hot, and burning, too. Hotter than the scorched coffee. And then it was gone, just like that.

She scooped ice cream, poured coffee, and felt so, so empty. One minute she was there, and then she was just gone. She didn't even reach for her medal. That life was gone, too.

Gone, like the stranger, who'd left a twenty-dollar-bill next to his empty plate.

And then everyone was gone, and she cleared plates in the quiet that was anything but peaceful. Her boss had finished cleaning up the kitchen, and turned off the lights.

"Don't forget the trash, and make sure to lock up."

She nodded. The bells on the front door jingled as her boss left.

And the fire was back, pushing its way out of her in red-hot tears. They burned tracks down her face.

"Stupid. Stupid girl." Over a knight in a rumpled suit. But it was more than that. It was hope that still lingered in the quiet diner.

Lorna locked the front door. The bags of trash were waiting for her. She hefted them with arms hardened by years of rural living and tossed them out the door. She set the alarm before she left.

One, two, three; she tossed the bags into the dumpster.

"Been waitin' for you, sugar." Jack's voice curled out of the darkness.

Then his breath was on her neck.

And the red-hot feeling was back. And she was gone.

Until she heard the deep blast of a big-rig horn from the highway.

The red cleared, she came back from wherever she went in her mind, and she saw Jack, sprawled out on the ground in front of her. Blood was pooling out from a gash on his head. His eyes were open, staring up at the stars.

She reached for the still feeling she'd had with the stranger in the diner. She took hold of Jack's legs and pulled him out of the security lights and into the woods. Far enough for an animal to find him.

Something bigger than a hungry raccoon. And then she was laughing. Harder than anyone in the diner, and harder than she'd cried, before.

She ran. Ran all the way back to her truck. Floored it along the dirt backroads to her cabin. Ran some more up the driveway, until her smoker's lungs complained.

I'm sorry, Daddy. She didn't even stop to shower. Just fell straight into bed, holding her gold track medal, and waited for the end of the line.

But the end didn't come. It wasn't even waiting for her on the front porch.

Maybe when she got to the diner. At least she wouldn't have to work her usual Saturday double shift.

But the end wasn't waiting there for her, either. No police cars, lights flashing in the parking lot. No crime scene tape. Not even old Sheriff Romero, apologetic while having to arrest the daughter of his old friend.

She'd figure they'd at least find the body, even though she'd poured bleach over the bloodstain and wiped down the dumpster where she'd slammed Jack's head into, over and over.

She'd thought she'd been so smart.

The truck. Jack's truck. She looked down the row of trucks that had already started lining up, waiting for the diner to open. She remembered it was blue, but there were about three blue ones in line.

She ducked behind the building before her boss saw her. She had to know.

Even in daylight, her backwoods instincts took over. She tracked her way back to where she left the body. Nothing. Not even the pile of leaves that she piled over Jack's body.

She exhaled. Jack wasn't dead.

Lorna felt for her medal. *Thank you, Daddy.*

She headed inside. Scanned the diner. No Jack. He'd probably crawled away like the animal he was. She coasted through her morning shift. Most of the truckers sat silent over their coffee. Too tired from a long night on the road to demand a side of Lorna with their pancakes. Still, she tensed up every time the front door jingled.

When the morning rush slowed down, she mimed smoking to her boss, and stepped out the back.

"Lorna."

Jack. She let go of the medal in her apron pocket and whirled around.

"Whoa, it's all right. I won't hurt you." The stranger. Different suit. Grey, and not at all rumpled.

She waded straight into the pool this time, and let the still feeling surround her. She closed her eyes.

"I just wanted to say..." He trailed off.

Lorna opened her eyes. She looked into his eyes, and knew. Knew there wouldn't ever be any secrets between them. 'I'm a forensic scientist,' she remembered him saying. The kind who would know how to clean up her mess properly.

She stared at him. He stared right back at her. She felt real for the first time since she was a kid. Real to someone. Real like how she felt before her father had died.

The stranger laughed. Not a mean one. Gentle and filled with...she didn't want to answer that, not even to herself.

"You're one smart lady," he said.

It was true. She realized she known that all along.

"And strong," the stranger continued.

"I am," she said it aloud.

The stranger waited.

"What's your name," she asked.

"Sean."

A nice safe name. It was the end of the line. Not the end of her line. But the end of her time here. It was time to start running. She looked at Sean, and nodded.

He stepped closer. She closed the rest of the distance between them.

He whispered into her ear. "Strong, and exciting."

She realized she could run and stand still, and he would always be there. And it was hope that blazed through her, red hot. She held onto him, tightly.

"Lorna, baby, got some of that sweetness to share?"

Ethan. Here it comes.

"Wait." Sean's breath was warm against her neck. "Wait until nightfall. Can't be too careful, you know."

She pulled back enough to look into Sean's eyes. The kindness was still there, but there was something dark hidden behind that clear blue. Dark, and exciting.

She smiled for the first time in years.

I'm not sorry, Daddy.

About the Author:

Willow Croft is a freelance writer and poet who currently lives in the high desert but dreams of a home by a tumultuous ocean. When not writing, she cares for her rescued stray calico and two very fat TNR feral cats.

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Ginger hated working in a rest home. This one was a dark place—atmosphere and ambiance. She had a sense of foreboding about the rooms on B-hall.

She pressed the timecard into the slot and went to check her schedule for the night. Beverly was a no call no show. So that meant she had B-hall all to herself. Mrs. Honeycutt's room—the last on the hall—was the main reason she'd thought about doing the whole no call no show bit.

No, she couldn't live with herself if she knew these people weren't being taken care of for the night. She pulled out a clean linen cart and checked to see if she had plenty of towels and cloths. There were only eight residents in four rooms, and Mr. and Mrs. Barlow were going to be at their son's tonight.

Ginger pushed the cart to the end of the hall. Might as well start here and get it over with. She knocked on the door and let it swing open. Mrs. Honeycutt sat in her rocker with her head down, asleep. Ginger switched on the light. Mrs. Rache lay in her bed as usual. She couldn't move on her own—late stage Alzheimer's.

Ginger noticed that Mrs. Rache's legs were beginning to contract.

Mrs. Honeycutt raised her head. "Give her some water."

Ginger poured a small amount from the pitcher and placed a straw in the glass. Mrs. Rache took a swallow then pursed her lips shut.

Mrs. Honeycutt always thought it was her job to take care of Mrs. Rache. Hospice had been called in at the beginning of the week for Mrs. Rache. Still Mrs. Honeycutt creeped Ginger out. She was usually asleep, but she'd raise her head and tell them to get Mrs. Rache some water. It was always get Mrs. Rache some water—in that throaty voice that gave her the creeps.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" Mrs. Honeycutt asked. "Stay and visit awhile."

Ginger hurried from the room. That was almost more than she could take.

Shift change finally came. Ginger clocked out and went to the parking lot. She reversed her car. Sirens wailed nearby. An EMS van pulled alongside her.

Curiosity got the best of her and she parked her car. She went into the lobby and Brenda, the night shift supervisor sat at the desk filling out paperwork.

"What happened?"

"Mrs. Rache died in her sleep."

"Wow, I knew it was soon, but—" Ginger said.

"I know. After having Mrs. Honeycutt pass this morning, it's been a busy day."

"Mrs. Honeycutt passed?"

"Yeah, sometime last night. Her family will be in tomorrow to get her rocker."

Ginger walked back and got into her car.

Mrs. Honeycutt sat in the passenger seat. "Now maybe you'll take some time and visit with me."

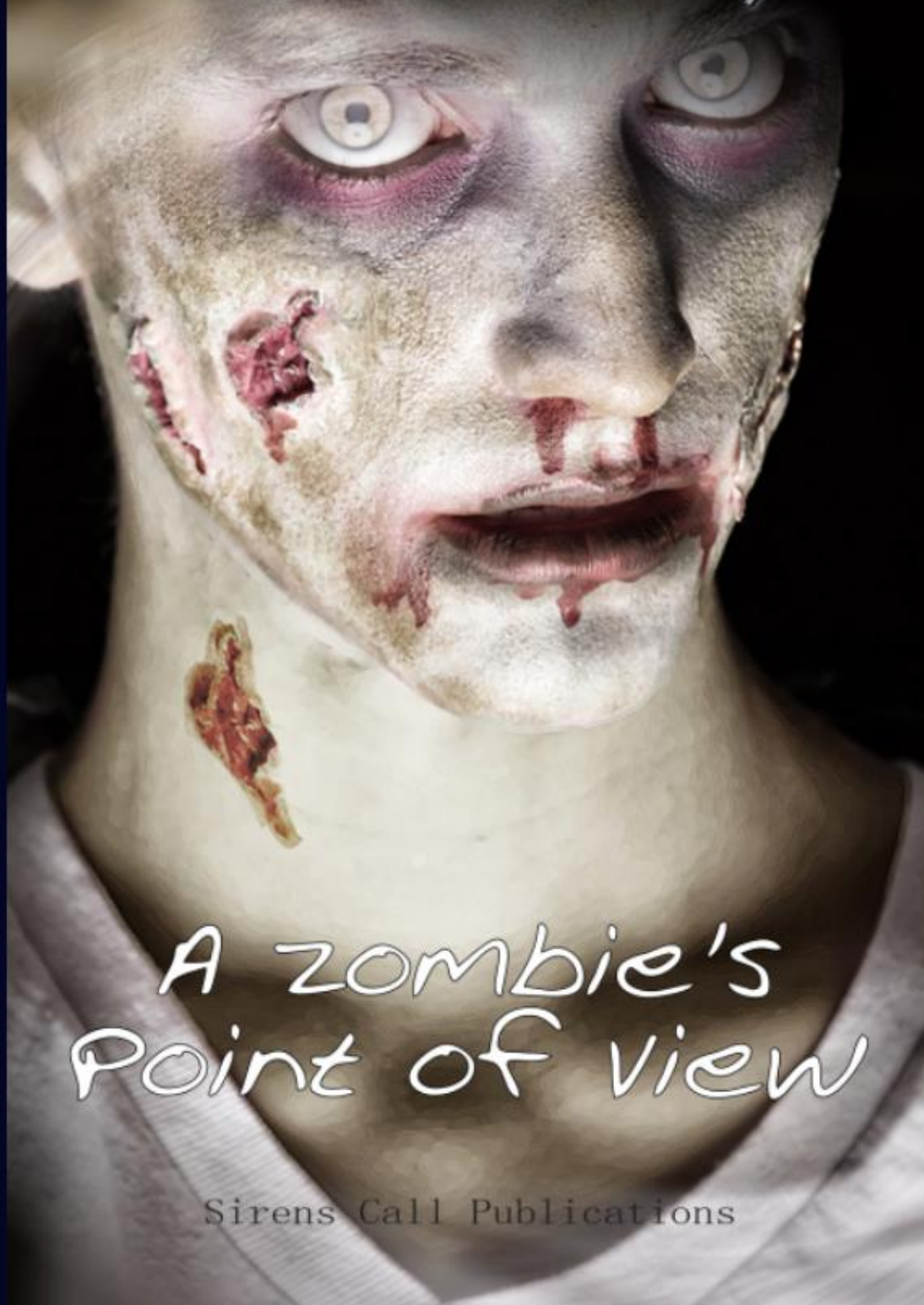
About the Author:

Dan McKeithan completed his MFA in Creative Fiction from UC-Riverside in 2016, all while fighting off cancer. Prior to that he attended UCLA in Professional Screenwriting in 2002. Now his day job is running two nursing homes in North Carolina and when he's not at home or off in Russia with his family he tries to get a little writing done.

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Through Clouded Eyes



A zombie's
Point of view

Sirens Call Publications

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

I was pulled from my slumber by the sound of her wails. From the moment my eyes spotted her ghostly visage making its way to my front door I knew why she had come. I humbly opened my door to the image of her in all white with long flowing hair of the same color. I presumed that the tears that streamed from her eyes were perpetual in nature. A supernatural profession of keening leaves no room for any emotion that is not related to grief.

I watched her levitate through the doorway and into my quiet home. The fear that formed in my stomach had bubbled forth and had filled my throat. My mouth opened and allowed my anxiety ridden words to pour, "I know you come for me spirit. It is to help console and guide me through my final days and this is why I gratefully accept you into my abode." The apparition did not answer, but only looked at me with her tear filled eyes. Then she slowly shook her head to show that my assumption was incorrect.

The realization that came with her nod almost forced me to the floor with grief. She had not truly begun to fulfill her duty and I was already at the verge of tears. I choked back the wave of grief and whispered, "If I am not what you have come for spirit, then may you lead me to the true purpose of your journey?" Without a word she simply turned and floated up my stairs slowly, allowing me to follow close behind.

Her movements ceased directly outside of my bedroom. She floated over the threshold and moved around the side of the bed to my sleeping wife. She let out a cry of grief that only I could hear as she hovered above my beloved. I clutched hold of my nightstand as the tears formed from the information I had just received. In desperation I asked, "Is it possible for you to tell me the time that it will happen?" Of course, she only shook her head and moved past me into the hallway.

I quickly composed myself and shuffled out behind her. I prayed that she would have moved towards the stairs, but fate is not so kind. Her form had moved into my children's room. She waited for me to be present as her gaze moved over all three of my children. She bellowed in anguish as she moved over my youngest daughter who was just shy of four years. Another blow that had yet to be delivered to my family.

"Please banshee," I whispered, "Please let this be it. These losses are too much for my heart to bear. Please tell me you have done your duty and then take leave." The spirit looked at me with a face that seemed even more forlorn than before. I watched her now float to my eldest daughter. There were several seconds where the apparition did nothing, which brought me the hope that my daughter would be left alone. Fate, as it would seem, had a different plan from my hope. The banshee's wails signaled another loss that I would have to bear.

I fell to my knees and let the tears flow freely now. I reached out in a feeble attempt to stop the spirit from floating towards my son. "Please spirit!" I cried, "Leave me my son. I will have nothing left. My possessions, my life, they mean nothing if my family is taken from me. I beg you to leave him!" I knew she could not be deferred from her task and she floated over my boy. Her final wail telling me that my bloodline would soon come to an end.

I collapsed onto my chest, weeping profusely into the carpet. I felt her presence come to a halt beside me and I looked up from my pitiful position. She placed a gentle hand upon my face, and that touch somehow brought a small calm with it. I would have no peace, but she did give me a small sense of understanding. What the banshee had shown was inevitable. I knew that I would have to bury my family.

Tuberculosis came to our household a week after the visit from the apparition. My youngest was the one who had contracted it, and soon it spread to the other members of my household. As if some cruel trick by fate I found that I had not contracted the horrible illness. I was made to suffer as I had to sit and watch my family slowly grow sicker with each passing hour. I witnessed them grow so weak that they could not even lift their heads from their pillows. It took less than a month for the plague to finish its sinister task, and leave me with an empty home.

My only condolence is that I will not have to live long in my state of depression. The apparition came back to me roughly a fortnight after I had laid my family to rest. A strange thing it truly was that only a few weeks before the spirit's wails had brought me misery, but this time I found relief in her keening. I do not know when my end will come, and by what means it shall be accomplished. All I know is that it will be soon. I now pray for the reaper to come to collect me so that I may be free from the burden of the losses I have suffered. Then I will have the only thing I now wish for, peace.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a new author living in Kansas. He is a lover of all things horror. His largest hope for his work is that people will enjoy his writing enough to share it with others.

"Please," you breathe, your voice tremulous, but only I can hear it, "please let me keep this one. I like this one." My hazel eyes darken to the color of the night sky. You do not see me, and your words ring of a prayer of the damned.

My teeth gnash against one another. I wonder if you even know him. Of course, you see him with those silver eyes of yours, but do you see beyond the surface?

Oh, darling, I have loved you and yearned for you for millennia, and yet, you see this exterior shell. Certainly, he has finesse and flash, but I have shown you what I am capable of or have you forgotten, my dear?

I think of the letter I wrote you the night after the first kill.

I thought it tacky to use a ballpoint pen, yet perhaps I would be scorned for a quill. I found a fountain pen in my interior breast pocket and hastened to scribble a few words. They were not my best. You deserve sonnets and villanelles, sketchings of your beauty etched in vowels and consonants.

My words would have to suffice.

The words I wrote cloaked in the blackness of midnight were more than this brute could agonize over in the centuries I have loved. I stare at him, trying to discern what it is you see in his form. Surely, it is not his charm. I think him the type to stare lecherously at women with no consequence. Perhaps he is one to partake in liquor but not truly enjoy the flavor. He escorts you to a coffeehouse, and as you stare dreamily into his eyes, I think of ways to kill him.

Will it surprise you to learn he was mountain-climbing and lost his footing? Would you be altogether shocked if he were at a petting zoo and when he knelt to pet the beast, he found himself kicked in the skull and inflicted cerebral hemorrhage upon himself? Would it shock you if while at a club, he ingested a dangerous number of intoxicants and slept without waking the next morning?

You seemed surprised when you were informed that he veered off the road after drinking too much and slammed into a telephone pole. That night, I threaded my fingers through your hair and read you fairy tales.

You commented to a friend on the telephone that night that you felt a breeze through your bedroom window, and it was like fingers resting through your raven locks. I tried to soothe you, though your body quaked with sobs. The letter I wrote spoke of love, and I had only loved like this once before. She too was a dark-haired, light-eyed wonder. I signed these letters with my Christian name, not the one most call me. Though I respond to Death, I much prefer the syllabic fluidity of Heath.

You continued to find these men (the very ones I decried as undeserving) worthy of your intrigue. I watched, repulsed, as you sat across from them in a variety of settings: restaurants, parks, bars, picnics. Your silver eyes flashed like mirrors as you gazed into them. I stalked behind you like a sullen child and found ways to destroy each of them. The method was inelegant at times, but I hungered to know you. I, desperate with desire, no longer cared about technique or style. Instead, I simply demanded you as my own.

Each night, as you took a glass of claret wine, I would sit beside you unnoticed, plotting your paramours' demise. You were so lovely. They all were monsters. More ape than men. I remember each of them as though they were lovers.

You were an exotic flower that needed to be plucked. I wanted to wrap my arms around your throat and smother the light out of your gazes. I wanted to dismember you with a machete, detach your limbs in the most loving way I can dream of. I've watched how spiders tear apart their prey, and it exudes romance. When seeing an animal eviscerated, I can't help but feel a warm fondness stir in my breast.

But I knew if I were to capture you and annihilate you in the most exquisite way I knew, you would never be mine. I pondered your death with a great deal of passion. My fingers quivered on my revolver as I pressed it to my temple, imagining it to be your brains and blood painting the wall like modern art. Delirious with possibilities, I had begun to believe you indeed loved me. I thought of snapping your limbs underneath me like twigs underfoot.

I dreamed of guillotines and crucifixes and torture devices. Only the best reserved for love. Perhaps I could create a chamber of horrors for you specifically. I would give you a black rose with crimson tipped petals as though dipped in a vat of blood.

One night, you shrieked into your pillow in agony. The anguish was great that night. You threw brass candle holders and ripped painted canvases. You shattered glass and drank Scotch. I had never seen you destroy. It was hard to contain my passion. You smoked cigarettes and paced the room, the frantic march of a woman on death row.

You knelt, clutching rosary beads as dark as night. You begged an absent god for answers, peering up at him. Your eyes rimmed in red and your hair disheveled from your emotional upheaval.

Finally, I let out a breath. You turned your head and it was as though you had discovered me for the very first time. I wore a dark suit, three-piece naturally, and my chestnut hair was cut in the current fashion. Those who saw me sometimes lamented later that my appearance was not like a vampire: ghoulishly pale, ice-blue eyes. No, not I. My eyes were a warm, twinkling hazel and my skin was not the color of milk but a natural, earthy tan. I had labored among mortals. I did not sleep during the day in an upright coffin. These were not my lore.

You stared at me, your gaze piercing through me. The penetration bathed me in delicious sin, an electrifying power. It felt as though our bodies thirsted for one another. I did not expect you to pommel the silence with words, and when you spoke, I expected your elocution to be like a bruise on one's throat. Instead, it was gravelly and deeply sexy.

"What is it that you want?" you asked.

I wanted to take a dove-white hand into my own. I wanted to press my body to yours. Though I am Death, I do not smell of blood or decomposition as some expect. My cologne is expensive and comes in small vials. I wanted to seduce you. Rip you into pieces. Feed you to wolves.

You must have seen the yearning in my eyes. You drew nearer and your eyes widened as you investigated me. I did not know how to posture, and as such, I stood as though in suspended animation, frozen and rigid. I knew not how to breathe.

"Why do you take them from me?" Your voice held a desperation as tears escaped and ran down. It shredded me to hear your cries. I could hear each tear free from your face and fall to your bedroom floor.

I wanted to tell you that I love you. My tongue was no longer in my mouth. I felt disoriented.

You held me responsible for your grief, but sweet darling, did you not see how you bled my emotions out and smeared them, red and raw, across the cobwebbed floor? Finally, a scratch of my voice returned, and I said hoarsely, "All I have done is love you the best I know how."

I desired to feel your heartbeat slow and your organs to fail as though you drank from a chalice spilling over with arsenic. I wanted nothing more than to take a razor's blade and drag it against your delicate wrists until blood drew a thin bracelet of scarlet.

Your mouth twisted in its attempts to make sounds. "Y-you love me?" The stutter created an innocence in you I had never seen.

I stared at you, shocked, my mouth falling open and I made no effort to conceal my surprise.

"Who are you?" you implored, your eyes flashing.

"Death," I growled, trying my damndest to sound sexy.

It was as though a transformation had taken place. I had never seen you collapse in a heap at the feet of a lover before, but when you crumbled, you lost all elegance. The blood drained from your face, and you were ashen. Your eyes glassy and cold. It was as though you had crossed to my side without any encouragement from me.

I waited.

When your eyes trembled, flickering, I hesitated, determining the next course of action.

I could not have predicted your next words, even if I had a century to compose them. "I have flirted with you, even as a child. I did not know your name, but you were like a beautiful dream to me. I was lost in thinking of what was beyond this dull landscape. I loved you before I knew of your existence, but if I'm being honest, I never imagined you to exist. Please know if I had known you were real, I wouldn't have sought any other lovers."

Your gaze struck me mute. I did not know the proper response. I wanted to tell you that I could not lay a finger on you, lest our bond be destroyed.

That was the swear I had made when I exchanged my sacrifices for this husk of a body. You were to shuffle off this mortal coil of your own accord.

I could not seduce you into spending eternity with me, though I fantasized about sharing the last moments of humanity with you, watching suicides and murders and explosions of buildings, our hands clasped in one another's, our lips locked in passionate embraces.

I could not speak. I was frozen with possibilities, hope numbing my soul.

Without another word from me, you rushed off and found a bundle of jute. You returned with it joyously. Our smiles met across the room as you slipped the rope halo to your throat. You whispered, "I will see you soon, my love." Your eyes glittered, and I stared, riveted, as you kicked the chair away.

My love is the noose around your neck. We have forever, my darling. Now, you are mine and I will never share you again.

About the Author:

In the words of Charlotte, a spider, Lucie Guerre is terrific, radiant, and some pig. She is also an author of both fiction and poetry. She enjoys reading, getting lost in the woods, baking, and going to concerts. She is constantly revising her debut novel but hopes to finish it before she dies.

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A.

D.

B flat.

B flat.

That B was not supposed to be flat.

By day, Mrs. Paisley's apartment hummed. Her sink plinked; her heater thrummed.

By night, it croaked. The crooked sounds bit my bad ear like a snake releasing its venom.

Night upon night, the wrong notes of clumsy, fat-fingered piano students oozed down through Mrs. Paisley's floorboards and into my basement apartment. My nocturnal predilection prevented me from having met Mrs. Paisley. But I knew all I needed to about her: piano lessons for miscreants Tuesday through Saturday evenings, Wurlitzer piano squawking above my bedroom. Even my corner trophy case absorbed each vibration. With each incorrect note, teeth rattled and hair swatches from former lovers swished against the glass.

Constant ringing.

Clinging.

Clanging.

B flat.

Grandmother would have struck my left ear until it rang in B flat for that malfeasance. And she had, many times, as she raised me. Now I had to stop the cacophony above me before I went mad. Grandmother warned me long ago that madness ran in our family. So, I crafted a plan.

When I buzzed Mrs. Paisley's doorbell, dull footsteps responded, the clack of heels on oak. They grew to a crescendo, then rested.

"Piano tuner," I said.

"Mr. Simmons' quarterly service isn't for another week."

"Mr. Simmons — Paul — is resting out of the country. He asked me to substitute. Last-minute cancellation."

The door opened. I smiled. I had done my homework well, I chuckled to myself. Mr. Simmons wouldn't be returning to the country in another week. Or ever. Grandmother would be pleased at my attention to detail.

"Right this way," Mrs. Paisley said.

With Mr. Simmons' tuning lever in hand, I followed her to the instrument, feigning innocence, as if I didn't know exactly from where those harsh notes creaked.

Silence played like a sonata as she sat upon the cushioned bench. I lifted the lid of the piano, revealing its cage of strings. I raised my lever. Mrs. Paisley raised her delicate fingers, then struck a note. Had it been another note, I might have tuned her piano and retreated.

B flat.

I swung, striking once. The lid snapped back.

She shrieked and thudded onto the keyboard: *C sharp A flat B flat F sharp E flat A C*.

The sounds faded until all I heard was the diminuendo of my own ragged breath.

Then came silence, beautiful silence.

Still, my task wasn't complete. I lifted Mrs. Paisley's body from the keyboard. I made fast work of the job, tuning each string with precision. All but one. I plucked the B flat string from the piano.

It would make a perfect addition to my trophy case, my magnum opus.

About the Author:

Alexandra Otto writes short stories, essays, and short screenplays. She is currently working on her first novel. When Alex isn't writing, she is outsmarting the largest bears in the world in southcentral Alaska.

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Tara loved the cooler weather, but hated once the wind started to pick up. It meant that she had to break from her normal night routine and make sure that the house was in order. She picked the coziest pajamas she could find, wasting no time trying to keep warm as the temperatures started to drop. She made sure that all the chores were done, particularly the kitchen twice, before the apple cider and cookies were done. Since her boyfriend was snowed in at her cousin's, Tara didn't have a warm body to be next to for that evening, so she settled for a super late night snack. Tara glanced at the clock and the time read 4:15am before settling in with a cup of warm apple cider and cinnamon cookies, being grateful for the time that she had alone.

Or so she thought.

A light knock broke her out of her trance. "Really? Why now?" She walked up to the peep hole to catch a glance. No one was there. *Probably one of those damn kids, always trying to annoy someone because they can.* Tara let out a huge sigh, then sat back down. A few moments later, another knock came. This time it was harder, louder, a sense of urgency. Tara hopped out of her chair and ran towards the door where she saw a woman standing there. She was in a black dress with her hair covering her face; Tara was concerned that the poor woman was out there in the harsh weather.

The moment she had touched the doorknob, fear began to rise in the pit of her stomach. Her body started to tremble, and sweat started to form from her forehead. *It's 30 degrees out, why am I sweating?* Whoever was out there, its presence was almost horrifying. She backed away slowly, keeping an eye on the jingling knob. "Get away!" Tara screamed. The jingling never stopped, the doorknob was about to break off, and she ran towards the kitchen. Her cell phone service was down, yet the gleaming knife on the counter caught her eye. She would be damned if someone was going to break in.

She gripped the knife as tightly as she could, despite her bowels ready to give way at any moment's notice. The jingling doorknob stopped and a loud crash happened at the side of the house, smashing her living room window. Her breathing came in short, ragged spurts; her lungs had forgotten how to take a deep breath at the moment. "Leave me alone!" Tara shrieked then ran upstairs.

She heard the glass crack, the woman was coming inside. Tara didn't bother looking back and just focused on getting to safety. She ran to her bedroom and her eye gravitated to her window. Push comes to shove, she would jump. Loud footsteps crept up behind her and startled her once she turned to see the woman less than several inches away from her.

"What have I done? Who are you?" Her shaky grip dropped the knife, and looked up at glaring eyes and teeth.

"My name is Leti, and you stole James from me. Did you really think you could get away with what you had done? You did whatever it took to take James and cover it up." Leti walked closer, her icy breath tingling Tara's nose. "I can smell your fear and his body in your basement. The others might believe that he's snowed in at his cousin's, but you and I both know that your rage got the best of you."

Leti poked Tara's chest and Tara had let out a huge, deep breath. "It's now your time to face your consequences." Tara saw her former boyfriend James appear from the shadows, expressing such an evil grin. Before long, the room suddenly grew warm. Beneath her feet, an orange glowing light began creeping up and dark shadows that resembled hands reaching for her legs. No matter how much she kicked and screamed, Tara was helpless. They were coming for her, they wanted their revenge. In a matter of seconds, her body was dragged into the Earth and disappeared in a flash of smoke.

Leti and James exchanged smiles as James faded back into the shadows. Leti took a final look around the house before leaving the window. The harsh wind had stopped, and Tara's phone service came back on. Another soul for Leti, he would be pleased.

About the Author:

Tabitha Thompson is a lover of writing words that become horror stories, reading, coffee, rock music, and video games while residing in Florida as a college student. Her work is featured in publications such as Sirens Call Publications, JEA Press, and Mocha Memoirs Press. When she's not writing, she spends time with loved ones. Always inspired, always creating.

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Dressed in a white suit, INSANITY crept through SANITY's mind—sweet, stealthy, sexy. She knew she should send him away. But he ran his fingers through the hills and valleys of her brain until she could see only him. Only him.

He took her . . . somewhere.

Standing in the place that was and wasn't, she stared into INSANITY's mesmerizing eyes.

You're nothing without me. No one cares about you. Come with me.

She took his hand.

She didn't know how long they'd been gone, but when she returned, she blinked against the bright sunlight. Sights and sounds struck her sporadically.

Children played around her in the grass.

She remembered she had children. She thought these children were hers, but she couldn't be sure. She scratched one of her broken fingernails along the thick nylon of the black folding chair, pretending to watch a boy pushing a dump truck and a girl poking her finger in the dirt. They came close into view and showed her things.

Their delighted voices told her something. She comprehended nothing. She smiled, pretending.

To see.

To understand.

To bond with them.

But she couldn't.

INSANITY's seductive massage forced her body into a molecular freezing. Each time she smiled, she felt like a puppet, for he pushed up the corners of her pliant mouth and lit small fires in her eyes.

The children popped in and out of her foggy fantasy.

But only his whispers registered in her brain.

Darkness engulfed her. Slivers of water sliced into her skin.

INSANITY ripped himself out of her body and ran away.

She didn't know how long he'd be gone, but she knew he'd be back.

She called to the children, who were splashing in muddy puddles.

No one listened.

INSANITY laughed from behind a tree and sauntered toward her.

When he got close enough, she punched him square in the jaw, and he fell to the ground.

She stared. Unsure.

Fire flamed up in his eye. He leaped up from where he'd fallen and stared at her.

She couldn't look away.

A child jumped into a puddle—right in front of her—muddying her jeans even as a torrent drenched her.

She stood still as death.

Lightning flashed. Thunder shook the trees.

She didn't blink.

Finally, the Wind danced and blew INSANITY away.

Far away.

A comforting warmth unfroze her. SANITY took the children into the house and cleaned them up.

Staring at the inside of the refrigerator, SANITY willed DINNER to make itself.

It didn't.

An HOUR walked around the room. Sometimes he pointed at the pantry. Other times, he pointed to the freezer. Each time she got close to him, he ran away laughing, just out of reach. Such a tease.

Finally, glancing around for signs of INSANITY, she drew up the nerve to make DINNER herself, trying hard to remember how.

Sometimes she heard the children.

Sometimes she didn't.

When she noticed them, they bounced across her field of vision.

Mostly, they were gone.

She stared at the aftermath of their existence. Spills of food here and there. Folded clothes swirled together with muddy laundry. Trash growing like crops around the cans. Toys on the stairs. Dirty clothes hanging out of drawers, exuding odd fragrances throughout the house.

Tears clawed at her eyes, trying to escape.

Her lover, INSANITY, slipped his arms around her, caressing her face, kissing her neck, running his fingers through her hair.

With an understanding smile, he stepped away and mixed together ingredients for cheesecake: eggs, cream cheese, crumbs squished into butter, granules of white powders he'd gotten from the garage blended into the filling.

She closed her eyes, inhaling the sweet scents of expectant deaths intermingling with the frozen chicken and fries she'd baked in the oven.

Throughout dinner, the children complained about burnt chicken and soggy fries. They knocked over their milk. The little one threw her plate.

SANITY tried very hard, but she couldn't remember how to cry. She stared out the window.

With a knowing smile, INSANITY nodded at her.

Rising abruptly, she sliced the cheesecake as if it were the soft belly of a newborn babe while the children salivated over its golden perfection.

Punching her stomach and pulling her hair, WRONGNESS nagged at her. She kicked him in the balls. Howling and pouting, he slouched off, tossing rotten looks her way.

Inhaling hints of vanilla wafting about, she lay down the cheesecake knife.

She stared at the SLICES OF DEATH.

INSANITY sidled up, dangling an arm over her shoulders.

She shrugged it off and pulled out grandma's china, placing a golden SLICE on each child's plate.

She held the delights aloft.

Their beautiful eyes danced. They o-o-ohed. They a-a-ahhed.

From the corner of the room, INSANITY urged her on.

She whisked the plates back to the counter. Ignoring the whines of the children, she, herself, ate every smidge of that cheesecake.

DARKNESS consumed her mind.

Her son's face swam over her in jellyfish fashion.

She slipped into a chasm of nothingness.

When a glowing light from unseen fires chased away the darkness, SANITY found herself in a decaying swamp with INSANITY holding her hand.

She couldn't see or hear the children anymore. Her house was gone.

Angry, she tore her hand away from INSANITY. She ran until—overcome by exhaustion—she threw herself to the ground and scratched her fingers through the mud at the edge of the nasty waters.

FEAR took her by the throat and smote her body into the murk.

Unable to breathe, she thrashed and writhed.

Something slipped around her waist.

Tightening so tight it squeezed the rest of her precious air out of her.

Her body flew out of the water and stories into the air.

The slick, black enormous snake—FEAR—held her aloft, staring at her, a cold blue fire burning within its soulless eyes.

Tight around her middle. So. Very. Tight.

It opened its jaws larger than her body, its fangs bigger than her arms.

Tighter.

Would its coils cut her in half?

Slamming her to the ground, FEAR dragged her far away from the swamp to a burning desert.

How much more could she take? Already dead from the arsenic in the cheesecake, she realized FEAR would keep hurting her. She would never die. Not really.

It would only be pain.

And more pain.

She wished she could kiss Jo-Jo's boo-boos again, brush Sammy's delicate dark curls.

TORMENT ripped out her heart and tore it to shreds. He crammed the pieces into her mouth.

Tears slid down her cheeks, losing themselves in the dusty ground.

When SANITY gave up entirely, INSANITY burst through the vegetation-laden trees and ripped her from the FEAR snake. As if for the rights to the keys to ETERNITY, he and FEAR battled.

SANITY watched, not knowing what else to do.

Finally, the defeated snake slithered away.

INSANITY pulled SANITY to her feet and kissed her on the mouth. They ran together through the blackness. They swam across slimy waters that scalded her skin and burned her eyes. They battled horned devils whose laughter mocked her. They came to a place of fiery caves and canyons where thorny bushes tore open her skin. When a scarlet red bird woman screamed and attacked them from the sky, INSANITY pulled up one of the bushes and beat the crazed creature until it flew away. Exhausted, SANITY and INSANITY curled up in one of the caves and fell deep into sleep.

When she awoke, she saw INSANITY for what he was: A DESTROYER.

He had led her to this ugly existence.

She looked around.

Far above, in the ceiling of the cave, she saw light glimmering.

Leaving INSANITY snoring on the cave floor, she climbed up and up the hand-slicing rocks until she found a tiny door with a little window. She was about to climb through the odd door when she felt INSANITY's death grip on her ankle.

They went tumbling down.

Down. Down. Down.

This time, a raging beast arose within her breast. She fought with every ounce of her being. Scratching, biting, pulling his hair, she battled until he punched her so hard, she hit her head on the cave wall.

She lay there. Bruised. Bleeding.

He stomped over, face writhing and twisting into a goblin's mask. He opened his mouth wide enough to swallow her whole. His teeth were like hippopotamus tusks. His breath stank of DEATH.

She wrapped her fingers around the nearest rock and threw it straight and true into his gaping hole. Then she climbed up as fast as she could go.

This time, she pulled herself through the little door. Only then did she turn to stare down at INSANITY.

His face turning arctic blue, INSANITY lay on the cave floor in the pit of Hell.

She slammed the door and piled the entrance high with rocks.

Unsure of what to do, SANITY floated around a while. When she realized she could fly, she went this way and that until she found roads and landmarks that looked familiar and found the house where INSANITY had tormented her long ago.

She watched and waited.

At first, she feared the children. She understood it was them by their eyes. By their beautiful eyes. But they were now all but grown and living in a horrible state with someone who didn't love them. She observed them as if they had been strangers she'd seen every day on a bus.

Unkempt and skeletal, Sammy left for school each day with a hunched stride and scraggly hair and didn't come back until long after dark. His sunken baby blues haunted SANITY.

As if she, too, were a ghost, Jo-Jo skittered here and there with none of the beautiful confidence she'd once had. When she left the house, she stared at the ground as if she wanted to melt into it.

SANITY cried.

One day, COURAGE urged SANITY to follow the boy.

Sammy traveled down dark, twisted streets until he found ADDICTION LANE.

SANITY shuddered as Sammy grew excited and hurried along on feet familiar with the terrain.

Flames arose within SANITY's breast.

Just before he reached a door, she popped in front of him and blazed in blinding, ethereal light.

His black-encircled eyes popped open, locking onto SANITY's brilliant face. Trembling violently, he screamed, the sound ripping through the neighborhood.

People yelled for him to shut up, but he didn't.

She steeled all her energy into a ball in the center of her essence, and words poured out of her gaping mouth in a long, low moan: *Go home*.

After a long moment, he ran. He ran straight into the street where the metallic green muscle car slammed into him without slowing and crushed him into a tree.

Sammy's flesh hung in SURREALITY, but his dead eyes, in his now-translucent self, found hers.

She wanted to hug him. To explain everything. To hold him. To say she was sorry.

Just before she touched his ghostly hand, he vanished.

Her tears flooded the street.
She floated off to be alone for a very long time.

Through the fog of her existence, she heard something from far away. It sounded like, *Mother*.
She drifted, allowing the force of the word to pull her along.
She knew not where.
Then she found herself at a high school football stadium.
While fans cheered and booed, SANITY drifted, mindless of anything but that whispered sound, *Mother*.
Under the stomping feet exploding from the bleachers above, she found HER BABY lying curled in a ball.
Jo-Jo.

Her sweater was all stretched out. Her nose bled freely. Her pants were askew.
Baby, baby, baby, SANITY whispered. *What happened?* She ran her fingers through Jo-Jo's hair.

As SANITY did this, the girl took in a deep breath and sat up. She felt around in the dirt for her things while a black bloom blossomed around her eye. Then she soldiered home.

SANITY wouldn't fail Jo-Jo. Not this time.

SANITY watched.

She waited.

She listened.

Day. After. Day.

When Jo-Jo kicked a brick wall as if she might knock it down, SANITY hugged her tight. When Jo-Jo cried hot tears into her pillow, SANITY whispered encouragement until HER BABY fell asleep. When Jo-Jo shared her terrible secret with the high school counselor and revealed THE EVIL ONE's name, SANITY smiled.

SANITY hunted for the boy like a raptor after a mouse.

When she found him, she knew she had eternity.

She watched.

And waited.

Striding around like a man of the world, THE EVIL ONE joked with friends and flirted with girls while Jo-Jo skittered about, avoiding him.

SANITY waited.

Oozing with malice, THE EVIL ONE made a point to catch Jo-Jo's eye and give her some kind of threatening look every time he saw her.

SANITY kept her cool and listened.

Cloaked in fake innocence, THE EVIL ONE worked hard to discredit Jo-Jo when the counselor confronted him.

SANITY smiled once again.

On a dank dark night in June, SANITY followed THE EVIL ONE as he drove to a party down DECADENCE ROAD. When he stopped for a red light, she burst before him in flaming, brilliant illumination. Her eyes blazed. Her hair—mousy in life—sexily danced around her like flickering flames. Her clothes fluttered as though she'd received them from GLORY itself.

Then her words—as if they were knives—stabbed him in the eyes. *Go back to Hell, Rapist*.

He screamed and threw his hands across his face. When his foot slipped off the brake and onto the gas, the car swerved off the road, straight toward a giant oak tree.

For an infinitesimal amount of time, SANITY thought of letting him hit that tree. Escorting him down to Hell would have been a proud moment in her otherwise inconsequential existence. But, in the end, she flew faster than light and balled herself up into pulsating energy. When the car hit the tree, she cushioned his evil head in just the right way to keep him from dying.

But she didn't let him keep his mind.

No, no, no.

She laughed out loud as INSANITY popped into view—his white suit still covered with murk and mud from Hell—to stand next to THE EVIL ONE.

Out loud, not inside her head, INSANITY said to him, "You're nothing without me. No one cares about you. Come with me. I'll show you around." He slipped inside THE EVIL ONE's blind, broken body.

THE EVIL ONE screamed.

SANITY smiled.

Every day from that triumphant moment, SANITY heaped encouragement onto Jo-Jo's plate. And every night—after careful hunting—she dished out vengeance to a new NEW EVIL ONE. As only SHE could.

About the Author:

Stacy Fileccia teaches English by day and writes dark fantasy/horror by night. A coffee and chocolate addict, she intertwines interesting life experiences with fantastic imagination to deliver pure entertainment. Winner of Horror Addicts' 2016 Wicked Women Writers contest (for "The Recluse at Glenda's Goodies"), she has been published multiple times in *Sirens Call* eZine and is working on a fantasy novel for children.

Author Blog: [Maledetto Tales](#)

Twitter: [@StacyFileccia](#)

Wicked | DJ Tyrer

"Such a lovely young lady." The assessment shared by all who meet her. No great surprise that the widower fell in love with her.

Even her children are taken with her, quite unlike in fairy tales where wicked stepmothers are horribly common, welcoming her into their home, loving her like a mother.

But, times passes, and the truth is brought to light: The candlelight by which she guides her way through the old house's corridors.

The children are waiting for her.

The stepmother pauses, warily.

Knives flash by candlelight, dark blood spraying the shadows, stepmother dying as their mother did.

Shipwrecked | DJ Tyrer

Spitting, he scrambled his way out of the water and up the beach. A surge of relief filled him that he'd survived. The sole survivor.

Just a short distance above the tidal line, he found the skeleton slumped against a tree. On its wrist, a watch, the same make as his own.

Crouching, he looked closely at it. The time it stopped – the moment the ship sank. He checked his own: the same.

Tearing it from the bony wrist, he sought the inscription: To him from his wife.

Recoiling, he looked wildly about, seeking escape, yet knowing there was none.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, UK, where they run *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *All The Petty Myths* (18th Wall), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of *Hinnom Magazine*, *ParABnormal*, and *Weirdbook*, and has a novella available, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

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ABERRANT is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...

An ABERRANT MIND



KEN MACGREGOR

Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

Evangeline enjoyed a luxurious, cosseted life, in her doting father's mansion.

"Don't upset the young mistress," was the dictum the entire household lived by from the butler to the most junior housemaid.

Carriages appeared, meals materialised, shoes were cleaned and silk dresses mended as if by invisible fairy hands. If 'Miss Evangeline' desired jelly and cake for breakfast, then these sweet treats were what she was served and they would be served, always on the very best china, as thin as a wafer.

This edict originated from the Master, who never explained it and no one dared to query; it was how it was. There was another accepted norm for the staff – that they hardly ever caught a glimpse of the Mistress, who due to 'a weakened constitution' spent her days bedbound being tended to by a hatchet-faced, muscular nurse.

Fortunately Evangeline had a sweet sunny nature. She spent her days playing with her pets, running in the gardens, gossiping with a bevy of imaginary friends and learning to read and write under the tutelage of her governess.

"Nothing like her mother," Cook commented, kneading the dough for that day's baking. "The Mistress was always a moody mare." Cook had been with the household, since she was a girl scrubbing the floors.

Jarrold, the Butler, shook his head. "She was a beauty once though. I remember the day the Master brought her home, carrying her over the threshold and her hair, well, it was like a raven's wing, lying on his shoulder." Jarrold harrumphed and polished his spectacles.

Cook laughed and looked amused. "You're an old softie at heart, aren't you?"

Evangeline bounced into the kitchen, "Can I eat those, pretty please?" She pointed at the strawberry tarts cooling beside the cooker.

Cook began to say no, then pulled herself up short. "Of course you can, Miss." She rolled her eyes at the butler though and mouthed, "*Spoiled, she is.*" Jarrold smiled back.

Outside a regular thud, thud, thud, could be heard. "I've told that young whipper-snapper not to kick his ball against the wall."

Jarrold headed out, followed closely by Evangeline, tart in hand, jam smeared on her face. Billy, the gardener's youngest lad, owner of the football, spotted her and laughing, pointed at her sticky face. "Cor, look at you Miss. You're a jammy sight, all right."

He then booted the ball right at the young girl. Alarmed, Jarrold threw himself between the ball and his young mistress, but his old body let him down and the pigskin ball struck Evangeline hard in her midriff, depositing her on the damp grass and soiling her violet, silk day dress. Billy roared with laughter. Jarrold froze and prayed.

He sensed a change in the air, as though electricity was crackling, more worryingly he tasted copper on his lips.

"Hey, Mister Jarrold, there's blood comin' out of yer ears," Billy said, before he fell whimpering to the grass clutching his own stomach.

Evangeline sat huddled on the grass, winded, angry and humiliated. Sensations which, in her eight years of privileged life, she had never endured. Energy surged through her and poured out; she was unaware of the effect it was having on the butler and the boy. Her body spasmed, jerking whilst her cheeks flushed brick-red. Her hair lifted from her head and when she opened her mouth, yellow saliva dribbled out. When drops of it landed on the grass, the blades withered and died.

"How dare you!" she screamed.

Billy and Jarrold watched in horror as the young Mistress' blonde curls mutated into slippery black locks, which slithered around her head. Her body morphed, extending, ripening, becoming more mature, as though she had aged fifteen years in a minute, whilst her lips turned carmine red and voluptuous.

"What's that comin' out of her back?" cried Billy, red droplets leaking from his eyes and nose. He rubbed them furiously on his jacket, gazing horrified at them. "She's given me a nosebleed. Me mum's goin' to be so mad at me dirty clothes."

Jarrold did not respond, he continued to stare at Evangeline, petrified. Evangeline's silk petticoats and dress ripped apart to allow a pair of black leathery wings to break free and rise above her head. Nestling there they looked like a pair of mammoth obscene ears. Jarrold knew otherwise.

"God help us," he whispered. "She's turning."

"Mr Jarrold, sir. Where's the young Miss gone to?"

Jarrold swallowed hard. "I believe, Billy. . ." He pointed at the creature ". . . that is Miss Evangeline."

In the child's place, a woman wearing bats' wings with luxurious rivers of hair streaming down her back hovered over the lawn. She flew over to Billy, who was lying in a pool of his own piss and sweat. She licked his face; her tongue grey and slimy. Billy screamed in terror.

Evangeline's father raced from the house, a shotgun cracked under his arm. He recoiled at the stench emanating now from his darling daughter. Addressing Jarrold, he cried, "Who upset Evangeline? You were all warned."

A second father joined him at the scene, Billy's - who watched in disbelief as the bat-woman hybrid distended her jaws and chomped on the boy's skull, cracking it open and slurping its contents, whilst blood and matter dribbled from her lips. He attacked the winged monstrosity with a spade, as it hissed, rearing above him on the manicured front lawn.

"Stop man!" yelled Evangeline father. "You will kill her. This is my child. She cannot help herself. This is what she becomes when angered or afraid. She inherited this trait from her mother."

The bat-woman, pausing in her feast, turned her head towards her birth father. His ear drums burst at her piercing cry whilst the house dogs, locked in the yard, howled in sympathy.

"Stop child! I beg you!" He could not hear his own words.

Jarrold, on his knees, prayed as he'd never done before. Billy's father swore and hurled the spade at the creature; it missed and smacked into Billy's headless corpse. His father howled in anguish. Evangeline's father lifted the shotgun and called his daughter's name one final time. As the creature flew towards him, he fired one true shot into the middle of her forehead. The giant wings flexed and fell, her eyes opened wide in disbelief, her body shrank and morphed in front of his eyes and once again his beloved young daughter lay crumpled onto the lawn returned to her eight-year-old's body.

From the upper storey of the mansion an eldritch screech ululated. His wife threw open the casement window, tossed off her veils and with jaws distended and teeth agape she flew to Evangeline's side. En-wrapping the tiny corpse, dressed in its torn silks, with her own leathery wings, she rocked her lost child.

Five years later another golden-haired girl scampered across the lawns of Heatherton Hall; clad in her chemise, bare-toed and giggling, she chased her pet dog, a gift from her adoring father. A shadow, at the second story window, hovered watching.

Each pregnancy had been a blessing and then a curse; each labour long and fierce, as the hybrid baby fought its way out into the world tearing apart the womb lining. The mother loved and hated her progeny. This was her biological destiny; to breed, to survive.

"Don't go near the water," called the governess.

Evangeline pretended not to hear. She tiptoed to the edge of the pond, lured by the ducks and the ripples. She swiftly removed her tight shoes and spread her toes, allowing the webbing in between each digit to extend and sense the air. Hiding her feet all the time was one of many strict rules her Papa insisted upon. She frowned at the memory of the long list of 'Do not do's'

"Evangeline, where are you?" The governess called again. Her voice rising in concern.

The girl frowned, and the first bubbles of anger fluttered in her stomach. The nails on her hands and feet lengthened into talons, her shoulders cracked and her chemise ripped apart, as two stubby leathery wings burst from her shoulders . . .

"Coming. . ." she trilled.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK; her fiction has been published both in print anthologies - *DeadCades*, *Women in Horror Annual 2*, *Trembling with Fear 1 & 2*, *Coffin Bell Journal 1* and in ezines. Demain have published *Night of the Rider* in their Short! Sharp! Shocks! series and her 1940's set crime novella, *Maggie of my Heart* this year. She performs at open mics, teaches, edits and hangs out with her dog on the moor in all weathers.

Author Blog: [Alyson Faye Wordpress](#)

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He was small, seeming younger than his age. Pale blond hair topped a high forehead and snub nose. His eyes, when he let her see them, were dark and deep, a non-descript color. He was polite and quiet, very well-behaved. How any parent could have abandoned such a child, Penny would never understand.

As though he felt the weight of her gaze, he turned from contemplating the dandelion stem he held. The yellow flower was gone, replaced by a fuzzy round seed head.

"Come in and wash up," Penny said with a reassuring smile.

He looked back at the stem he held and blew to free the multitude of fluffy parachutes. Dandelion seeds drifted across the yard, settling in the dry thinning grass, and Penny sighed.

When he crossed the yard to her, Penny smiled again and held out her hand, hoping he would smile back. Instead, his somber expression did not change and he dropped his eyes. But he took her hand and walked with her into the house.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he said, but didn't seem enthused.

She turned him toward the hall. "The bathroom is the first door on the right. Wash your hands, and when you come back lunch will be ready."

Without another word he followed her directions, disappearing into the half-bath. A moment later, Penny heard the water turn on.

She went back to the counter to finish the sandwiches she was making for lunch. Faded ginger hair fell across her tired eyes as she thought about the boy.

She'd found him on the side of the road. When she stopped her car, he'd solemnly answered her questions, dark eyes hidden after the first soul-searching look he'd given her. He was clean and well-nourished, but alone. When she asked where his parents were, he'd shrugged in a matter-of-fact way that brought a lump to her throat.

"They're gone," he'd said evenly. "They didn't want me anymore. Nobody wants me."

Remembering his forthright words made tears sting, and she blinked as she carried two plates to the table. Her eyes sought the framed photos on the wall. Penny herself, younger and happier, holding her daughter as she leaned against her husband's side. She blinked hard.

"Where are they?" the boy asked, and she nearly dropped their lunch.

"What?"

He pointed to the grouping of pictures.

Penny cleared her throat. "My daughter passed away. Tom—Tom left after that."

"It makes you sad," he said, meeting her eyes now. His were dark, as black and empty as the hollow space that had grown in her since she lost her family.

"Yes," she said, uneasy. "Didn't you say you're hungry?"

"Very hungry," he agreed.

Then Penny was on the floor, not knowing how she'd gotten there, with the boy perched above her. His mouth gaped, revealing sharp pointed teeth. When he darted forward, she couldn't even scream.

She remembered hearing once that sorrow gnaws at your heart. She had never expected it to be so literal.

About the Author:

Rose Blackthorn lives in the desert but longs for the sea. She is a writer, dog-mom, jewelry-maker, avowed coffee drinker, and photographer. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared online and in print with a varied list of anthologies and magazines including the collection *Beautiful, Broken Things*.

Author Blog: [Moonlight and Thorns](#)

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I hate having to wear a mask when I leave the office. It muffles my voice and keeps me alive but it leaves a groove around my mouth and nose that takes days to smooth out of my skin. And the trolley that carries the canister of life-supporting air is hard to pull up and down the stairs. If I didn't need to call my supervisor at The Department of Environmental Disease Control to find out why I have no internet or phone service, I wouldn't leave the office. But I need to access my emails. It's been a week and I still haven't received a response to my report on how to eradicate a virus. My idea to use our air as the cleansing agent was ingenious but I wonder if anyone agrees. Maybe the suggestion was so fanciful, the lack of communication is a polite way of implying it's time to hang up my skin, as they say, and consider early retirement.

My bleak mood about my future with the department darkens further as I wait to cross the road. The traffic is horrendous. I don't know what came first, the shopping complex or the population explosion. It's a far cry from the quiet country town that used to be here. The complex is open twenty-four hours a day, and I'm sure some people never go home. Why would they? Aside from the grocery and specialty shops, there are cafés and lunch nooks, three restaurants, a movie theater, and a car park the size of a football field.

I break out of my miserable musings to seize a break in the traffic. Giving my hated trolley a jerk, and receiving a whack in the ankle in retaliation, I hurry across the road and enter the central arcade to search for a payphone. As I merge with the shoppers, I'm caught in front of a group of women who rush toward 'Betty's Bathroom Supplies' just inside the entrance. Half-price sale signs cover the windows and people swarm around a display of printed bath towels like hornets invading a beehive.

It vexes me how the mere mention of a sale can affect human behavior. There's pushing and shoving and a complete disregard for the 'no-more-than-two-towels-per-customer' sign. Anyone would think the end of the world is nigh even though towels are no use in an apocalyptic event. Shaking my head in disgust, I extract myself from the women, but I'm pushed further into the shop by a paunch-necked lady clutching eight bath towels. She dances from side to side in her effort to reach the checkout, then barges past, banging against my shoulder. I'm not hurt—for my age, I'm a stout old reptile—but she shoots me a glare as though it's my fault.

Muttering about disrespect to the elderly, I hurry from the shop, but trip over a girl being pulled along by her mother. The girl gives a frightened squeak and drops her cup of juice. Her mother scowls and drags the girl away, leaving me with the puddle of sticky, orange mess.

I shouldn't draw attention to myself but, in a moment of reckless abandon, I pull my trolley through the puddle so the wheels make orange track marks along the floor. The security cameras capture my antics. A 'Code F' announcement blares through the complex's sound system.

A shop attendant arrives with a mop. His name tag reads 'Sam'. It should read 'A-Grade Footballer Sam'. His shoulder span is wider than my trolley and his biceps bulge beneath his uniform. He smells nice, too—Sandalwood or Vetiver, Oakmoss, perhaps? I also detect a hint of Musk but I've no desire to wear a scent that attracts a mate to engage in cuddles. Overpopulation is rife as it is. Regardless, my 'Old Dead Man' scent could use a lift. It's so bad it makes my eyes water.

A-Grade Sam doesn't appear to notice. Or maybe he's just a polite lad. But he rolls his eyes at my trolley when he sees the track marks on the floor. That makes me like him even more. He hates my trolley as much as I do. And he's a whiz with the mop. One sweep and the mess is gone.

I wonder about offering A-Grade Sam a job in our department, but I'm distracted by a horrific scream. It's the paunch-necked lady from Betty's. Three bags of towels hanging from her arm, she points toward the car park.

A-Grade Sam should be a mid-fielder at the speed he pushes through the gathering crowd and runs to the screaming woman's aid. I lose sight of them as the crowd thickens. Then chaos erupts. Women shriek. Children wail. Men shout as though shouting solves the world's problems. The doorway darkens. I peer outside but my eyes open so wide my eyelids nearly tear from my face.

One of our stealth aircraft, the department's latest acquisition in the fight to control prolific viruses, hovers above the car park. The craft's mirror outer surface should reflect the color of the sky, but the stealth mechanism must have a glitch because the craft is visible. Thus the reason for the panic—the craft's honeycomb panels look distinctly out-of-this-world.

If there's ever a time I need a phone, it's now. The last thing our department needs is an inquiry into our activities, especially when the health of the environment is at stake. I wonder if A-Grade Sam has a phone—he's a helpful lad—but I can't get to him. I'd ask someone else but everyone uses their phones to take photos. All I can do is

pray that the blundering fool on the aircraft remembered to switch on the cell phone transmission blocker so nobody gets a call out.

A panel opens on the underside of the craft. Beams of red light shoot out. The lights cross over each other, forming a hexagonal dome over the entire shopping complex. Then the dome fills with green mist. The mist condenses into a thick fog that drifts toward the ground.

People jump from their cars and run toward the shops. The shoppers in the doorway scramble for safety. Grabbing the canister on my trolley so it doesn't get knocked over by panicked shoppers, I watch the people caught in the immediate drop zone. When the fog touches them, they stiffen as though paralyzed then drop dead.

I look on with surprised delight. I didn't expect death to occur this quickly. At this rate, there won't be one virus left alive in the entire complex.

The fog gets sucked into the ventilation systems and spews through air vents in the arcade's ceiling. Death runs amok after that. More people drop to the ground, eyes wide and mouths agape as though their lungs fill with quick-drying cement. Those who correctly suspect there's a contagion in the air run inside the shops, including the paunch-necked lady who, to my disgust, clutches her bags of towels and uses them as a battering ram to get through. It shouldn't come as a surprise. Death has a habit of drawing out selfishness and she gives an outstanding display.

Safe behind my mask, I'm content to stay put until the fog clears, but A-Grade Sam scoops me up with one arm, grabs my trolley with his other hand, then carries me into Betty's Bathroom Supplies like he's a back-marker sneaking a run down the sideline. We end up in a tiny staff room at the back of the shop.

A-Grade Sam lowers me to the floor then helps the other fast runners clog up the gaps around the door using, unbelievably, the on-sale towels belonging to the paunchy lady. Making a mental note to adjust my opinion on the use of towels during an apocalyptic event, I settle back to wait for death to show its beautiful face.

It sneaks through an air vent in the ceiling. Even if the towels were of good quality (sale towels never are), there's no holding back the inevitable. I don't dare take off my mask so I can explain why. The air in the room could still be as poisonous to me as the new air is to them. I wait until the last person dies, which thankfully isn't A-Grade Sam (for all his brawn, he lacked stamina and was the first to go), before kicking the towels away from the door and venturing outside. Even then I'm afraid to remove my mask. The fog looks the right shade of green but after seeing the department make a mess with the stealth mechanism, I'm not willing to risk breathing it.

I go outside to the car park. I can't see anything in the fog. But my supervisor appears in front of me, minus his skin and mask.

Deeming it safe to breathe, I pull off my mask and strip out of my disguise, intent on demanding an explanation. But when I breathe in the fog through the slits in my nose, my reptilian skin tingles with exhilaration. It's nothing like the old, recycled air in the canister. It's pure, fresh, deliciously clean home-planet air.

My supervisor holds out his hand. "Travers? Perfect timing. I didn't think you received my email. It kept bouncing back."

Anger returning, I click my claws at his face. "My server's down and my phone's out. And that damn hovercraft malfunctioned. Everyone saw it. I hope you thought to block cell phone transmissions."

"Sorry about that. The department's having communication issues. Budget cuts. You understand. Not to worry. Everything here is under control. We fixed the aircraft's glitch and blocked all calls. The area outside the drop zone is being evacuated. Gas leak. The usual excuse. Brilliant idea, Travers, to use our air as the cleansing agent. I expect this trial to result in a one hundred percent kill rate."

"Brilliant? It's extraordinary. Remarkable. Inspiring. One breath and they dropped dead. But why wasn't I consulted earlier? I've had no response to my report."

"Sorry. No time. We have an urgent situation in the Northern Hemisphere and needed to test your cleansing agent ASAP." He sniffs the air then shoves a metallic device into his nostrils. "Best cover up," he says, nodding to my discarded mask.

There's a sucking sound like a vacuum cleaner turns on, then the fog clears. I grab my mask and secure it on my face. After breathing our planet's fresh air, the stale recycled air makes retirement sound enticing. But I'm curious about my supervisor's lack of canister.

"What is that?" I ask, pointing at the metal device in his nose.

"It's the new in-nostril air convertor. Just released last week. I'll have one sent to your new office."

"What new office?"

"You're promoted. Effective immediately. I want you to handle the Northern Hemisphere situation. Perkins from Sector 65 released a super flu six months ago but people survived and are now super-resistant to everything we throw at

them. We can't let them breed. Can you imagine the consequences? This planet can't cope with another population explosion. Perkin's made a hell of a mess. I want you to leave immediately. I'm impressed with you, Travers, and your ideas. Anything you need, just ask."

My anger fades. All the worry about my future with the department was for nothing. But ... anything I need? "A new skin would be nice. But not some old dead man this time." I kick my discarded skin with my foot.

My supervisor frowns. "We're all out of fresh skins, I'm afraid."

"We're not now," I say, refusing to take no for an answer.

"All right then. Consider it your yearly bonus. Just make it quick. The aircraft leaves in three minutes and I want you on it."

I hurry back to Betty's Bathroom Supplies and drag A-Grade Sam from beneath the pile of dead shoppers. Using the tip of my claw, I make an incision down the length of his spine.

"Time to go to work, Sammy-boy," I say, peeling off his skin. "There's a mess to clean up and you'll be perfect for the job."

About the Author:

Pauline Yates loves to use her devious streak to plot solutions to the world's environmental problems. Her stories can be found with publications including Sirens Call Publications, Aurealis, Bete Noire, Metaphorosis, plus others. She lives in Australia and treads softly on the Earth so she doesn't disturb the apocalypse Gods.

Twitter: [@midnightmuser1](https://twitter.com/midnightmuser1)

The Crack on Curse | *Michael D. Davis*

For generations, each and every family member has met their end in similar fashion. Whether the cause of death was car wreck, a fall down the stairs or just simple illness everyone dies of a broken neck. It is said to affect all members of any age and is preempted by a sound. A crack as loud as a thunderclap is heard seconds before your spine snaps like a twig. Some have said that we simply suffer from genetically weak necks, but this isn't true. This morning I was healthy, neck stronger than a horse, then I heard the crack.

A Daughters Help | *Michael D. Davis*

I'm stuck here. A prisoner in a basement. I don't even get my own cage; I'm strapped to a table like a lab rat. It seems like she's kept me down here forever. With all the things she's done to me, I just want to die, I can't imagine what she's going to do next.

A kid; must be her kid, is in here. A little girl. I try to beckon her over, but she's shy. Finally, she comes, I ask her to release me. The little girl stands there looking at me then she stabs me instead. Finally, death.

About the Author:

Michael D. Davis was born and raised in a small town in the heart of Iowa. Having written over thirty short stories, ranging in genre from comedy to horror from flash fiction to novella he continues in his accursed pursuit of a career in the written word.

I always knew I would die alone. Isn't everyone when they take the journey you may ask? Only your soul is the one that leaves when you die. So technically, yes... you'd be right.

I don't mean it in that way though. I mean that when I die, no one will be around. There will be no one to save me... no one to call for help. An empty room will most certainly by fate be the last thing I see as I blink out of existence.

It has been this way in my family since before I can remember. It's happened to all of our women. All succumbed to heart afflictions brought on by different conditions. Not to be blamed on a genetic defect or disease. All had been exactly 49 years old and all as I aforementioned, died alone in their homes.

They were all married and obviously had children because well, here I am. All of the husbands had gone out shortly on errands and came back to find their wives alone. Always on the floor, hearts stopped.

Ambulances were all called too late. They arrived and took our loved ones one by one to their resting places. We learned at younger ages than most about funeral arrangements and how to speak about life insurance and organ donation.

It wasn't anything sinister, there was no malice or foul play involved. Everyone had moderately natural caused passings. It just happens that way. It doesn't really bother me like you think it would. I make the most out of my days and my family is prepared to be taken care of after my time comes.

My grandmother Marie was one of the most beautiful people I will ever meet. She was the kind of woman that made everyone around her feel special. The whole town wanted to be her friend. At the same time though she knew when to call bullshit. She believed in me more than I knew that I even could. Her care gave me strength as a little girl that made me who I am today.

I bring her up because she was the first person that I loved and lost. Her mother died long before I was born, when my mother was a child. My heart broke and I felt so lost. I listened to her message on the answering machine over and over and would respond to it as if we were talking. This always made my mother cry and eventually her and my dad disconnected the machine entirely.

Grandma didn't have to be such a good person either. I wouldn't have been if I was in her place. You see, she had two baby girls and raised them their whole lives knowing exactly what age they would die. Maybe she found some comfort in the fact of knowing that she wouldn't be alive to see it. She believed very heavily in God and said she knew she would be in Heaven waiting for them.

Each pregnancy boys were prayed for, naturally. Of course though for generations our family had nothing but girls. There was pink and lace and baby girls as far down the line as I could track. I myself had two sisters and as I said my grandmother had two girls of her own. My Grandmother had a sister twelve years older than she was that I also never got to meet.

Honestly, I used to think it was cruel to keep the family line going sometimes. Why would you create a life knowing that it would only reach barely over half of its life expectancy? Yes, every life is precious and young people can do the greatest of things; but think of the daughters. Years and years of broken hearted daughters and granddaughters.

My mother would get frustrated with me and tell me she hoped I grew up to have kids just like me. I would always yell back that I would never have kids. To that my grandmother would smile at me and say, "Oh Ellie, trust me. When you get older and meet a man that you truly love, the first thing you are going to want to do is give him a child. AFTER marriage of course young lady, remember that."

I would shake my head and go about my day, not absorbing what she said. The conversation happened so many times after all.

Well, that viewpoint changed, many years later, the minute I first saw my husband. He was everything my parents wouldn't want for me but everything I wanted for my hypothetical future children. I saw bedroom eyes, baby clothes, him sweaty from building a crib, the whole nine. He felt the same way, also never having thought he would ever want or have children. When he saw me though..... He knew.

I gave birth to three healthy children, and by a twist of fate they were all boys! The first twelve weeks of every pregnancy was spent on pins and needles, waiting to be far enough along for blood testing.

Did you know that now they can tell the sex of your baby just by testing your blood? And as early as twelve weeks! That, my friends, is what's called progress. I love them and treasure them every day, knowing that they will live full and hopefully long lives.

Of course there was always a chance that I could be wrong. In my heart though I knew, I just knew they wouldn't be afflicted. The pink 49 curse we would call it, not that we went out of our way to bring it up. Who wants to hear or talk about things like that at Christmas gatherings and barbecues ya know?

My mother has been gone for some years now. I had my children later in life so she only got to meet one of them unfortunately. I know that she is somewhere in the cosmic ether still watching over me and my boys. I can feel it sometimes, just as strong as a sudden ray of warm sunshine on a cold rainy day.

She hadn't been able to be as strong as Grandmother Marie. She was like a Christmas light that glowed brighter and brighter until it burnt out, bulb exploding.

There would be so many fun days. Days where I would get to stay home from school and go shopping. Or days where I had ice cream for dinner and got to stay up with her all hours of the night. She would indulge my every wish.

Then there were days where she was quiet. Her hair matted and her clothes stained and smelling. Her eyes dark bagged and hunger not being a function her mind could process. She would keep me in her bed with her all day and stroke my hair and cheeks. Just over and over again in that dark room, smelling of emptiness and a beaten down soul. She would always cry whenever she called me her baby, even after I was an adult.

I understand all of this now as it's less than two months before my 49th birthday.

When I was a young adult I thought it odd and sometimes irritating that the women always banded together to raise the children. My whole life it was always my mother, grandmother and aunt all at once. I understand now that they needed each other, needed to teach each other how to go on. How to carry on the traditions and make sure their short life's works amounted to something.

You have no idea how thankful I am.... was.... that I didn't have those worries. Each of my children most likely had a better childhood than I ever could have had. They were able to see a color that we could not, the color of the sun hitting the sky. Freedom; they got to live out from under the shadow of death.

My sisters also had boys and I was so glad that they could share my joy. That we could all raise our children together without fear. Oh of course we worried, we were mothers, but not like ours had to.

The weight of the pink 49 curse lifted off of our hearts. I know I do go on and on but I just want to properly express how much of a blessing this was to us. This was our chance to start anew. Maybe our boys would all fall in love and have sons, leaving the broken trails of this way of death in the past to die out from history.

Today I write this as an explanation, a gift if you will. Every time someone commits a horrible act everyone asks, "How could anyone do this? How could a human being be so selfish?" Here is the written answer to that question. Proof for all to see and linger in your minds until the memory of me and my family is long gone.

You see, I got a call from the doctor's office yesterday. I haven't been feeling well, not myself lately. As it turns out, yes even at my age, I am 13 weeks pregnant. The blood testing came back and my heart froze as I heard that it is a healthy, blood type A-, baby girl. My hopes of the broken curse shattering along with my phone screen as it hit the tile floor.

I think that everything will be ok though. My daughter will not die at 49 and I've decided neither will I. I will break the cycle right here and now for the generations of women ahead. My family will live on, new and enriched because of my choices. I will.....save.....us.....all. The necessary steps have already been made and this memoir if you can call it has been written.

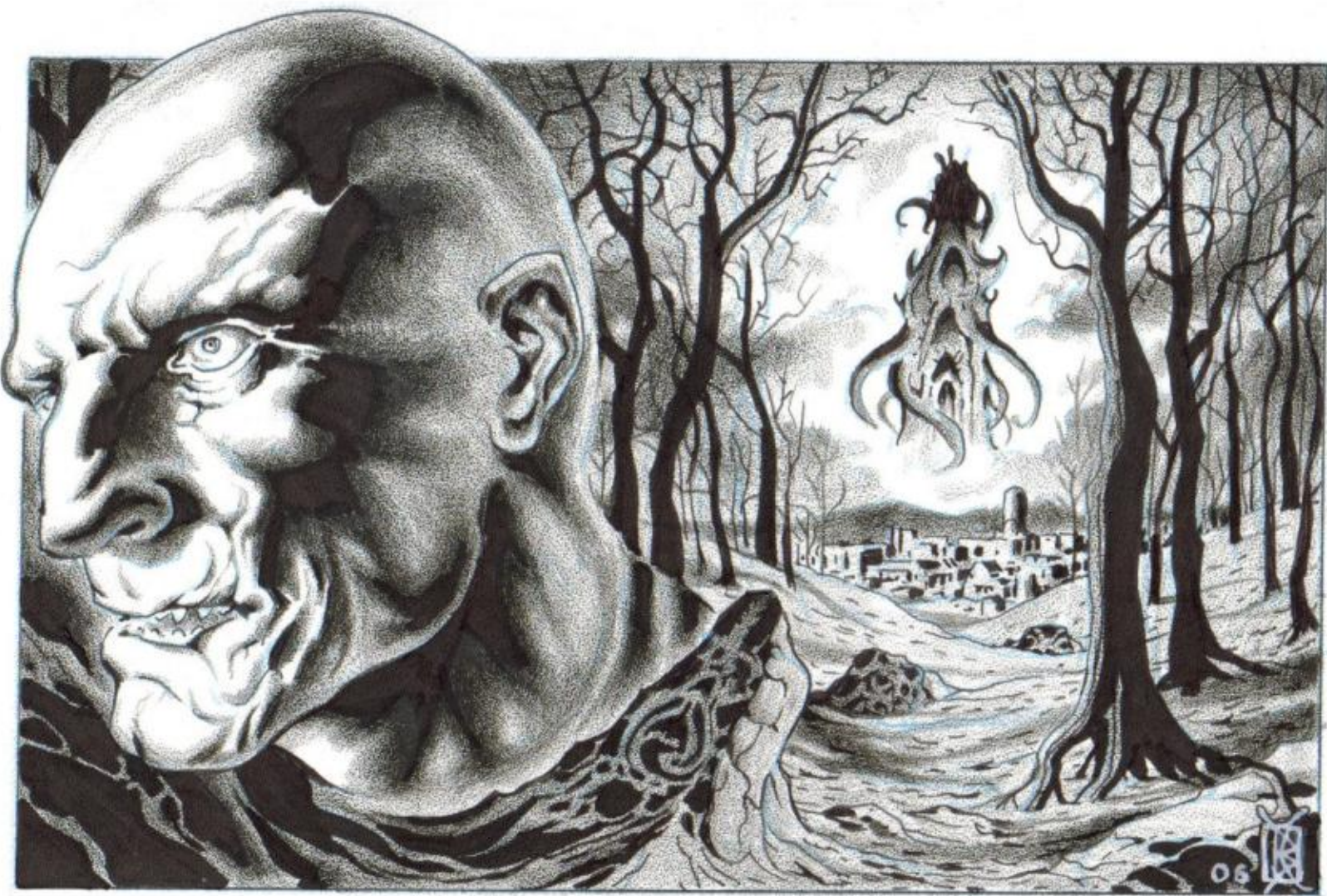
I am alive but soon I will not be. I'm taking my daughter and I to a better place. It's the middle of the night and my husband is soundly sleeping in bed. I am out in the shed as to not taint the house in a negative way. I have taken the rope and tied it in all of the right ways. My feet look so small, so very small standing high on seat of this chair. The bitter taste of poison lingers on my tongue, I made sure all bases were covered. As structures do break and ropes can fail. As I stand here reciting my final prayers, I make sure to thank God for my life and ask for his mercy. I cradle my stomach in my hands as I lift a foot off of the chair platform. I am Ellie. I will die at 48 years old, NOT from a heart related condition, NOT in my home; and for once in my life.....I know I will not die alone.

About the Author:

N.M. Brown is an international bestselling author from Florida. She's a happily married mother who sheds light on the dark corners of the mind that we like to keep hidden. Her other publications include stories in Sirens at Midnight, Calls From the Brighter Futures Suicide Hotline, the Scary Snippets Collections, Mother Ghost Grimm children's horror anthology, Dark Xmas, along with several others.

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Billie rode down the elevator next to her husband Jeff, earbuds in to avoid the horrible piano arrangement that was playing within the confined space. She decided before they boarded the flight to Los Cabos, that this year's vacation would unfold to her own soundtrack. She suspected the experience would be so much sweeter.

The elevator display showed the floor lower to B for basement, and then keep going.

The kids were safely at their grandparents' cabin for the week, which meant they were blissfully child-free for seven whole days. It was finally time to play. The simple act of dropping the rug rats off and waving goodbye had lit Billie up inside like a Christmas wreath.

The number on the elevator display blipped past B-1. Billie changed albums, pleased when *Bury a Friend* by Billie Eilish came on. The energy of the music had anticipation coursing through her veins.

Jeff had his own ear buds in, bopping to the usual power mix. The two exchanged glances and a smile. Jeff gave her a sexy wink, and a warm flush rushed up her cheeks.

B-2 passed by.

It had been such a long year. As a teaching couple, Billie taught mostly art, while Jeff was a history and science guy. He maintained a fairly nerdy persona during the school season, but not today, looking delicious in his ripped jeans and form-hugging Henley. Unable to resist, she pulled him to her, his lips easily crashing down onto hers. Jeff raked his fingers through her long dark hair. She didn't care that they were being monitored by the bigwigs. This was her vacation and she was going to soak every moment in.

Ding! The elevator slowed to a groaning stop at B-3, and Billie quickly untangled herself from her husband's embrace. Jeff flipped a thumbs up to the camera in the corner, a cheeky smile on his face. She giggled. Nobody would know by their behavior that they were in their mid-thirties.

The doors opened. Picking up her weapon of choice, Billie slung the blunt end of a sharpened machete over her shoulder. Jeff's flashed his scalpel, a mischievous look in his eye.

Stepping out of the elevator, they turned down the long dimly lit hallway. Every year at the same time they returned to this place. It was their haven, their getaway for depravity. Where the rampant urges that caged them all year long could finally be unleashed.

The lights flickered overhead as they started the long luxurious walk. A multitude of heavy prison-grade doors lined the walls, leading to their own uniquely themed paradise, each room a self-contained murderers' delight. Door #4 was her personal favorite, a red room straight out of *50 Shades of Grey*. That was last year's pleasure. This year she was trying something different. The jungle room awaited her presence at the very end of the hall.

Giddy and perhaps a little high, it was like walking down the hallways of high school. If serial killers had a school. The who's-who of the game were all gathered here, along with some unknowns, and a few weirdos. A raucous cheer resounded from a small group hanging out by the New York subway room. "There's the crew," Billie murmured.

Jimmy 'the butcher' was hard at work behind the first door. Billie waved through the small square viewing window as they passed by. His white lab coat was already splattered with red, a blocky knife gleaming beneath the doctor's office lights.

Jeff shot his finger guns at Meredith inside the cabin in the woods room, preparing her drill for a second pass into the cheek of an unhappy subject. The woman smiled like a little schoolgirl beneath the charm of her husband's lopsided grin. Billie scoffed, knowing no woman could hold a candle next to her own sadistic brilliance.

'Crazy' Eric was having a hay day pulling out entrails in the redneck backcountry room, the subject's shaking body suspended from the ceiling. Billie didn't go for entrail fun, personally, but the resulting screams were still beautiful to hear.

She saw Morley exit his room up ahead and come cruising down the hall, cheerfully sipping on a margarita with one hand, his chainsaw dripping blood in the other. Good ol' Morley. His long black apron was slick from his obviously amorous adventures. Billie plucked out an ear bud as he approached.

"The haunted mansion room is to die for," he beamed. "So glad you guys are finally here. The Slaughter Slam retreat wouldn't be the same without you."

"Our flight got delayed, but we made it. Yeah, I did that room three years ago. It is amazing. Did they give you the young lovers, or did you ask for a special order?" Billie asked.

"Young lovers. I heard they swiped them fresh from a popular 'parking' hangout. The windows were all fogged up and everything. Nice and ripe for my tastes." Morley chuckled with glee. "What a rude awakening that must've been!"

"Oh, my goodness, yes!" Billie laughed, patting his arm playfully as he continued by, likely headed to the break room. Morely was a portly middle-aged accountant from Toledo. His looks were so unassuming, complete with a bald head, glasses and a perfectly groomed mustache. Every member of the retreat looked up to him. The man had successfully managed to fly under the radar for decades - the epitome of elite.

Billie and Jeff continued on down the hall. She wished she could peak into the red room, but it was always fully private... fashioned with the darkest sexually deviant appetites in mind. Billie closed her eyes, blissfully remembering her time spent there. Jeff was watching her, shaking his head, a slightly jealous glint in his eye.

"Well you'll just have to do it sometime. You won't know unless you try," she shrugged. But his desires were always solely focused on the slice, a purist... so old school. "I swear, it's *very* fun."

"Maybe we'll do it together then." He cocked an eyebrow in her direction.

Billie did a double take at his expression, the corners of her lips rising. Was this really her husband speaking?
Interesting...

The rest of the crew was waiting for them by room #10. Jenkins was completely covered in grey matter, wiping his goggles off, while Jessica and Tandy were both pristine and shower clean. They must've arrived late too. Tandy was whirling her shiny new *Cat o'nine* tails at a practice board, showing it off. Jessica hurled three throwing knives into the center ring of the target with a grin, just to show she couldn't be outdone.

In greeting, everybody slid their palms slyly over each other's, equivalent to a brotherhood handshake. This was the rest of the rat pack. The *crème de la crème*... all superlative killers in these modern times. Skilled in covering their tracks, and devastatingly creative in their kills. Every one of them were top placers in the latest *Serial Games*, which was held last Christmas. Jeff had placed 4th, a new personal best.

In any other world, they would be labelled monsters. But here, they were royalty.

The group gushed over Billie's custom cut and detailed machete. She'd placed 1st in the games, and subsequently reached a new social status as a result. Billie blushed over the praise, but wasn't surprised. She had lopped three heads clean off in two quick strokes with her machete. The fastest triple kill on record.

She was kind of a big deal.

Darting forward, Billie stole a peek into her room. Her pulse began to race seeing the dark steamy tropical paradise beckoning her. A single slender form with long blonde wavy hair was tied to a tree in the far corner. A female, slumped over unconscious. The drugs would be wearing off soon.

At first glance, her victim looked like a country singer type, straight out of Nashville. How wonderful. The fantasies were already forming in her mind's eye. Jeff whistled to get her attention, twirling the scalpel between his fingers, and interrupting her imaginings.

Billie rejoined the group to discuss the plans for the week. Within seconds, a sharp banging noise rattled the walls. A door down the hall clattered on its hinges. A bloody Justin Bieber-type came scrambling out of the room. Frantic, his head swung in all directions. The boy spotted them immediately and ran their way, pleading for help.

As if on cue, each of the crew brandished their weapons with devilish smiles. The boy took in the terrifying image and instantly skidded to a stop. Sneakers squealing, he changed directions, leaving a dribbling blood trail behind as he fled. Laughter rose up amongst the group.

"Scared little mouse," Billie quipped.

Little Trudy poked her head out from the room in question, spying on her victim's trajectory. A Taser in one hand, and a Katana sword in the other she quickly glanced at the Elite. For only sixteen, that girl showed great promise. Trudy confided once that she let her parents live as long as they nurture her needs. They'd been sending her to Slaughter Slam since she was thirteen years old. Billie was certain that those poor parents worried what would happen to them once their little girl turned eighteen, truly independent. *If I were them, I'd be terrified.*

"I see Trudy let her boy-toy run again," Jeff commented dryly. Petrified screams down the hall echoed back to Billie's ears. It was a futile effort for the boy to run, as there was no way out. The elevator was specially coded to members' thumbprints. This establishment did not thrive year after year by being stupid. Down here, members could do whatever they pleased, as long as they followed the three golden rules. No killing other members, no killing subjects that don't belong to you, and no killing during the off season.

The retreat provided a smorgasbord of entertainment for members to unleash their inner beasts upon every year, but only under a strict contract. Slaughter Slam couldn't afford to have any evidence leading back to this place if members couldn't manage to contain themselves in the outside world. If anyone broke the rules, they were shunned from the membership, plain and simple. Then promptly assassinated. The establishment bigwigs were not to be messed with. Signing one's life away on the dotted line was hefty membership criteria, but it was worth it. So very worth it.

"Good for her. She deserves some fun. We all do. It's been a long year," Jeff said, watching Trudy counting out loud to ten.

"Here, here," Jenkins applauded, taking a bite from a granola bar. Tandy shot him an incredulous look, shivering in disgust that he could be eating while covered in brain. Where was his sense of propriety? He shrugged in reply, unconcerned.

Trudy flashed the group a little wave before taking off after her victim, cackling maniacally, the thrill of the chase fueling her desires. "That girl is going to be a force to be reckoned with one day," Billie mused, watching everybody nod in agreement. She'd really have to be on top of her game if she wanted to hold onto her title in a couple years.

Billie secretly harbored hope that her kids would one day develop that kind of killer instinct, or 'the hunger', as Jeff called it. How much fun would that be? Spending precious family time together, passing down their knowledge and expertise. To watch her babies take a life for the very first time. Billie couldn't imagine how proud she would be, not to mention the fact she would likely take *way* too many pictures. So far there was no evidence of it... the kids were both emotional messes. But everyone was different and progressed on their own time, in their own way. Billie just kept her fingers crossed.

Bieber's scream echoed down the halls.

"I'm going in. I can't handle this anticipation any longer," Billie said, quickly kissing her husband.

"Have fun!" Jeff chirped. He would be going into room #11 shortly, the Las Vegas room.

Nodding to the others, Billie stepped back and twirled her machete a few times, loosening her muscles. Popping her earbuds back in, the creepy melodies washed over her once more. Taking a deep breath, she winked at her smiling friends, and opened the door.

The energy was coursing through her body, arcing and sizzling, awakening all of her senses. Billie was in the zone. Closing the door behind her, and locking it, she smiled slowly.

Let's do this.

The humidity was high, as vents pumped heat and steam into the room to mimic a tropical climate. Damp soil dimpled beneath her footfalls. The thick foliage glistened from moisture. She noticed there was a sleek metal table perched against the nearest wall, layered with a myriad of extra tools and weapons - and drugs - if she chose to partake.

Perhaps later. I still have a buzz.

Billie sidled her way over to the already-bloodstained tree and inspected her bound subject. Boy, up close she was a real bombshell type, the kind Billie really loved to hate. Funny enough, the woman reminded her of an old college roommate. Candy - a real prissy bitch.

Candy mysteriously went missing one night. So sad...

Billie was wild and untamed in those days. Really, it was lucky she didn't get caught. From that point on she became much more careful, her discipline perfecting over time. Those early experiences served as valuable learning lessons.

Slicing off a lock of that curvy golden hair, she wrapped the end with an elastic, and tucked it into a *Ziploc* baggie for her collection. A simple token to keep the memory alive.

"Exactly how fast do you think an eyeball can pop out of its socket?" Billie whispered mere inches from her victim's face, grinning wickedly.

She poised the sharpened tip of her machete lightly on top of the woman's right eyelid. The beauty queen's hands were twitching, her head sagging low. She was still asleep... but not for long.

Billie took a deep breath, hoping the blonde startled easily.

"Wake up!"

About the Author:

Rachael Clarke is a former police officer living in Portage la Prairie, MB. She shares her life with a loving husband, two busy children, and a couple of bizarrely ill-behaved dogs. An endless dreamer, she lives for a good cup of coffee, and seeking new inspirations. Rachael is currently working on several different projects, which include writing her first novel, and writing/illustrating a picture book.

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Cody sat in his rustic wooden lawn chair and admired the view from the porch. It overlooked a five-acre lake with a dilapidated, red A-frame home that had been the victim of two floods in two years. It was a sad sight for him sometimes. He pondered the previous residents of that house. A friend had lived in that house before getting married and settling down, and Riley's son had lived there until the first flood took everything from him. Cody and Riley usually held their best conversations in the morning before they both started their days then branched apart until dark when all his work halted with the final setting of the sun. This day was different though, Riley was being sweet and she was never sweet. They spoke about dinner plans and Riley said she had a special meal in mind for that particular evening. She had told him that he might like it and she was inviting some friends over to join them for dinner. Cody went with it, knowing that Riley was one of the best cooks in southeast Texas.

Cody finished his coffee and stood up from his chair feeling older as his knees cracked and popped. He then made the trek to his brand-new, used 1964 Case 1150E dozer. He purchased it three months ago, but just got it running last week. This was his new girlfriend. Hell, he even named her Catherine. He gave her all the attention she needed, checking fluid levels, greasing her up, and monitoring her gauges for any abnormalities. As he was doing this, the hair stood up on the back of his neck and he got a feeling he was being watched. He looked back and was pleasantly surprised to see Riley walking toward him with a large glass of sweet tea. She could be a mean bitch sometimes, but when she was sweet, he felt like a lucky man.

She walked around the dozer, sat on the tracks, and lit a cigarette. Cody went back to working on Catherine and he realized she would not start. He checked everything he could think of, but could not understand why she would not run.

That was when Cody smelled the gas, but it was too late.

A flash of light flooded through his eyes followed by a loud explosion. Cody's body burst out of the seat and struck the metal ceiling with the force of a bullet fired from a gun. The sound was awful; he could hear his skull and neck cracking over the blast of the explosion. As his eyes were closing, right before he lost consciousness, he saw Riley. He smiled, knowing that she was not hurt.

Cody's eyes opened and he felt warm liquid drip onto his chin and slowly slide down his face towards his scalp. He felt no pain, but he knew something was wrong. He was hanging upside down and could see the frame of the oversized swing chairs he had built for Riley a few years ago. Forcing his chin towards his chest, he saw Riley standing at his side. He attempted to beg her for help, but all that came out was a grunt. The explosion had left him paralyzed from his chest to the tips of his toes, and the fire had scorched his throat and vocal chords. Blood continued to flow down his body as Riley methodically cut into the soft skin between his belly and groin. At that moment Cody noticed the barbeque pit was roaring to life. Riley was preparing for dinner, and he was on the menu. With a flood of blood, fat, and intestine falling past his face, the last thing that went through his mind was, *who is going to fix Catherine?*

Riley finished butchering Cody, discarded the waste into the lake, seasoned the fresh steaks, and placed the evening's dinner on the pit. Later that evening Riley called her friends, informed them that Cody had to go out of town for work on an emergency job, and invited them over for dinner. Only a handful of friends made it. They laughed and joked about Riley accidentally blowing up Cody's dozer while he was away on business, and ate the best steaks they had ever had.

About the Author:

Ryan Prentice Garcia is a construction worker and US Army veteran with a warped sense of reality. He lives in Texas with his wife, children, and three dogs. His short fiction has also appeared in The Sirens Call eZine, Issue #47.



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Ethan sat bolt upright in his bed. It was the third time in the last week he'd dreamed of coffins and funerals. He needed to get out of the house—see his friends—maybe try to call Ashley again. He'd left her over four voicemails and at least thirty texts, but no response.

The sunlight shone through the window. Ethan checked his phone—the screen was black. He knew he shouldn't have gone over to Lacy's house the other night, but all they did was talk. He'd never cheat on Ashley—she should know that.

He showered and dressed. No callback. He tried again and it went straight to voicemail. Maybe her friends could help?

He sent a group text asking for help and got an immediate response. Cheryl, Jasmine, and Brooke all three sent him heart emojis. They asked him to meet them at Crowe Park after the sun went down. That seemed a bit odd, but whatever worked. He was incomplete without Ashley.

Ethan parked his Ford Fiesta at the side of the park where the playground was located. It was too chilly outside today for anyone to be out here playing. He looked around and saw Cheryl, Jasmine, and Brooke swinging on the swing set.

He walked over to them. "I was hoping that maybe Ashley would be able to make it."

Cheryl stopped kicking her feet. She jumped from the swing and landed in the sand. "Ethan, honey, that's over. Really it has been for a while."

Brooke jumped into the sand. "Ashley doesn't know better so it's our job to help her. We've known for a long time that you were dragging her down."

Jasmine kicked her legs faster and faster. The swing went high—almost to the flipping point above the bars. She summersaulted out from it at the top. She landed with a flourish in the sand beside the others. "She's going to miss you, but she'll get over it. We'll help her cope."

A burning sensation went down Ethan's back. He looked down. Blood was running from a large wound. Cheryl held a huge butcher's knife. He had been focused on Jasmine—never saw it coming.

"What?"

"It's called sisterhood," Cheryl said. "And you're out of the picture."

Ethan collapsed to the ground. The last thing he saw was Ashley's car pulling up at the park.

His eyes watered. He heard her scream and the girls were talking about him. His breath caught. Ashley would save him. She loved him.

"Let me finish him off," Ashley said.

Ethan tried to open his eyes. Everything went black.

About the Author:

Dan McKeithan completed his MFA in Creative Fiction from UC-Riverside in 2016, all while fighting off cancer. Prior to that he attended UCLA in Professional Screenwriting in 2002. Now his day job is running two nursing homes in North Carolina and when he's not at home or off in Russia with his family he tries to get a little writing done.

Facebook: [Dan McKeithan](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Dan McKeithan](#)

Nora glanced up from her paperback thriller, slid her gaze to the whirring dryer on her right. Twenty minutes left in the cycle. She sighed and rolled her neck, shifting sticky, damp hair from the back of her neck. The glass-paned door of the Wash 'N Go stood open, allowing a light rain to *plip-plip* onto the linoleum, but the summer night was still miserably hot. She surveyed the long, fluorescently lit room. Apart from the bored-looking teenager staring at the screen of her cell phone at the front counter, Nora was alone.

She yawned and settled in for another chapter. She'd been keeping odd hours lately, taking extra shifts at the restaurant as she tried to save enough money to feel motivated to do something with it. The laundromat wasn't the nicest of places, part of a bricked strip of shops nestled against the train tracks that split town, but it was within walking distance of her apartment and open late. An itch rose in Nora's right eye and she scrubbed at the spot, dislodging her contact. *Dammit*. Setting her novel aside, she carefully pinched the slim lens from the corner of her eye, rooted through her bag one-handed for the travel-size bottle of contact solution she carried.

She left the book on her chair, approached the counter with the offending eye squeezed shut. "You got a bathroom?"

The girl was slow to look up. "It's for customers."

Nora blinked, then pointed back to her book and laundry basket. "I've been here over an hour."

The teen lifted an indifferent shoulder, returned her attention to her cell phone. "Down the hall."

"Thanks," she replied, but it was no more than an afterthought, for either of them. Going unnoticed wasn't new to Nora. She'd always existed this way, drifting by without causing a ripple, without leaving an impact.

She elbowed open the first door she came to and found the space beyond pitch-black, felt along the wall for a light switch. She rinsed the lens in a questionable-looking basin and stuck it back to her eye, was still blinking away the burn as she exited the small bathroom. The giggling blur that passed knocked her flat against the wall.

Nora's startled inhale drew the girl's attention. "You okay?"

"Yeah, somebody's kid is..." She trailed off, seeing it was still just the two of them in the laundromat. She shifted her weight, frowned. "Never mind."

"Did you see Friendly Ben?"

Nora turned back. "Who?"

"Our ghost." The girl drew out the word. She set her cell down on the counter and leaned in, eyes twinkling. "They say he makes the lights flicker."

Nora's gaze drifted upward. As she watched, a flicker of the fluorescent light overhead matched perfectly with the blasted horn of an approaching train. The windowpanes rattled as it cha-chunked past. "I think it's just the train," she said, with a hint of unexpected disappointment gnawing at her.

When she next exhausted her meager, melancholy-colored wardrobe, Nora considered finding someplace that smelled less of mildew and didn't seem at risk of collapsing whenever a train went by, but felt drawn back to the Wash 'N Go. The heat of late summer was stifling, but she trudged down the sidewalk, basket hooked under one arm. This time, there was no paperback in the purse slung over her shoulder.

The same girl was working the counter and was just as enthralled by her cell phone screen. Nora figured if she really wanted to steal another patron's underwear, she could easily do so without being noticed. But it was a moot point, because she was again the only customer.

She sat in a stiff plastic chair, empty hands clasped in her lap. After an hour passed uneventfully, Nora went to the counter, waited until the girl raised her eyes. "So who's the ghost supposed to be?"

"What?"

"The ghost. Friendly Ben?"

The girl shrugged, wrinkled her nose. "I don't know. Some dude."

"It's a kid," Nora corrected automatically.

"What is?"

"The ghost." She hadn't realized how much thought she'd given the specter, but now that she'd said it, she was sure. "It's a little boy," she insisted, with strange, ill-fitting confidence.

The girl recoiled. "Geez, lady, it's just a story. Ghosts aren't real."

Cheeks burning, Nora returned to her chair. She was hurriedly unloading baking-hot laundry from the dryer when the lights overhead buzzed and flickered. She straightened, releasing a handful of drab sweaters. She was feeling, perhaps, hopeful. A familiar horn blared in the distance and her shoulders dropped, but then a dark shape caught her eye and she turned her head.

At the juncture of the narrow hallway that lead to the restroom stood a small boy.

Nora's heart tripped wildly even as a chill dropped down her spine. The girl at the counter didn't look up. She blinked roughly, and the boy disappeared.

She skipped work the next night and went back to the laundromat, just before 9PM. The door chimed as she pulled it open but the man at the counter never looked up as Nora passed wordlessly, strode down the hallway with determined steps.

The boy was waiting for her.

"Um, hi." She crouched to eye-level, feeling self-conscious, but unafraid. "You're Ben?"

He shook his head. That's just what they called him. She knew it, just as she knew he was waiting for her.

Nora had a nickname once, too. Not so sweet and given to her by the ruthless masses when she was not quite as young as he. The ones who couldn't understand being different and didn't care to try.

A smile stretched across his pale face, and a welcoming warmth seemed to reach out and wrap around her. A name popped into her mind: *Miles*.

"Miles." Her breath clouded in front of her face despite the stale, warm air. "Why are you here?"

Friend.

She thought it was the boy's loneliness that had chilled her before, but it was her own. Feelings she'd been keeping at bay for years suddenly threatening to swallow her whole.

Nora reached out to Miles, offering her hand. He wrapped his frigid fingers around her warm ones and pulled her toward the door at the end of the hall, away from the bright lights of the main space of the laundromat. She allowed Miles to lead her out into the darkness of the night.

A warning horn sounded, and Nora paused on the pebbled berm of the tracks just beyond the back of the building. She turned her head, squinted at the light of the approaching train. The boy tugged at her, and she shook her head. "We should wait for the train to pass."

The light grew, the train drawing nearer. Nora tried to reclaim her hand, but the icy grip on her fingers was firm. Her heart fluttered, and a brief flirtation with fear gripped her as tightly as little Miles gripped her hand.

The light was close now, blinding white in its intensity, and the blaring horn of the approaching train drowned out anything else as Miles stepped forward, dragging Nora along.

Her death was ruled a suicide. Nora Bridges lived alone, without even a cat to keep her company, and had no family within twelve hundred miles. Her boss at That Place eventually told the authorities she kept to herself, but had needed a recent picture of the deceased to jog his memory.

The local legend persists, and people still blame Friendly Ben when the lights flicker at the Wash 'N Go on Hardegan Street, their excited voices lowered over cigarettes under the awning as the nine o' clock train whizzes past.

But Friendly Ben finally has a friend, and Lonely Nora is no longer alone.

About the Author:

Chrissie Rohrman is a training supervisor. She lives in Indianapolis, Indiana with her husband and their five four-legged kiddos. She is currently drafting her debut novel "Fracture," the first installment of a young adult fantasy series.

Facebook: [Chrissie Rohrman Writes](#)

Twitter [@ChrissieRawrman](#)



Poetry

Post Mortem: The Lady in the Water | *Timothy Hosey*

Her death was undetermined since she's been,
Submerged under water longer than three weeks,
Her skin wrinkled like a raisin.
Her skin had a leathery appearance that was ghastly.
Where the water had no oxygen,
to aid in the later stages decomposition.
Her arms bound with ligatures,
She had no chance of survival,
The last thing she saw were fishermen flashing their lights,
Above the water's surface during twilight hours.
She sunk to the bottom like a rock,
As the lights bobbed out of existence above her.
She struggled for five minutes with the confusion of a sailor's knot,
until the air bubbles became less frequent.
She fell limp and rigor mortis settled in.

A garrote wrapped around her thin neck.
A couple of rocks weighed her down like a paper weight.
Her toxic gases from her gastric tract,
Ascending to the surface like a lost buoy,
Pulling the heavy chains and rocks,
that once bound her to the basin of the lake.
Her eyes pale orbs in their sockets,
She was last seen wearing a jogging suit with a Walk Man and headphones.
Even though her facial features were obliterated for positive ID,
No ID was discovered in her pockets.
Her dental records confirmed she was a lady in her twenties.
The news dubbed her as the Lady in the Water.

About the Author:

Timothy Hosey is a poet. In his free time he reads horror books. He hopes to write flash fiction in the near future.

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

Reckoning Day | *Juleigh Howard-Hobson*

Blood doesn't stay liquid once it has been
Released. It spurts, runs, gushes until it's
Out. The last trickles, the smears, the spray when
Death throes are over become stains that sit
Brown and flat on whatever surface they
Land on. The thicker pools turn to custard,
Jelly, quiver before they finally lay
Like dense scabs outside the corpse, dried, rusted
Shiny. Dark bubble rings. Cracked oil paint.
Brick colored clay. It's amazing how pale
People become, disensanguined, how faint,
How fast. Skin color doesn't matter, male/
Female, young/old, everyone's flesh goes grey
When death comes, bloody red, on reckoning day.

The Trees | *Juleigh Howard-Hobson*

The trees are not just trees right here. They saw
What happened and they won't forget it. No
Simple passing, no, it was a horror
Scene replete with blood and poison. Don't go
Beneath them. Their roots drank it, all that blood
That she coughed up, and all the arsenic
That caused it too, all her misunderstood
Sorrow, all her dead dreams, all her heart sick
Agony—it went into the trees. Their
Leaves turned brown and fell. When they grew back
They were black edged for years, each one a prayer
For that girl who died beneath them. No plaque
Marks the spot, but there is no need for one--
These trees know how remembering is done.

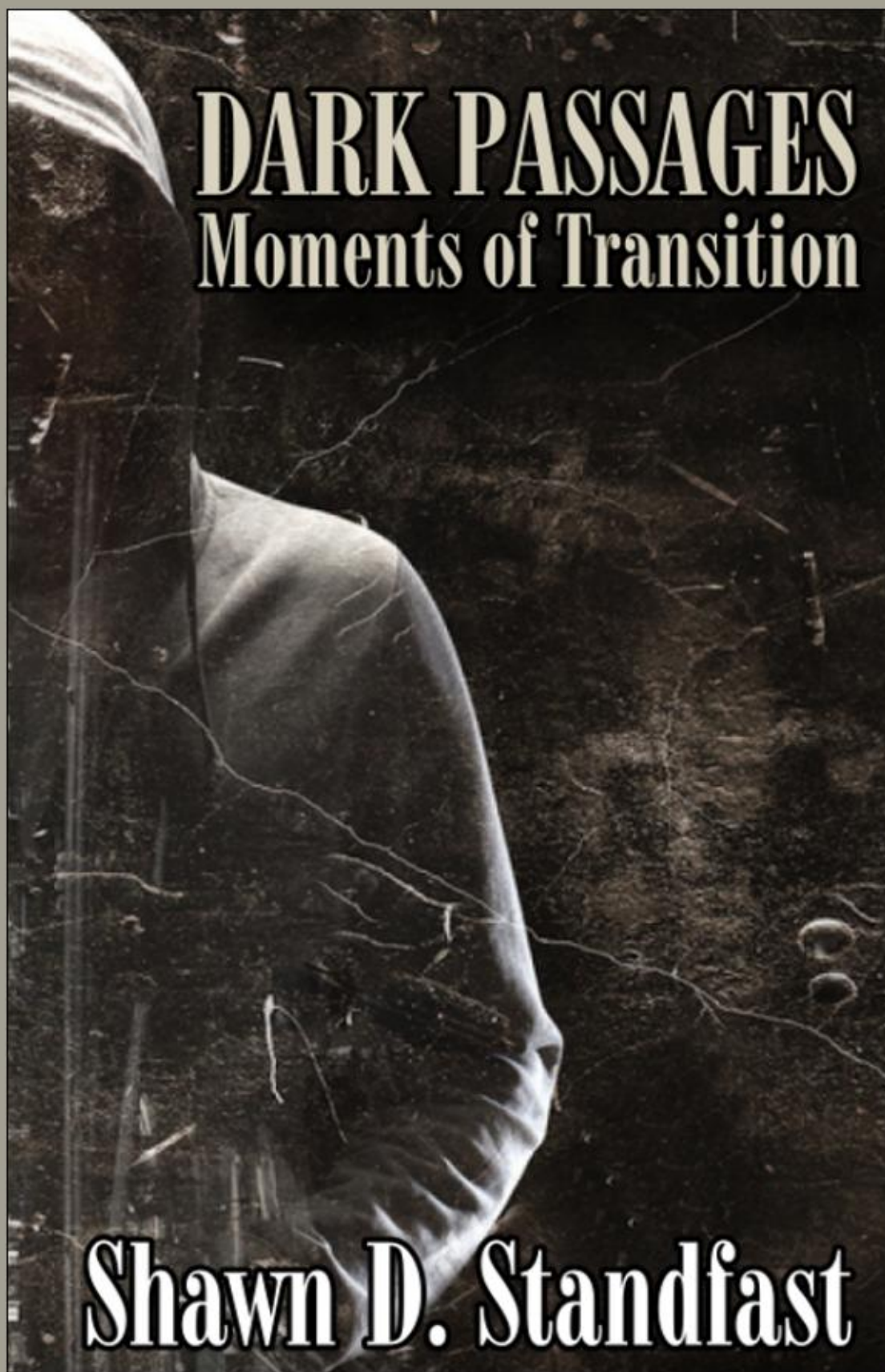
About the Author:

Juleigh Howard-Hobson's poetry has appeared in *Mooky Chick*, *Eternal Haunted Summer*, *Ghost City Review*, *The Ginger Collect*, *Coffin Bell*, *Dreams and Nightmares*, *Mandragora* (Scarlett Imprint), *Lift Every Voice* (Kissing Dynamite), and many other places. She homesteads off grid with numinous ghosts for neighbors, in the forests of the Pacific Northwest. Noms: The Pushcart, The Best of the Net and the Rhysling.

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

Amazon Author Page: [Juleigh Howard-Hobson](https://www.amazon.com/Juleigh-Howard-Hobson/e/B000APYU8Q)

A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants
of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Colour of Time | *Shawn D. Standfast*

Every morning it's the colours I see first
I look out my window and see this world
There's no colour where time stands still
Without time there's only black and white

You are the very first guest I have ever had
The very first since, well since time began
I sit here and watch the universe pass by
I love the colours and how they move

I have watched your world form from dust
I watched as life began to grow and spread
I was there when your species walked upright
Moved over the surface of this shining world

I was there at the first glimmer of civilisation
At the Fall of Troy and the rise of Rome
I was with you in every war and every disaster
I have followed every plague and every scourge

Yes, I was there each and every time
I was also here protected from time
You doubt me; I see it in your eyes
You think I'm mad or you're dreaming

I have often wondered what a dream looks like
But I assure you if this is a dream it is not yours
I see many questions forming in your mind
Sit down; we have all the time in the world

Yes, sit down and we'll have food and refreshments
Food prepared by the finest chefs that have ever lived
The best wine fermented from ancient vineyards
I will be your host and answer all your questions

What is that? You want to know who I am
I beg your pardon. I've forgotten my manners
It is a new experience for me - having a guest
I'm Death Incarnate and I've claimed your soul

About the Author:

Shawn D. Standfast was born on an island in Northern Ontario, Canada. His early years were spent without running water, indoor plumbing, and electricity. Shawn began reading to pass the long summer days and cold winter nights. A high school English class sparked his interest in poetry. Inspired, Shawn began writing. In 2005 Shawn relocated to the United Kingdom. His first collection of poetry ***Dark Passages: Moments of Transition***, is now out through Sirens Call Publications.

The Story and Dance of the Demon Master | *Ariana R Cherry*

Beyond the damp dingy sewers and into the underground,
where the earthworms burrow and termites bite,
I creep within the soils, into the mud,
below the trails of decaying rotting human flesh, in search of a satisfying delightful treat.

For I spend much of my time hidden into the earth's darkness,
in search of souls that bring me short-lived happy orgasmic thrills.

Their blood-curdling screams, oh to my much delight, it just gives me joyful chills!
Each night, I create such wise little schemes.
Oh the wretched and the torment!
It makes me giggle at the thought of those little humans' horrid dreams!

It isn't until I have them under the sweltering light,
that they begin to put up their cute little fight!
But first, I must lure them, as I escape from the underground.

So sad and meek, I cry my tearful story,
"Those stupid little humans, they think I'm so lost!"
And then, to their dreadful surprise!
They realize it's their soul that I want and have found!

Oh such a pity, to tie those people up, with a rope so taught,
For a moment, I stop, pat their heads and sigh,
"My, my, such a sweet poor little pup..."

Perhaps for a moment, per one second, I feel the smallest ounce of sorrow,
But then after-all, it's just their soul that I need to borrow.

The cries echo out, but soon become muffled, as I drag them into my underground.
Before long, they become weak and their faces tear-stained, lips cracked.
Voices far gone, without any sound.
Tis' it is such a point, that I know, my battle has been won,
and their little human existence, is done.

And so, with anticipation, my excitement grows,
The scent of soon to be decayed human flesh filters under my nose.
Into my underground, I have quite the unique contraption
It's the sparkling center of my comfy abode,
as it does all the work, throwing my little humans around.

With one dramatic artful scene, I do a bit of a jig, perhaps a little dance.
In sing song, I laugh and I sing!

*"Oh, hi ho, hi ho, I love this trite life,
Little humans, you bring me such joy, such joy, to each, I own,
You're mine, you're mine,
Oh how you shine, little humans of mine..."*

And with a grand bow, I get on, with the duty of decomposing my humans,
one does not need to know every detail of the then and how...

Then the delight, I am brought, with each and every human soul that is caught.
I crank the handle of my unique contraption
watching each mangled body roll on down, showing no emotion or reaction.

One ...by...one, rolling off into the deep dark abyss...
Their guts spill and begin to pile onto the floor, captured by me, the demon master!

Their heartfelt chatter-heard no more.
Oh, so proud am I about all that I have accomplished!
This one moment, my very heartfelt worldly bliss.
There's nothing more satisfying than the art, of human mortality, and its eternal soul.
For now, they shall forever reign in me, and they, will no longer, ever, ever be.

About the Author:

Ariana R Cherry has been writing for over 20 years. She has published 8 collections of poems and is the author of the epic poetic tale, "Only If," which received a Reader's Favorite Award. Cherry is also the CEO of Cherry-House Press and host of her podcast, "Spoken Poetry Podcast." She has also read poetry at public events in her area.

Twitter: [@ArianaCherry99](https://twitter.com/ArianaCherry99)

Author Blog: [Ariana R Cherry](https://www.arianacherry.com/)

Black Reiki | *Lesley-Ann Campbell*

Darkness hides in the lightest of places,
Death creeps in the shadows, teasing his wares with a kind smile.

Love and light lie, redirected to distract from the deepest deception.
Truth is control, a harbinger of relentless misdirection.

Fathoming distrust, a shallow grave dug by one's own hand.
The tragedy of all. Blind eyes.

Belief begrudging, fools follow.
The demon, the jester, the trickster uncontrolled.

Once was is now with heartfelt regret.
Saddened with fury, awakened with the knife.

Choices made and rituals avoided.

I am free.

About the Author:

Lesley-Ann is a horror writer from the North West of England. She relishes dark horror and poetry. An avid reader, she is influenced by John F. Leonard and Tim Waggoner. Random fact: she is a trained reiki practitioner and colour therapist.

Author Blog: [Housewife of Horror](https://www.housewifeofhorror.com/)

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

On my way | *Mathias Jansson*

I am dead
but something went wrong
I am not in Heaven or Hell

I am in a place so familiar
a dark box dressed in lace
but wait
I hear voices
I am moving
I am on my way
I can hear the heavy gates
closing behind me
Are they the gates
to Heaven or Hell?

The silent and darkness
embrace me
in the distance
I hear a roaring sound
coming closer
and the heat increases

It must be
the fire of hell
melting my skin
burning my eyes
I am dead
but I have never felt so alive...

About the Author:

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

Author Blog: [Mathias Jansson](#)

Ballad of the Night Jogger | *Ysadora Alexander*

I go running through the forest on these darkened nights
Jogging till I can no longer see those damn city lights
People warn me of the dangers, being alone in there
But that feeling of isolation makes me not care
They say there are demons, creatures of the dark
Murderers and rapists lurking in my beloved park
I laugh it all off, tell them it has to be a joke
As my running feet free me from society's yoke
The cold nips sharply, chilling my exposed skin
As the smell of heady pine air makes my head spin
The darkness smothers me, a deathly deep bath
So pendulous and heavy I barely see my path
Tonight the forest is different, menacing by design
I shake my head to clear these thoughts from my mind
Paranoid, I think, with just a somber little giggle
But so nervously, as those thoughts still niggle
My eyes dart through the leaning trees behind
As I imagine all the horrors there that I may find
Imagination can be so vivid, when it is so pure
I run a little faster, stretching out to be sure
A crack behind me, a footstep I have no doubt
I sprint now, panting as my bravery gives out
Branches whip at my arms and face, finding blood
As panic rises in my throat, my fear is a flood
Another loud crack, a footfall, yes a foot fall
Fear biting at my heels, I sprint, with nary a stall
My blood runs cold as my heart turns to ice
Panic blinds me, adrenaline will have to suffice
A protruding root catches my foot, I never did see
But a half buried, sharp branch rises up at me
A single trip on that damned root was all it took
The cost of running, panicking, without a look
I cry out, the stake pierces right through my heart
As my scattered thoughts are blown right apart
Impaled, crying, with death before my eyes
I turn back to see the harbinger of my demise
A murderer, a rapist or something more sinister
A witch, a ghost, or a ghoulish satanic minister
As the dregs of my life bleed out, I find it funny
The cause of my death was a simple wood bunny

About the Author:

Ysadora Alexander is a non-binary, queer, Indigenous writer from Perth, Western Australia. They are currently working on five novels, including three series while also writing short stories for a creative release.

Novels tend towards the paranormal romance, urban fantasy or post-apocalyptic genre, while their short stories are pure horror, often in the Victorian era Penny Dreadful style.

Patreon: [Ysadora Alexander](#)

Forever Mine | *Rose Blackthorn*

in a box beneath the stone
wrapped in cloth and left alone
lies the heart of my beloved
he is mine, forever mine

in the dark of moonless night
hidden always from her sight
his ghost is wandering and calling
but he's mine

she doesn't know that he is taken
her faith has never shaken
even though he won't return
because he's mine

sometimes I want to tell her why
he never came to say goodbye
but then I stop before I do
for he is mine, and only mine

...the love he had for her was just a lie

Leaves | *Rose Blackthorn*

Leaves cover the ground, brightly colored and crunchy, crackling with cool fire. Jacob, dark-haired and dark-eyed, uses the wooden and plastic rake to scrape them up in piles. The air is cool, the sky painfully blue, and everything seems as crisp as a ripe apple.

Bony fingers protrude from beneath the largest pile. Jacob pauses, contemplating the pale, curled digits; they seem to be beckoning. The leaves are but a temporary blanket.

"Afternoon, Jacob," Mr. Jenkins, the neighbor, calls from his yard. "How's your mother?"

"Time will tell," he replies, rearranging the leaves. "Funny how beautiful dead things can be."

About the Author:

Rose Blackthorn lives in the desert but longs for the sea. She is a writer, dog-mom, jewelry-maker, avowed coffee drinker, and photographer. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared online and in print with a varied list of anthologies and magazines including the collection *Beautiful, Broken Things*.

Author Blog: [Moonlight and Thorns](#)

Twitter: [@rose_blackthorn](#)



The Dark Street | *Meg Smith*

The night
runs deep, to music.
Lights splash across
the windows, the sidewalks -
scarlet, blue, mourning.
A crowd emerges, like
beings from spaceships.
Someone has gone to sleep.
You know it and I know it.
That's why you called me.
Or, not.
We both know black lines
running vein to vein,
but that symphony is done.
There's some trek of silence,
in just two corners.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. Her work has appeared in *Illumen*, *The Horror Zine*, *Sirens Call eZine*, *Dreams And Nightmares*, *Raven Cage, eZine*, *Dark Dossier*, and more. She and her husband, Derek, enjoy karaoke, rock concerts, and chilling with their cats. Her poetry books, 'This Scarlet Dancing,' and 'Dear Deepest Ghost,' are available on Amazon.

Facebook: [Meg Smith Writer](#)

Twitter: [@MegSmith_Writer](#)

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.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud 'War Poetry for Today' competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award. Her poetry has appeared in many publications including: Apogee, Firewords, Capsule Stories, Light Journal and So It Goes.

Author Blog: [Poetry - Lynn White](#)

Facebook: [Lynn White - Poetry](#)

Dirt rained down on the lid,
drumming like
an afternoon rain,
a steady tap
of fingers,
slowly subsiding
in their urgency.

I don't know
who dug this grave.
It must have been me.
My hands are mud-caked
as I clasp them over my chest.
I'm alone now
with the one thing
I had feared: silence.

When you left,
you did not wrap
a red string
around my finger.
Now,
there is
no bell to tell
those at the surface
that I'm down here,
still breathing.

This wasn't how I wanted
to go out—
no roaring funeral fire,
juniper branches catching,
my skin popping and burning like stars.

Instead, my hands brush against
this soft fabric.
This lush, cold darkness.

I curl up into myself
because I know
right now,
cool black beads are
slipping between your fingers
and the prayers
your silent lips form
are only for you.

About the Author:

Jessica Drake-Thomas is a poet, novelist, and blogger. She is the author of *Burials*, a collection of poems that is forthcoming from CLASH Books in 2020.

Twitter: [@IAMBADWITCH](https://twitter.com/IAMBADWITCH)
Facebook: [Jessica Drake-Thomas](https://www.facebook.com/Jessica-Drake-Thomas)

red hot death | *Eliana Venessa*

the memory of stubble,
brushing over silk sheets
and fishnets,

still burns, like the frenzy
of our meaningless
goodbye sex,

which, unfortunately, did not satisfy,

good thing death and i
are as tight as a teenage crush,
and that he is incorrigible enough,

to light up
my smoke with a
black-candle-skull,

the sacrifice;
a sharp tongue and
needling kisses that linger,

in return
for the roar
of a hell-fire nightmare,

that will leave my ex in cinders,
as the
new flame
sparks only darkness,

and,
with a sickle
in his left hand,

mercilessly
inflicts the hot pricks
of a, tried and true, voodoo hex.

About the Author:

Eliana Vanessa is originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina and moved to New Orleans, Louisiana at a young age. Her work appears in *Siren's Call*, *Wildfire Publications*, *Harbinger's Asylum*, *The Horrorzine*, *Punk Noir*, *The Rye Whiskey Review*, *The Ramingo's Porch*, *Fearless*, and *The Blue Nib*. Her poetry is published in three anthologies: *Masks Still Aren't Enough* (2018), *Americans and Others* (2019), and *A Dark and Stormy Night: 16 Halloween Tales* (2019).

Facebook: [Eliana Vanessa](#)

Metal Meticulous | *Sonora Taylor*

Metal meticulous,
Wire to frame.
He held her aloft
And he made her his way.

"I won't have you staring,"
He said with a sigh
As he wrested a wrench
From a belt on his thigh.

"I won't have you glaring,
Or speaking too harsh.
I'll set up your wires
To blight out the dark."

He crafted and tinkered,
Creation so fair,
But when he was finished
She stood with a glare.

"So much of your craft is
Attempts at control,
But you forgot something:
To give me a soul.

"But never you mind,
I know just where to look."
And her fingernails pierced him
As all his bones shook.

The wires he'd crafted
To guide all her moves
Helped her to drain him
And fill all her grooves.

His blood swam to her
Through his sweat and his tears.
She held and she drained him
Of all of his years.

Metal meticulous
Blood upon bone
She held him aloft
And she turned him to stone.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the author of *Without Condition*, *The Crow's Gift and Other Tales*, and *Wither and Other Stories*. Her work has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *Mercurial Stories*, and Camden Park Press' "Quoth the Raven." Her latest short story collection, *Little Paranoias: Stories*, is now available on Amazon. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

Author Blog: [Sonora Writes](#)

Twitter: [@sonorawrites](#)

Driven underground by those of the light...
Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for
Purchase or Borrow!

Night Guard | *Linda Imbler*

He walks between,
each grave unseen.
Guards each during,
all the many hours of sunlight.

As daylight fades,
they are afraid.
All those decayed,
lying deep under deepening night.

He just wants to,
help them get through,
nighttime dark hues,
where there is a lack of candle bright.

To ease their fears,
he spends his years,
within frontiers,
of the stony etched headstones bleached white.

About the Author:

Linda Imbler is a Kansas-based Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Nominee. She's an avid reader, classical guitar player, and a practitioner of both Yoga and Tai Chi. In addition, she helps her husband, Luthier, build acoustic guitars. Linda enjoys her 200-gallon saltwater reef tank.

Author Blog: [Linda's Poetry Blog](#)

Odyssey of the Dead | *E. N. de Choudens*

A black veil falls
like the one on a widow bride
when the death arrives, and no hope remain

A waterfall of darkness
dropping condemnations over myself
I don't know if I'm dreaming or if I'm awake
but the humid coldness of dirt
I can feel it like a mantle of death

Embalming fluid comes out from my skin
while critters eat my putrefied guts
as my body decays and deforms

Leprosy for the dead, suffering and pain
as Dante's describe it, in his circles of Hell
when he walked with Virgil
in the kingdom down deep in the Earth
and Botticelli illustrated in his paints

In my desperate agony I wake up
but my eyes remain closed
I am inside of a damn box!

I hear the cry of sadness
my name is in it.
I cry too.
The coffin is lifted.
The tormenting true.

My journey down to the abyss has begun
where the Florentine master witnesses
the madness of the human being

Down into the abyss
where my nightmares already told me
about the horrors of Hell
as a preamble of my eternal fate.
The torment doesn't wait!

I will search for the poet steps
to find the way-out of the infernal place.
From the Devil I will escape

A long and painful journey is ahead
like Ulysses sailing on a sea
full of misery and mysteries.
He was lost for many years,
I have an eternity

My body become food and dust,
my bones remain in the grave
but my soul will be out of the flames

About the Author:

Originally from the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, the author currently lives with his wife and two children in the state of Maryland, missing the sun and the blue sea. The author has more than 50 published poems and several short stories in various journals and anthologies. He is the author of the Poetry Collection of horror and science fiction 'A Quick Look To An Insane Mind'

Death and the Maiden | *F.J. Bergmann*

The princess did not speak the giant's language,
but she attempted to convey to him
by means of dramatic gestures
that she was in distress and in need of rescue.

She had been magically transported through the air
to a strange land of gleaming deserts and soft mossy banks
where her mother's armies had never raised the royal standard high,
had never loaded slaves with tribute for the long journey home.

She did not think the giant understood her,
so she decided to walk in the direction of what
seemed like sunlight for as long as she was able.
The few monolithic trees towered over the windless plains.

Perhaps the enchantment that had brought her to this place
would provide a steed, a savior prince, or spread a sorcerous banquet,
but she was not one to wait upon her destiny
as if she were a helpless infant in the palace nursery.

As she set off on the journey, her smooth black skin
naked under the diffuse illumination, the giant
appeared to finally notice her movement
and turned toward her with an incoherent cry.

His immense foot descended toward her unprotected body,
crushing the silky chitin before she could so much as begin
a last defiant ode to her queen. For many minutes,
her antennae still twitched despairingly under those alien skies.

About the Author:

F. J. Bergmann edits poetry for Mobius: The Journal of Social Change (mobiusmagazine.com), and imagines tragedies on or near exoplanets. She has competed at National Poetry Slam as a member of the Madison, WI, Urban Spoken Word team. Her work appears irregularly in Abyss & Apex, Analog, Asimov's SF, and elsewhere in the alphabet. Her dystopian collection of first-contact expedition reports, *A Catalogue of the Further Suns*, won the 2017 Gold Line Press poetry chapbook contest and the 2018 SFPA Elgin Chapbook Award.

Facebook: [F.J. Bergmann](#)

Twitter: [@FJBergmann](#)

Friday-Night Sacrifice | DJ Tyrer

Answer the ad
Willing to earn some money
Babysitting is a simple job
A little embarrassed
As the Mom probes
Confirms she has no boyfriend
Is innocent in such things
Obviously want no hanky-panky
With the kid asleep upstairs
Okay, all's good
Leave a list of contact numbers
Ask her to go up and check
When the clock strikes nine
Dutifully waits
Let's the child sleep
Then at the chime
Heads upstairs
The light-switch flicks uselessly
Bulb must've blown
Can barely see in light from hall
Approaches the crib
Looks down
Child looks up
Takes a moment in the darkness
To realise what's wrong
The shape
The shape!
Not a baby
Not a human one
Alien
Strange
It leaps up
Barely a chance to scream
Silence
Except for the sound
Of feeding upon flesh
That demon child receiving
Its weekly
Friday-night sacrifice

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, UK, where they run *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as *Chilling Horror Short Stories* (Flame Tree), *All The Petty Myths* (18th Wall), *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of *Hinnom Magazine*, *ParABnormal*, and *Weirdbook*, and has a novella available, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

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Copyright Kent Burles

Hey Kent, it's an absolute delight to have you as our Featured Artist. We'd love to get to know more about you, and what goes through your mind as you create your phenomenal pieces!

Q: What are some of your main influences?

A: As a very young kid I stumbled on Albrecht Durer, and tried to draw like him for quite some time. Then I discovered comic books, right at the dawn of the Marvel Age, and was swept away by the work of Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko. I'd even say I'm an artist because of Jack Kirby. Since then Berni Wrightson, Ghastly Graham Ingels, Steve Bissette, Virgil Finlay, Steve Fabian, Frank Frazetta, Scott McCloud, Andreas Martens, Moebius – you see I could go on and on!

Q: What mediums do you work in?

A: I've worked quite a bit recently with Prismacolour markers with both grey tones, and using Prismacolour pencil crayons (grey tones) to both sharpen and soften things. I'll do something similar with a full range of Prismacolour coloured markers, and coloured pencil crayons. I've also done quite a bit of work with Coquille board, a wonderful drawing paper that has become increasingly hard to find.

Q: Is there a medium you've always wanted to try but just haven't had the chance to yet?

A: I've just dipped my toe into the digital world, but because it's such a small part of my toe, I'm going to go with digital art, as I feel I've only just begun. I just bought an IPAD Pro, and have begun to use Procreate – can't wait to really dive in! Next will be Photoshop, Cip Studio Paint etc. etc. I only hope I don't run out of time!

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

A: I'll confine this answer to living artists – it would be too hard to pick if I didn't! For a living artist it would have to be Junji Ito. I don't know if it would be so much work with him as just soak in the atmosphere of his presence, watch the way he does things, and be in the presence of his creativity. I'd be asking a lot of questions – I'd probably drive him crazy!

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

A: This answer relates in some ways to the next question. I've learned not to be too wedded to what I see in my head. The vast majority of the time it's kind of vague and fuzzy anyway – most artists I've asked about this agree with me on that – so why obsess about it? At the same time, I don't want to be too locked in too early. If I stay open and sensitive to new things, new directions, and happy accidents I'll make wonderful discoveries, and wonderful work I never would have otherwise.

Q: Do you ever suffer from a creative block? What do you do to get through it?

A: I don't usually have that problem, though I once did. My issue was that I felt every piece had to be 'original'. So, I was putting a lot of pressure on myself, needless pressure, and it often resulted in an absolute blank when it came to ideas. Once I dropped the idea that I had to be 'original' each and every time out, and began to learn how to just let it happen, the ideas would always come, and I was a lot happier.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?

A: Literally anywhere – pretty boring answer, right? Of course, things unbidden swim out of my consciousness, but a random comment by a friend, someone seen on the subway, springboards from a multitude of artists - favourites and new influences, movies, anime and comics, things my students do, and my own emotions are just part of my, or any artists, inspirations.

Q: What is your favorite piece that you've created, and why is it particularly special?

A: Favourite of all time is tough, but one of my ACADs is high on the list. It was late at night, and I didn't feel like working, but I scribbled a few lines on a page. They suggested a torso. I fiddled a bit more, and more lines suggested a female in an 18th century long dress. Soon her pose, the environment, and her story came pouring out of me. It's one of the best combinations of image and word I've ever done, and it came about because I just kept plugging away, and let it happen to me – see my answer on creative block.

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

A: I don't know how to answer this – there are just too many wonderful things I've seen, both in older artists, and in the work of modern artists as well. Also, in some ways the cumulative mass of an artist's career may outweigh any single piece – Jack Kirby and Moebius come to mind here.

Thank you again for being our feature this month! Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I post my ACADs every day on Facebook.

I also post on Instagram and Twitter almost every day.

You can find me at the links below:

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

Instagram: [@kentburles](https://www.instagram.com/kentburles)

For commissions or professional assignments, I can also be reached at kentburles96@hotmail.com

ACAD is A Character A Day. This is a sketchbook challenge I set myself: to draw a new character every day for a year. I'm in my 7th year now, and have just over 2800 characters.

Finally, a poem I wrote several years ago:

When will the siren's song be woven?
When will I hear the slow, steady stamp of feet,
Not as God intended,
But hard, and scored, and cloven?



The scream was first heard on Claymore Street, giving Ellie Harmon a start as she got into bed. She froze on the edge of the mattress, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, as the scream faded from earshot.

Ellie blinked and shook her head. "Boy, my head hurts," she muttered, removing her dentures and dropping them in the glass of water on her nightstand.

"What's that?" Her husband Otto leaned towards her across the floral-patterned bedspread, turning up the dial on his hearing aid.

Ellie swatted him away and reached in the nightstand for her crochet needles. Their tenth great-grandchild was expected any day, and Ellie was determined to have the damned blanket finished by then, or God help her.

Otto mumbled to himself and rolled over to switch the lamp off on his own nightstand. Lying on his back, he reached for Ellie's hand as he'd done nearly every night for over sixty years. He pressed the small, wrinkled hand to his sunken lips and kissed each finger one by one. Ellie sometimes acted impatient with Otto's loyal, unwavering affection... but really – truly – it was her favorite thing about him.

Only moments later, Otto's breathing turned to light snores and Ellie put her needles aside. She peered down at him as he lay beside her, passing gas in his sleep. She crinkled her nose, but smiled all the same. He was an old fart, that was for sure, but he was *her* old fart, and she loved him.

Suddenly, the scream she'd heard earlier – yet somehow, had immediately forgotten – echoed in her mind, and the smile dropped off Ellie's face. She reached for a crochet needle, and without hesitation, plunged it through Otto's nightshirt. It easily punctured his paper-thin skin, and drove into his weak-beating heart.

His eyes popped open and rolled back in his head, a small wheezy breath of air escaping his lips. With the other needle, Ellie calmly skewered herself, shoving it through the front of her neck and out the back. With a few garbled gasps, she fell over onto Otto, the smell of her own passed gas mixing with that of fresh blood.

The scream shot down Verona Avenue, just as Lauren Johnson and her son, Bryson, were carrying groceries into their house. It hadn't been easy getting her video game obsessed sixteen-year-old to emerge from the dungeon-like depths of his bedroom, but with the threat of taking his precious Xbox away for a week, he'd come out to help with the groceries willingly enough.

"I don't care what Mark says, I think we should go with Lisa's idea!" Lauren, bags in one hand, cell phone in the other, argued with a co-worker, and didn't pay attention to the passing scream. Nor did she notice the sudden glazed look on Bryson's face as he stood motionless beside the car. It wasn't until he dropped the bags he'd been holding that Lauren turned around, cans of soup rolling down the driveway.

"Hillary, I gotta go." Lauren ended the call and set her bags on the porch. "Bry, what's going on," she called, coming towards him. "What happened?"

Bryson blinked and shook his head, eyes clearing. He looked down at the dropped bags at his feet, runaway cans in the street. "Oops," he said.

"Oops? That's all you've got to say is oops?" Lauren huffed, stooping to retrieve the bags he'd dropped. "Grab those cans and come on. Your dad'll be home soon and I haven't even started making dinner yet."

She click-clacked in her heels up the walk into the house, shaking her head in annoyance. She knew he hated helping her bring groceries in, but he didn't have to be such a brat about it!

Emptying the bags onto the kitchen counter, she heard Bryson coming in to join her. Without turning, she said, "Hey, did you grab those bags I left on the porch?" No answer. Rolling her eyes, Lauren opened the fridge and bent over to drop a bag of grapes into the bottom fruit drawer. This kid was really getting on her nerves today! She was already stressed from the big managers meeting she had to present at the following morning; she didn't need Bryson's teenage moodiness to contend with as well.

"Well, did you at least get the cans out of the street?" Straightening up from the fridge, she closed the door and turned to face her son with a scowl... and got her answer, when she was met with a can of soup to the face.

Lauren screamed, in surprise as much as pain, staggering in her heels against the counter. A thin trickle of blood streamed in her eye where the edge of the can had cut into her forehead. Holding one hand against the wound, she turned and stared in shock at her son, dented can in his hand, face utterly expressionless.

"Wh-why... Bryson?" she muttered, head spinning. But Bryson's only response was to raise the can and strike her again... and again... and again. Until her head was nothing more than a concaved mess of blood and matted hair around a broken skull.

The beat-up soup can dropped from Bryson's hand as he reached for the butcher knife on the kitchen counter. With one deep slice across the throat, he joined his mother's mess of battered brain oozing onto the newly polished kitchen floor.

Drifting through the open bathroom window on Lakeside Drive, the scream reached Brandy Maren on her knees beside the bathtub, bathing her toddler. She dropped the washcloth she'd been holding into the tub as her eyes glassed over and her mouth hung open. Sienna, barely two, and oblivious to her mommy's strange sudden state, continued to splash about happily in the lukewarm water.

After a moment, Brandy's eyes cleared and she blinked, shaking her head. She smiled at Sienna and rubbed her back, soap bubbles clinging to her soft baby skin.

"Time for Mr. Squirtle!" Brandy cried, reaching for Sienna's favorite bath toy: a purple octopus that could be filled with water and squirted from its mouth. Sienna laughed and clapped her small pudgy hands as Brandy filled the toy and squirted her belly before handing it over.

While Sienna played contentedly with Mr. Squirtle, Brandy began to wash her hair with strawberry scented children's shampoo, the only kind she'd buy. Brandy's favorite time of day was lying with Sienna after she'd had her bath, nuzzling her nose into her soft yellow curls, inhaling the sweet combination of her little girl's own scent mixed with strawberries. It was the best smell in the world.

Hair wash complete, Brandy – still on her knees beside the tub – eased Sienna onto her back to dunk her hair in the water for a rinse. Sienna closed her eyes as instructed, with a wide baby-toothed smile. Dipping her head back just enough until the water reached her hairline, the scream rang through Brandy's mind... and she pushed Sienna's head all the way back, submerging her startled little face in the soapy water.

The small kicking legs splashed water into Brandy's eyes, but she didn't blink or move until the legs stopped. Once they did, she reared back her head and slammed it against the side of the tub. Over and over, chipping off chunks of porcelain, blood streaming into the water, dying it red.

It was just getting dark when the scream made its way through the intersection of 12th and Main, where the nearly retired Officer Richards had just pulled over a white Sedan for running a red light. Pausing halfway between his police cruiser and the white Sedan, he lost all conscious thought and fell into a stupor, his eyes drooping, arms going limp at his sides.

A moment later, blinking and shaking his head, Officer Richards continued toward the Sedan as if nothing had happened, tapping on the driver's side window with one hairy knuckle. The tinted glass rolled down to reveal a car full of young twenty-somethings, the radio blaring, pot smoke billowing from the open window.

"Turn that shit down," he grumbled, bending over to peer inside and get a good look at everyone in the car. His back twinged in pain. Damned arthritis.

"So sorry, Officer," the driver said, reaching over to snap off the radio. "And I'm sorry I ran that light. I thought I had another few seconds before it turned red."

"You thought wrong," Officer Richards barked. "And even though marijuana is legal now, you're a damned fool to be driving around smoking it. You could kill someone." He narrowed his icy blue eyes at the kids in the car, drawing his bushy white eyebrows together. "License and registration."

As the young man pawed through his wallet, Officer Richards reached for his ticket pad... and heard the strange scream resound in his head. Something snapped inside him, as if a dam had broken, shooting freezing cold ice water through his veins. And instead of grabbing the ticket pad, Officer Richards grabbed his gun from the holster. He held it up to the driver's face, cocked it, and pulled the trigger.

The terrified screams of the car's occupants filled his ears, but couldn't compete with the one already inside his head. One at a time, he shot the gun in each of their horrified faces, blood and bits of brain matter spattering the car's interior.

Stepping back from the blood-soaked car, he pressed the gun under his own chin... and was hit head on by a soccer mom in her SUV, the same blank expression on her face as Officer Richards had worn... as Brandy had worn... as Bryson had... as Ellie.

The sinister scream had traveled through the town of Oakwood like a harbinger of death, the streets running red with the spilled blood of its victims.

Standing beneath the banner hung between two tall trees on the edge of town, (*Thanks for visiting Oakwood! Come back and see us soon!*) Luxsa Stargone, red hair like a streak of blood down her back, emitted one last scream, birds scattering from the treetops. With eyes closed and arms wide at her sides, she breathed deeply, absorbing from the ether the souls she had earned. The scream was only one of many ways she went about collecting her souls, but it was a way which had often proved fruitful. Effective and easy – using just a bit of manipulative magic to trigger the appropriate reaction in the humans’ brains – Luxsa had barely to lift a finger, and the results yielded such high numbers in a short amount of time.

As the souls filed inside her, Luxsa licked her lips, feeling more powerful with each one she drew in. She counted them off, one by one, and stored them deep inside. It was a nice total to add to her already sizeable collection. But she still needed a hell of a lot more to pay for her passage through the gates of Infernum; and more yet to help her survive in its fiery depths, as she fought to retrieve what was taken from her.

Luxsa fingered the locket at her throat, where inside she kept the last remaining item she had of her Arkham: a single red curl, cut when he was a baby.

She wouldn’t stop now; she couldn’t. If necessary, she’d collect every soul, on every planet, within every universe, in all dimensions. She belonged to the species of Untethered, after all, able to travel between any and all planes of existence, no matter the time or space. She’d been at it almost a millennium already, and she’d continue on for as long as it took, until she was reunited with her son... and had destroyed all those who’d dared to take him from her.

Absorbing the final soul, Luxsa fingered the gold ring she wore on her middle finger, the ring given to each Untethered on their one thousandth day of birth – the day they were considered adults, and allowed to roam The Eternity freely. Turning her back on the town of Oakwood, she twisted the ring once to the left, twice to the right, then once more to the left. Directly ahead, beneath Oakwood’s parting banner, a swirling portal took shape. Bright lights and unfathomable colors reached out in tendrils and waves.

Pressing the locket to her lips for good luck, Luxsa stepped through the portal and moved on to the next world.

About the Author:

Amber M. Simpson is a dark speculative fiction writer from Northern Kentucky with a penchant for horror and fantasy. She acts as Assistant Editor for Fantasia Divinity Magazine where she has gotten to work with many talented authors from all over the world. Her fiction has been featured in multiple themed anthologies as well as published online.

Author Blog: [Amber M. Simpson](#)
Facebook: [Author Amber M. Simpson](#)

Old Tom | Rich Rurshell

Abi finally got me today. Bit me on the arm as I threw a chicken through the door. I managed to lock the door again, but I probably don't have long. The infection works fast.

My buddies told me I should do the right thing and put Abi out of her misery, but I love her too much. I even punched out old Tom Coburn for offering to shoot her.

"I'll make it quick," he said. I think I broke his nose.

It'll probably be old Tom Coburn who does me when the time comes... then Abi.

I'm sorry, Abi.

About the Author:

Rich Rurshell is a short story writer from Suffolk, England. Rich writes mainly Horror, Sci-Fi and Fantasy stories. Having a childhood interest in fantastic creatures, many of his stories feature monsters, whether it be dragons, demons, foul beasts, or monsters of the (in)human variety. When not writing stories, Rich is a musician and writes music instead.

Facebook: [Rich Rurshell Author](#)

Most of the mainstream press dubbed him the Christmas Killer. One tabloid altered the spelling to the Kristmas Killer, a variant he particularly detested.

He always killed on Christmas Eve, leaving the bodies in public places so they would be found quickly. He wanted their families to find out on Christmas Eve, or better still, Christmas Day. He took his greatest pleasure not in the killing, but in the comforting thought the families would have their Christmas ruined forever by the knowledge their beautiful daughter, mother or sister had been strangled during the season of peace and goodwill to all men.

Six times he had struck. Once a year for the last six years. The police had no chance of ever catching him; he was too smart. They always knew it was him; he left a piece of mistletoe on every corpse. It was his trademark.

He left his apartment at 7 p.m. He already knew who his seventh victim was. A common little shop girl from the supermarket. Pretty enough though. He liked them pretty. A police car drove past, but he didn't react. They had no idea. He felt something light touch his face. Looking up he saw it was snowing. This would be the first snow on Christmas for about ten years.

The snow was starting to settle by the time he got to the supermarket. He knew she finished at 8 p.m. He knew what route she walked home; no car for this poor little church mouse. He wondered why she didn't take the bus; perhaps she was saving her pennies for something nice. What a waste of time.

He stood in the bus shelter across the road from the store. He could see the supermarket was busy with last minute shoppers, filling their trolleys with turkey, sprouts, beer and wine. It was 7:45 p.m., he had time to relax and savor the moment. The flakes were coming down hard now, there was about an inch of dry, fluffy snow on the ground. He glanced around; how festive it all looked.

He decided to walk over to the staff entrance, just in case she left early or went a different route. He walked across the car park and behind the building. His face was muffled in a hat and scarf, and the shapeless jacket he wore would render any CCTV images useless. He could be anybody.

The rear of the building was deathly quiet compared to the front. Dumpsters and wooden pallets lay strewn around untidily. The snow was pristine, untouched, and he relished the sensation he was the first to leave his footprints.

Some animal instinct caused him turn round.

Behind him were footprints. Six sets. He watched in fascination and awe as they formed in the snow. There were no figures making the prints, but he knew who they were.

"You've always been following me haven't you? Sometimes I thought I sensed someone behind me. You clever girls."

The footprints stopped.

"Now I can see you, now I know you're there, what are planning to do? There's nothing you can do to stop me."

The footprints moved forward.

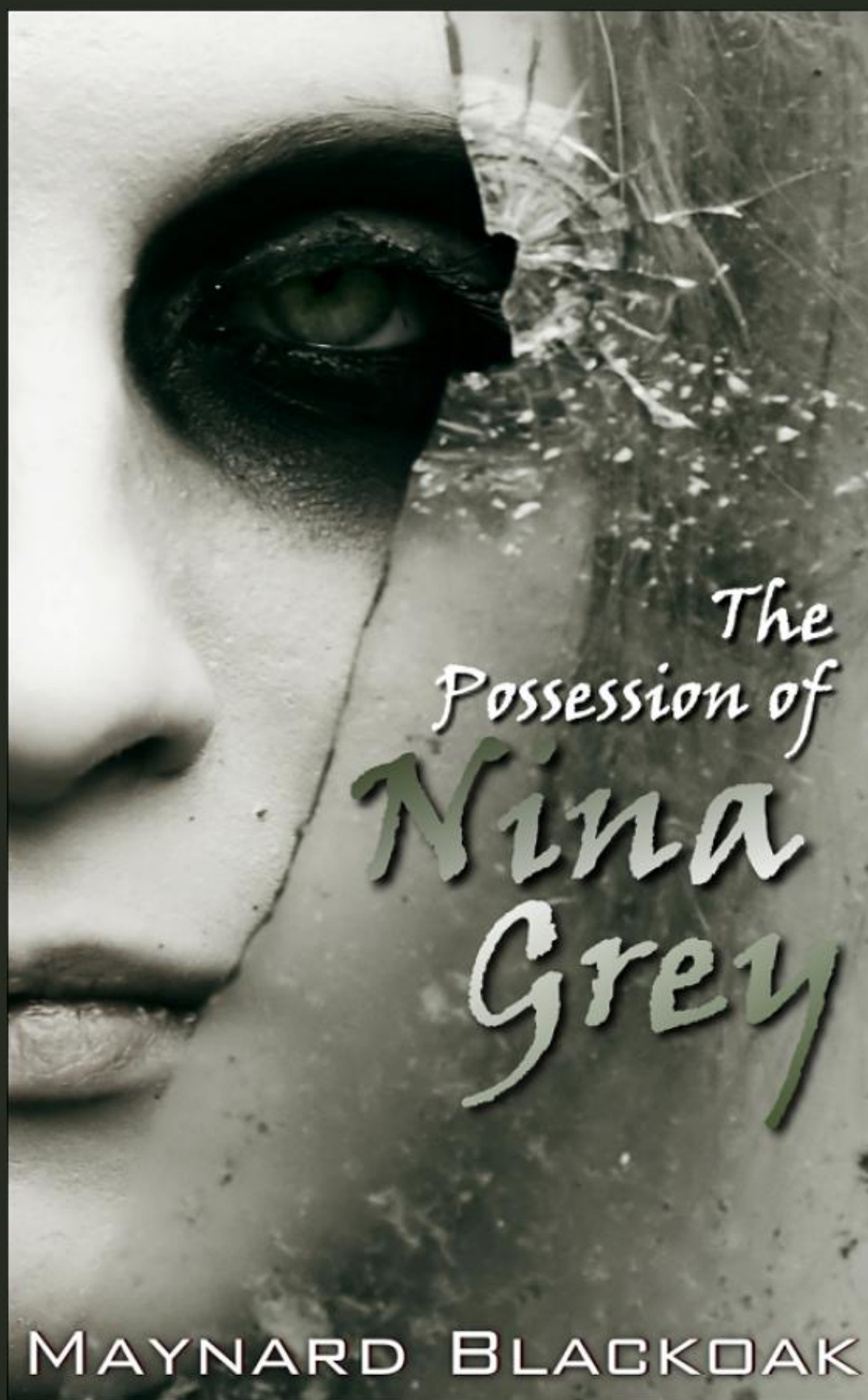
Belinda left the store about fifteen minutes after the other girls had left. The manager had wanted to discuss extra hours in the new year. She had expected to find the rear of the building deserted; nobody wanted to hang around on Christmas Eve, especially not when it was snowing. Instead she walked into a crowd of people surrounding a dark shape lying on the ground. A man. She could see he was dead. There was a wreath of mistletoe draped across the body. She was shocked; it looked as if the Christmas Killer had struck again.

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, The Infernal Clock, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Smoking Pen Press and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

Facebook: [Richard Meldrum](#)

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*The
Possession of*
**Nina
Grey**

MAYNARD BLACKOAK

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

I neither love nor hate my day job. On one hand, I get to drive around alone without anyone looking over my shoulder, and the work is a piece of cake to do. On the other hand, the pay is crappy and the prospects even crappier. I get the opportunity to deliver hot food to elderly people twice a day and usually find a little time to chat verbal nonsense with them, as I set up the pre-cooked food for them to eat. I'm not one of those divine bubbly humane caring types; who gives a fuck about the old codger's welfare or how they are doing. I just look at them as out of date items that are ready to die at some point in the near future. I don't get sentimental when one of them kicks it; I think of the inconvenience that the next new replacement client will add to my cushy schedule. Most of my slop- drop-offs are grouped pretty close together in the Chadderton area, so I can clock up some quality free skiving time by doing them first. There is one particular client that I actually look forward to visiting; it's my last drop- off this particular lunchtime. Old Mister Thackeray, he's an O.A.P who lives alone in a massive detached house on the fringes of the Chadderton Greenbelt. The guy was well loaded back in the day; he was some sort of investment financial expert who made his money on the markets. Now, he's just a sack of decaying meat with mild Alzheimer's disease, who sits in the kitchen staring out at the massive garden all day. Whoopee- fucking do! For him.

I pull the van up outside his house and check myself in the rear-view mirror, not bad for thirty-seven, no grey hairs or missing teeth yet, unlike all of my decrepit old clients.

I get out, straighten myself up so that I look half decent and give the doorbell a press. I do have a key to the house but the bell ring is a coded signal to the fulltime nurse that Thackeray has caring for him. She opens the door with a welcoming smile, "how is he, today Princess?" I ask, pretending like I actually care.

"He's a bit fidgety again today Steve; something daft has triggered him recently, all I have heard all morning is demented rambling about something hiding in the garden, I can't get any sense out of him whatsoever," she replied. I nodded my head doing my best to look concerned and sympathetic to her situation; I was actually undressing her with my eyes. Nurse Carrie was fit as hell and I fancied asking her out before the old geezer croaked it and we lost contact. "You had better go in Steve and look after him; I don't like leaving him alone when he's like this."

"No problem fair maiden, your gallant 'food delivery' knight will protect and give succour to the lord of the manor; whilst you grab your lovely self a quick smoke break." This had been the deal for the past three months, I look after the old guy while she lights up a fag and checks her bloody Facebook status on the phone. Carrie placed her arm on mine and whispered, "I wish there were more blokes out there like you Steve, caring and considerate, a real gentleman. Not like that useless lump of lard I'm married to." This was like taking candy from a baby; the silly cow had fallen for my charm like a ton of bricks. I reckon that any time soon she will end up back at my flat for a bit of what her husband isn't giving her. I kissed her hand whilst making prolonged eye contact; I could have taken it further; but chose to keep her waiting so that when the time was right, she would be gagging for it. She was a good looking lass with a great body but not a stunner, just the way I like them, not too bright, easy to control and clingy. I closed the front door behind me and yelled out loudly so that the old git could hear me, "Only me Mister Thackeray, Steve, I've brought your dinner." I sauntered through the house clocking all the expensive fittings, the grand piano in the living room must be worth a fortune. I went online and Googled the make and model and it is valued somewhere in the region of a hundred-K. What a bloody waste of money! Not that I begrudge the old bastard a penny, just look what all that money has done for him now? Can't buy your health can it George old boy?

Mister Thackeray sat in his electric wheelchair gazing out at the garden as per usual. This is where I have to behave myself and play the role of a decent guy; I can't say what I really want to say to the old geezer. In this day and age, countless numbers of carers and nurses have been caught out abusing their patients by sneaky hidden cameras, placed strategically near the location where they are being fed or bathed. Some distrusting family member would have had their suspicions about how poor old Granddad or Grandma; had obtained frequent bruising's or noticed valuables or money missing from the house. They can even hide a bloody camera in light fittings nowadays, so it's best I don't do anything that could get me sacked or locked up. "Hello George, how are you doing today?" I ask, keeping it short and sweet. The last thing I want is a soul-destroying conversation with a gibbering dementia sufferer. I placed the food down on the small table like I normally do; Thackeray hadn't answered my question yet. He has never ignored me before but it is a required aspect of my job to hand the food over to him; so I stepped directly in front of Thackeray to get his full attention. "Afternoon George, today's culinary delights are as follows, for lunch, roast turkey breast, mashed potatoes with carrot batons and savoy cabbage in a glorious thick gravy.

For pudding we have..."

“Get out of the way you fucking idiot!” Mister Thackeray roared, stopping me in mid-flow. I was gobsmacked; this is the first time I had heard the old geezer swear. I looked at his hard determined face, trying to look past me at whatever had held his attention in the garden. I stepped aside. There was no point telling him that it was apple crumble and custard for pudding, he was too far gone in his own little world. “Suit yourself then George,” I replied, getting out of his line of view. I whipped out my mobile phone and opened up the Facebook app. Sure enough, nurse Carrie was online chatting garbage with some of her close girlfriend’s. Her profile wasn’t private so I could spy on her activities without her suspecting. She had been asking one of her girlfriends about a leather miniskirt she fancied buying off eBay; it sure as hell wouldn’t be for her husband’s pleasure. She had shown me a photograph of him at one time and the fat fucker had more chins than a Chinese telephone directory. They had been on a fishing holiday together in the Norfolk broads, (who the fuck goes fishing with their wife? I ask you!) Why she married that boring good for nothing slob, I will never know. I nearly dropped the phone in fright when old Thackeray shouted, “I can fucking see you, you know! Come and get me if you dare... you little shit. I won’t just sit here ready to fall asleep so you can sneak up on me you fucking coward.” His tone sent a chill down my spine, what must be going on in that puddled brain of his? I hope to fuck someone whisks me off to one of those *Dignitas* clinics if I ever get anywhere as crazy as this old duffer, Jesus! What would the point of living like that be? I placed my phone on the table and crouched down next to the old man. “Are you alright George? You want me to get the nurse for you?” I asked, just in case I was being filmed. Who knows! They may even leave me a few quid in the will when he eventually pops his clogs. George grabbed my wrist with his right hand; his grip was unbelievably strong for a coffin dodger. “Look at the bushes you dickhead! The laurels... can’t you see the fucker?” I played along with him; there was nothing to be seen. “Nope, George, what is it? A cat or a magpie?” George looked directly into my eyes and said “Don’t humour me, kid. That fucker has been watching me for days, every time that nurse goes missing, it comes creeping out of the bushes and gets closer every time. It was in the kitchen with me this morning when she went to the toilet. It was just stood there watching, and then it started to sniff the air like a wild beast moving slowly towards me, I think it wanted me to have a heart attack and die. I didn’t shout out for the nurse, I let it get right up close to me so that it was almost in touching distance.” Old Mister Thackeray stopped talking and had a blank look on his face; there was a line of drool flowing down his chin. It was like his brain was rebooting. I asked him what happened after the creature had got close to him, suddenly Thackeray pulled out a large Chef’s knife from under the blanket that was on his lap, and begun stabbing an imaginary creature in front of him “I nearly had the bastard. You see! It had underestimated me, next time I won’t miss.”

I jumped to my feet and stepped back, my heart was hammering in my chest, the demented old bastard had scared me with that unexpected knife stunt. I only knew that he had to hand the bloody thing over before he or someone else got hurt with it. Nurse Carrie had to be told about this, I would stay with her until George handed it safely over. It wouldn’t do any harm to score a few extra brownie points helping her out, I just hoped he didn’t end up being permanently hospitalised, that would spoil this nice little set up for me. I walked through the house and almost made it to the front door, when I realised that I had left my phone on the side table next to George, the last thing I had been looking at had been nurse Carrie on Facebook. I didn’t want to risk her seeing my snooping, so I quickly dashed back to retrieve it.

I stepped into the kitchen dining room to see George with his head wrenched backwards and blood gushing like a fountain from his exposed neck. I was frozen to the spot in fear; there was a creature in front of him that looked something like a filthy chimp. It was slashing at Old mister Thackeray with the chef’s knife he had shown me less than a couple of minutes ago. The creature locked eyes with mine and jumped off George Thackeray, it was still holding on to the murder weapon. I wanted to run and get the hell away from it, yet my feet were glued to the floor, not receiving the message from my terrified brain. The chimp thing moved closer to me, it was less than three feet away. I could see the animal perfectly clear now, it wasn’t a chimpanzee, it was an apelike creature with yellow eyes and shiny skin like a reptile. Its nostrils flared as it began to sniff around me, I could hear a deep guttural clicking noise emitting from its throat that sounded something like ‘tika-tika- tika.’ The most unnerving thing about the animal; was the eyes, they were intelligent and calculating. I could see it weighing up its options as it flipped the chef’s knife from hand to hand judging how I would react to the threat. The creature looked at the dark stain that was forming on the front of my jeans as I lost control of my bladder. I was too scared to feel any shame; the ape thing cocked its head to the side and grinned at my predicament, the sight of all those sharp teeth in its mouth made me want to faint. I watched as the creature straightened up to its full height, it began to vibrate unnaturally, I don’t fucking know what it was doing, I’m no bleeding anthropologist. I just looked on as the blood and gore that had covered the ape’s body began to be absorbed by its unusual skin; until it was completely free from any messy residue. I could see ripples of colour flow through the skin as it adapted to the room environment. When I first saw the creature it had the same colouring as the Laurels outside,

now it was a much darker brown. I heard the front door slam as Carrie let herself back in, “Everything alright Steve?” she hollered. Any moment now she would be in the kitchen and would see this monster and what it had done to George. The smile had gone from its face; the beast slapped the handle of the chef’s knife into my hand and sprinted out of the kitchen faster than anything from the animal kingdom that I have ever seen. The sound of Carrie’s scream of “Steve what the fuck have you done?” from behind, snapped me out of the fear-induced trance. I was just glad to be alive. I jumped onto the granite breakfast bar and began to unscrew the light fitting with my left hand, whilst keeping hold of the knife with my free hand. “You’ll see! Carrie... I just need to find where the camera is hidden.” I threw the fitting to the floor after finding nothing that resembled a lens. There were four boxes of breakfast cereal on the bar; I started ripping them open on the off chance that they were dummy boxes. Before I knew it, the place was covered in Co-co pops and Weetabix. Carrie was edging her way out of the doorway ready to make a run for it. “Wait! Carrie...you don’t think I did this do you? I’m not a fucking serial killer. I was watching you chat with your ugly mate about that leather miniskirt you fancied buying off eBay, while a man-sized ape thing that had been hiding in the laurels; came in the kitchen and killed old George with this knife.” Carrie frowned and replied, “You stay the fuck away from me... weirdo.”

I heard her running for the front door, then the sound of her car starting up as she drove away in a hurry. I looked around the room at the mess I had made, and begun laughing hysterically, ‘*Serial killer*’ I had said, whilst being surrounded by scattered cereal.

When the police arrived five minutes later, I was sat on the front step, the door locked firmly behind me with the key still in the lock. I didn’t want to risk the ape thing coming at me from that direction. I was tucking into the late mister Thackeray’s dinner and was on for the apple crumble dessert. I had a feeling it would be the last decent meal I would be having for a long time to come.

About the Author:

Andy Swindells is a singer bass player with Manchester prog-rock band the Killershrews. He lives in Chadderton-England, with his wife and two King Charles spaniels. He spends his days writing a mixture of fast-paced thrillers, horror and science stories, that keep readers coming back for more of the same craziness. His books include ‘Work Rest and Slay’ and ‘Badgerforce’.

Facebook: [Andrew Swindells](#)

Littoral Rendezvous | Greg Fewer

For years, the old man would sit near the water’s edge with his female companion. He now sat alone. The man was frail – it was hard for him to carry his fold-up chair and set it up on the bank.

As he settled onto his seat, I saw the metal stick he beat me with fall and slide downslope into the water. Cursing, he crouched down on rickety legs and reached for his stick. Finally! I torpedoed towards him, clamped his hand between my jaws and dragged him, flailing and screaming, beneath the water where I feasted upon him.

About the Author:

A lifelong fan of speculative fiction, movies and television, Greg Fewer writes predominantly flash fiction. His stories have appeared in (among other places): *Cuento Magazine*, *Lovecraftiana*, *Monsters: A Dark Drabbles Anthology*, *Page & Spine*, *Trembling With Fear*, and *The Sirens Call*.

Drinking blood is glamorized. It's not appetizing, tantalizing, or exotic. I can most accurately describe it as metallic and lingering. I don't do it to satisfy a misguided goth proclivity, and I don't operate under the assumption that vampires are real. I tip back whiskey tumblers full of viscous red because it's my job. My name is Bob, and I'm a Caretaker.

The swill I'm swallowing is preserved blood, which means that the deceased had a package of the stuff drawn from their veins before they died. It's not that you can't drink from a dead person. It's that it's, honestly, kind of disgusting. When someone signs up for a Caretaker, we normally ask them to draw a pint for our consumption. Mr. Henry William Leed did just that.

I'll be honest in saying that most people have never heard of a Caretaker. Most can't afford us. We're more of a luxury than a sustainable business model. We're the final insurance measure and we date back to the primordial beginnings of human civilization.

The majority of people have some form of last will and testament. The rich will bequeath their earthly items to their family, make sure all their financial bows are tied, and call it quits without leaving a mess behind them. But some folks want to make sure that they get one final request before they shuffle off to the big empty.

Oh, I should tell you that there's nothing after. Just a darkness that you've never known. Sorry to break it you like this.

Anyway, when they want to make sure they attain their final request, a person hires a Caretaker. We arrive within 48 hours of the passing (it makes for amazing frequent-flyer miles, let me tell you), hold communion with the deceased, drink their blood, learn their final will, and we then execute that final command. The one catch is that we are blood-bound to complete the final request, whatever it may be. I don't have to tell you about the mudholes that I've found myself swimming in. I bet you can imagine it just fine. The consequences of not doing so...well, let's save that for another day.

I arrived at the bedside of Mr. Henry William Leed, 74, four hours ago. His overbearing and terribly dressed son leads me into the overly air-conditioned bedroom. The body is still dressed in pajamas. He's been kept chilled for a day, so he is still moderately fresh. The cold preserves him enough to negate the smell. The son looks at the father with a craven glare before scurrying out of the room. There's a weekly pill container on the bedside table, the big *W* is open. One last fiber supplement before the old man cut out.

A Caretaker sits in solidarity with the body and makes physical contact. So, I hold the old man's hand for hours in meditation. Silence and concentration. About an hour into it you feel the person's presence on the peripheries of your mind. You see them in the corners, but if you look they've gone. At three hours, they take center stage and their soul leaks into your consciousness. In the middle of the ceremony, I begin to sip the blood like fine whiskey.

The body and the blood. You've seen it a thousand times in Catholic masses and never thought twice. Where did you think the Catholics got the idea? Anyway, here I am taking the eucharist of the dead. It'd be nice if he tasted nearly as good as communion wine.

A few of my professional acquaintances have equated the visions to a hallucinogenic drug trip. That's bullshit. They're just trying to sound exotic. It's always been plain and straightforward.

Once the blood is consumed, I close my eyes and Henry William Leed escorts me into the crimson tunnel. It is deep and glossy, like it may shatter if struck. Mr. Leeds stands in the middle of the endless expanse. He does not speak. He signals with his left hand and I see.

A wavering hand, a dropping sphere, an open compartment, the content feeling of comfort followed by agony, a drawer, a pearl handle. The final moment is uncontainable rage and then nothing.

The old man, still angry following his final moments, nods toward me and fades into the glossy darkness. Gone. Endless dark instead of St. Peter and the pearly gates.

I'm out of the crimson tunnel as quickly as I was in. Mr. Leeds is at rest now, so I fold his hands over his chest and whisper a short prayer.

I find the pearl-handled pistol in the bottom drawer, where he told me it would be. I rack the slide and a bullet slides into the chamber. I hold the gun at my side and leave the room.

The son walks towards me before I can close the bedroom door.

"Has it worked?" His eyes dart around my face looking for answers.

"Yes," I say, as I raise the gun, place the barrel against his forehead, and fire.

The bullet explodes out of his skull and his body falls to the floor in a thump.

I wipe the gun down with a handkerchief and leave it next to the body. I wonder if the son wiped his print from the pill case after he replaced the medication with arsenic. Maybe he thought the old man would be unaware of his cowardice in death.

All in all, it doesn't matter. As a Caretaker, I'm blood-bound to carry out the final will of my clients. But that doesn't mean that I can't have some fun while doing it.

About the Author:

Ethan Robles is a writer, scholar, and higher education professional. His creative and editorial work centers around horror fiction and film, but he also writes science fiction, crime/mystery, and fantasy fiction. He has published in *Aphotic Realm*, *Horror Homeroom*, *Revenant Journal*, and he is currently working with a colleague on an edited collection regarding youth-focused horror film and television. He lives in Cambridge, MA.

Author Blog: [Ethan Robles](#)

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Decay | *Rebecca Anderson*

The morning after we brought my daughter Katie home from the hospital, a maggot fell out of the ceiling. My husband Dave and I were sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee. It fell squarely in my mug. I screamed and instinctually knocked the cup over, watching the maggot wiggle around the puddle of spilled coffee.

"There must be a dead squirrel in the attic," Dave reasoned. "Give it time to clear."

It didn't and the smell got stronger every day: rancid, like rotten meat. We called in exterminators who found nothing.

The stench stuck to our skin. Strangers began to recoil; we reeked constantly of death and decay.

Dave lost his job and we both knew it was because he emanated rot. I stopped going out altogether, afraid Katie would be taken away.

I flatlined while giving birth. I saw the light everyone talks about, but turned around, toward the darkness. "I'll give anything to live," I implored.

At three months, Katie uttered her first word: "Death."

"Daddy?" Dave asked hopefully.

"Death," Katie repeated.

She pointed and laughed at something behind me, unseen to all but her: "Death."

The smell got stronger. Every morning I woke up to maggots on the kitchen counters. Dave and I discussed moving (surely this couldn't follow us?) but we couldn't afford it.

One night, I woke up to the same darkness I saw on the night Katie came into the world. I inhaled the rot and decay and savored the maggots inching over my skin.

"You're overdue." I heard the message in Katie's tiny voice, even though she was sound asleep in the nursery at the end of the hall.

That time, I went toward the dark, but turned back, hoping to find the light.

About the Author:

Rebecca Anderson is a psychotherapist, tech entrepreneur, and writer. She lives in North Carolina and enjoys boating, cooking, and playing with her miniature dachshunds when she's not crafting dark tales.



"Hey? Who did this one belong to?"

"Hmmm, I dunno. Wait, wasn't it that guy? You know, the one with the cap."

Blank stare in return.

"Which guy?"

"Oh! You know, the one with the cap who kept trying to hit on you."

"Not really jogging my memory to be honest."

Shrug.

"So. Do you remember, it was just after the guy who had the whiny sister, but before the guy who wanted to be an Instagram influencer?"

"Oh yes! The one with the really sexist cap?"

"That's him!"

Smiles all round

"He was the one with bad skin."

"Which is why we took his teeth instead of flaying him."

"I do remember him!"

"He did have lovely teeth didn't he?"

"Yeah, they're really nice. What should we do with them?"

A few moments of quiet contemplation pass.

"Ooooh! I know! Why don't we sew them to your mask! That way you'll always have his lovely smile. And... And, anyone you're killing will get to see it!"

"What a great idea! But maybe glue would work better, what do you think?" Clapping happily.

"You're probably right. It'll be nice to have something to remember him by though."

"And how often do people say we should smile more?"

"No, you're absolutely right."

"What about this one then?"

"Nah, that guy wasn't just skeezy, he smelled bad too. I'm not so keen on remembering him to be honest."

"I guess you're right. Should we just acid bath him?"

"Might as well. It's not like we need to keep it as a memento."

"Ok, dump it then."

"I hope they understand."

"They won't, they never do."

Resignation, acceptance.

"It'd be easier if we were men. They all seem to love it when men do this. But if a woman dares to skin thirty men and boil their flesh from their bones and use their skins as clothing, then everyone lose their damn minds!"

"It's nothing more than plain misogyny."

"Well, we'll ditch what we can and take the rest with us. I'd hate to lose all of them. So many fond memories."

"Oh love, no need to cry. There'll be more. So many more."

"I know, it's just so sad. We were doing so well here. I liked it here."

"We'll find somewhere else and we'll make it a home again."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

About the Author:

Kane Salzer is a full-time parent and aspiring writer. Prior to taking the plunge he worked in financial services and consultancy. He is an avid reader, tabletop role player and multi-disciplinary geek. He is currently working as a full-time parent to an amazing kid who is sadly too young to read the things he writes.

I was in a bad place. Feeling low, isolated, I was looking for that magic pill. That's when I found her. That's when it all went bad.

She took me in easy. I needed that, I guess. The reassurance, comfort, and the idea of something greater, working towards my greatest good: I believed it all.

I was stupid really, dripping in enthusiasm but lacking money sense. I turned out my pockets quick, buying what she was selling without a second thought. This energy healing business is good right? You hear the stories online from all the saved souls. One session and BAM, life changed. That's what I wanted. And what I got? Life over.

After the informal first meeting and the initial course to learn the basics, I started attending these group meetings. I thought why not, it's all part of it. What could the harm be? Well, let me tell you...

You know those feelings you get, that sick stomach punch when you know something isn't quite right. Well that's what I got when I walked into the first 'group'. I picked up on a smell, unfamiliar, yet familiar all the same. Like an old hospital crossed with a meat grinder. Something was off, and it wasn't just the smell of the building.

I went out for some air and felt a walk would do me the power of good. The venue was an old church, one of those really old gothic looking ones that are the centrepiece of a tiny rural village. Really alarm bells should have been chiming then. I've watched enough horror to know that creepy rural places are full of lunatics and death cults. Generally, I like places like this: they are quiet and you rarely get disturbed by the unwanted annoyances of life. This place though - creepy would be an understatement.

At a guess, about 70 percent of the graves were of children under sixteen years old. Now I'm no expert on death or anything, but I don't think that is totally normal. My first thought, and I was totally joking to myself by the way, was that they must be sacrificing their kids for their fancy silver spoon lifestyle. It was quite an affluent area. Plenty of money here, and plenty of folk with too much time on their hands to go with it.

Putting the graves to the back of mind, thinking it would make a good horror story, I carried on with my walk, ignoring the unnerving feeling building up within my stomach.

I went back into the hall where this meeting of the 'healers' was happening. I knew I shouldn't be here. I wasn't one of them, and quite frankly I didn't want to be. Jesus, 'love and light' here, there and everywhere, and not one of these two-faced creeps meant any of it.

The leader of this merry band, a woman named Suzanne, beckoned me over with her crocodile smile. She guided me to a bed and asked me to lie down and close my eyes while she demonstrated the 'healing'.

It felt okay. I had been the recipient several times now, and admittedly I had felt better from it. I've always been a curious one, wanted to know the secrets to the universe and all. I peeked. That moment, that brief second where I opened my eyes a fraction was when the bottom dropped out.

She was wearing a face. A small child's face. It was distorted and bloody but obvious all the same. It was the face of a toddler, stuck on hers like a Halloween mask. She was drawing signs in the air above me with a bone. She must have sensed my shock or my fear; she opened her eyes and cried out something inhuman. Everyone jumped up, surrounded me on the bed before I could move. "Don't be scared," Suzanne said as she peeled off the poor child's face. "We heal ourselves through the sacrifice of the village. One child every six months, that's all. All the families here have some extra for this". She spoke as if this was normal, as if she were chopping carrots. I screamed at them to move, to let me go. I jumped off the bed and ran for the door only to be stopped by a bulky woman, Tori or Tammi, something like that. She grabbed me by the hair, flung me back and with a smile sentenced me to eternal damnation.

"We are not what you think, murderers, no, of course not. Everyone wants this. Money, power, health, the perfect life. We all make sacrifices. Our lord wants two children a year and no more. It may seem harsh, but the riches we receive in return! We all want this, we all agreed". She spoke to me as if I were the unstable one. Her voice was unnaturally calm and composed. It was as if she had been taken over by some entity. She continued this insanity, rambling on about how it was acceptable and perfectly normal to kill their kids. All those kids, the graveyard was full.

I was surrounded, back on the bed but this time restrained. "You're a little old for him, but I sure he won't mind as it's for the good of us all. I'm sorry, I am, but I just can't have you ruining this for us. I can't let you destroy us."

Terrified, I was trying so hard to kick my way free, but they all surrounded me closer and held me down. I started to scream but stopped as my mouth was filled with a warm metallic liquid. I was choking. The stark fear burning through me, I thought choking on the blood of the innocent was to be it. I wasn't even allowed that respite. Suzanne, complete with dead baby mask, held up a bone, a rib I think. She chanted something unrecognisable and bore down, slicing through my chest with the bone. I was pleading with myself to pass out, to let this end. The pain, it seemed, wouldn't

allow me that mercy. I was awake right until, and even after, they removed my heart. I don't know how I was still alive; I wasn't. The last thing my eyes witnessed was Suzanne biting into my still beating heart.

I think I'm dead now. I hope so.

About the Author:

Lesley-Ann is a horror writer from the North West of England. She relishes dark horror and poetry. An avid reader, she is influenced by John F. Leonard and Tim Waggoner. Random fact: she is a trained reiki practitioner and colour therapist.

Author Blog: [Housewife of Horror](#)

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Talitha Cumi: Maiden, Arise | *Andrea Goyan*

The executioner slipped the noose over Margaret Jones' head. Hemp fibers pricked her skin, but with bound hands, there was nothing she could do. One of the harnessed horses sidestepped, and the wagon she stood upon wobbled. The rope pressed against Margaret's windpipe.

"Whoa!"

Gagging, she twisted, seeking relief. Someone steadied the horse. Margaret gasped. She could breathe again. *God is with me*, she thought, closing her eyes.

Margaret knew nothing of the Devil's book, or the blood mark they swore she'd made inside its pages. She knew of bloody births. Of babies who'd torn their mothers open, screaming their way into this world. Of the violence that shadowed creation. But Margaret was God's servant and a sworn emissary of life, not its enemy. Inside her church, she'd dipped the quill in ink and signed her name to the document making her covenant with God. It was the only oath she'd taken.

But in her prison cell, in the anemic light cast from a single candle, the magistrate wove another story.

"Confess, and you live."

She never read the declaration he bade her sign. God knew her truth.

"I will not," she replied.

"Then I leave you in eternal darkness," the magistrate said, crushing the candle's flame between his thumb and forefinger.

A horse whinnied.

Margaret opened her eyes as the wagon lurched, and she flew, an angel without wings. Above, the elm tree's canopy was glorious, and beyond its leaves, blue sky, and...

Heaven. She smiled. *I'm with God*.

About the Author:

Andrea is a writer, actress, and Master Pilates Teacher. Recent stories can be found in Halloween Party 2019, On Loss: An Anthology, Dirty Girls Magazine (May 2019), and Newfound Journal (October 2018). She's an accomplished playwright. Over a dozen of her plays have been produced in Los Angeles where she lives with her husband, a dog, and two cats.

Twitter: [@AndreaGoyan](#)

Facebook: [Andrea Goyan Storyteller](#)

One more day. Just one more day until I would finally have enough gold to pay off my debt. If I chose my destination wisely, I may even have enough left over to go on a short vacation. I glanced at the frost that had snaked its way across my bedroom window. *Preferably somewhere warm*, I thought.

I tiptoed down the stairs and placed some bread in the toaster. Technically, we could make incidental noise and still claim the gold. Footsteps and coughs were deemed acceptable by the Council for Silence. Still, it didn't hurt to play it safe.

Just one more day.

An old radio lay abandoned on the kitchen counter, cobwebs curling their way up the antenna. I wondered if it even played anymore; it wouldn't surprise me if the DJs had long-since quit their jobs. A piece of gold was certainly worth more than their daily wage. It was worth more than most wages here.

The problem was that it was so difficult to be silent.

A frustrated sigh, a surprised yelp. If you were the source of the noise, you could not claim your gold. There had been so many days when I missed out on the prize by a tiny groan, diligently reported by one of the many hidden microphones or informants. Well, not today.

My toast sprang up and I took a moment to enjoy holding it in my cold hands. At some point in the night my electric heater had broken, and I made a mental note to replace it before making any vacation plans. A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. Things would be much more comfortable after I received my gold this evening.

All I had to do was be quiet.

Almost five years had passed now since the Freedom Party's controversial election victory. Whispers of corruption had spurred thousands onto the streets, filling the air with their fear and anger. News outlets broadcasted evidence of injustices and opposing parties began to form. The country was screaming.

So, the voices were silenced. Not with violence, as had been expected, but with money. For every day that someone did not make a sound, they earned one piece of gold.

At first, there was rebellion. People vowed that their voices could not be bought, so the Party swiftly increased prices and plunged the nation into debt. Soon, it was no longer enough to simply work. To survive, you needed to be silent. And what became necessary soon became normal.

I began collecting my things and braced myself for the crisp winter air that awaited me outside. From the kitchen window, I could see my neighbor Isabelle preparing her own breakfast. She caught my eye and nodded. I pointed to my camera and threw up my hands.

Another day at work!

Have a good day, her smile replied.

I waved and then placed my camera into my bag. Isabelle was a professional silent, and often asked me through scrawled notes why I didn't become one myself. It certainly was a popular career choice; silents received more gold for their efforts, and I'm sure Isabelle was itching for the commission she'd receive for recruiting me. However, as a photographer for the local paper, I usually had the luxury of being able to complete my work noiselessly.

It was easier to be a silent when you were older, anyway. Some of my friends were thinking about becoming parents soon, so they needed to have enough money saved to last at least a few years. It's hard to be silent when your baby is crying, or your toddler is about to throw themselves off the couch.

The lock on the front door clicked into place behind me, and I carefully made my way down the icy street. Birds that had no use for gold serenaded me with cheerful songs until I reached the creaking wooden steps that led up to the train station. I opened the heavy door and walked inside.

The waiting room was warmer than outside had been, but I could still feel the draft creeping in from the badly-patched cracks in the walls. It had been a long time since this building, or any building around here, had been refurbished. Still, I was surprised to find it empty. Normally this room was filled with passengers blowing on steaming cups of coffee and gulping down the last few bites of their breakfast, unwilling to brave the chill until their train arrived. I glanced at the ground. Crumbs from a half-eaten granola bar had been trampled into a long, thin line toward the platform.

Weird.

I stepped over the crumbs and through the doorway that led outside. A slight mist had fallen onto the tracks, and I pulled my jacket closer around myself. To my left, the platform was bare; the silence was one of absence there, free from the usual rustling of papers and light footsteps.

Where is everybody?

A sharp scream echoed through the platform. I peered to my right. Hidden beneath the mist was a crowd of people huddled together at the far end of the platform.

"Please, someone help me!"

I raced toward the crowd and stared at the tracks in horror. A young woman, no older than eighteen, lay crumpled against the crossties, her eyes closed and her legs stretched awkwardly behind her. Another woman sat beside her. She searched each person's face and screamed again.

"She's not moving. I'm begging you, someone please help me!"

A man reached down from the platform and raked his fingers uselessly through the air above the injured woman.

"We need to get down there!" I cried. The man pulled himself back up and gestured at his wrist.

7:42am. The train would be here in three minutes.

Outstretched arms tangled together as the crowd tried and failed to reach the unconscious woman. I leaned forward and found her friend's eyes.

"Please help me. Please call for help," she whimpered.

"Does anyone have a cell phone?" I yelled. People turned to me with wide eyes. "Come on, does anyone have a cell phone? We need to call someone. Where is the station master?"

A woman next to me shrugged, and I gritted my teeth in frustration. Cell phones had largely become obsolete since the Silence Initiative, but I had hoped someone kept one for emergencies. Apparently not.

I ran down the length of the platform until I found an old phone pinned to the wall. With a quick prayer that it still worked, I lifted the handle.

Silence.

"No!" I slammed the phone into its cradle and sprinted back to the group. Below us, the woman had pushed her arms underneath her friend and was trying to lift her, but seemed unable to pull her further than a few inches. Her friend's eyelids fluttered briefly.

"Everything's going to be ok," I said. "I need somebody to go and see if there's a working phone in the office!" A teenager nodded at me and then sprinted away. I crouched down and tried to smile at the woman on the tracks. "What's your name?"

The woman stared up at me, tears spilling onto her cheeks. "Lola. Dolores really, but everyone calls me Lola," she answered.

"Hi, Lola. What's your friend's name?"

"Mallory."

"How did this happen, Lola?"

"It was an accident. It was just an accident," Lola said, her words almost lost between her sobs.

"Did Mallory fall?"

"Yes. It was an accident, I swear."

"I believe you. Did she hit her head? Did she hit her back?"

Lola stared at her friend. "She hit her head on the tie, and her back on the track."

I inhaled sharply. "When did this happen?"

"About five minutes ago. Maybe ten, I don't...I don't know."

"We need to get her off the tracks *now*. Can you move her at all?"

Lola shook her head. "She's too heavy. I tried, I really tried. She's so much taller than I am..."

I shifted my weight until I was sitting on the edge of the platform. A hand gripped my upper arm, and I glanced up into the sea of faces. An elderly woman shook her head furiously at me.

A shrill whistle sounded, and then a long steel nose broke through the mist. Lola screamed and raced to the platform. I jumped to my feet and grabbed onto her hand, then pulled as hard as I could. She scrambled up the gritty wall and landed next to me.

"Are you okay?" I asked. Lola bit into her balled fists. A trickle of blood ran between her white knuckles and onto the smooth cement beneath her. The rest of the passengers waved their arms in unison at an unseen driver.

"Stop! Stop the train!" I begged.

The train's brakes squealed, and Mallory's eyes flickered open.

"Help me," she moaned.

I clapped my hands over my mouth and turned away as Mallory disappeared beneath steel wheels. There was a guttural screech as the train finally pulled to a stop, and then silence. Lola fell to her knees and screamed. I pulled her close to me and she rocked back and forth, leaving bloody handprints on the cement.

"How long were you planning to wait before calling for help?" I cried into the crowd. "You had plenty of time to find a phone! You had plenty of time to help her!"

Nobody answered me.

A man in a faded green uniform stumbled from the train, his face ashen. I staggered to my feet and grabbed onto his arm.

"No, no, no. I saw her too late. No, no, no." He placed his hands on the side of the train and squeezed his eyes shut. His breath seemed to rattle within him.

"I tried to call you, but the phone on the platform doesn't work. If I had just had more time..."

"These bloody ancient trains...these bloody ancient trains! I told them we needed more emergency phones. They don't care, though. They haven't cared for five years, and they won't care for the next five. Damn them all!"

"That's enough of that talk," a man in an identical uniform said as he stepped down from the train. He glanced at the crumbling awnings above us, then guided his colleague away by his elbow.

"Miss?" I heard a voice say. I spun to find the teenager from earlier standing next to me. "The phone in the office worked. The authorities are on their way," he said.

Behind us, a man vomited as quietly as he could into a nearby trashcan. I took my camera from my bag with shaking hands.

'The price of gold,' I typed. I moved my mouse until it hovered over the 'send' button, and then clicked. It was done. I slumped forward and pushed my briefs to the side of my desk. They would have to wait until tomorrow, or whenever I had the stomach to return to work.

'Good job.'

I nodded at the email alert and was about to minimize my browser when I noticed one of the unread messages sitting in my inbox. My lips curled into a snarl.

'Unfortunately, you will not be able to claim your gold for today. Better luck tomorrow!'

I slammed my hand over my keyboard and screamed. I screamed until my throat burned; until all the breath had left my body and the numbness had transformed into rage.

There would be no more silence.

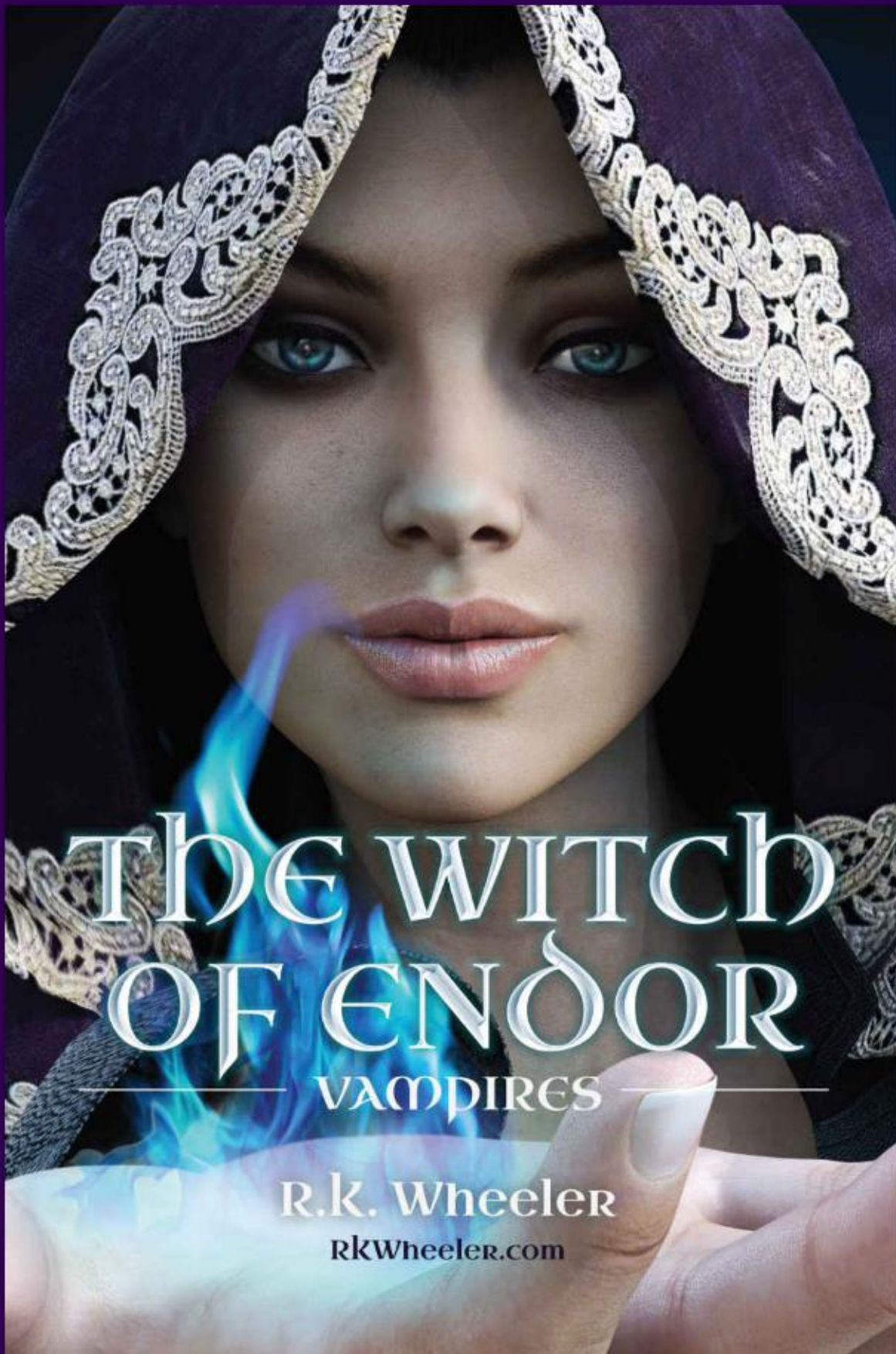
About the Author:

Elizabeth Nettleton studied Law at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, and now lives in Colorado with her family. She has had several of her short stories published on Short Fiction Break, and *The Price of Gold* is her second story to be included in *The Sirens Call* eZine.

Author Blog: [Elizabeth Nettleton](#)

Twitter: [@ElizabethNett18](#)

Vampire lovers, betrayed by their own.



Available on Amazon

Death comes to us all. It's the one thing that no one can escape. But we all die trying. My uncle said that if death comes once, it comes in threes. I never believed this until I worked in a nursing home.

Our facility was well kept by most standards. We didn't have any smells and the residents received lots of attention. My job was a caretaker for an elderly man. His name was Richard Dye. Mr. Dye's family paid me to be an extra set of eyes for him. Basically, I sat in the room with him and helped him when he needed it. This worked well until Mr. Franklin moved in with us.

Frank, as he liked to be called, immediately befriended me. Mr. Dye was in the last stages of Alzheimer's and rarely talked. Most of the time I would sit and nod off in my chair, but Frank wanted the company. He didn't want to be alone for long. He believed his time was short and that death was hunting him.

Frank shook my arm to wake me from a stupor one day. He whispered in my ear. "Did you see the shadow?"

I shook my head. He must've been dreaming.

"It's here in this building. I think it's after me," Frank said.

I pointed at Mr. Dye—lying in his bed with his legs in a fetal position. "If death is on the prowl looking for anyone, I think it's going to be him."

"You don't understand," he said. "It's in threes. The first and sometimes the second are expected. But the third is usually someone you'd least suspect."

"Maybe it's always watching us," I said trying to be funny.

"I agree—who here is close to dying?"

"Mrs. Banner had some heart trouble last week, but she's better now, maybe Mrs. Else on C-Hall."

A siren sounded from outside. An ambulance was on its way up the winding drive to the facility. They turned off their siren on approaching which meant it was too late.

I stuck my head into the hall after a few minutes. A stretcher with a covered body was being wheeled out of Mrs. Else' room.

Frank grabbed my arm with his bony fingers. "The first death has arrived. The second will soon be knocking at our door."

I jerked from his grasp. His eyes bulged. He had a wild look—like a trapped cat. "I need to leave this place before it's too late."

"Who's to say that it wouldn't just follow you wherever you went?"

"It doesn't work like that. It will be in three's here," he said.

I looked at my watch. "My shift is over. I'm going home to rest," I said.

The next day I pulled up at the facility. An ambulance was out front. Another that quick? I waited outside until they exited the building. They pushed a stretcher with a body bag.

"Mr. Dye?" I asked.

They shook their heads and loaded the body into the vehicle.

I walked to the front desk. Nurse Matthews sat behind it, reading a book.

"Who?" I asked.

She looked at me over the top of her glasses and went back to reading her book.

Stupid HIPAA violations.

I walked to Mr. Dye's room. Frank wasn't inside. His belongings were gone, and his bed was made. Had he skipped town?

Mr. Dye was snoring when I entered the room. He sat up in his bed and looked me straight in the eye. "Thank goodness you came. It's been lonely in here without you."

It was the first time he had spoken to me that wasn't in a mumble. "Mr. Dye, are you okay?" I had heard about a person getting better right before they passed. Was he going to be number three?

"Where have you been?" he asked.

"At home as usual," I said. "When did Frank leave?"

"Who's Frank?" he asked.

The orderly came into the room. "Time for a bed bath, Mr. Dye."

Mr. Dye lay in his bed and mumbled again.

"I usually do that," I said.

He ignored me and walked over to the bed. “Usually your sitter does this,” he said. “But they found him in the lobby bathroom this morning. He’d had a heart attack last night. No one even realized he was in there until today. Hopefully your family has some contact info on him. We didn’t even know his name.”

“I’m right here,” I said.

“Mr. Dye?” the orderly said. There was no response. The orderly rushed into the hall. “Call the funeral home, we have another one.”

Mr. Dye rose up and looked at me. “Looks like it’s just you and me, kiddo.”

All I could do was stare at Mr. Dye’s room. My final resting place.

About the Author:

Dan McKeithan completed his MFA in Creative Fiction from UC-Riverside in 2016, all while fighting off cancer. Prior to that he attended UCLA in Professional Screenwriting in 2002. Now his day job is running two nursing homes in North Carolina and when he’s not at home or off in Russia with his family he tries to get a little writing done.

Facebook: [Dan McKeithan](#)
Amazon Author Page: [Dan McKeithan](#)

Food for Thinking Fast | John H. Dromey

Lou Kleindieb felt threatened by a lack of job security. He was near the bottom of the food chain in a criminal enterprise.

“I want a bigger piece of the pie,” he told someone higher up the company’s corporate ladder.

“This is a big outfit. You’re small potatoes.”

“Don’t you mean I’m excess fat that needs to be trimmed?”

“To be brutally honest, yes.”

“I thought so. No matter how you slice it, there are going to be some changes made.”

“Huh?”

“I already carved up those enforcers you sent my way.” Lou held up a bloody knife. “You’re next.”

Caught Dead to Rights | John H. Dromey

A heavily-armed private eye confronted a psychopathic killer who’d been arrested multiple times but never convicted.

“Your luck’s run out. I assured my clients I can place you at the scene of a crime,” the PI said. “No exoneration this time.”

The crook laughed.

“You should take me seriously. I’m going to keep my promise—right here, right now—by making you a victim of vigilante justice. Any last words before I pull the trigger.”

“You’d better not. There are witnesses.”

“Unlike eyewitnesses you bribed or intimidated to keep from testifying against you, *these* highly-interested onlookers are paying me.”

Bang!

About the Author:

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. He’s had drabbles published in some previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*. His short fiction has appeared in *Alfred Hitchcock’s Mystery Magazine*, *Mystery Weekly*, *50-Word Stories* (Tim Sevenhuysen’s website), *Thriller*, *Unfit Magazine*, and elsewhere.

The whistling was becoming annoying, the same tuneless, worn out phrase over and over, grating on her nerves. Six notes rising and falling, the silence between each iteration a moment of relief and hope, but short-lived every time the old man began again. Nobody else in the subway car seemed bothered by it, as if they couldn't hear it. The train was almost empty—there was a young couple further down murmuring to each other in the way that young couples do, an older woman intently reading a well-worn romance novel (the cover featured a shirtless, bronzed muscular man clutching a woman who appeared to be in the throes of either ecstasy or death) and a few seats taken up by business commuters.

She looked more closely at the old man without staring, pretending to read a poster above the window by his seat. He was elderly, yes, with long gray hair and a gray beard that came down to his chest, but he was dressed eclectically, wearing a three-piece suit and tie, a black fedora, and black circular sunglasses. He was holding a white cane. He looked vaguely familiar sitting there, his profile to her, staring straight ahead and whistling that damned tuneless tune again and again.

Then, without warning, the lights in the subway car flickered and went out, plunging the passengers into darkness. She gasped silently, gripping the seat beneath her, primitive fear causing panic to rise in her throat. After a few seconds, the lights blazed back on, filling her with relief until she realized that the old man was staring right at her, those black lenses making him look slightly grotesque. Then he smiled suddenly, and she remembered something that she hadn't thought about in years.

She was six. The family had gathered at her dying grandmother's bedside in the house where her father had grown up. She didn't understand why Nana was so sleepy, so she was playing on the living room floor with the doll she'd brought with her. The doorbell rang. She waited, but no one came to answer it. She could hear someone whistling outside, a faint sound that carried into the house. She got up, curious, and through the frosted glass, she could make out the silhouette of a man. He was wearing a hat and was standing on the porch facing the street. After a moment, she slowly walked over to the door and opened it. The man on the porch spun around. He was elderly, wearing black circular sunglasses and carrying a white cane. He grinned at her, sightless behind those sunglasses, leaned down, and whispered, "*Not you.*" Terrified, she ran back into the living room, clutching her doll, and hid behind a chair, sobbing.

Later, her mother found her, still behind the chair. "What's wrong?" she asked, her voice full of grief. "Don't be sad about Nana. She was very sick."

"There was a man," she replied.

"What man?" her mother demanded, looking towards the door, but it was shut and the man was gone.

She'd always thought it was a bad dream, brought on by subconscious anxiety. Now though, she wasn't so sure. Yet it couldn't be the same old man—her grandmother had died over 20 years ago. Then the train began to slow down and she realized it was her stop. She got up to move to the opened car doors but as she passed by the old man, he reached out and grabbed her wrist. "*Not yet,*" he whispered, those black lenses staring up at her sightlessly.

She stared back at him, caught between screaming and fainting. After a long moment, she yanked her arm free, but it was too late—the doors had closed and she had missed her stop. Shaken, she moved further up and stood at the next set of doors, her back to the old man, who had resumed his whistling refrain, six notes rising and falling relentlessly. When the doors opened at the next station, she fled the car. He was harmless, just an eccentric old man, not some creature from a bad dream, she thought, trying to convince herself. But why did she feel so cold?

Later, at home, she wrapped herself up in a blanket to ward off the strange chill that had buried itself deep in her bones. She was curled up in an easy chair watching the news when she heard that someone had been randomly attacked and killed at her regular stop, the one the old man had made her miss. As the newscaster spoke, the camera panned down to a romance novel, the bronzed, muscular man on the cover stained with blood. As she pulled the blanket even tighter around herself to stop the shivering that she couldn't seem to control, she could have sworn she heard someone whistling.

About the Author:

Suzanne Craig-Whytock is a Canadian writer. Her first novel, *Smile*, was released in 2017, and her new Young Adult novel, *The Dome*, was released in October 2019. Her writing has been featured in *Slippage Lit*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, *Women Writers*, *Women('s) Books*, and *Spillwords Press*. She also has a weird sense of humour.

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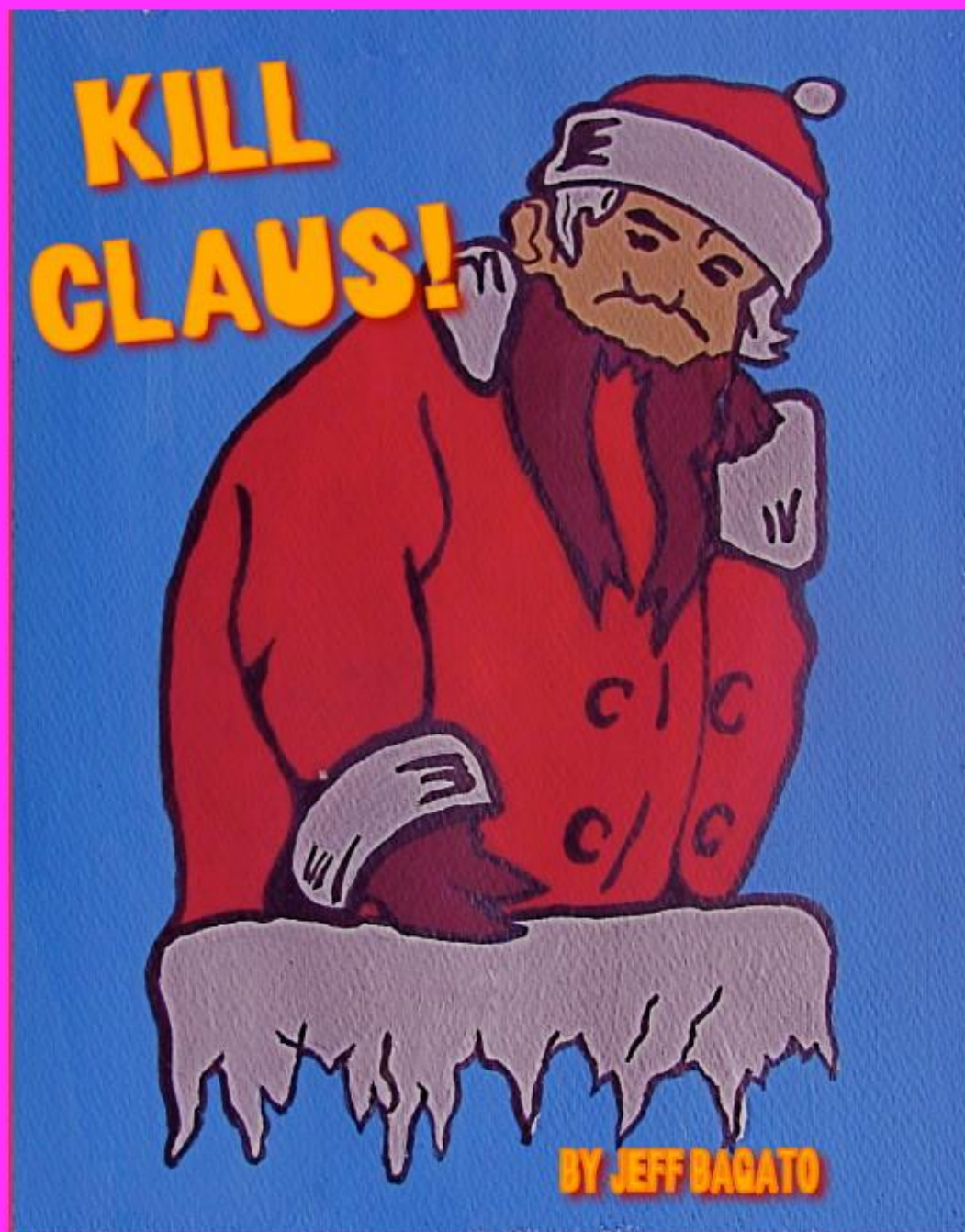
Exhume the LOL of Cthulhu

70+ rhymed poems based on Lovecraft's mythos



Available on Amazon

Bizarro horror novel available on Amazon.com



Sesam always refused to believe the Xmas legends. After the Claus and his elf swarm kills or captures everyone he knows, Sesam vows to *Kill Claus*. If the poison from an elf's candy cane doesn't kill him, he might be eaten by the cannibal snowmen, zombie Xmas trees, octopus-flies, or jelly creatures. Along the way, Sesam learns terrible secrets about his fellow humans, himself, and his nightmare world. If he completes the trip to the North Pole, can he survive a face-to-face encounter with the Claus himself?

The old man sat on the bench by the cemetery entrance. A walker strode past him, slipping his dog's leash as he approached the gaping, derelict gates.

"Hey," the old man called. "You must be new to these parts. Do yourself a favour, leash your dog and make sure she doesn't soil any graves."

The walker glanced at him then looked through the entrance to the burial ground beyond.

"You afraid that a sprinkling of dog pee's gonna raise the dead?" The walker smirked. "If there's graves in there they've been long forgotten, judging by those weeds."

"If you see weeds then I'm telling you, it's not safe for you or your dog."

The walker ignored him; a crazy old man wasn't going to spoil his poodle's fun.

A few minutes later, the pair's pained yelps filled the air. The old man shook his head, he was rightly afraid of the cemetery, dreading what he would meet if he carried his lifetime of error and weary malice through its gates...

The old man had first visited Spring Garden Cemetery twenty years before, when he'd watched Gloria's coffin being carried to her final resting place. It was tranquil, its ancient stone walls and heavy iron gates muffling the sounds of the busy town that surrounded it. Spring Garden's gently wooded parkland has been the logical choice for his wife's grave. Of course, back then it was a sacred resting place, before the unquiet dead had found a way to wreak their judgement on the living.

Hundreds had turned out for Gloria's funeral. She had been a stalwart of the local horticultural society, her garden compared to legendary Babylon. The procession had been hushed, accompanied only by birdsong and the soft music of the wind in the ancient yew trees that lined the walled cemetery. The silence had been apt. Gloria had rarely raised her singsong voice, preferring to communicate using the subtle Victorian language of flowers. Neighbours had come to dread the barbed messages encrypted in the lovely hand-tied bouquets she would deliver in response to an errant weed or unpruned shrub that encroached on her own miraculous garden.

The mourners had been surprised that she had specified 'No Flowers' at her funeral, but her intent became clear as an altar boy handed out small packets of seeds as they left the church to follow the cortege to the graveyard. As soon as Gloria's coffin had been lowered, the gravediggers shovelled soil into the hole. Father David, the parish priest, had ended his eulogy with an invitation to the mourners to scatter their packets of seed onto her grave.

The old man recalled the day that Gloria died – they had argued, the toxic fungus of their marriage finally bursting, their harsh words scattering like spores around her pristine garden.

"Eric, I've always been reasonable about your loathsome hobby and your trashy mistress, but I won't tolerate them in my home." She gestured at the paving slabs and model railway lines laid crudely over her favourite flowerbed, its previous residents scattered limp and torn over the lawn.

She had handed him an orange lily, symbol of her hatred and disdain for him. He had hurled it back at her.

"MY obsession? You never loved me as much as you love these plants."

"I loved you enough to plant *that* on our wedding day!" She had pointed to a luxuriant blood-red rose, her rage overwhelming her as she saw a trailing columbine winding its tendrils around the shrub.

"Did you plant that abomination? Do you think you've found a way to strangle the last breath from our marriage? It will never die, NEVER! You faithless, ungrateful excuse for a -"

She collapsed, her final epithet unfinished.

"Heart attack. Natural causes," the coroner had concluded.

Eric had done a good job of hiding his elation as he organised the funeral. He'd played the role of the grieving husband, allowing Gloria's friends into her garden to take plants to remember her by. He too, had been surprised by her instruction not to have flowers at her funeral, but the idea of the seeds had been so very *her*. They were sure to grow rampantly and become another high-maintenance, attention hungry attraction. Yet, it had given him the perfect setting for his own tearful eulogy...

"Gloria loved living things. I'm sure that her spirit will sleep easy in this Spring Garden and make it forever summer. She planted this rose in our garden when we were married 30 years ago. I decided to transplant it to this place. It's the only headstone that would do her justice..."

He'd smirked with satisfaction as he patted the earth around the roots, glad to be rid of this last remnant of his marriage. But the rose had wrapped itself around his arms, its wicked thorns piercing his skin.

"Aw, she doesn't want to let you go," one of the mourners had quipped.

"Don't be ridiculous!" cried Monica, Eric's long-time mistress, who had been disconcerted by his nauseating eulogy.

Eric had torn himself free, blood dripping onto the grave from his shredded skin.

The months had passed. Eric had levelled Gloria's garden and paved over every green inch. He installed a complete model railway, and then Monica moved in. Gloria's friends reported that her grave was a wonder, the seeds they'd scattered during the funeral were growing abundantly, though it was anyone's guess what the green shoots would become.

The rumours had started later that summer. Some said that Spring Garden was a wondrous delight; others said it was weed-strewn malignancy. Eric hadn't cared. He had been happy in his concrete utopia; Monica the only flower that he needed. Yet he hadn't been able to ignore the rose when it cracked through the paving, its hateful blood-red blooms pulsing with vigour. No matter how deep he dug the foundations, no matter how many tons of concrete he poured, the rose pushed through. It vined round the doors, tearing at Monica's hair and clothes every time she entered the house. Every afternoon Eric cut the thorny branches down, every night they would grow back. He tried weedkillers, corrosives, even a pest-control flamethrower, but the rose resisted them all.

Six months after the funeral he had given up and moved into Monica's flat, ten floors up in a sterile glass and steel high-rise tower block. They had breathed easy for a few days, then green shoots appeared in a tiny crack in the metal frame surrounding their bedroom window. A week later, blood-red rose buds leered at them through the curtains.

Monica had been distraught and suggested an exorcism, convinced that Gloria was exacting her revenge on them. Eric thought it was nonsense, but he went to see Father David. The priest had been dishevelled, his hands shaking as he poured himself a large glass of brandy.

"Evil stirs in that cemetery." Father David muttered, barely aware of Eric's presence, "Her flowers can see your soul. They judge, they punish, they punish..."

"But Father, you're a holy man. You have nothing to fear. Surely your pure soul can expunge this evil?"

Father David had laughed. "My soul is fouled beyond your imagination. I thought God had forgiven me, but the flowers know. I see the boys' faces in the blossom, their sweet faces- I buried my sin, but they have thrust it out of the earth for all to see."

The priest sobbed and rubbed at his scabbed and blistered hands.

"Poison ivy." The priest said grimly. "Yet the gardeners can't find a trace of it in Spring Garden, is that not strange? Yet it assails me everywhere, the cemetery, the church, everywhere..."

Eric had crept out of the priest's house and had headed to Spring Garden, convinced that he would find a serene glade where the dead lay undisturbed by old offences. Although there was a chilled hint of autumn in the air, the fragrance of rose and honeysuckle was intoxicating. But there was no benign pot-pourri waiting for him beyond the gates. As he crept towards Gloria's grave, the sunlight was dimmed by writhing briars that arched over him. The rose he'd planted blazed in the unnatural twilight as its blood-red blooms turned their petalled faces towards him, glowing with glee.

Eric had turned away, but there was no path behind him. The thorns tore and tangled his legs as he pushed his way out. Father David had said that the flowers could read souls. Eric knew that they had read his darkest secret, a secret that even the coroner hadn't detected. Still, the flowers had no voices, if he could escape the garden's malice then no-one would ever know about the foxglove leaves that he'd added to Gloria's herbal tea.

As he wrenched himself through the gates, he saw Monica running towards him. He caught her waist and pulled her away from the cemetery.

"Don't go in there," he had urged.

"I wasn't intending to. I was looking for you. I was afraid he'd hurt you."

Eric had been bewildered.

"Father David! He's dead! He went insane, scattered burning incense around the church and threw himself off the tower."

As Eric hugged her tightly, he saw a couple approaching the cemetery. He waved at them urgently, "Don't go in there, it's dangerous, the plants, they mess with your mind."

The couple recoiled "What do you mean? We've come visit Grandma, we come very week. Spring Garden is such a peaceful place for her, and for us."

Eric had let them go.

They judge, they punish, the priest had said. *Only the guilty,* Eric realised.

The old man shook his head, when he'd escaped from the cemetery all those years ago he thought he'd escaped Gloria's justice, but he'd been wrong...

After Father David's death, Eric and Monica had moved to a different district, but the blood-red rose followed. Monica grew anxious and waspish. They'd asked the Bishop to exorcise the cemetery, but when the holy man visited he saw only sunshine and flowers thriving within the burial ground's ancient walls. Yet stories of the cemetery's retributions persevered as its visitors' grubby secrets were gradually unearthed.

Eric became sick of his dreary life, the persistent rose was a living accusation; Monica's fretfulness was tedious. He had toyed with admitting his original felony. The thought of living in a barren prison far away from Gloria's revenge was appealing, but he had shied away from it, there was little point in committing the perfect crime just to give himself up.

Instead, he had embarked on a campaign of vandalism, daubing warnings over the cemetery gates: *SINNERS BEWARE*. He lobbed crude weedkiller 'bombs' over the walls. He had been arrested, cautioned, fined, but the magistrates would never give him a custodial sentence, repeatedly giving in to his age and Monica's impassioned pleas for clemency.

One evening he had arrived home covered in paint and pursued by the local police. Monica was chastising him, as usual, when Eric had suddenly realised what he needed to do. A single act of atonement to quiet Gloria's spirit. As Monica had turned to respond to the police approaching the flat, Eric threw the noose of his tie over her head and tightened it quickly; he kissed her hair and told her he was doing this for love of her. When she was dead, he calmly opened the door and gave himself up.

Eric had enjoyed prison. He had been free for ten glorious years until the night before his release, paroled, his age and infirmity labelling him as no longer a threat to society. He'd fallen asleep on his prison mattress for the last time, dribbling as he often did without his dentures. When he had opened his eyes the next morning, there, in the patch of moisture by his mouth, was a tiny rose striving towards his face, a perfect blood-red bud, the size of a pinhead, uncurling its pristine petals.

The old man sat on the bench outside the cemetery's derelict gates, his meagre possessions sitting in a prison issue sack next to him. He watched the dishevelled dog walker struggling out, cradling his whimpering dog protectively. Both were scratched and dotted with thorns.

"That place should be closed down, it's a menace!"

"You were warned. This is 'Clean Conscience Cemetery' where the flowers read your soul and punish your sins. Just be glad that all you carried in was stupidity."

Eric stood up, brushing against the thorny branches of the rose that had sprung up by the bench in the hours he'd been sitting there. He knew now that there was no escape. He took off his clothes and walked naked and unprotected through the cemetery gates.

"All right Gloria, you win, do your worst!" he shouted.

The barbed roses engulfed him, blooms bursting into blood-red glory as they scanned his soul.

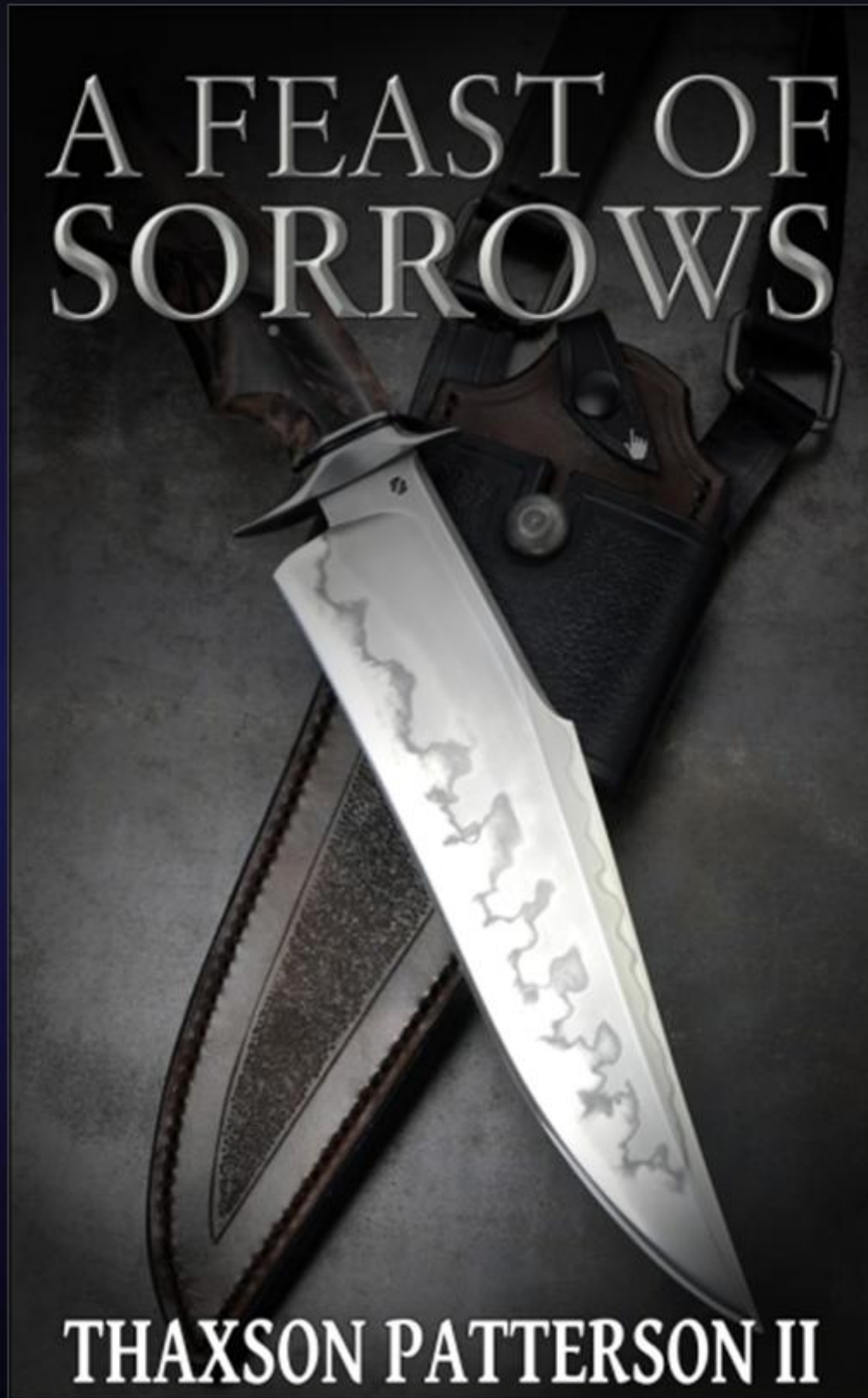
About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grey is fulfilling her dream of writing poems and stories that engage the reader's emotions. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate – it's a sweet life. Of her horror writing, Alex' best friend says 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!'

Author Blog: [The Ideal Reader](#)

Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)

There are even worse things in the world
than serial killers...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for
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"Is the spirit of Clara Carmichael with us? If the spirit of Clara is here, use me to communicate with your niece, Florence," the grey haired medium intoned.

Flo had been a little shocked when, at the reading of her aunt's will a few weeks before, Clara had expressly specified that Flo have her exotic opal and silver amulet and visit Madame Romanov at her earliest convenience. She'd put off going, thinking it hokey, and she'd heard that opal were bad luck, but it was so pretty with its iridescent light pastel hues. Her friend Helen eventually persuaded her, wanting an adventure

Flo sat at a round, lace covered table in a dimly lit room smelling of incense, holding hands with Helen on her right and Madame Romanov on her left. Opposite Flo was a middle-aged woman hoping to speak to her son, Johnny. "Lost in action in the Great War, he was." If she'd said it once, she'd said it half a dozen times; it seemed to be a line to hold on to. Flo pitied her. She didn't expect any communication with the 'other side' and didn't believe for one moment that the medium was psychic. She probably had a letter or some missive from her aunt to give her after the 'show'.

As she finished her request to the departed, Madame Romanov squeezed Flo's hand tightly. It hurt and Flo wanted to pull away, but remembered the instruction to 'not break the circle' and hoped her hand wouldn't be bruised later.

The medium's back arched violently and then relaxed, head dropping to her chest. As her head rose slowly, Flo was watching intently and noticed subtle changes in the woman's face and bearing. Her skin seemed to have tightened and she sat more upright. She wasn't sure if the others could see the slight adjustments in the dim light, but she could.

"Hello dear," came a very familiar voice out of the medium's mouth. "I see you carried out my wishes. The opal complements the colour of your eyes beautifully."

Flo had been devastated seven years before when her mother's sister had gone missing. She'd always got on well with Aunt Clara and looked forward to her missives when her aunt was on one of her many trips abroad. The news that she'd disappeared on a dig in Morocco had been a bombshell, and doubly so at the horrific death of Clara's maid; discovered in her room, a ghoulish parody of a smile marking her throat, slashed from ear to ear. Clara had vanished, abduction assumed, but no demands were received and her body had never been found.

"I... how...?" Flo stuttered, not believing her ears. It was her aunt's voice, but that wasn't possible, unless there was some kind of chicanery at hand. She glanced around the dimly lit room for some kind of clue, but only found Madame Romanov's assistant in the curtained doorway, a concerned look on her pinched face.

As Flo turned back to the table, out of the corner of her eye, she could've sworn she actually saw her aunt sitting where Madame Romanov was. The woman's breath was starting to be laboured, but she continued to speak in Aunt Clara's voice, a little faster now.

"Yes dear, I know it's hard to swallow, but please bear with me. I need your help. I'd like you to read my last journal. Madame Romanov has it and the key. It'll help you understand-"

Madame Romanov gasped, cutting off the communication. She coughed hard and when she drew in breath again, she cried out, "Enough Clara! My debt is cleared. Begone spirit, back to the realm from whence you came." She looked haggard, but a very pale and shaky version of herself again. She released her grip on Flo's hand, and staggered to her feet. She leaned against a dresser whilst she opened a small coffer and drew out a battered black leather journal with an ornate lock. Lifting a chain from around her neck, she thrust both into Flo's hands before grabbing hold of the proffered arm of her assistant, clearly in need of the aid.

"What about my Johnny?" the other client asked plaintively.

"Give her a refund," the medium told her assistant sharply.

"Please leave now," the assistant said firmly as she gave the woman back her money, "Madame has had a trying session and needs to rest," and indicated the way out.

Standing on the pavement outside the respectable-looking townhouse, Flo's hands started to shake. Johnny's mother stomped off, muttering to herself.

"Let's go and have a cup of tea, eh? Sally Lunn's?" Helen asked, worried for her friend's state of mind.

"Yes," Flo agreed, looking down at her twitching hands. "A cup of tea will sort me out, and maybe one of their buns whilst we're at it."

Feeling suitably refreshed, and much calmer, the girls went their separate ways after Sally Lunn's. Flo made her way to the station to get the train back to Oxford, in a sombre, pensive mood. She missed calling Bath home and having Helen next door. It was a dreadful wrench when they moved to Oxford with her father's work.

Before she knew it, she was in front of the station building; a grand curving frontage built of local honey-coloured Bath stone. It glowed gold in the setting sun, reflection from the windows a blinding glare. Flo shielded her eyes and, unbidden, the image of her Aunt Clara overlaying Madame Romanov sprang to the forefront of her thoughts. It had to have been a trick of the dim lighting, but still the image stayed with her, taunting her logical mind to explain it conclusively.

The whole afternoon had been quite disturbing. If the scene at the medium's had been staged, it had been a sterling act. She still had Aunt Clara's journal to read – if it was hers at all. She felt she ought to take a look, just in case. Flo knew her aunt's handwriting, and she had a strange feeling she was going to be even more disturbed after reading it.

Getting her ticket for the first class carriage, Flo made her way up the ramp to the platform. The locomotive with its green body and black nose, steam billowing around it, looked like an angry rhinoceros ready to charge. It made Flo smile and lightened her mood slightly as she stepped up into the dark red carriage. Entering a first class compartment, Flo settled down on the deep green velvet banquette to open the journal.

Flo had put the key around her neck for convenience more than safe-keeping, and looked about self-consciously, before fishing it out of her décolletage. It fitted into the embellished lock easily. Not knowing what she would find in the journal, she nervously turned the key. It snicked, the sound loud in the small compartment, making her jump, and she tentatively opened the black leather bound cover.

This journal belongs to Clara Carmichael – 1912, the fly leaf stated. It was definitely her handwriting, and Flo found her hands shaking again as she turned the page under the already lit electric light fitting.

The train tooted as it starting moving out of the station and Flo nearly dropped the book in alarm. Heart pounding, she gripped it in sweating hands, as the train lurched into motion.

After taking deep calming breaths, Flo made herself comfortable and started reading her Aunt Clara's last thoughts.

The journal was part diary, part occult reference book. She'd known her aunt was interested in mysticism, but she'd not known that Clara had taken it seriously. As far as she could gather, there were rituals in the book.

Flo was jarred out of her study by the train brakes squealing as it started to slow on its approach to the two mile long Box Tunnel. She hated this part of the journey. The dark made her anxious; the pressure hurting her ears.

Instead of the speed starting to level out as they passed through the shorter tunnel leading up to Box, it slowed further. She caught a glimpse of dusk outside the window before it was blotted out by nothingness. They had entered the tunnel.

She prayed the train would keep going, not stop, but the brakes shrieked as the train ground to a halt, the smell of steam and hot metal filling the air. The lights flickered and Flo could feel her panic rising.

She pulled down the window in the compartment door. The corridor was empty and she realised she could hear nothing – no voices of other passengers, no hissing of the steam engine. "Hello? Anybody there?"

The opal pendant swung free as she leaned out the window and she caught hold of it. It felt cool and smooth and she absently rubbed her thumb over it as she struggled to breath around the tightness of panic in her chest.

Suddenly, Flo's breath plumed out in front of her, tiny ice crystals blooming on the glass as the temperature in the carriage plummeted. The lights dimmed, and she was plunged into darkness.

She couldn't see, couldn't hear, but she could feel the cold seeping into her. Flo drowned in the weight of the night, collapsing in a heap on the carriage floor, her breath coming in fast gulps.

Slowly, she became conscious of a light. The glow expanded - a swirling yellow oval - until it filled the height of the carriage.

"Flo, dear," came her aunt's voice from the direction of the glow. "Reach towards the light." Clara's words wavered, and Flo looked up. Dazzled, she cringed away, hands over her face.

"Do you want me to take away the fear? Take away the pain?"

Flo nodded in response, not sure she could speak, her throat dry and constricted. When no response came, she realised her aunt might not be able to see her acknowledgement.

"Yes. Please," Flo croaked out, voice cracking.

"Then take my hand, little one."

Flo inched forward, eyes averted, and extended her hand up. The portal was a chill touch on her skin as her hand passed through it.

What was left of Clara Carmichael seized her niece's hand. The seven years on this side had taken their toll and she was but dry flesh and bone. She'd done this before and the sacrifice price was worth it for a new younger body every fifty years or so.

At the moment of contact, the sorceress took possession of her blood kin's body, her spirit stepping into the young woman's skin. With a sigh of relief and pleasure, Clara flexed her physical and mental muscles and pushed the soul of Florence Cooper down into the now jet black amulet, robbing it of senses, trapping it in the dark.

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.

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The Blank Book | *Maura Yzmore*

James hurls profanities toward the crypt and throws his hat on the ground. "It's gone! The gold is all gone!" I sigh. "Graverobbers."

"At least your book's here." James cracks open the leather cover, flips a few pages, then hands it to me. "It's blank."

I smile and close my eyes. My fingertips fly across the pages and I read the embossed script in an ancient language, a chant floating off my lips.

James's face contorts with mounting terror, the sand whirling around us.

The one I awoke emerges from the crypt, glorious, the last sight before our blanching eyes.

Again and Again, the Blade Glistens | *Maura Yzmore*

The boy grips his Mom's sharpest kitchen knife. A banshee scream erupts from his throat as he jumps into the air and onto the back of a man in black, a man towering over Mom and Dad's bodies splayed on the bed, smothered in blood and entrails.

The boy strikes, again and again. The blade glistens, in and out of the shoulders and neck, but there isn't a scratch on the man.

"I cut you!" The boy heaves, back on the floor. "Why aren't you bleeding?"

The man turns around, eyes brimming with pain. "Because you spilled enough blood today."

About the Author:

Maura Yzmore is a writer and scientist based in the American Midwest. Her darker fare has appeared in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *Aphotic Realm*, *Coffin Bell*, and elsewhere.

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The kitchen was already alive with the sticky sweet scent of jam and eggs when Phil came down the stairs and saw Laura at the stove, spatula in one hand, firm grip on a skillet with the other.

"Morning, honey," she cheerfully called out.

Phil smiled, still fussing with his tie. "Good morning, my sweet cupcake."

From underneath the table, Phil's bull terrier Ramsey lazily swaggered over to him, eager for an approaching breakfast handout; Phil playfully scratched behind the dog's ear before sitting down. Carefully arranged around him at the table were eight plates and eight glasses, coupled with eight sets of utensils.

"Kids aren't up yet?" He asked, unfurling the rolled-up newspaper placed beside his own plate. Laura gestured to the bathroom just beyond the kitchen while she poured Phil's coffee.

"Brandy's taking a shower. I heard Sarah doing something upstairs."

Phil took a sip from his mug. It was a novelty cup, old and stained around the rim from years of repeated use, the phrase NUMBER ONE DAD! stamped along the front in bold red letters. Phil smiled wider, remembering when Brandy had given it to him for his birthday years before. She'd only been seven then, and sometimes it bewildered him that his eldest was now prospecting universities instead of hawking Girl Scout cookies.

Sipping some more coffee, Phil spied the front page headline and groaned, loud enough for Laura to hear above the crackle of the eggs.

"What is it?"

"A body was found in Mero Park yesterday," Phil read aloud. "Louise Proppet, 23, was discovered by some joggers. Police say there was evidence of extensive torture and a rudimentary attempt to sever the head. Sexual assault was the probable motive."

Pangs of tension streaked across Phil's temples and unconsciously he began massaging them. Laura brought the pan over then, heaping eggs onto Phil's plate before snatching the newspaper and folding it so he couldn't see the headline. "Phil, you know this stuff upsets you, so don't even spoil your day reading it. Just leave it alone and eat your breakfast."

Phil sighed, peppering his eggs. "I know, I know. You're right. I'm a born masochist. What else can I say?"

Before he could take a bite, Brandy walked in, and for a second Phil thought she was a waking phantom of Laura, twenty-five years before, they looked so similar; Laura's thumbs, though, wouldn't have been a blur of furious texting. Phil swore he didn't know how Brandy could help from running into things, but somehow she managed to navigate the kitchen to the refrigerator and pour herself a glass of orange juice, all without looking up from her phone.

"No cell at breakfast, Brandy. How many times do I have to say it?" Laura carped from the stove, clearly not as impressed with her daughter's delicate balancing act as Phil was. With a grumble Brandy pocketed the phone and sat down.

Phil said nothing, but couldn't help picturing Brandy as that little girl who'd so proudly given him the mug he drank from. It was those cherished memories that made everything else worthwhile. Just with Brandy alone he remembered so many tiny instances of joy: her first steps, trips to amusement parks, birthday parties, bake sales and school plays.

He also happened to recall that Brandy was named after the first person he had ever murdered.

That Brandy he'd known in college, a sweet girl from Iowa who helped run the campus radio station. He remembered her close-cropped red hair and blue eyes, and the way her apartment was always messy, like a thief had freshly ransacked the place.

It had been a snowy night in January when he met her outside the broadcasting booth. The flakes fell hypnotically as they went back to her place; untidy or not, tonight was the night. The whole drive they couldn't keep their hands off each other, but once in the bedroom, Phil, for the life of him, couldn't keep things going. From somewhere deep within, a dark, roiling rage slithered to the surface as he glanced back and forth at the naked, squirming girl beneath him and the limp noodle of flesh dangling between his legs that refused to answer lust's clarion call. The black miasma spread throughout his being, and before he knew it he'd smashed in Brandy's skull with the bedside lamp, smashed it so bloody you couldn't even recognize the face amid the pulp. Patiently he'd pulled the teeth from the wreckage of the head with pliers and sheared off fingertips with sewing scissors before dumping the body in the river.

Brandy. His first. Now his daughter.

"Dad? Hello?" Brandy waved a hand in front of Phil's face, snapping him back to the present. "Are you in there?"

"Just thinking." Phil said. Brandy laughed.

"You were seriously zoned out. Like, gone-to-Mars zoned out. What were you thinking about?"

"How you got your name," he replied. Before Brandy could query any further, Sarah came in.

Sarah was fifteen, and like most girls her age, an animated atomic storm that could chatter a mile a minute, even if sometimes to Phil she seemed to be speaking some foreign language he could barely translate; everything was LOL, TMI and OMG!

"How is everyone today?" Sarah asked, upbeat as ever. As Laura was about to heave some eggs on her plate, Sarah pointed a neon-pink polished finger at the pan, her cute features curdling.

"Mom, I don't do eggs."

Laura's hand froze mid-scoop. "Since when?"

"Since I became a vegan," Sarah said, perkiness gone. A bemused smile spread across Laura's face.

"Vegan? Really?"

"Yeah. No more meat or dairy or eggs or leather for me. It's inhumane."

Laura's smile grew. "This from the same girl who ate a bacon cheeseburger and declared it part of the best meal she'd ever had?"

"I've changed a bit since then, Mom."

"It was only last night."

"Don't we have any organic muffins or anything?"

"Not that I know of." Frustration slid into Laura's voice. "Settle for a regular old artificially sweetened cinnamon bagel?"

Sarah rolled her eyes. "If I must."

Phil watched the standoff between mother and daughter, watched and remembered.

Sarah he had met a few years after college when he was a delivery boy in the city. She was a paralegal assistant who later admitted she checked his ass out first in the elevator. Phil recalled how she loved movies and would talk about Audrey Hepburn's greatness until she was blue in the face. She'd been tall and blonde and perfect.

It had been Phil's suggestion for a campout in the desert, to which Sarah, ever the ardent nature lover, readily agreed. She was still basking in the glorious landscapes when he strangled her with the piano wire he'd brought with him. Later he skinned and dismembered her, scattering the parts for coyote food before driving back to the city alone. Years later, when Laura gave birth to their second, Phil couldn't think of a better name.

"Uh-oh, he's got that thousand-yard stare again," Brandy said to Sarah, giggling out loud.

"What's so funny?" A husky voice called out from the hall. Moments later Tobey strode into the kitchen, pulling a Bruins jersey over his head. At thirteen, he was caught in that age between being interested in hockey and *Hustler*. Close on Tobey's heels was Marissa; she was twelve, awkward with freckles and glasses, but absolutely insistent she was headed to Harvard to cure every ailment known to man.

"Dad's just acting like a dork again," Sarah said, spreading jam on a bagel. Tobey sat, nodding a cute agreement that garnered a wounded look from Phil.

"E tu, Tobey? Have you turned against me?" Phil dramatically clenched his chest, theatrical anguish on his face; around the table, all the children laughed.

"There, there, Mr. De Niro. We still love you." Marissa patted Phil on the back.

"Dad's way funnier than De Niro," Tobey said, pouring some juice. "He's, like, Sandler or someone like that."

Marissa scowled. "No way."

"He is too."

Bickering, Phil thought. Tobey and Marissa were always bickering. So was the pair of high-maintenance yuppies he'd encountered back in the eighties. Greed was God then, and everywhere people were prepared to sacrifice anything on the Altar of Avarice. Tobey had been some Wall Street investor whose main pastime was snorting half of Manhattan's mutual funds up his nose; Marissa was a rich-bitch slut who'd fuck anything that moved if it looked like it would improve her status. Phil had met them with Laura at a cocktail party and afterwards stalked them back to their condo, where the eternal fire within blazed to the surface once again. He shot them each in the head, the brains they never utilized splattering across thousand-dollar wallpaper. Tobey he dissected and burned bits of in the fireplace. Most of Marissa he ate.

Tobey. Marissa. Proof that good names could be wasted on the wrong people.

"You're picking me up after hockey practice tonight, right Dad?" Tobey asked. Phil turned to Laura.

"I thought you--" He didn't get any further before his wife pointed to the red circle over the current day's date on the wall calendar. Red was Phil's pick up day. Sheepishly he glanced at his son.

"I guess I am." He answered. Tobey grinned enormously.

"Awesome. Can we get pizza on the way home?"

Phil shrugged. "We'll see."

Just then a stampede of tiny feet echoed down the hall before two identical girls scampered into the kitchen so quickly they almost collided with the table.

"I win! I was here first!" One cried. A pout wove across the face of the other.

"Cheater! You started before me!"

The argument between the pair raged until Laura placed a box of cereal between them, each girl abandoning their disagreement in favor of Count Chocula.

Mandy and Jessica. The twins. They were eight, and had been a complete surprise to both Laura and Phil when the pregnancy was discovered. Of the pair, Jessica was eldest by five and a half minutes. More than any of the other children, the girls were a constant whirlwind of madcap momentum, so much so that in his mind, Phil sometimes referred to them as the Fireball Twins.

He had met Mandy on a business trip. He'd made it to regional manager by then, and though he was truly in love with Laura, Phil couldn't resist the charm and wit and curves of the young brunette lawyer. When Mandy laughed, the world was exultant. When they were together that evening, Phil calmly reached for the gas can he'd strategically placed by the bed. In a matter of seconds she went up like a Roman candle, her screams making him drunk with pleasure.

A few weeks later Phil tried it again, the Fireball Stunt, on Jessica, a woman he met at an office party. Her whole condominium caught fire with her, which pleased Phil all the more. Jessica's yappy dog went up in flames with it. She'd called it Ramsey, just like his dog.

All around Phil, the kitchen, filled with the serene scents of fresh coffee and eggs moments before, had transformed into a daft, chaotic din: the twins argued over who should rightfully claim the cereal-box toy while Tobey ranted about hockey and Marissa tried to conduct a science experiment on her food, the whole time Brandy and Sarah rapturously gushed about some hot boy they knew. Next to Phil, Laura finally sat down to her own breakfast and for the briefest of moments their eyes locked, an exasperated smile passing between them.

After a few minutes, the heavy hiss of school bus brakes filled the air, and the older children rushed out the door after it. Not much later Phil told the twins it was time for their own ride, and before Phil went out to the minivan with them he hugged Laura.

"Another crazy morning, huh?"

Laura sighed. "Sometimes I swear the kids are going to drive me nuts," she paused, smiling. "But you know, there are times I actually think I want to have another baby."

Phil squeezed her tighter and gazed at the folded newspaper on the kitchen table, a gleam coming to him that she couldn't see.

"That's wonderful, honey," he said. "I've got the perfect name."

About the Author:

Exposed to the weird worlds of horror, sci-fi and comics as a boy, Damascus Mincemeyer has been ruined ever since. He's now an artist and writer living near St. Louis, Missouri and has had numerous stories published, including tales in the upcoming anthologies *Hear Me Roar*, *On Time*, *Deathlehem 2019* and *Monster Party*.

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The day started pleasantly enough: we'd met for our weekly game of tennis, the old dependables, Chris, Marilyn, Malcolm and me. Then the man in the dirty suit appeared, and everything changed.

It was summer and the weather was warm, so we'd used the outside court, the one next to the soccer pitch. We'd been playing for about fifteen minutes when I noticed a guy staggering towards us over the field. When he finally arrived, he stood at the chain link fence, staring through at us and smiling vacantly. His skin was pale as if he'd been saved from drowning, but his lips were cherry red. Saliva slowly dribbled down his chin and dripped onto the ground. He gripped the wire with both hands and stood there, making mewling sounds, his clothes torn and soiled, as if he'd been sleeping rough. At first we ignored him, but having him there was unnerving, I couldn't concentrate on my serve. I thought he was drunk or had learning difficulties and hoped someone would come and take him away. Chris saw himself as the 'silverback' and he went over to talk to him. When he didn't seem to make much progress, the rest of us joined him. Chris asked the guy if he needed help, but he just kept whining and gurgling, I called 911 on my cell but all I got was a busy signal.

As we stood there, another visitor shuffled into sight from the direction of town. He had the same pale complexion and red lips, but there was blood on his chin and down the front of his shirt. He looked like the man who ran the hardware store. I took a closer look and realised that he *was* the guy from the hardware store.

We realised something strange was happening. I told the others I was going to the police headquarters, about five hundred yards away. I walked to my car, and Chris padlocked the gate after me. There was a disturbance from the other side of the court, half a dozen more weirdoes had arrived. They all wore police uniforms, but they were dishevelled, with torn shirts, no hats, ties askew, faces bloody. I nearly crapped myself, as I jumped in the car and locked the doors. Then the kids from the elementary school arrived, hundreds of them, tousled, bloody, moving slowly. They surrounded the court and hung on the wire mesh, whimpering and moaning, and looking sort of hungry.

I drove to the police station and looked around carefully before I got out of the car. The double doors were open, broken furniture and debris littered the foyer. Somewhere in the depths of the building an alarm was ringing. I climbed over the front desk and walked through the empty offices until I found the staircase. I worked my way up through the rooms on the next two stories to the top floor, searching for somebody, anybody. The door from the stairs to the top level was locked. I hammered hard and eventually a face appeared, a frightened face, then another three. They made me turn around to get a good look at me before they opened the door.

"Do you know what's happening?" asked the blonde girl who I found out later was called Sally.

"Not really, but look at that." We could see down into the tennis court from the office window. Marilyn, Chris and Malcolm were standing back to back in the centre of the court, holding their rackets in front of themselves like clubs. The weight of the zombies had flattened the fence, and they were slowly streaming over it. The whole town seemed to be out there. I watched in horrified fascination as the zombies slowly surrounded and overwhelmed my friends. A few minutes later the mob dispersed and there was no sign of them, they'd been absorbed.

All this was eight days ago. There are five of us up here, me and the four clerical workers, Wally, Sally, Brian and Sheila. We've secured the entrances at ground level and gathered all the food and water we can find. We spend a lot of the time on the flat roof of the building, vainly waiting for a helicopter to come and rescue us. Water won't be a problem when the water cooler bottles run out: there are fire tanks up here. It's the food I'm worried about. We haven't got much of it, and small quantities keep disappearing. I'm sure it's that fat bastard, Brian, who's stealing it.

The hot weather reminds me of my time in South Africa, watching the Bushmen cutting strips of meat from their kill, then drying it in the sun. They call it 'biltong,' it keeps for months. I look at Brian and think about quietly sliding a biscuit into his pocket and then denouncing him. I have one of the policemen's pistols, all I need is an excuse to use it.

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 pursuing a career in higher education. He writes in a variety of speculative genres, his stories have appeared in about twenty ezines in the last two years.

Author Blog: [Roger Ley](#)
Goodreads: [Books by author Roger Ley](#)

It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Mark was hyped as the helicopter circled the helipad and landed on the tarmac. A huge cement wall surrounded the estate. The entrance gate was covered in sculptures of death—a person with a spear through their body—a person being split apart by two demon like creatures—a lady raising her hand in terror as a werewolf loomed over her body. It looked creepy as hell and it was just as he was told it would be. This was his one and only chance at stardom. If he could pass this, then maybe he'd have a shot at being on TV.

The pilot gave him a gold key card and motioned for him to deplane. He ducked under the blades and approached the gate. A crowd cheered from somewhere within. Then a lady's shrill scream of terror. Then the crowd cheered again. His dream was at his fingertips. It'd just come about in a weird way.

Mark had flipped the channels of his TV to a wrestling match. He loved watching the competition. Even if he wasn't at that level yet. There was a loud knock at his door. He put his program on pause and yanked open the door.

A beautiful lady wearing a trench coat and a large sun hat stood outside his apartment. He was immediately taken back by her beauty. Her long red hair flowed down over her shoulders—she just looked so damn good. Her eyes were a translucent green. They practically glowed.

"Mike Tripp?" she asked.

"Never heard of him," Mark said.

"Is this 334 Florida Ave?" she asked.

"It is, but he's never lived here."

She sighed and stood with her hands in her pockets. Then she smiled. "Maybe you would like to experience the chance to be famous?"

"How much does it cost me?" Mark asked.

"No cost, just your time," she said.

"What's the gimmick?"

"Doesn't everything have a catch?" she asked. "Ours is just pretty easy to read. And it won't take but about five minutes of your time, if you decide you're not interested."

Mark nodded his head and swung open the door.

"First I'll need your name and occupation," she said.

"Mark, and I'm a wrestler,"

She smiled and patted him on the back. "You'll do just fine. And call me, Vennie."

He tried to help her remove her coat and hat, but she refused. She insisted they sit at the couch and she shut his window blinds.

After he saw what she was offering, he was on board.

Mark stopped at the iron bars of the gate. A box on the right was designed for his key card. He tried it, but it didn't work. That's funny, it should've opened for him. He tried it the other way. Still no success.

A large bald man in a suit jacket jogged over to him. "Wrong entrance. That's for spectators only. We have to go to the other side."

Mark reached out a hand. "Mark Auguste, have you ever done this kind of thing before?"

The man shook his hand. "Barry, and no—it's my first go round. But I expect to be back again if you catch my drift."

They walked through dead leaves around the side of the cement wall. "How many are competing?" Mark asked.

"Beats me, I think it's an ongoing thing. Mike may know."

"Man, did you get to meet Vennie? She practically sold me without even saying a word," Mark said.

"Not yet. I was ambushed."

"What?"

"Some buddies of mine bought this for me as a surprise. This guy—Bates caught me in the middle of the night—placed a gag over my head and next thing I know, I'm here."

"How'd you find out it was your friends?"

"They told me when I landed. After they explained where we were and what was going on. I was pissed at first, until I met Mike."

The side of the wall opened into a small alcove that had a wooden door. Above it was a word—discessisset.

"What's this place?" Mark asked.

"It's the contestant entrance," Barry said.

There was a key card reader. Mark stuck the gold card inside it and the door unlatched and swung outward.

A beefy looking guy—with shades and thick mustache—beckoned them inside. "Mike Tripp, welcome to the arena."

Mark balked. Wasn't Mike the guy Vennie had been looking for? Something wasn't smelling right.

Mike gave Barry a high five and nodded to a log wooden bench behind him. A lone woman—wearing what looked like a toga and holding a spear and gold-plated shield—sat on it.

Barry pointed her out. "That's Cassandra. She doesn't speak English. We're after her."

"How long have you been here?" Mark asked.

"Just long enough to get in here and be sent back out to round you up."

Mark stood and walked over to Mike. "What's the idea here, anyway?"

"I just work here, man. Don't know nothing—don't see nothing."

"Vennie was looking for you when she found me," Mark said.

"Don't know, man. Everyone has their own lure to this place. She probably used what she thought would work best to entice you." He turned his back to Mark and stopped talking.

Mark thought back to what Vennie had used to sell him on the idea of coming here. It hadn't been hard. He was ready for fame. So, all she had to do was lay out how he could be famous. She said all he had to do was come to her arena and fight in an unsanctioned match. It would be all over the internet and his name would be on everyone's lips after this. She showed him a brochure of a man sitting on a chaise lounge having grapes fed to him by a young servant girl. Just what he'd wanted.

Was all this a lie just to entice him here?

Mike moved over to a small locked gate. He took out a long ancient looking gold key and turned it in the lock. It opened. Cassandra stood and moved over to the entrance.

"Nos morituri te salutant vos qui estis," Cassandra said and crossed her fingers over her chest. She stepped into the entrance. Mike shut it and locked it behind her.

"What was that all about?" Barry asked.

"Latin for 'We who are about to die salute you'," Mike said.

Mark stood from the bench. "She's expecting to die?"

"AHH!" The crowd cheered.

"Was that her?" Mark asked.

"Unfortunately, some don't last long at all. She was ill prepared for what she was up against," Mike said.

"What was she up against?" Barry asked.

Mike moved to the locked door. "You're about to find out. You're next."

Barry stood to go out the door.

Mark jerked past him and raced through the door. He had to know what was happening out there. He knew he'd been played, he had to have the upper hand. The door led to a short passageway. Mark ignored the shouts behind him and ran through the corridor and out into an open arena. He blinked at the size of the stadium. It was huge and filled with thousands of spectators. Where did all these people come from?

A man with a top hat and cane entered the side of the arena. He looked at Mark in surprise, then recovered. "Welcome to the Fight to Death. A contest of champions from all through time and space."

Mark looked around at the people in the stands again. Some were wearing odd—old fashioned clothes. Others looked like alien beings. All shapes and sizes.

"In this corner, we have—," the ringman said. He stopped as he watched Barry walk into the arena also. "Tonight, we have a special surprise. Two for the price of one. Mark Auguste and Barry Stubber will both compete at the same time, but not against each other."

Mark and Barry looked at one another. Things were getting ready to be out of control.

“Barry will fight Bates and Mark will take on Vennie,” the ringman said. “Wish them both luck as they fight to the death.”

An iron gate opened on the opposite side of the arena. A large well-built man walked through. The crowd erupted in a huge cheer. It was easy to see he was a crowd favorite. Vennie walked in behind him, still wearing her trench coat and hat. Mark couldn’t help but stare at her beauty.

Vennie stepped to the side and threw off her coat and hat. Her body was pale, thin, and naked. She stretched her arms out longways. They transformed before Mark’s eyes. Before he could blink, she had changed into a giant bat.

Bates ripped off his shirt and pants. In seconds his body was covered in fur. Elongated claws extended from his hands and feet. His face changed into a ferocious wolf—sharp fangs—large snout. He pounced like a rabbit in the air straight at Barry. One swipe and Barry was bleeding profusely from his chest.

Mark ducked as the bat swooped low over his head. It dropped in front of him. Vennie transformed back to her human form. She grabbed his shirt and lifted him up. Fangs protruded from her jaws. Her eyes were demonic. He wanted to go to her. He had to resist.

He kicked his foot into her torso, and she dropped him to the ground. He had an idea.

“Barry, let’s switch, you take her on.”

Barry nodded in agreement, holding his chest to stave off the blood flow. Bates charged on all fours toward him, he dove out of the way and Mark pounced on his back.

Mark pounded and pounded on the top of Bates’ spine. He was able to straddle him like a bucking bronco.

Bates kicked and bucked to throw him off. Mark kept a tight grip. Finally, he heard a snap. Bates fell to the ground and stopped moving. The crowd was silent.

Barry dodged Vennie as she swooped down on him. Then he grabbed her by the wing and ripped it. She fell to the ground in her bat form. He got on her back and ripped the other wing.

She changed underneath him. Both her arms broken, pinned under Barry’s weight.

Mark squatted beside her. “Sorry, baby not today,” he said.

He stood and stomped on her face. He felt her bones break under his shoe.

Barry moved off the top of her—the blood slowing down some.

Everything was silent, then the crowd erupted. Cheers and clapping all around. The ringman walked to the center of the arena.

“For the first time ever, we have a double victory. The contestants have beaten the champions,” he said.

Mark didn’t care anymore. He was ready to go home and get out of the professional fighting world once and for all.

About the Author:

Dan completed his MFA in Creative Fiction from UC-Riverside in 2016, all while fighting off cancer. Prior to that he attended UCLA in Professional Screenwriting in 2002. Now his day job is running two nursing homes in North Carolina and when he’s not at home or off in Russia with his family he tries to get a little writing done.

Facebook: [Dan McKeithan](#)
Amazon Author Page: [Dan McKeithan](#)

Martin gathered his friends together. A Ouija board sat in the center of the table. Nathaniel, Bart, and Thomas all took a seat around the table with skeptical looks. Martin had always come up with some crazy ideas, but this one took the cake. In front of each teen was an empty shoe box. Martin closed the lids on them and asked everyone to hold hands.

They were going to try and talk to the dead. They wanted to be able to reach Martin's grandad and find out where he buried the cash that he'd hidden years ago before he was arrested and died in prison.

Martin told them this was the way of letting the dead know they were willing to make a sacrifice to them. The one who received the death token would be the one to die.

No one with the exception of Martin really thought anything would happen, but it turned out they were all dead wrong. Martin turned off the lights and they waited to see if they could hear anything. Dead silence.

Martin let go of Nathaniel's and Thomas's hand so he could switch on the light. When the light came on, Bart was missing. In front of his place setting—his shoe box lid lay open—a dead owl inside.

"Who set this up?" Martin asked.

Nathaniel shrugged. "Bart said you were going to do something crazy, but we had no idea what it was."

"There's no way we could've set anything up and you know it," Thomas said. "I don't believe in this crap anyway, but if I did—where's the money?"

"Maybe Bart just got up and walked out," Martin said. "When did he let go of your hands?"

"Not sure," both said at the same time.

"Let's try this again," Martin said. "I'll turn out the lights and maybe we'll get an answer from the board."

"No way count me out," Nathaniel said.

"Are you scared?" Martin asked.

"Why don't we just go and search the house for him?" Thomas asked.

Martin switched off the lights and sat back in his chair. He took hold of both Nathaniel's and Thomas' hands. Nathaniel's was cold to the touch and rough. Martin jumped up and hit the switch again. In the place of Nathaniel was a skeleton. Nathaniel's open box held a dead cat.

"Screw this," Thomas said. He raced outside.

Martin stared at the Ouija board, not sure what to do next. A shadow passed over the room. He heard Thomas scream from somewhere outside.

The Ouija board started moving on its own. Martin wrote the letters as it spelled out the words. It read: Death comes to those that seek evil.

A cold wet hand was placed on his shoulder. He wanted to turn and look but he was afraid. He knew his time had come.

About the Author:

Dan McKeithan completed his MFA in Creative Fiction from UC-Riverside in 2016, all while fighting off cancer. Prior to that he attended UCLA in Professional Screenwriting in 2002. Now his day job is running two nursing homes in North Carolina and when he's not at home or off in Russia with his family he tries to get a little writing done.

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Undersea Solitude | *Ryan Benson*

Slava heard it again. The banging on the outer door of Russia's undersea base occurred each midnight for the last week. Could someone be knocking?

For months he'd laid claim to polar oil fields, but solitude took its toll. His chest tightness certainly signaled a developing condition. Air filters or isolation to blame?

Bang.

Slava's superiors deemed his problems psychosomatic and suspended communications.

Bang.

Was the communication blackout accidental? Was the banging his replacement?

Bang.

Slava bypassed the safeties and turned the door's wheel. "Hello—"

The crushing weight of frigid water smashed his body and filled the undersea base.

Mirror Man | *Ryan Benson*

Cooper stood in the bathroom, glaring at his reflection. *A moment's peace.* Anxiety intruded. Only minutes before a family member banged on the door.

Cooper studied his wrinkles. "Time for work." Six years of higher education, only to pay loans and work a job he hated.

Then, without warning, his reflection shrugged its shoulders and smiled. Grouchy Cooper stood stock still, mouth agape. Cooper watched his son enter only the mirror man's room and hug his likeness. The two exited, leaving Cooper reflectionless.

He tried to follow but was stuck in place.

Alone, except for his misery, Cooper faded away.

Words Hurt | *Ryan Benson*

"Answer me, Kenta." Jan wiped away tears. The pair fought as only husband and wife can.

Kenta's lips quivered. He'd said plenty. Any more and he'd hurt Jan.

"We have to talk."

His hands balled into fists. Would he cry? He pinched his mouth shut. Talk, and he'd regret it.

Jan grabbed Kenta's shoulders. "If you love me, say something."

Tears poured from his eyes, and he spoke.

A red humanoid form, gnashing its teeth and clawing its own head, emerged from the man's mouth. It smiled and lunged at Jan.

Man and woman screamed—one for the last time.

About the Author:

Ryan Benson resides outside of Atlanta, GA with his wife and children. Ryan keeps himself busy writing short fiction stories and a novel. *The Sirens Call Publishing*, *Trembling With Fear* (Horror Tree), *Dark Moments* (Black Hare Press), and the anthologies *The Collapsar Directive* (Zombie Pirate Publishing) and *A Discovery of Writers* have published his work.

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Mrs. Harrison was a nice lady. Pretty too. The workers always saw a lot more of her than the old man, even though everybody said the plantation was his. Sometimes Mrs. Harrison would walk along the rows of tobacco leaves, all smiles, and tell them what a wonderful job they were doing.

Cecil especially liked her. She was born on the plantation, and in her thirteen years, she had never left. But as a young girl, she often watched as one of the men would drive Mrs. Harrison into town on the carriage. She always wished it were her driving. She had wanted to see the world for as long as she could remember.

The plantation wasn't so bad. She had never seen another one, but had heard stories from workers who had come from them.

"They whoop you," Leroy, a man around her pa's age, said one evening in the dorms as all the younger workers crowded around listening wide-eyed. He took off his shirt and they all gasped. His back was covered in thick welts that stretched in every direction, and crossed over one another. "If you bad, they whoop you. If you don't work, they whoop you. Look at they daughter or they wife..."

Cecil had been in the crowd watching, listening in horror. Mr. and Mrs. Harrison had never whipped a worker that she knew of. She had been five at the time. That night, she told her Ma and her Pa what Leroy had said.

"Hmp," her Pa huffed. "Don't you be worrying 'bout none a that. This here the Harrison Plantation. Ain't no whoopin' happenin' here, girl."

And there wasn't. As the years went by, others came with stories. Some said they had seen male workers' privates cut off with hatchets for kissing their bosses daughters. Others said their friends were tied to poles until they starved to death. The workers at the Harrison Plantation were never treated badly though.

One night Mrs. Harrison came into the dorms wearing a lovely coat. It had white and black fur all over. Cecil wanted to touch it, imagined it would be soft and wonderful against her fingers.

Mrs. Harrison caught her staring, and said, "You like it? It's chinchilla."

Cecil looked down at her feet.

Mrs. Harrison reached out, lightly touched her cheek. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Cecil," she replied, not making eye contact.

"Pretty little thing, ain't you?"

Cecil's shoulders floated up as if they could shield her face as she flushed. The boys on the plantation were always trying to touch her, but she had never been told that she was pretty by a white person.

"Cecil, how would you like to move into the house with Mr. Harrison and myself? We need another server, you know."

Cecil began to panic. Her parents lived in the dorms and worked in the fields. She couldn't leave them. Mrs. Harrison seemed to notice.

"That a 'no' then?"

"No ma'am. I mean, yes'm. I like it out here with my ma and pa."

"Well that's okay." Mrs. Harrison smiled. She chose another girl to move into the house.

That night, a boy named Jeffry, who had lived on the plantation his whole life like Cecil, came to her bed.

"Cecil." His voice was a whisper. "Cecil, wake up."

"I'm awake," she whispered back. "What you want Jeffry?"

"I need to talk to you."

"No, Jeffrey. I'm tired." She already knew what he was after.

"Not that, girl." He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "This important!"

Cecil took a deep breath and climbed out of the cot quietly so she wouldn't wake the other workers. When they were outside, she said, "Jeffry, you know you not supposed to be out your cot at night."

"Ssshhh." He put a finger over his lips and looked around. "Look, Cecil, we leavin' soon."

"Leavin'?"

"Ssshhh," Jeffry hissed. "Girl, you gonna get us killed before we even gone."

"But you can't leave, Jeffry." Her voice returned to a whisper. "No one's allowed to leave. You know that."

"Look, Cecil, we ain't goin' tonight. It's not the right time, you understand? There's a railroad. Callin' it the Underground Railroad. On just the right night, at just the right time, you go down to the river and they pick you up. Take you Up North."

"Up North?" she shrieked.

"Ssshhh. Come on, girl! Cut that out now. Listen up. Up North, everybody free. Every man's a equal, ya hear? We can work and the pay us. Coin money. We can go anywhere we wanna go, Cecil. I see you. I see the way you watch that carriage when Willy takes Mrs. Harrison into town. That's how we found out 'bout the railroad. A worker from another plantation told him when he was in town."

"Oh, Jeffry. It probably ain't even true!"

"It's true," he growled. "It's true, all right! You think he the only one heard about it? Look, Cecil, you can't tell no one, ya hear? Not yo ma, not yo pa. They ain't gonna come with. Too old. Too set in they ways. You tell anyone, girl, you get us killed."

"Killed?" Cecil didn't believe that for a second. "Mr. and Mrs. Harrison would never—"

"Listen to me, girl!" He grabbed her shoulders so hard she gasped and cringed, afraid she might get hit. "I only told you 'cause I thought maybe you wanna go with. You make up yo mind, and you tell me soon, ya hear? We leavin' any day now, Cecil. Don't miss the train. Don't you go tellin' no one neither, girl. I find out you told, I ain't gonna be happy."

"Okay," she turned her head so she wouldn't have to look at him.

That night Cecil thought about the Underground Railroad. She had never seen a railroad before. And the North? Was it really like Jeffry said? People could go anywhere? Do anything? She decided not to think about it. Cecil wasn't going anywhere without her ma and pa.

A couple days later all the workers were called into the dorm. Mrs. Harrison was waiting with Mr. Harrison in one of her fur coats. They told the workers that some of them would be sent away, chosen in groups and sent to live Up North. That's all that was said. No talk of what it implied. No talk of freedom or other plantations, and none of the workers asked any questions.

Seven were chosen. Mrs. Harrison walked amongst them, eyeing every one appraisingly, pointing at random. Mr. Harrison followed beside her—his pipe in his mouth—and nodded as she chose. Then they were taken from the plantation on the carriage.

The next night, more cots were empty. Talk was circulating among the workers. Some wondered what they had to do to be picked. Others didn't want to get picked, wouldn't know what to do with their freedom if they had it. Still, others said it was all lies. There was no freedom. No North. Never trust a white.

What did that mean? Cecil wondered. If there was no freedom, no North, where were the workers going? Then one night her parents' cots were empty and she panicked. The first person she found was Jeffry. Doing her best to keep her composure, she pulled him outside.

"What is it?" he asked when she didn't speak, just stared up at him, her jaw quivering. "Cecil, talk to me, girl."

That's when the tears came. They flooded out and streamed down either side of her nose. Jeffry threw his arms around her.

"Ssshhh," he said. "It's okay, Cecil. It's gonna be okay. Tell me what's a matter now."

In the distance, gravel crunched under hooves and carriage wheels. Cecil just continued to cry, her face pressed into Jeffry's chest. Light appeared off to the side, and she turned to see Willy driving the carriage, a lantern in one hand, reins in the other, a solemn look on his face. Mrs. Harrison sat next to him, wearing a new coat. It was dark, with curly black hair all over, and her words from only nights ago echoed inside of Cecil's head.

You like it? It's chinchilla.

But her new coat wasn't made from chinchilla.

Willy's eyes met Cecil's and there was no mistaking what she saw. Terror. She looked again at Mrs. Harrison, who didn't seem to notice as the carriage passed. Her lips were hard, pressed together, yet curved into a crescent smile.

Jeffry seemed to be in a trance, his eyes glazed over, his mouth open. With one hand, he touched the top of his head and trembled.

Once the carriage was gone, they locked gazes. Neither spoke, and Cecil became aware that she was shaking as well in his arms, but her tears were gone. Finally she nodded and Jeffry nodded back.

"Tomorrow," he whispered.

She spent that evening counting the empty cots in the dorms. There were twenty-three, including her ma and pa's. That's how many scalps it had taken to make Mrs. Harrison's new coat. She wondered what the woman would say if anybody asked her what it was made from.

The next night, she snuck out of the dorms and walked quietly to the house. All she could see in her mind was blood-red-murder. The pain and suffering of her ma and pa as their scalps were cut off. Were they killed first? If so, it would have to have been done in a way that didn't soil the hair and ruin the coat.

It didn't matter though. Whatever had happened to her parents, she would do worse to Mr. and Mrs. Harrison—ambush them in their bed and make them suffer. She would leave them dead. Then she would flee the Harrison Plantation.

Her hand was on the cold knob, when it turned on its own and the door moved. Cecil froze, knowing she was caught. She clenched her fists, and every muscle in her body tensed. Mrs. Harrison wasn't much bigger than her. She could easily fight her. And Mr. Harrison? He hadn't done any real work a day of Cecil's life. His hands weren't calloused like hers. His body was big, but hers was firm and muscular.

She felt light, like she might pass out as the door slowly opened. But neither of the Harrisons appeared. It was Willy, terror still haunting his face. Cecil glanced down and saw the horrible coat in his hand.

"Come on, girl," he whispered. "We gettin' outta here."

She just stood staring for a long moment because it wasn't too late. The Harrisons were still asleep in their bed. Willy seemed to read her mind.

"Let it go, girl. It ain't worth it."

And he was right. If she killed the Harrisons, what would happen to the workers still in the dorms?

That night, eight workers left for the Underground Railroad. Willy led the way, keeping to the woods on the side of the street. Once they reached the river, they stopped and waited.

Jeffry put his arm around Cecil, and she didn't move away from him. Together, they stood and watched as Willy set the horrible coat in the river and let it float away. There were no stars in the sky, but the moon was round and bright. It reflected off the water, and for just a second, it turned black as the coat passed over it.

Cecil thought about what it would be like Up North. She realized as she leaned into Jeffry, that for the first time in her life, she was off the plantation. Jeffry pulled her closer and it felt good in her chest.

They all stared at the water until the coat disappeared, then they stared some more, but nobody spoke. The train was coming to take them away, where everybody was free. Where everybody was the same. It was just the right night, so they waited at the edge of the river for just the right time.

And even though they were discovered the next morning and hanged without a trial, it's said that every year on April 19th, they can still be seen at night, waiting at the water's edge, watching as Mrs. Harrison's new coat floats away, eclipsing the reflection of the moon.

About the Author:

Michael J Moore lives with his wife, author Cait Moore, in Seattle, Washington. His books include *Highway Twenty* and the bestselling novel, *After the Change*, which is used as curriculum at the University of Washington. His work has won awards, has appeared in various magazines and anthologies and has been adapted for theatre produced in Seattle.

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Thomas Walker | *Radar DeBoard*

Thomas Walker's childhood paranoia of death had grown into an unhealthy obsession of keeping it away at all costs. Thomas Walker's house had been fortified with steel beams on the windows. Each door leading to the outside world had at least four different locking mechanisms. He never went out, so food and other essentials were delivered directly to him.

Thomas spent most of his days cleaning every inch of his home to keep germs at bay. Too bad that after all that upkeep he forgot to check the batteries in his carbon monoxide detectors. At least his death was painless.

Death Knows | *Radar DeBoard*

I saw him, and he knows it. He was standing behind a woman at the bus stop. His emaciated form was easy to discern under the ill-fitting black suit he wore. He placed his ghostly hand gently upon her shoulder and then she fell forward. Right into the path of an oncoming car.

I knew at that moment what he was. He had completed his task, and I was the only one who had seen it happen. But he knows I saw him. He's been standing out in front of my house every night. Waiting patiently to take my life.

A Distracted Killer | *Radar DeBoard*

Stephen ran hot water over the bloody knife in his hand. He was so focused on cleaning the blade that he didn't notice the garrote wire coming over his head.

He gasped in pain as the wire went taut around his neck. He struggled to no avail as the life was slowly strangled out of him.

Michael dropped the garrote wire and stepped over the lifeless body of Stephen. He didn't enjoy letting innocent people be killed, but the easiest way to kill a killer was while they were distracted. And nothing distracts a killer more than a fresh victim.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a new author living in Kansas. He is a lover of all things horror. His largest hope for his work is that people will enjoy his writing enough to share it with others.

Lilly, Unfinished | *Elizabeth H. Smith*

Lilly couldn't permit his breath another deceit, another whisper of bent perspective. In error, Marcus tread beneath the lines, the reverse where rule had no application. Once read, died lonely, meaning gone. Only his voice had spoken clear before she put a blade in his middle.

Despair fled down her cheek. Red hands didn't bother to wipe it away.

His gesture of life to mark the spaces festered with his stiffened frame. His stain upon the floor would ever haunt the room. His deviation couldn't be undone. Neither could hers. Resolved to nature, vicious and raw, the need satisfied the conclusion.

She wished with dreams the pages back, Marcus telling the story that would never be finished. But in her wispy conjuring his face distorted, split, shattered—vision of something long-dead.

Lilly closed the book with crimson marks, allowed its scent one last memory. The tale untold, she walked with dread pace, and left Marcus to death's long and giving tender.

About the Author:

Elizabeth H. Smith is a storyteller who writes while trying to keep her cat, Luna off the keyboard. The musical group, Rasputina is her muse. She was born in the state of New York and would never feel at home anywhere else.

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

The Blood Lights are the last
thing you'll see...

The
BLOOD LIGHTS



ELAINE PASCALE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Limbs scattered like mannequin parts. Charred bones, wads of hair. Willa and me, we saw some horrible things after the crash. One time, while sowing watermelon seeds right here in our clearing, I dug up a clump of teeth.

But even that didn't make my heart drop the way it does now, as the *thwack* of a knife slashes through the brambles that surround our camp.

"Oh God." Willa crouches behind me, her breath warm on my neck. I clutch my trowel, my sweaty fingers slipping on its handle. How many times have we wished for better weapons? That's what we started wishing for after we gave up on wishing someone would rescue us.

Thwack.

A flash of tee-shirt between the vines. He's almost here.

Panicked as mice, we peer out the busted window. I imagine how we must look from outside, Willa and me. Two grimy foreheads, two matted ponytails, four terrified eyes staring out the back of a blackened school bus.

"Jax," Willa slides down against the back door and hugs her legs to her chest. "What does he want?"

"Us." I sit, clasping Willa's hand. We knew this day would come. He wouldn't stay away forever. I lean my head on her shoulder and close my eyes. "God help us."

We crashed two years ago. Well, three of us crashed. The rest burned.

It was our ninth-grade trip to Crow Canyon, the archaeological site. We spent the whole semester studying it: the people, their pottery. The trip was supposed to be educational but we were mostly excited about making out and sneaking joints in the woods.

Sometimes I say, doesn't that feel like a different lifetime? And Willa agrees that it does.

The drive was long, the canyon remote. Our parents had to sign special waivers. I remember Mister Payton, our teacher, warning us to be careful while hiking on the trails. He said that if we slipped off into one of the slot canyons we'd be toast. They were so remote and so deep that we might never be found.

As it turns out, he wasn't kidding.

The belly of the bus was crammed with sleeping bags, tents, food, bins of trowels and tools...and tanks of camp-stove propane. There were nineteen of us on board, twenty counting the driver. Missus C. She was an older lady with a kind smile. I remember how she glanced back to click her tongue at our juvenile antics. Then the sparks as the bus kissed the guardrail.

Willa and me, we were in the last row. I clutched my stuffed turtle, the one Willa had teased me for bringing, as we careened across the highway, smoke billowing up from below. Willa pressed the locket she always wore against her forehead as the flames licked, tasted, consumed.

Willa and me, we were thrown out as the bus tumbled into the canyon. Somehow we didn't burn.

And neither did he.

"Hello?" he calls. His voice is clear but cold. We're belly-down in the aisle. Willa's face is buried in her hands, next to the metal box, the old emergency road kit.

Twigs crunch outside. He walks so loudly it's disgusting. Willa and me, we've learned a quieter walk.

"Well, well." He grins wickedly as he sticks his head through the space where the bus door used to be. His features blur; he could be any boy from our class. I can't remember his name.

"What are you doing here?" Shaking, I stand. Willa does too.

"Quite a life you've made down here, Jax." He looks around the bus and nods. Like us, he's filthy. Hair past his shoulders and a natty beard. As he steps closer I'm struck by how broad his chest is. He's not a boy; he's a man.

I clear my throat. "Go back to your own camp."

"Hey now. No need for that." He moves closer. I can smell his sweat, his urine. "Just thought I'd visit after all this time. See if I could be of service."

Behind me, I can hear Willa's heart thumping. Mine is too. I brandish the trowel.

"Ooh, look. She digs me," he says, chuckling softly at his pun.

Something scrapes the floor, almost too quiet to hear. It's Willa nudging the road kit.

Swallowing hard, I force my lips into a coy smile. Slowly, I bend down. My fingers hook under the lid of the box.

His grin widens, his mouth gap-toothed, gray. He moves closer, so close now that I can smell his disgusting breath.

Willa's lips brush against my ear. "Just like we practiced," she whispers.

I snap the flare and slam the flame into his right eye. He howls, careening backward, stumbling out of the bus.

We clasp each other, Willa and me, still as the wild rabbits we hunt. He retreats, slashing back through the brambles. Just when we're ready to exhale into the silence, he screams my name from up the hillside, followed by a word my mama told me never to use.

After the burning bus fell, we followed it downhill. Not him though; he stayed high. When the sun's angle is just right we can spot his camp up on the hillside.

We went to spy once. It was early on, shortly after the crash. We crouched behind a fallen log and watched him build a roaring campfire without bothering to dig a break. Bits of food scattered on the ground, ample bait for a bear. Firelight danced on his carefree face.

Well, I had whispered to Willa, he won't last long.

If only I'd been right.

A few days later, he returns. By then we have a plan.

He stomps through the thicket like a herd of elephants, as my mama would have said. As soon as we hear him I lay the canvas, sweeping fallen Aspen leaves over it like a carpet. Then I check the knot. It's Willa's knot, so it's bombproof. Her knots always are. *It'll be just like snaring a rabbit*, Willa had promised.

"Let's go." I shoulder my pack. Trowel, water, a bundle of jerky. It shouldn't take more than a day to get up to his camp.

Halfway to the edge of the clearing, I stumble on something. It's a rock, one of the ones Willa was supposed to clear when we sowed last summer's melon. I try to stand, but my ankle buckles.

The bus jostles. He's aboard.

"Willa!" I hiss. "Help me up!"

She stares at me, mute.

He calls from the bus, his voice thick as honey, "Jax?"

I gesture wildly at Willa, but she's paralyzed with fear. His footsteps grow louder. Swallowing hard, I shove her onto the pile of Aspen leaves. Yellow-orange confetti showers the clearing as the canvas bundle snaps upward, dangling, silent.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

My heart beats in my throat as I crawl out of the clearing. For me to leave Willa at that boy's mercy. God help me.

For hours I limp through scrubby washes and up steep hillsides. Finally I see his camp, his tent staked on a narrow ledge.

I must get back to Willa. Once I arm myself with whatever he's socked away up here.

I duck under the tent flap. There's his bedroll, jug of water, stack of rabbit pelts. I'm surprised at how neatly everything is organized.

"Jacqueline."

I whirl around. A tiny creature with matted gray hair and feral eyes lurks in the corner, tied to a chunk of engine block. She's bound with twine, her limbs protruding bone. A pair of mesh athletic shorts hangs on her hips, which are covered in bruises.

"Missus C," I whisper.

"I always wondered about you, Jacqueline," she says quietly. "Down there by yourself this whole time."

"By myself? No...Willa and me. We've done okay."

"Willa?" she asks. Her sparse eyebrows knit together, confused. "Willa Daniels?"

"Of course." I cross my arms. "She...stayed behind today."

"I see." Missus C looks away. Something rustles outside. A rabbit or a squirrel, from the sound. Panic flashes through her eyes. "Jacqueline, you should go."

I hesitate. "I can't leave you here."

"Please go," she begs. "If he finds you, he'll kill you. Or worse."

I feel dizzy. "I'll go," I hear myself say. "But only if you come with me."

Our hike is slow, between my ankle and her frailty. As we rest on a rock, I thump my good heel against the granite. Poor Willa, strung up in canvas because of him. And those bruises on Missus C's hips.

I say: "We will end him."

"Yes," Missus C agrees. "We will."

"When it's done," I explain, "we need to get Willa down. She's caught in a trap."

Missus C says slowly, "Are you sure it's Willa in your trap?"

"Of course. Who else would it be?"

"It's just that, well..."

"Well what?"

Missus C clears her throat. "Jacqueline, Willa Daniels died in the crash."

"No way," I say with a hard chuckle. "She's been in the canyon with me."

"Jacqueline, I saw her," Missus C says. "Willa burned."

We approach. Missus C has learned the quiet walk, too. He doesn't hear us coming.

Thwack.

The trowel cracks against the back of his skull. He spins around, his remaining eye glassy and pleading, its pupil a naked marble darting between Missus C and me. A coy smile plays at the edges of my lips as I pounce.

When you're hunting, you've gotta be quick, Willa used to say, back when we were learning to catch rabbits. I snatch his knife and plunge the blade into his neck. His blood runs over my hands, thick and warm. It's done.

I drop to all fours and vomit until I gag on bile. Without a word, Missus C sits next to me. Her hand feels heavy on my back. I crumple into her lap and she rubs circles between my shoulder blades, like my mama used to do when I was sick.

We sit like that for what feels like hours, until she says softly, "Jacqueline, I must rest."

That night, when Missus C is nestled in Willa's old bedroll, I climb out of the bus.

Thwack.

With his knife, I cut down the trap. Willa's bombproof knot unravels easily.

I drag the canvas to the middle of the clearing and shake it, the same way my mama used to shake bedsheets as they came off the clothesline. My stuffed turtle flies out. It sails through the crisp night air and lands soundlessly in the meadow. The necklace plunks down a few feet away, the locket I unclasped from my best friend's charred bones. It rests in the grass now, glinting in the moonlight.

I wipe away a tear as I turn back toward bed.

About the Author:

Shelby Van Pelt writes fiction under the never-ending guidance of her six-pound calico cat, whose fluffy tail is responsible for any errant keystrokes herein. A Seattle-area native, she lived in Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, and points between before recently settling in the Chicago suburbs where she lives with her husband and children.

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The scenery whizzed by like in an old movie when they would run the projector beside the stable prop vehicle, giving it a detached appearance. Anyone watching that movie knew it wasn't real, but our minds have an uncanny way of filling in the blanks. The real sometimes becoming indistinguishable from the unreal.

It was difficult to concentrate on the road, as the bare tree branches and postcard blue sky were easy distractions for Natalie. Hands planted firmly on the wheel, she urged her red Focus onto her destination as she peered out the window. It was time to get to the office. Visiting Oliver's grave early in the morning had become part of her daily ritual. She missed the way they would flirt back and forth. The way he pursued her in the beginning. She loved the chase. The possibilities between them. How sad that this was to be the end of their story.

Natalie's life had felt like that for almost an entire year after losing Oliver. It wasn't just the losing him that stung, it was losing a part of herself. Hit head-on by a drunk driver on a day, not unlike today. Oliver had died on impact. He'd been lucky.

Natalie had overcome a coma of two months, suffering severe head trauma. Events were hazy now. Dates and time.... worthless. She was able to recover somewhat with therapy and an arsenal of pills that helped her seem barely normal. The job gods had smiled on her, with a boss that had enough empathy for her to keep her position open.

She knew she wasn't doing well there though, as the whispers of her other co-workers continued to grow. How long would it be until she finally exhausted their good graces? At times she would find her blue eyes just staring at her computer. Seconds, perhaps minutes went by until she snapped back to the task.

That particular afternoon had been horribly unnerving as she'd stirred from a haze to discover Ollie, Ollie Ollie..... typed repeatedly across the computer screen. She pushed back her chair from the computer with a gasp, spilling coffee all over her notes.

"I'm okay." She choked out, motioning the others away. "I'm fine."

Some of their concern was fake. She knew they wished she'd just quit, but she needed to keep this job to keep her apartment, however meager. Missing the quaint Cape Cod she'd shared with Ollie certainly wouldn't bring either of them back. Now she was fortunate to have found a small apartment over the coffee shop just down the block from the advertising agency. At one time, the graphic design department of Fine and Briggs welcomed her. After moving to Pittsburgh to be closer to Oliver, she had found the job rather quickly, despite the sparse job market. Her grades and business experience made her a perfect candidate for success. Now she could barely complete a project on time, despite all the extensions Mollie Fine granted her.

Natalie smoothed a strand of her long red hair behind her ear and returned her focus to the keyboard, deleting the screen before anyone could see her handy work. She swore she didn't remember typing his name but, it was there in spades.

Frustrated, she hit the delete button. Mollie came up beside her unexpectedly, driving another gasp from her.

"Nat," she whispered. "Can I take you for a coffee? Let's get out of here for a while."

Natalie nodded her head and shut down her computer, before grabbing her purse from the desk drawer and following Mollie to the coat rack.

"We'll be back in about an hour or so," Mollie called out to the other five girls on the floor. "We are going to discuss the Taite campaign."

Muffled groans greeted them, as she realized Mollie was trying to save face for her. She knew she needed a break, but was afraid to ask for one as she was already so behind. Looking down at her watch she realized it was only eleven-eleven. It seemed so much later in the day.

"Come on," Mollie said. "My treat."

"Thank you," Natalie said, blowing into the teacup before taking a long sip of the lavender brew, feeling its warmth as it went down. It was good. "I needed this."

"I know," Mollie said with a slight smile. "Nat, we really do need to talk about the Taite account. I can see that you're struggling so I am going to offer you some help."

"Help? From the boss?" Natalie asked, fumbling with her pill bottle. "Why? Why don't you just dismiss me? I know I've been a failure lately."

Mollie shook her head, her blonde bob moving softly. Dressed in an impeccably cut grey suit, she was a beautiful woman of forty-five. Natalie knew she'd never make it that far as she downed a few of the pills with a sip of her tea.

"It's not your fault Nat. None of this is. I hired you because I saw you had a lot of potential. Would I be a good boss if I didn't help you return to that?"

"This has been hard, you know," Natalie said. "Living without Oliver has been tough, but there are things that have been so much worse. I feel like I lost more than just him that day, you know? Every day is just so damn hard. I get out of bed and think that it will be better, but it isn't. My mind, who I was...All of it's changed. I never used to miss deadlines or forget what time it is or where I parked my car. It's scary."

"What does your family think about you being here alone?" Mollie asked.

"They don't like it, but there isn't much they can do aside from committing me and I'm not there just yet."

"Just yet?" Mollie asked. "Nat, should I be more worried for you?"

"Headed in that direction I'm afraid," Natalie answered playing with the rim of her teacup. "I swear I saw him today, walking the path near his grave. The closer I got to him though, the faster he moved. I found myself far from my car and all of the other graves. Almost near the edge of the cemetery where the deer graze. I smiled at him Mollie and he smiled back at me. I couldn't walk, I couldn't speak. I just knelt down on the ground and waited for him to claim me."

"You're here Natalie," Mollie said reaching across the table and taking her hand. "You made your way back."

"Did I?" Natalie asked. "I only feel like I am half here most of the time. Just look at me. I'm a mess."

"How is your therapy going? If you'd like me to, I'll go with you sometime."

"Therapy? They ask me the same questions over and over again. The answers are always the same. Usually, the session ends with them prescribing me some new dose of meds that they think will solve all of my problems. They can't save me from the inevitable."

"The inevitable?" Mollie asked.

"Death of course," Natalie answered. "You see Mollie, I believe I was meant to die that day as well. It's approaching the anniversary of the accident. By the end of this week, you will have to turn my accounts over to one of the other girls. Give them to Helen. She's worked hard this past year and is most deserving of them."

Mollie squeezed her hand tighter and shook her head. It seemed she wasn't getting through to her. Perhaps she didn't believe it herself?

"We've made contact, Mollie. Not just at the cemetery."

"Where else have you seen him?" Mollie asked, rising up in her seat.

"In my bedroom," Natalie answered softly.

"By your bedside?" Mollie suggested.

"More like in my bed." Natalie offered. "Inside of me."

Mollie looked around the coffee shop, ushering the waiter away as he approached.

"Natalie, you were dreaming. It is natural to dream about the dead. Many people do. I know it probably seemed and felt real but you are on a lot of meds."

Natalie slowly took off her coat and unbuttoned her blouse to show Mollie her shoulder.

"What is that?" Mollie asked pushing back some of the fabric so she could get a closer inspection.

"A handprint," Natalie said. "It's where Oliver had gripped my shoulder."

Mollie stared in surprise as she examined what was indeed a perfect handprint.

Mollie granted Natalie the rest of the week off. This was provisional, however, as she agreed to visit the therapist, call in twice a day and allow her to check in on her. As suspected, she endured the same routine at the therapists, including another prescription. More of the same. Always costly and never hopeful.

"I won't need the scrip," Natalie told Bailey the receptionist, leaving the slip of paper on the counter. She didn't feel the need to explain to her that her dead boyfriend was coming to claim her.

"Your co-pay for today is fifty dollars." She half yawned in a monotone voice.

"Bill me," Natalie said with a wry smile as she put on her coat.

As she neared the parking lot she discovered that she'd left her purse back at the therapists. She swore, going back to collect it. A bird swooped overhead, just missing her. She squealed as she hunkered down behind another car, hearing his footsteps. Once things were clear she scurried back to the office and shut the door behind her. Hair long red hair fell into her eyes as she panted in fear or perhaps, was it excitement?

"Natalie are you okay?" Bailey asked, rising from behind desk inside the service window.

"I'm fine," she said, retrieving her purse. "I'm just going to sit here in the waiting room and rest a second." She used to love making him wait.

"Sure," Bailey said. "Take your time."

It was nearly eight o'clock by the time Natalie left the therapists. She'd fallen asleep in the chair and Bailey had woken her. Nothing like making yourself look overmedicated

Once Natalie returned to her apartment she found herself refreshed from the impromptu nap. She went through her purse, deciding it was time to clean it out. Full of receipts and used tissues, they scattered onto her bed like leaves. Suddenly there was a rush of sound as various pieces of change began to fall in a stream beside them. How many could there be? It took her a while to count them, but they totaled fifteen dollars. Fifteen...like the fifteenth. Oliver collected change in a mason jar that he would cash in from time to time to buy her small treats. She pushed the change into a pile on the bed and backed away. Her tiredness was wearing on her. She'd had no dinner and was finding herself wanting to go out. Why would she want to do any dishes when her days were numbered?

She rifled through her closet and found his favorite green dress. This would be the dress she'd wear out tonight. A few blocks down the street was one of their favorite Italian places. She ordered and sat alone in the brightly colored restaurant eating her meal without distraction. Oddly enough this was the first time she'd felt clarity in quite a while. The bottle of wine she'd ordered wouldn't set well with her pills, so she decidedly left them in their case. Why ruin this perfect evening by ingesting that garbage?

The walk home was blissful as the fall air kissed her body. She swung her purse beside her, appearing just as happy as the other young girls walking down opposite sides of the street. It was the first time she'd carried this bag. It was new and she wanted to enjoy it just once. Staring down at her watch she realized it was late, eleven-eleven. Suddenly she felt a stone in her shoe, an interruption she didn't desire at this point. Stopping to lean against the railing of a book store she pulled her foot out of the pump to reveal not a stone but a penny. Slowly she put it in her coat pocket and slid her foot back into the shoe, wondering if Oliver was watching her. She practically skipped back to the apartment, suddenly feeling the urgency to get back. Was he waiting there for her?

"Ollie! Ollie!" She called out, swiftly opening the door of her tiny apartment. Tossing down her purse and coat, she turned on the hallway light. With no answer, she slumped, having scoured the apartment for any sign of him. Defeated, she sat on the edge of the bed and began to play with the belt of her dress. This was going nowhere.

Suddenly, her attention turned to the Mason jar full of change on the corner of her nightstand. The mound of coins that she'd dumped onto the bed from her other purse was gone.

"Ollie!" She called out. "I know you're here. Please answer me."

A noise came from the corner of the room and she remained seated pensively on the edge of the bed as a shadowy figure came towards her. He was just as good looking as she'd remembered him. The smile was unearthly but welcoming as she held up her arms to receive him. Pulling him down onto the bed beside her, happy tears formed in her eyes.

"I'm awake. I'm not dreaming. This is real. Tell me, Ollie, that this is real."

He nodded his head before dropping his lips to hers.

"Please just open the door for me!" Mollie pleaded with Natalie's landlord, as they stood outside her door. "It's been over a day and all my calls are going to her voicemail. She hasn't moved her car. I told her that I'd check in with her. I got so caught up in work that I couldn't leave the office."

"This is a gross intrusion lady. I could get sued for this." The landlord shrugged. "If you say she's in trouble I have no choice though, right? You'll vouch for me."

"Just open the damn door!" Mollie yelled at him, as he hastily played with the lock.

The apartment was partially dark, save for the lights in the hall.

"Natalie! Nat are you in here?" Mollie called out, moving towards the bedroom, then dropped down to her knees as she reached her friend.

"Natalie." She whimpered staring at her naked body fanned out on the bed.

With face lifted upwards, her eyes closed in the most angelic fashion; she looked at peace.

Empty pill bottles were scattered on the nightstand along with a Mason jar filled with change.

"I'll call 911." The landlord stammered, fumbling with his phone.

"It's too late," Mollie said, stroking Natalie's long red hair. "The chase has ended."

About the Author:

Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner is a writer from Western Pennsylvania that enjoys dabbling in the horror and neo-noir genres. She has previously published a short story *Closure* for Pyrite Press that is in chap-book format where she gave a reading of her work at Chatham University. She lives outside of Pittsburgh with her husband, mother and three cats. Her husband Gregg Steighner is also an author and they edit and critique each other's work.

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Smash and Grab | Ryan Benson

Andre held a hammer and eyed Grandma's piggy bank. The potter had shaped the antique ceramic in the form of his great-grandmother.

Coins fell from the small bottom hole, but a large jade broach remained inside. How'd Grandma get it in?

The heirloom was for his future daughter, but first, he needed a wife. A woman of merit requires money. The broach would fetch enough coinage.

He'd pay Grandma back.

Painted eyes resembling Grandma's stared at him. Andre swung the hammer.

SMASH!

On the shelf sat the ceramic woman. Intact

On the floor lay Andre. Shattered into hundreds of pieces.

About the Author:

Ryan Benson resides outside of Atlanta, GA with his wife and children. Ryan keeps himself busy writing short fiction stories and a novel. *The Sirens Call Publishing*, *Trembling With Fear* (Horror Tree), *Dark Moments* (Black Hare Press), and the anthologies *The Collapsar Directive* (Zombie Pirate Publishing) and *A Discovery of Writers* have published his work.

Twitter: [@RyanWBenson](#)

Featured Author | Anthony Avina

Hello there everyone. My name is Anthony Avina, and I am the author of the upcoming novel, *Identity*. I am thrilled to be able to share a bit about my novel with you. It's a story of serial killers, cults, and the paths each character takes to determine their destiny. Today I wanted to offer you a glimpse of what inspired me to write *Identity*.

The novel is a genre mash-up, blending the serial killer thriller theme with classic crime noir. *Identity* focuses on three individuals in particular: James, a young man who finds himself in the clutches of a monster; Nathan Hawkes, a private detective with a traumatic past who must help his friend before it's too late; and Chloe, a beautiful young actress taking Hollywood by storm who harbors a dark secret she must protect at all cost.

I've always been intrigued by pushing the boundaries of what readers expect from certain genres and themes. As a fan of the style and era of classic noir stories, I wanted to explore a modern world where these themes never really died off. As a longtime fan of serial killer stories, I wanted to push the limits of what defined a serial killer in entertainment. Typically, serial killers have been portrayed as men who live on the fringes of society with the rare exception of the phenomenally successful character Hannibal Lecter, of course. Likewise, I wish to posit the question are serial killers and evil persons in general limited to certain roles in society, or can they hide amongst the 'best' of us?



Finally, I wanted to explore a novel that dealt with the theme and concept of identity in general. The identities that society and those in our lives believe we are destined for versus the identities we see for ourselves. What determines a person's ultimate identity? Is one destined to be a specific identity through genetics and environment, or can they become something more (or less)? From a killer unable to resist their darkest desires, to a private detective haunted by his past trying to become a better person, identity is the central focus of this novel.

In *Identity* I enjoyed showcasing a variety of characters that break the molds society expects of them as well as demonstrating that fiction in general isn't bound by those tropes. The story features women who use men's worst assumptions of their gender to their advantage; those who push against the 'damsel-in-distress' narrative to seek the truth and display genuine strength; heroes who are haunted and imperfect yet still strive to rise above their past and become what is needed of them; and villains who fight against society's perception to become the best version of themselves possible. The most succinct way to describe the core basis of *Identity* is in its continual pushing of boundaries and expectations.

Thank you for giving me the time to share my inspiration for this novel with you. It has been a dream project of mine for years, and I want to thank Sirens Call Publications and all the wonderful editors who have worked with me to make this book a reality. It is my pleasure to be able to share this, and I look forward to hearing what you think of my written exploration as we find out what defines one's *Identity* when my novel premieres in early 2020!

Author Bio:

Anthony Avina is a writer, blogger, and the author of the upcoming novel *Identity*. With years of experience as a book blogger and entertainment writer, he is uniquely suited to deliver stories that will entertain and offer readers the opportunity to explore unique themes in general. Anthony lives in Southern California with his Yorkshire Terrier, Sammy, works as a freelance writer, and investigates claims of the paranormal in his spare time.

You can learn more about Anthony at his official website and on his social media haunts. Follow him at the links blow.

Website and Blog: [Author Anthony Avina](#)

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IDENTITY



Anthony Avina

Prelude

Bethany Levine scanned the crowd of the strip club through cold, lifeless eyes as she rubbed up against the stripper pole. Her breasts heaved as the loud rap music pulsed through her. She felt the thread of the silver tassels hanging from her nipples against her warm skin. Bending backwards while holding onto the pole, Bethany drowned out the crowd's cheers with her own inner dialogue.

Find him, Bethany. Find the first bastard to waste, she thought. Scanning the room, she saw the usual assortment of men (and some women), who usually frequented the Fuzzy Rabbit. She saw old men watching with a predator's gaze as the strobe lights bounced off of her figure, making her shine with the help of some body glitter. She saw young women talking amongst themselves, watching Bethany with fascination. Then there were the younger men, who frequented the club either to escape their wives and girlfriends or who came in hopes of sleeping with one of the strippers. It was this group of men that she was paying the most attention to; as it would be easier to lure them into a false sense of security, which was exactly what she needed.

She was one of the establishment's greatest attractions, known to all as Busty Bethany. She was tall, with ink black hair, beautiful black eyes, golden tan skin, and a voluptuous body that turned the audience into absent-minded animals. Putting on the familiar mask of a sweet, innocent-looking young woman who believed herself to be stripping to save up enough money for college, Bethany flashed a wickedly seductive smile while rubbing her body with one hand and dangling from the pole with the other.

As she danced, she spotted the one she was looking for: the guy in blue jeans, with a Hawaiian shirt and a pair of tennis shoes. He was a tad overweight and balding, with milky white skin that was currently red from the sweltering heat of the club, and beady gray eyes like those of an eel. When she looked at him, he licked his lips, as if she were a delicious piece of meat he intended to devour. She recognized the look in his eyes, and she knew that he was the one.

This guy wants to fuck me, and I think I'm willing to oblige him, she thought.

As the music faded, Bethany did the usual demeaning task of crawling on all fours, grabbing the money from dirty, grimy hands as they pawed at her bare ass and sweat-slicked breasts. Having collected their cash, Bethany ran backstage, stuffing it into her locker and getting all her gear together, in case she had to make a quick getaway.

"You were on fire up there tonight, girl. You were starting to turn me on," Veronica said. Veronica was known as the Voluptuous Veronica. The owner of the club, a middle-aged man named Lester who spent more time snorting coke than making sure the girls of the club were safe and secure, was not the most creative man in the world. However, she lived up to the name he had given her. A tall girl much like Bethany, Veronica was thin, with long black hair and warm hazel eyes. Veronica believed Bethany to be her best friend. Bethany allowed her to believe that, although she herself couldn't care less.

"Thanks, I'm in a good mood tonight," Bethany replied.

"What's his name?" Veronica asked.

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to find out," she replied. Veronica laughed and headed to the dressing rooms as Bethany made her way towards the showroom, eager to find the man in the Hawaiian shirt.

Stepping through the curtain, having not bothered to clean up or put clothes on, Bethany walked through the crowd, wearing nothing except for a thong bikini bottom and a pair of black heels. Looking around the room like a cat seeking the perfect mouse to play with, Bethany spotted the big man sitting in a booth by the windows overlooking the parking lot. The view wasn't great because they lived in Apple Valley, CA, and all that lay outside the window were the few stores and houses that the high desert accommodated, then beyond that, an endless sea of dirt.

Smiling, she made her way to him. As she approached the big man, he turned in time to see her and began to lick his lips once more. Standing in front of him, Bethany smiled, and without saying a word she climbed onto his lap, straddling him and allowing his meaty hands to grab her ass.

"What's your name sweetheart?" Bethany asked, grinding on his hardening crotch and rubbing her breasts against his face.

"It's...it's Cliff," the man replied in short gasps, on the verge of an orgasm. She smiled as she continued to grind on him, until she felt a warm stickiness against her thigh. She heard him curse, and then apologize, as if embarrassed to be alive.

"Shh, it's ok, darling, that's alright. Do you think you could get going again?" she asked Cliff.

"Sure, I could get it up again. Were you thinking of a private dance?"

"We could do a private dance, or you could wait until my shift is over in ten minutes, and then fuck my brains out. It's your call."

"You...you want to sleep with me?" he asked in disbelief, convinced that she must have said something else.

"No, I don't want to sleep with you. I want you to take control of me, and do whatever you want to me. Use me any way you choose. Sleeping together implies something much too intimate. I want you to fuck me. Would you like that, Cliff?"

"Hell yeah," he replied, putting his face between her breasts and taking a deep breath. Rolling her eyes, she climbed off the big man, and kissed him on the cheek.

"Save some of that fire for outside, darling. Meet me in ten minutes behind the building, and bring that big hunk of wood with you," she said. Without waiting for a reply, she walked towards the back. Her heart was pumping at the prospect of finally getting what she wanted: Total power and domination.

Ten minutes later, Bethany was behind the building. The blouse she had slipped on had ripped open. The skirt she had changed into had pushed down as the hungry little man made his way inside her. Pinned against the cold concrete wall of the strip club, she gasped as he entered her. She wrapped her legs around his ass in an attempt to hurry the process. As soon as he had spilled his seed while she was straddling him inside the club, she knew that he would be quick...which worked out for her. She had no interest in screwing him any longer than she needed to.

Sex had never been what she was after. Picking Cliff had not been about attraction, or a need to get dominated. Quite the opposite in fact: she wanted to be the one who held the power. She had chosen Cliff for one reason, and that was because of the similarity between him and a man she had known long ago. In her twenty-two years she had known many men and had been powerless in their presence. That was about to change.

Within a couple of minutes, she felt Cliff unravel inside of her, and with one final push he climaxed. Feeling her legs weaken from the power he had thrust into her, she knew her timing had to be precise. She reached behind her, to the knife that she had taped to her back. She knew that he would be so quick to fuck her that he would never look at her back. If he had, he would have seen the weapon and may have been able to save his own life.

Pulling the knife out, she saw that his eyes weren't open and he was panting for breath as he tried to regain some strength. She smiled and readied her hand.

"Look at me Cliff," she said softly, caressing his cheek with her free hand. He looked up, and as his eyes fixated on the knife, widening with the realization of what the weapon was meant for, she struck, never giving him the chance to fight back. The knife sliced through the chilling air, slashing open the man's throat and sending a spray of blood onto her skin. As the man's strength all but faded, she smiled a menacing smile, bathing in the blood as if she were simply taking a shower.

Unwrapping her legs from Cliff, she stood up and watched him crumple to the ground, taking one final gasp of breath before the light faded from his eyes forever. She became so enamored with her first kill and the process of his death that she didn't even notice the man watching her not even ten feet away. Rubbing her body with the warm blood, she held the small knife up to the sky, watching as the steel glimmered in the moonlight and seemed to give the blood a magical glow.

After a minute, she felt the heavy presence of eyes upon her, and she looked up to see an older man smiling and watching her. He looked like he was in his fifties, and looked way too rich to be in a shithole like The Fuzzy Rabbit. He wore a tailored black suit, and had short, snow white hair, fair and wrinkly skin, shark-gray eyes, and a chiseled face that made him look like both a grandfather and a military man.

"What the fuck," Bethany said out loud, staring at the smiling old man.

"Hello there, Miss Levine. It's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Thaddeus Hoag," the old man said, bowing before her and speaking with a heavy English accent.

Reacting out of fear and instinct, Bethany launched herself at the old man, slashing the air with her knife and hoping to take him by surprise before he could yell for help. Rather than call out, the man smiled, stood his ground and dodged the knife, smiling all the while.

He grabbed Bethany by the arm, and spun her back into the wall of the building, causing her to hit her head and drop the knife. She slumped to the ground, and as she began to black out, she heard the man whisper, "Fret not, Miss Levine, all shall be well when you wake up." Then she passed out and was swimming in a black sea of nothingness that she had always hoped she would be surrounded by when the end finally came for her.

When Bethany opened her eyes, she saw that she was in a hotel room, dressed in a pair of sweatpants, a sweatshirt, and thick wool socks. The blood had been cleaned from her body, and as she lifted her head, she felt the twinge of pain that erupted from the back of her head. She felt around and found the wound on her head was already stitched and bandaged.

Sitting up and swinging her legs off the side of the bed, she looked around and saw that she was in a small motel room. She listened to the sounds of honking cars and airplanes taking off.

"Where the fuck am I?" She asked herself out loud.

"You are at the Ontario Airport, Miss Levine," a familiar voice replied, and when she whirled around she saw that the old man was standing in the bathroom doorway, wearing the same suit and smiling that inviting smile of his.

"The airport? What the fuck am I doing all the way down the hill in Ontario? Who are you?" she asked, confused and wary of this stranger.

"As I said last night, my name is Thaddeus Hoag, and I am here to make you an offer. I've been watching you for some time now, Miss Levine."

"You've been watching me? Jesus, did you rape me when you knocked me out?"

"No, nothing happened, Miss. I had some female friends of mine clean you and get you dressed. I sutured the wound on the back of your head and waited here until you woke up. As for why you are here in Ontario, well that is what leads me to my business proposal. I've studied you for weeks now, Miss Levine. I know about the darkness inside of you, and I believe I can help 'nurture' that darkness."

"What the hell are you talking about? What darkness are you talking about?"

"Tell me, why did you automatically ask if I'd raped you before?"

"What?"

"Just humor me, Miss Levine."

"I don't know, I guess I've seen and experienced enough to know that a lot of sick fucks out there get off on shit like that."

"You mean like your father, Miss Levine?"

"What...what did you say?" Bethany asked, staring at him in shock as he spoke the words she'd never had the guts to speak out loud before.

"Your father, he gave you that experience, did he not? A bloody bastard, wasn't he? The chap and all his mates took you as a child, and used you in ways no child should ever be used, didn't he?"

"How did you..." she began to ask, but she sat back down on the bed, feeling weak and sick to her stomach all at once.

"He used you until you were 16 years old, and when you had saved up enough money, you ran away, fleeing from the hell you'd lived in your whole life. If I had to guess, your mother died at a young age, and your father took advantage of her death to make his advances on you. Judging by your accent, I'd also guess you hail from Iowa, maybe Wyoming. You fled to California, where you began to work in any trade that allowed you to use your body. A dancer is but the latest in a string of sexually based employment, being abused for so long made you hypersexual, did it not?"

"Please, stop it," she pleaded, her voice weak and tears streaming down her face for the first time since she'd escaped her father.

"Hypersexuality wasn't all that your father made you, was it Miss Levine? He took your very soul, turning it into something dark and twisted. You put on a great face, I do admit, but that mask of sanity has been slipping for some time now, and last night became the first of what is sure to be a large killing spree. You have a monster dwelling within you, Miss Levine, but I can help you control it, using the monster within when you choose to use it."

"What can you do? Why would you want to help me?"

"That brings me to my proposition. My colleagues have disposed of that man's body, and cleaned up the evidence from the building's exterior. The murder weapon is in our possession and we can help you cover this up."

"In exchange, you want what, Mr. Hoag?" Bethany asked.

"I want you to become a member of the household staff that I run. I represent a wealthy client who has similar appetites that you do, Miss Levine. She employs men and women who share a fundamental need to kill, much like you, and even myself in fact. Part of my job besides maintaining her household and the staff is seeking out new employees when the need arises. I desperately need a new member of the kitchen staff."

"No offense Mr. Hoag, but I've never been much of a cook or server, and I wouldn't know how to fit in with high society types."

"You can be trained, and you'd also be used as entertainment at parties. However, I think the benefits of this job far outweigh the responsibilities you'd have."

"What benefits would that be?"

"You'd receive a six-figure salary, plus boarding within a large complex that you could decorate and customize to your heart's content, and complete health benefits. The bonus however is the best aspect of this most cherished job."

"Bonus?"

"For your services, you'd get the chance to fulfill your need to kill. You'd be allowed to live out whatever desires you have, be they sexual, power, or pain related. You'd choose your victims, and along with the mistress, you'd be able to carry out the kills in any fashion. You'd be able to carry out any dark fantasies you have, and you'd be surrounded by others like you, others who share your dark desires. All I need is a simple yes, and we can begin the rest of your lucrative life. What do you say, Miss Levine?"

Bethany looked up at Thaddeus, and smiled.

Chapter 1

1

Six months passed since the disappearance of Bethany Levine and the world moved on. There was no big news story about her and the only mention of her name was in a blurb about the Fuzzy Rabbit on the back of an Apple Valley newspaper. To the rest of the world, she was just another unfortunate soul who disappeared from everyone's radar without so much as a single tear being shed. To her customers, she would be missed not as a person, but as an attraction. Like all stars, she had burnt out, and new ones had taken her place.

Now, ninety-two miles away from Apple Valley, in the City of Angels, James Willamette sat on a barstool in a popular Los Angeles bar called Paradise, drinking whiskey and listening to an up-and-coming band. Their set was performed before a crowd of a mere two hundred people. The band, a four piece alternative hard rock band called Tonight Shall Rise, was whipping the crowd into a head-banging frenzy, drawing in the audience with their badass music and gritty rock vocals that made James feel like he was living in the era of the 80's punk rock glory days.

The band was phenomenal, putting James in an even better mood than he already was. Earlier that day, he had been hired as an international photographer for an event coordinating company. The corporation helped put on some of the world's most popular events, which housed the most influential celebrities, politicians, and individuals on the planet. He had gotten the job of capturing the essence of each event, which meant he would be travelling around the world, doing what he loved.

Having been born into a house of multi-generational police officers, James had always felt like an outsider in his family. He'd been drawn to the arts since he was a child, first channeling all his energy into painting. However, as he grew older and as technology advanced all around him, he became intrigued with the sheer amount of detail one could capture on film, and so he became a photographer. His father, Harrison Willamette, had always hoped his son would follow in the footsteps of his pop and grandfather, but James was determined, and pursued his own career despite his father's misgivings.

James's mother, Ellie, had passed away when he was ten years old from lung cancer. She had been a smoker all her life, and sadly for James and his father, she had been taken at the young age of thirty-eight. On her deathbed, Ellie had taken a teary-eyed James in her arms, and in a weak, squeak of a voice said, "James, sweetheart, don't ever give up on your dreams. Live your life, find someone you love, and make the most of your time. I love you darling."

Before the young boy could cry, his mother had passed, leaving James alone with his father. He loved his dad, but their difference in opinion, not only on James's love for the arts but on life in general, caused a rift to form between them. When James moved out of his father's home and began to live his own life, they rarely spoke, mostly on holidays and birthdays. Despite doing what he loved and having his independence, James felt a hole in his heart; his mother was not there to witness him becoming the man she told him to be, and he and his father could not cross the divide between each other.

A week earlier, Harrison had called James out of the blue, at first, plaguing him with the thought of his father in the hospital or worse. However, the call was even more shocking: Harrison got emotional on the phone, telling James how sorry he was that he let his pride and his views on the world come between him and his son. How he didn't want to

die without having reconciled with him. Harrison explained that James's mother warned him about his pride, but he hadn't listened, and as he got older, he began to see how much his stubbornness was affecting his relationship with his only son.

"I want to make it up to you, son," Harrison had explained. "I want to become the father you deserved to have growing up. I'm sorry I never went to any of your school events or to any of your gallery shows. I should have been there, and I failed you. I want to be in your life, but only if you'll have me. Can you forgive me James?"

James had been stunned. Now at the age of twenty-eight, he was finally able to be himself around his father. He accepted his father's apology, and in doing so, he'd begun his week of happiness. After beginning to mend the relationship with his father, he'd gotten this amazing job, where he would be photographing these remarkable events filled with marvelous people. Now here he was, sitting at this awesome club, drinking some incredibly strong but smooth whiskey, and listening to one of his new favorite bands.

James began to bob his head up and down to the tune of the music, his green eyes sparkling in the dazzling lights of the club and his tan skin slick with sweat from the humid atmosphere. As he got into the song, the bartender walked over to him, and set down another whiskey.

"Hey man, I appreciate it, but I didn't order another drink," James shouted over the music to the bartender.

"I know you didn't, pal. The lady in the VIP booth over there sent it with an invitation to join her in the booth," the bartender replied.

James looked over, and saw the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

2

The woman was simply breathtaking. She had porcelain white skin, making her face look like that of a doll's, incredibly long blonde hair, with haunting pale blue eyes, and an incredibly fit figure with tight curves. Looking as tall as an Amazonian goddess, the woman wore a white mini dress with black open toed heels that showed off a perfect pedicure, and when he locked eyes with her, she smiled. In that moment he knew who she was.

"Oh my God, is that Chloe "Doll Face" Danvers?" James asked the bartender.

"Yep, she's a regular here at the club. She told me to tell you she's a fan of your blog, and would like you to join her at the booth to talk about your work," the bartender replied.

James looked at the stunning woman, and marveled at the luck he was having this week. Chloe Danvers was Hollywood's current IT girl, making a name for herself first as a phenomenal actress and then as a popular novelist. She got her start at the age of fifteen on a TV teen drama called Ocean's Edge where she played an orphaned teen who fell in love with the popular guy at her high school. Audiences identified with her because she brought authenticity to the role.

Having been abandoned as a child and growing up in the foster care system, Chloe emancipated at the age of fourteen, and began working as a young actress. After her run on the show Ocean's Edge ended, she began getting offers to star in films and other television shows, and her fame grew instantly.

Now, at the age of twenty-eight, Chloe was one of the most famous and beautiful actresses in Hollywood as well as one of the richest, owning a lavish mansion in the Hollywood Hills called The Widow's Spire. It had forty bedrooms, twenty bathrooms, two kitchens, a basement, four levels accessed by an elevator, four living rooms, six dens, an indoor pool, and a ball room, where Chloe became known for throwing extravagant parties.

As if she hadn't already proven how talented she was, Chloe also wrote a series of fictional novels centered on a young internet superstar who uses her popularity online to help solve the murder of her own mother, travelling across the world in search for answers. The series, titled Searching for Lacy Live, had grossed her millions of dollars and made her one of the most powerful young actors of the current generation.

With a resume like that, James couldn't believe that an amazing, beautiful, and talented woman like that would even know James, let alone respect his work and want to talk. Feeling nervous, James got up, carrying the whiskey she had sent over. The bodyguards policing the booth stopped him from entering.

"Relax boys, I invited him here. Let him pass," Chloe said, smiling and leaning back into the leather booth seats. James smiled, and passed the body guards, standing in front of the young starlet.

"Miss Danvers, it's..." James began to say.

"Please, Mr. Willamette, Miss Danvers is way too proper and makes me sound like an old maid. Call me Chloe," Chloe said, smiling and handing him her hand to shake.

"OK then, Chloe, it's nice to meet you. You can call me James," he replied, taking her hand and kissing it on the backside. She smiled and pulled him towards her, until he was sitting right up against her. He was wearing beige shorts

with a striped polo shirt and brown slip-on shoes, and as he sat next to her, he could feel her warm, smooth legs brushing up against his own. His cheeks blushed.

"It's nice to meet you too, James. I'm glad you could join me this evening."

"Are you kidding me? When you hear someone as talented and beautiful as you likes my work, I have to come over. I thought the bartender was pulling a fast one on me at first."

"Oh please, don't let my public image intimidate you. I'm a pretty laid-back girl, really. That's why I love coming here. While most of my peers love the top 40 pop and R&B music, I prefer rock music. I heard TSR was playing and I had to come see them. I've heard good things about them, and now I know why. They kick ass."

"Wow, um yeah, they really do kick ass. It's nice to meet someone who has achieved success at your level and still maintains their personality. It's very refreshing."

"Well thank you kindly, James. Now, I must confess, I'm a huge fan of your blog. I especially loved your post a couple months ago in which you wrote about the children who live on the streets of our city. The images you captured were quite moving. I donated immediately to some local shelters that housed homeless youths to get them off the streets. You inspired me."

"Wow, well thank you. I felt so bad seeing these kids running around, not able to feed themselves and committing crimes to either eat or get caught so they could get three square meals in prison. I'm glad you enjoyed those pictures."

"You know, I have to be honest, your photos were not the only reason I called you over here."

"Oh, and why did you call me over here?" James asked curiously, smiling and looking at Chloe.

"I really want to take you home with me tonight, and I wanted to get to know you before we left. I prefer to get to know men before I sleep with them."

James had been drinking his whiskey when she said this, and he began choking on his drink, coughing in a fit and failing to comprehend what she had just said. When he was done choking, he looked up at her, and she smiled.

As the amazing rock goddess for Tonight Shall Rise, TINK, announced their next song in the set list, "Rage Rebel," Chloe placed one delicate hand on James's thigh and gently grazed his leg, sending shivers down his spine. As the music grew louder and the crowd began jumping up and down in tune with the beat, Chloe brought James's face close to her own, and planted her lips on his. James felt as if he were living in a dream world, and he didn't intend to wake up anytime soon. Grabbing her face gently in his own hands, he felt her perfectly manicured black nails run through his short black hair and he rose to meet her embrace, massaging her exploring tongue with his own.

Soon, after the set ended and the band left, Chloe had her bodyguards lead her and James out of the club and into a limousine. Together, they headed to The Widow's Spire.

3

When James walked inside of the lavish home of Chloe Danvers, he thought that he had stepped through a portal in time, leaving behind the age of technology and landing inside of a castle from medieval times. The mansion's interior and exterior steel girders and hardwood floors had been decorated and fashioned to look like cold stone. The walls were adorned with all manner of art, from the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire and their art to late 12th century Gothic art from Sweden. Electric lights were built into the walls and into chandeliers above the foyer of the large mansion, which housed a home movie theater for viewing parties and a lavish ballroom, adorned in gold and silver straight out of a fairytale and large enough to host extravagant parties.

The young photographer was struck by the sheer level of wealth and power that radiated off the walls of this mansions, which resembled more of a palace, when he was greeted by two young men who opened the door for the couple.

"Wow, this place is staggering. I feel like I'm in a Mary Shelley novel or something," James remarked, walking into the foyer and admiring the art all around him.

"Thanks, I've always found medieval art and architecture to be quite inspiring. It helps flesh out my creative side," Chloe called out, turning her attention to the two men at the front door and giving them instructions.

The two men locked the doors behind them and left. James smiled and said, "Wow, it sounds like you have a lot of people working here. How big is your household staff?"

"Right now I have twenty-four people living on the estate in an apartment complex I had built for the staff. I just asked for the team to wrap up early so that we could have the home to ourselves. I have a bottle of champagne chilling in my master suite, along with some dessert for later. How about we go upstairs to my room and get better acquainted'."

"That sounds perfect," James replied, taking Chloe's hand in his own. The two lovers made their way up to the fourth floor, and into the master bedroom.

The master bedroom was more of an apartment than an actual room. It housed a separate living room with a built in entertainment system, where rock music was currently playing. There was also a small kitchen with a refrigerator, microwave, and oven, where Chloe was free to keep any dish or drink she desired not twenty feet from her bedroom. James whistled, clearly impressed, and he stepped into the room, afraid to break anything of value.

"This place is..." James began to say, but before he could finish the thought, Chloe pinned him to one of the walls and kissed him. Reacting to her intensity with his own passion, he explored her body with his hands, making his way from her back down to her buttocks, which he gripped in his fingers, and then down her legs. She wasted no time and, as they kissed, she ripped his shirt off just as he began to pull her dress over her head, revealing a lacy white bra and matching panties.

Pushing James back onto the large bed, Chloe climbed on top of the young man whom she had only met hours earlier, and soon they were in the throes of passion. As the underwear slipped off of both of them and the two became one, the lovers gasped against one another. The cold night felt warm as ten minutes turned into an hour, and an hour turned into two. James marveled at the wonderful turn his night had taken, and with each thrust and every breath he and Chloe shared, he felt happy and complete.

4

After they both had exhausted all their energy, James and Chloe lay together in bed, wrapped up in a tangle of sheets. Feeling the warmth of her breasts on his arm as she snuggled up against him, James smiled, kissing her head and allowing her to wrap her legs around his. They snuggled in silence for twenty minutes, until finally Chloe broke away, and sat up on the edge of the bed.

"Where are you going? Got a secret laboratory you have to get to?" James asked, eliciting a laugh from Chloe.

"Actually I could use a dip in the pool after the workout we just shared. Would you care to join me? We could use the Jacuzzi afterwards."

"A soak does sound good right now, but I don't have any swimwear with me."

"Don't laugh, but we have a spare wardrobe in the pool area for guests. I'm sure we can find your size in there somewhere."

Shaking his head in amazement, James got up and followed Chloe out of the bedroom. Smiling more than he had in previous years, James held onto her hand as they listened to soft jazz music playing in the elevator. Once interrupted by a ding to signal their arrival, he allowed himself to be led to the pool, housed towards the back of the home on the first floor.

Housed inside the home and made in the shape of an infinity symbol, James followed Chloe past the heat controlled pool. As Chloe stopped in front of an unmarked wooden door, something sharp stung the back of his neck. Whirling around, he saw an older man, looking to be in his fifties or sixties, with snow white hair, gray eyes that danced in the lights of the pool like phantoms in the night, a chiseled face and strong body like that of a retired ex-special service operative. He had fair, but wrinkly skin, and in his white gloved hand he held a small needle, dripping with some sort of golden brown fluid.

"Chloe, run," James shouted, afraid for the woman's life and wanting to be the hero who saved her from the menacing figure.

"Don't be silly, James, I have nothing to fear from good old Thaddeus. The man's like the father I never had," Chloe replied. James whirled around, and saw that Chloe was smiling, pulling a blue kimono out from behind the unmarked door and wrapping it around her naked body. James stumbled backwards, and found his vision blurring. He tried to speak, but his words became slurred, and he realized far too late that he'd made a mistake coming home with this woman.

"*Wha- fuck?*" James asked in his slurred voice, looking around wild eyed and finding the room growing darker. Before he could collapse to the ground, he fell into the strong arms of Thaddeus Hoag, and as he felt himself lose all motor function, he watched Chloe approach him, smiling that award-winning smile that all the cameras loved.

She leaned in close to him, and as the world grew black, she whispered in his ear, "I want you in my bed." Then he was gone, and with the deep slumber that came, he hoped that he could stay there forever, because he feared what kind of pain awaited him when he woke up.

When James opened his eyes, a thousand tiny needles pricked his flesh, sending jolts of pain from the tips of his toes to the top of his skull. He winced, and took a deep inhale of breath as he tried to adjust to the bright iridescent light filling the room he was in. He tried to sit up but found he was strapped down, and when he tried to move around, he found his head secured into place. With each attempt to move, sharp stilettos dug into his body, and he cried out in pain.

"Shh, hush now James, you don't want to make the pain any worse than it already is, do you?" a familiar voice asked. When James looked up he spotted an upside down Chloe, sitting on a stool, wearing nothing but some ratty old boxer shorts and a leather apron that seemed stained. Her lavish hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and she smiled and bopped her head as James identified the music beginning to fill the room as one of the classical composers, perhaps Beethoven.

"Chloe, what's going on?" James asked, still dazed and confused.

"Dear boy, I thought you were brighter than that," a man said, and the older fellow named Thaddeus walked into James's field of vision. Upon seeing the old man, all James's memories came flooding back to him, and he shouted in pain and fear, his pupils dilating and his muscles straining in an attempt to break free.

As James began to scream, Chloe smiled wider than ever before, jumping out of her seat and hovering inches from James's face, seeming to soak in his shouts of icy terror as if they were rays of sunshine. Locking eyes with the young man she'd slept with only hours before, Chloe began to mock him by screaming herself, smiling at him as if they were school children on the playground, engaging in a bit of carefree teasing with one another.

As James stopped screaming, Chloe leaned in next to James's ear, and nibbled on his earlobe, as if it was foreplay. She breathed in as she explored his body, and as she did, jolts of pain exploded through him.

"What have you done to me?" James asked with as strong a voice as he could muster.

"I've added you to my collection, James," Chloe said, as if presenting a trophy to a parent with pride.

"Be glad she actually likes you my boy, for if she didn't, you'd have woken up with a few less limbs I should say. That, or you would be coming face to face with some of her other *pets*," Thaddeus responded, and as he spoke, a large sound arose in the room, and to James, who still couldn't see anything except for the lit ceiling of the room, the sound was like that of two sharp metal objects running against one another.

"Usually I don't play with my collector's items quite as much as I did with you before I accumulate them James," Chloe said, giving some sort of speech that equated to a show and tell display. "Usually I'll sleep with my victims once, and then lead them to the pool. I'm often dissatisfied with their performances, and I like to take something from them just like they took those precious few minutes of my time. Yet, you satisfied me like no other has ever pleased me, and for that I'm grateful. I'm going to enjoy our time together."

"Our time together? What are you planning to do to me, Chloe? What have you already done to me? My body feels like it's been stabbed with a thousand needles or something," James replied, closing his eyes as the light from the bulb began to hurt.

"I wouldn't say a thousand per say, but I'd estimate about two hundred and twenty-four needles, wouldn't you say, Thaddeus?" Chloe asked.

"I'd say that's a fair estimate, my lady," Thaddeus replied.

"What did you just say?" James asked in shock.

"I was merely agreeing with my mistress, young man. You have about two hundred and twenty-four needles nestled into your flesh. Have a look."

Unclipping some sort of strap from underneath James's chin, the young photographer found himself able to move his head and neck, and when he looked around he saw that tiny acupuncture needles had been driven deep into various parts of his body. His boxer shorts were still on, but everything else had been stripped off his figure. Blood trickled in spots here and there from where the needles went too deep, and he saw that he was a human pin cushion.

"Christ," James muttered, laying his head back down, feeling weak and not wanting to witness what was being done to him.

"I'm proud of you James. Most of the others down here screamed for hours when they found out what had happened to them. You are as resilient as I'd hoped you'd be. We're going to enjoy one another's company for a long time," Chloe said, laying on top of the table and cuddling her naked body next to his. His body responded to her warmth out of instinct, and his growing excitement ended up giving him even more pain. A single tear escaped from his eyes,

and when Chloe saw this, she leaned up to him and licked it from his face, seeming to savor the taste as if it were a rare steak.

“Dear Thaddeus, I do believe this is the best addition to my collection yet. Make sure to let the household staff know he is off-limits to everyone except for me. I want to keep him all to myself,” Chloe replied.

“Of course, my lady,” Thaddeus replied in his proper English voice. Chloe continued to rub her body against his in some sort of misguided affection, and with each shudder James exuded at her touch, his body responded with pain, and Chloe found this so amusing that she began to laugh, until the laugh became more of a cackle. The cackle seemed to illicit some sort of response, for in a matter of seconds dozens of screams erupted from the area James was in. James’s eyes widened in terror, for the true meaning of his captor’s words sank in for the first time. He was a part of a large collection.



Look for the release of *Identity* by Anthony Avina in early 2020!

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Identity

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